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Jordan's Political Public Sphere: Understanding the Youth's Awareness and Perceptions of the Constitutional Reforms in the Post-Arab Spring Era

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**Jordan's Political Public Sphere: Understanding the Youth's Awareness and Perceptions of
the Constitutional Reforms in the Post-Arab Spring Era**

By Krista Vendetti

Spring 2012

Jordan: Modernization and Social Change
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Abstract:

This study evaluates Jordanian youth's awareness and perceptions of the constitutional amendments of 2011 and explores the youth's main sources of political news. I hypothesized that a majority of young Jordanians are largely uninformed about the amendments and expected that the main source of news for most young Jordanians were official media sources. My research data consists of survey responses, given by 65 students from the University of Jordan, as well as five interviews with young Jordanians. My findings proved that the Jordanian youth has a low level of awareness about the recent political reforms, and the main news sources used by the youth are government affiliated. I argue that these results are indicative of the limitations the youth in Jordan face in the political public sphere. The political public sphere in Jordan largely prohibits the ability of citizens to articulate "common concerns," there is a lack of inclusivity and equality within the public sphere, and critical-rational debate is severely limited. Therefore, despite the marginal political improvements of the recent constitutional reforms, significant political reform is unlikely to develop without a more open and robust political public sphere.

Introduction:

The purpose of this study is to evaluate Jordanian youth's awareness and perceptions of the constitutional amendments of 2011 and how the youth access political news. From this focal point, I plan to draw larger conclusions about the status of the political public sphere in Jordan amidst recent political developments. The constitutional reforms, which were formally approved by King Abdullah II in a decree issued in September of 2011, were adopted in the wake of protests in Jordan. These protests coincided with several protests movements in other Middle Eastern countries during the Arab Spring of 2010-2011.¹ Included in the forty-two amendments, drafted by the Royal Constitutional Committee, were laws that are intended to establish new election laws, enhance civil liberties, and limit the power of the monarchy and State Security Court.

¹ Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2012 - Jordan," 22 January 2012, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4f2007d3c.html>, accessed 4 May 2012.

I initially became interested in the Arabic Spring and the topic of political reform in Middle Eastern countries while at college in the United States. Many people in the media and academia began to argue that the youth were the main impetus for these protests and revolutionary movements. However, there seemed to be very limited views on their motivations for action and how widespread dissent was amongst the population. I also felt that there did not seem to be a general consensus as to how successful these movements had been at achieving real political change. After coming to Jordan, I learned of the constitutional reforms initiated by King Abdullah II last Spring, and I thought this recent development would be an excellent topic to focus on for my study.

Not only is my area of inquiry relevant because it focuses on the very recent political developments of the Arab Spring, but also because it specifically addresses a very integral segment of Jordan's population. Currently, the youth in Jordan is the largest segment of the country's population. According to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Higher Council for the Youth, as of 2004 people under 30 years of age represent 74% of the total population.² Understanding the youth's awareness of recent political developments and how they are informed about politics will offer greater insight into the health of the political process and public debate in Jordan as a whole.

I hypothesized from the outset of my research that a majority of young Jordanians would not be aware or fully understand the constitutional reforms, and those who were aware of the reforms were likely to feel that the reforms were not sufficient in achieving desired political change. I based my hypothesis on my assumptions that the political public

² Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Higher Council for the Youth, "National Youth Strategy for Jordan 2005-2009," December 2004.

sphere in Jordan (even in the wake of the recent reforms) was still very limited for young people, meaning that most youths would have very little access to political information or political activities. I also assumed from the initial stages of my research that those who were aware of the reforms were more likely to be informed by official sources, like government-owned or pro-government media sources, due to the fact that I believed the government had a extremely influential role in directing information in the public sphere. I intended to test my hypothesis by conducting a survey that asked young Jordanians about the recent constitutional amendments. I also planned to supplement my fundings with a few brief interviews. The main goal I hoped to achieve with my study was to contextualize the youth's awareness of the recent political developments in order to understand the accessibility of the political public sphere in Jordan.

