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'GLASNOST' IN JORDAN

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AMMAN-WHENTHREE CABINET MINISTERS, THE HEAD OF THE ROYAL COURT AND THE MAYOR OF AMMAN ALL RESIGN AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME, YOU WOULD ORDINARILY FIGURE THAT JORDAN'S HASHEMITE MONARCHY IS IN THE THROES OF YET ANOTHER LIFE-THREATENING UPHEAVAL.

A RUFFLE OF DOOMSDAY DRUMBEATS ON INFLUENTIAL OP-ED PAGES IN RECENT WEEKS POINTS IN THE SAME DIRE DIRECTION - TO A CRUMBLING OF KING HUSSEIN'S BEDOUIN POWER BASE, TO THE SUPPOSED COLLAPSE OF JORDAN'S ECONOMY, TO A GROWING THREAT TO THE THRONE FROM ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISTS, TO SEETHING DISCONTENT AMONG THE DISPLACED PALESTINIANS THAT MAKE UP MAYBE HALF OF JORDAN'S POPULACE.

IF TRUE, THAT'S DISTURBING STUFF, WHEN YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT A MONARCH WHOSE 37-YEAR REIGN HAS ONLY NARROWLY SURVIVED CIVIL WAR AND COUNTLESS ABORTIVE COUPS AND ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS. ANYTHING THAT UNSETTLES THIS KEYSTONE KINGDOM, WEDGED INTO THE CENTER OF THE MIDEAST POWER STRUCTURE, IS UNSETTLING FOR THE MIDDLE EAST. SO KING HUSSEIN'S ABRUPT ANNOUNCEMENT, IN JULY 1988, THAT HE WAS CUTTING JORDAN'S LAST CONNECTIONS WITH THE WEST BANK DID INDEED CREATE A CRISIS OF SORTS.

JORDANIANS OF PALESTINIAN ORIGIN WERE BADLY SHAKEN. THE SHOCK WAVES TOOK A HEAVY TOLL ON JORDAN'S FRAGILE ECONOMY. LAST SPRING, AUSTERITY MEASURES SPARKED RIOTS IN SOUTHERN JORDAN, A SUPPOSED STRONGHOLD, FORCING HUSSEIN TO FALL BACK ON A FAMILIAR FORMULA: A SHAKEUP OF HIS GOVERNMENT AND AN EMERGENCY APPEAL FOR A FINANCIAL BAILOUT FROM HIS WELL-HEELED FELLOW MONARCHS IN THE PERSIAN GULF.

IT WORKED - BUT ONLY UP TO A POINT. JORDAN'S ECONOMY IS ACTUALLY REBOUNDED; CONFIDENCE IN ITS CURRENCY HAS BEEN SOMEWHAT RESTORED. BUT THOSE APRIL RIOTS ALSO TURNED OUT TO BE A WARNING SIGN OF SOMETHING MORE PROFOUND. THIS TIME AROUND, HUSSEIN FINDS HIMSELF FORCED TO COME TO TERMS NOT WITH SOME PHYSICAL CHALLENGE TO HIS SECURITY BUT WITH SOCIOECONOMIC ISSUES HAVING TO DO WITH OFFICIAL CORRUPTION, GOVERNMENT INEPTITUDE, SUPPRESSION OF POLITICAL RIGHTS.

WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE, THEN, IS NEW AND DIFFERENT - A FUNDAMENTAL, PERHAPS GENERATIONAL TRANSITION THAT IS BOTH LESS THREATENING AND MORE PROMISING THAN THE CRISIS-MONGERS WOULD HAVE YOU BELIEVE. HUSSEIN IS NOT SO MUCH LOSING HIS GRIP AS HE IS LOOSENING IT IN A CALCULATED EFFORT TO TIGHTEN THE HOLD OF HIS HASHEMITE DYNASTY.

BEFORE CRYING FOUL, HOWEVER, IT IS INSTRUCTIVE TO CHECK IN WITH TAHER MASRI, A WELL-RESPECTED PALESTINIAN POLITICIAN FROM A PROMINENT FAMILY IN NABLUS ON THE WEST BANK. A FORMER JORDANIAN DIPLOMAT AND FOREIGN MINISTER WHO RESIGNED THAT JOB IN 1988 IN PROTEST OF THE WAY THE WEST BANK "DISENGAGEMENT" WAS HANDLED, MASRI WAS BROUGHT BACK INTO THE GOVERNMENT IN THE APRIL SHAKEUP AS DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF STATE FOR ECONOMIC AFFAIRS. HE IS ALSO ONE OF THE THREE CABINET MEMBERS WHO STEPPED DOWN TO RUN FOR PARLIAMENT.

"BEING AN MP," HE SAYS, "IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING A MINISTER" - AND NEVER MIND THAT JORDANIAN PALESTINIANS WILL BE SUBSTANTIALLY UNDERREPRESENTED; HE THINKS IT'S SAFER THAT WAY, NOW. WHY? BECAUSE A LOT OF TRANSPLANTED WEST BANKERS HAVE DONE PRETTY WELL FOR THEMSELVES UNDER HUSSEIN'S RULE, ENOUGH SO TO HOLD A LARGE STAKE IN JORDANIAN STABILITY: "WE NEED THE KING," HE SAYS. EVEN 15 OR 20 SEATS, HE RECKONS, WILL GIVE JORDAN'S PALESTINIAN CONSTITUENCY CONSIDERABLY MORE CLOUT THAN IT HAS NOW.

ON THE OTHER HAND, ANYTHING TOO CLOSE TO A PALESTINIAN MAJORITY, HE FEARS, WOULD MAKE IT THAT MUCH EASIER FOR RIGHT-WING ISRAELI HARD-LINERS TO PRESS THEIR CLAIM THAT PALESTINIANS UNDER ISRAELI OCCUPATION ON THE WEST BANK AND IN GAZA DO NOT NEED AN INDEPENDENT PALESTINIAN STATE - THAT THEY ALREADY HAVE ONE IN HUSSEIN'S HASHEMITE KINGDOM OF JORDAN.

MASRI HAS NO ILLUSIONS ABOUT INSTANT DEMOCRACY. HE SPEAKS INSTEAD, OF JORDANIAN "GLASNOST" - "WE WILL TAKE IT IN SMALL STEPS FROM THE KING." INTERESTINGLY, HUSSEIN ALSO SEES THE ELECTION ONLY AS A PRUDENT AND NECESSARY RESPONSE TO THE DEMANDS OF A NEW, BETTER-EDUCATED GENERATION OF JORDANIANS BUT ALSO AS AN EXPRESSION OF JORDANIAN NATIONHOOD.

FOR ALL THE CAREFUL MANAGEMENT, IT'S SOMEWHAT OF A LEAP IN THE DARK, AND NOT JUST BECAUSE NOBODY 41 YEARS OLD OR YOUNGER HAS EVER VOTED NATIONWIDE, AND WOMEN WILL BE VOTING FOR THE FIRST TIME. ALSO THE BEGINNING OF THE PROCESS THAT COULD BE HARD TO SLOW DOWN, EVEN HARDER TO REVERSE.

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