With this goal in mind, I plan to use German sociologists Jurgen Habermas' widely influential theory of the "public sphere" from his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) to frame my analysis of the youth's awareness and access to political information and the political process. Habermas' book chronicles the rise of what he terms the "bourgeois public sphere" in the 18th and 19th centuries, during the growth of industrial capitalism and shift towards the modern state system in Western Europe. He argues that only with the development of the modern state and economy did the notions of "public" and "private" assume their currently recognized form: "public" relating to public authority of the state; "private" relating to the economy, society and the family.³

According to Habermas, within this new social distinction between the public and the private emerged the modern concept of the "public sphere," which he defines as the sphere of

³ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1962 Trans. 1989), 7-11.

“private people” coming together “as a public.”⁴ Habermas clarifies his definition of the modern public sphere, explaining that it is distinguished by the following key characteristics: common interests, people engaging in the public sphere share similar “public” concerns; inclusivity, generally speaking there are no obstacles barring individuals from engaging the public sphere; equality of status, status is largely irrelevant within the public sphere; rational-critical debate, the public sphere addresses concerns and arrives at common interests through rational discussions and debates. Habermas argues that recently, with the rise in commodification, mass media, and the blurring of state and private interests, a process called refeudalization is occurring in which the public sphere and rational- critical debate is being replaced by mass media and powerful state interests in creating public opinion.⁵

For my paper, I plan to use Habermas’ definition of the public sphere to analyze the Jordanian youth’s political awareness and participation in terms of their access to what I will call the “political public sphere.” Essentially, I am incorporating all spaces, institutions, and processes by which “private” Jordanians learn about, discuss, or engage in political activities or developments into my definition of the public sphere. I will use the four key characteristics outlined above as a guideline to judge to overall status of the political public sphere in Jordan. Finally, I plan to use Habermas’ theory of refeudalization to discuss the Jordanian government’s policies of intervening in in the public sphere.

Literature Review:

⁴ Habermas, *Structural*, 3.

⁵ Habermas relates this phenomenon with feudalism in Europe during the Middle Ages when the notions of “public” and “private” concerns were much more interwoven and political elites including the lords, kings, and religious leaders largely dictated and censored “public” perceptions. Habermas, *Structural*, 15-17.

Because my topic deals with very recent political developments in Jordan and focuses on a very select population (the youth), I did not encounter many academic resources that dealt directly with my area of study. However, I did manage to find literature that offered greater insight into key elements of my topic: the political public sphere, which is how I will evaluate the youth's access to political processes in Jordan, and political reform in the Middle East, which includes the reform movements in Jordan and the recent constitutional amendments. First, I set out to find literature that placed Habermas' public sphere theory in a Jordanian context. Though Habermas' theory of the public sphere offers a very clear, general theoretical framework for this study, his work is historically rooted in the development of modern Europe (and to some extent North America). This makes it somewhat problematic to apply his theory to the Middle East, which has an entirely different political history. To address this issue, I found literature that used the public spheres theory in a Middle Eastern context.

Initially, most of the material I found concerning public sphere theory in the Middle East was essentially limited to academic discussions about the role of Islam in the modern public sphere. Though these articles were very interesting, they did not offer a lot of theoretical or factual insight for the purposes of my topic.⁶ However, I found Marc Lynch's book *State Interests and Public Spheres: The International Politics of Jordan's Identity* (1999) to be a very useful guide in contextualizing Habermas' public sphere theory in Jordan. In his book, Lynch is primarily focused on locating the impact Jordanian identity and national interests has on Jordan's foreign policy. Though Lynch is concerned more with the influence the "international public sphere" in the Middle East has on Jordanian identity and national interests, he does use

⁶ For readings on Islam in the public sphere see *Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in the Middle East and Europe* or *New Media, New Publics: Reconfiguring the Public Sphere of Islam*.

Habermas' theory of the public sphere to explain the way public opinion and national interests are formed within Jordan. I find Lynch's book particularly helpful because he uses the concept of the public sphere to explain the level of accountability that governments are held to for their policy decisions. Lynch explains that in the absence of "an effective public sphere" it can be assumed that the state will enjoy "a considerable amount of autonomy in the definition of the national interest."⁷ Thus, Lynch's theory provides not only a basis for applying Habermas' theory of the public sphere to a Middle Eastern context, but also explicitly connects the strength of the public sphere to the actions and interests of the government.

Similarly, I found Sean L. Yom's "Society and Democratization in the Arab World (2005)" to be a helpful resource in framing my understanding of the public sphere in Jordan. Yom argues that the concept of "civil society" as it is known in Western Europe and the United States does not necessarily apply to societies in the Middle East. Furthermore, Yom states that academics who assert "vigorous civic activism" is the main impetus for democratic change fail to consider the role of the political regime in controlling or initiating political reform.⁸ I found parts of Yom's argument to be problematic, as recent political developments across the Middle East have shown that vigorous civic activism can actually play a role in creating significant political change (Egypt and Tunis for example); however, I believe Yom's skepticism of the political power of civil societies in the "Arab World" complements my discussion of the limited access young Jordanians have to the political public sphere.

⁷ Marc Lynch, *State Interests and the Public Sphere: The International Politics of Jordan's Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 21.

⁸ Sean L. Yom, "Society and Democratization in the Arab World," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 9.4 (2005): 12.

In addition to looking to sources that put Habermas' theory in a more accurate geographical context, I also looked to critical theorists Nancy Fraser's book *Rethinking Public Spheres* (1990) to put public sphere theory in a more contemporary context. Fraser explains that although Habermas' theory (which he wrote and first published in 1962) offers a very cohesive analysis of public life, recent revisionist historiography has shown that some of Habermas' assumptions are oversimplified. For instance, Fraser believes that historically the public sphere has not been fully inclusive and does not disregard status completely as Habermas suggests. Fraser explains that several minority groups, especially women and members of lower classes, did not have the same access to the public sphere as the male bourgeois because of discrimination.⁹ Fraser also explains that Habermas' notion of a "common concern" among private citizens can be problematic because there are no naturally given "public" or "private" concerns.¹⁰ Rather, Fraser asserts that issues become common concerns after "sustained discursive contestation" in the public sphere.¹¹ Though Fraser raises legitimate criticisms of Habermas, I agree with her claim that Habermas' basic theory is "an indispensable resource."¹² Therefore, I plan to take into account Fraser's criticism of Habermas as I use his theory to frame my analysis, particularly in terms of the status of women in the public sphere.

In addition to the literature that I am using to frame my discussion of the political public sphere in Jordan, I also found a few works that offer a very useful analysis of recent political reforms and democratization in the Middle East. First, I found Glen E. Robinson's

⁹ Nancy Fraser, *Rethinking Public Spheres: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1990), 58.

¹⁰ Fraser, *Rethinking*, 62.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Fraser, *Rethinking*, 57.

article “Defensive Democratization in Jordan (1998)” to be extremely useful in interpreting the motivations of the Jordanian government in instituting the constitutional reforms. Robinson, whose article specifically deals with Jordan’s political-liberalization programs of the late 1980s and early 1990s, asserts that the Jordanian regime undertook sufficient reforms to “assure its political longevity,” without altering the “cores of power in Jordan.”¹³ This type of top-down reform, which Robinson terms “defensive democratization,” is best understood as “a series of pre-emptive measures designed to maintain elite privilege while limiting the appeal of more fundamental political change.”¹⁴ Though Robinson is not commenting on the recent reforms in Jordan, I believe that my research will show his concept of “defensive democratization” in many respects applies to the recent constitutional reforms of 2011.

The article, “Arab Monarchies: Chances for Reform, Yet Unmet (2011)” by Marina Ottaway and Marwan Muasher, offers a slightly different interpretation of the recent constitutional reforms than Robinson’s “defensive democratization” theory, arguing that the reform measures taken by the Jordanian government are a positive step, but require amore comprehensive strategy. According to Ottaway and Muasher, a majority of Jordanians desire greater political and economic reform; however, they want the monarch to lead the reform process.¹⁵ I found Ottaway and Muasher’s discussion of the reform process to be study are useful to my research on the reform movement in Jordan; however, some of my own findings have led

¹³ Glen E. Robinson, “Defensive Democratization in Jordan,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30.3 (1998): 387.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵ Marina Ottaway and Marwan Muasher, “Arab Monarchies: Chance for Reform, Yet Unmet,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Washington D.C. (2011): 13.

me to question if a majority of Jordanians active in the reform movement are comfortable with the regime leading the reform efforts.

Methodology:

Overall, my research experience was very positive and helpful to this study. I was able to obtain very useful data from surveys concerning the youth's awareness of the recent constitutional reforms. In addition, my interviews provided greater insight into the youth's participation and perceptions of the reform movement. Initially, I was unsure how willing the Jordanians I spoke with would be to delve into their personal opinions about their government and the reform movement. However, I found a majority of them to be very candid with their views and learned a great deal that helped me frame my analysis.

From the outset of my research I decided that my main methodology would be surveying young people about their awareness and opinions of the constitutional reforms. I felt that surveys would be the best choice for conducting my research because it would allow me to easily obtain the views, however brief, of a large group of young Jordanians. I conducted my survey at the University of Jordan, with the help of Dr. Ashraf Alqudah, who allowed me to survey students in his class. I chose to conduct my survey at Jordan University for a few main reasons that I felt would benefit my research. First, conducting a survey in a university classroom will ensure that my respondents are what could be classified as "the youth," meaning that they are old enough to give informed consent, but still fall into the 12-30 age bracket (which is the age bracket that Jordan's Higher Council for the Youth uses as age parameters for the youth). Also, I also assumed that college-educated youths would likely have a basic level of education and knowledge about current events. I surveyed 65 students, which I believed was an ideal survey

sample, as my initial hopes were to survey between 50 and 100 students. Finally, because of my connections with Dr. Ashraf Alqudah, I knew that it would be easier for me to conduct my survey at the University of Jordan without having to go through any other official channels to obtain permission.

I also planned to conduct a few brief interviews to supplement my surveys. I felt that this was necessary to my research because surveys alone only provided a shallow picture of the youth in Jordan. Most of my survey questions were closed, meaning that the students were asked to choose from pre-determined answers. Though I knew that this would be beneficial to me because it would reduce the time I would spend translating open-ended answers and allow me to survey a larger sample size, I also understood that this would limit the students' ability to give me in depth responses and elaborate on their opinions. Thus, I decided before starting my research that I needed to conduct a few interviews to supplement my surveys in order to have a more complete picture of the youth and their political awareness.

For my interviews, I spoke with five individuals. Akram Idrees, Mohammad Zeidan, Tayseer Klob, and two Jordanian college students that wished to remain anonymous. I chose to interview Akram Idrees because he is active in the reform movement and is a founder of an Amman-based debate club. He was an ideal interviewee because not only did he have very strong opinions about the reform movement and the political process in Jordan, but he also was very active in getting other young people involved in political activities and discussions. Similarly, I decided to interview Mohammad Zeidan (who is also my ISP advisor), a free lance translator and Arabic teacher who runs a book club in Amman. He is also very informed and active in politics and I felt that his experience with running a book club would offer interesting

insight into the youth's involvement in intellectual activities in Jordan. I also interviewed Tayseer Klob, an Islamic reformist, because I wanted to gain a perspective on the reform movement from someone who identifies with Islamism. Finally, I chose to interview two college students in order to get more in depth opinions from the youth than my surveys alone would allow.

In order to ensure that my participants would not experience any negative repercussions from participating in my research project, I made sure to protect their identities and inform them what my research entails and how their assistance would be used. For my interviews (except for two, for which I obtained verbal consent) I asked the participants to read and sign an informed consent form, which gave a brief description of my project, ensured that their participation was optional, their participation could be terminated at any time, the information provided would be used for research purposes only, and that they had the right to full anonymity if they wished. I also explained to my interviewees that my research was not funded by any outside sources. For my surveys, I obtained verbal consent from participants in Dr. Ashraf Alqudah's class and also stated at the top of my survey that participation was optional, participants could stop taking the survey at any time, and all data would be used for research purposes. The survey participants were not asked to give any identifying information aside from indicating their gender. The actual surveys, my notes from my interviews, and the signed informed consent forms were kept in a sealed folder and I was the only person to have access to these documents. The only other person who looked at the surveys was Talal Al-shoubaki, an SIT language partner, who helped me read and translate a small segment of my survey results.

To protect the validity of my results and to prevent misunderstandings in my data, I conducted my interviews in English and conducted my surveys in Arabic. Because I am not

fluent in Arabic and knew that expressing complex and perhaps controversial ideas would be difficult with a translator, I conducted all of my interviews in English. Every one of my interviewees spoke English fluently and I encountered not problems understanding them. For my surveys, however, I chose to write the survey and give it to students in Arabic. I was not confident that a majority of students would be fluent in English and also felt that even students who spoke English would feel more confident answering a survey written in Arabic. In order to reduce the time it would spend analyzing the survey results, a majority of the questions were closed. The survey, which I wrote in English, was translated into Arabic with the help of my SIT Arabic teacher Riham N'aemat and reviewed by Dr. Ashraf Alqudah.

Fortunately, I encounter very few obstacles during the course of my research. The bulk of my issues in obtaining my data concerned getting in touch with my interviewees and translating my survey. It took several attempts to reach my interviewees, some of whom did not live in Amman, and was forced to reschedule a couple of my interviews due to scheduling conflicts. Translating my survey proved to be somewhat difficult as well. While working with Mrs. N'aemat, I discovered that some of the English phrasing I used was difficult to translate into Arabic. However, Mrs. N'aemat and Dr. Ashraf helped me edit my survey until I was confident that it conveyed the right meaning. Finally, though most of my surveys were filled out correctly, a few of my participants did not fully complete their survey. This usually only occurred on the few open-ended questions, and I assume that this was due to the fact that the students did not feel like answering or because they genuinely did not know what they wanted to say as their answer. This did not pose a very big problem, as I just took into account the answers that they did provide.

I made a few changes to my original proposal that I believe enhanced the depth of my study. Initially, I had intended to interview academics and journalists from official media sources to discuss the youth's perceptions of politics and the youth's political activity. However, after some consideration I changed the focus of my interviews, deciding instead to interview young people to comment on their own opinions and their opinion of their peers. I felt that this would better supplement my surveys. As previously stated, my surveys did not allow for participants to respond to open-ended questions. Therefore, I was getting a very limited, somewhat shallow view of their perspective. Interviewing young people, especially those who were politically active, provided me with a more in depth insight into the youth's perspective on politics. Thus, I felt that though my interviews with academics and media sources would have provide an interesting view *of* the youth, I decided that I wanted to focus my research primarily on the views *from* the youth. However, I did use other sources (articles, statistics, etc.) to obtained a more informed understanding of the Jordanian youth in general.

The only other change that I made from my original plan was to distribute my survey in Arabic only. Initially, I had planned to bring copies of the survey in English and in Arabic to the university; however, I decided to only provide the Arabic draft of my survey. As stated earlier, I felt that this was the most effective way to conduct the survey because I felt the students would be more comfortable answering the survey in their first language.

Findings:

Brief Background

The forty-two constitutional amendments which I asked the participants about in my survey were initiated by the Jordanian government as part of a larger process of addressing

protestors demands during the early stages of the Arab Spring. Demonstrations in Jordan, inspired by events in Tunis and Egypt, broke out in January and February of 2011. King Abdullah II replaced the prime minister and ordered the newly appointed prime minister, Marouf al-Bakhit, to initiate political and economic reforms. This included the creation of a national dialogue committee in March and the establishment of a royal constitutional committee in April. The committee proposed forty-two constitutional amendments, which were later approved by both houses of parliament and King Abdullah II in September. ¹⁶

The amendments addressed several issues put forth by reform groups. One of the amendments called for the creation of a constitutional court to monitor the constitutionality of laws and regulations. In addition, the reforms established an independent electoral commission to replace the Ministry of the Interior in organizing elections. The amendments also established new laws regarding civil liberties including the prohibition of torture and the classification of all forms of communications between Jordanian citizens as private and immune from censorship or confiscation. Finally, the amendments revoked the government's ability to issue temporary laws during the absence of parliament and limited the State Security Court's jurisdiction to cases of treason, terrorism, or espionage. ¹⁷

Survey Results

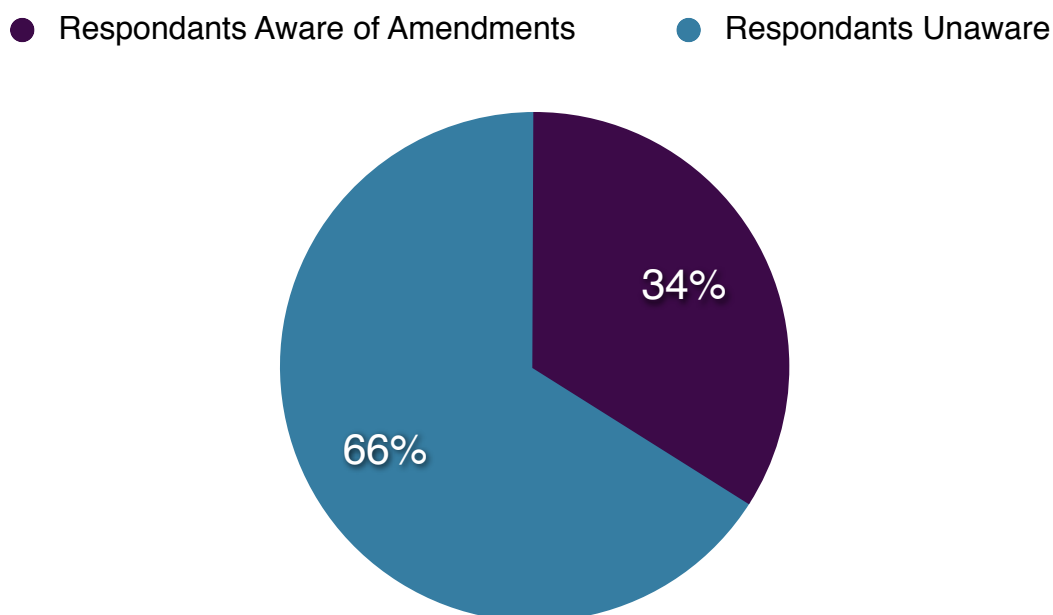
To find out the youth's awareness and perceptions of these constitutional amendments, I conducted a survey at the University of Jordan and interviewed two college students. Of the two college students that I interviewed, one male (age 18) and one female (age 19), only the male

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2012."

¹⁷ Ottaway, "Arab Monarchies," 11.

student was aware of the reforms.¹⁸ The female student was not aware of the reforms and said that she “rarely” follows political news.¹⁹ In my survey, I asked 65 students if they were aware of the amendments, if they agreed with the reforms, and if they thought the reforms were sufficient. I also asked the participants to indicate where they learned about the reforms and political news in general. Of the 65 students asked, 22 students responded that they were aware of the amendments and 43 responded that they were not aware of the amendments. When these responses were broken down by gender, I found that of the 10 male participants, 5 were aware of the reforms. Of the 55 female respondents, 17 were aware of the amendments. These results, which are depicted in Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3, show that overall awareness of the constitutional reforms is approximately 34%. Male awareness is higher, 50%, and female awareness is slightly lower, approximately 31%.

Figure 1



¹⁸ Male College Student, Interviewed by Krista Vendetti, April 19, 2012.

¹⁹ Female College Student, Interviewed by Krista Vendetti, April 19, 2012.

Figure 2

● Males Aware of Amendments ● Males Unaware

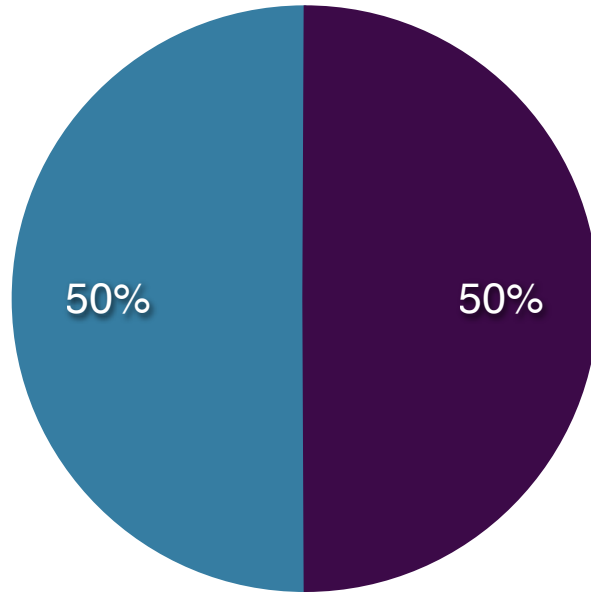
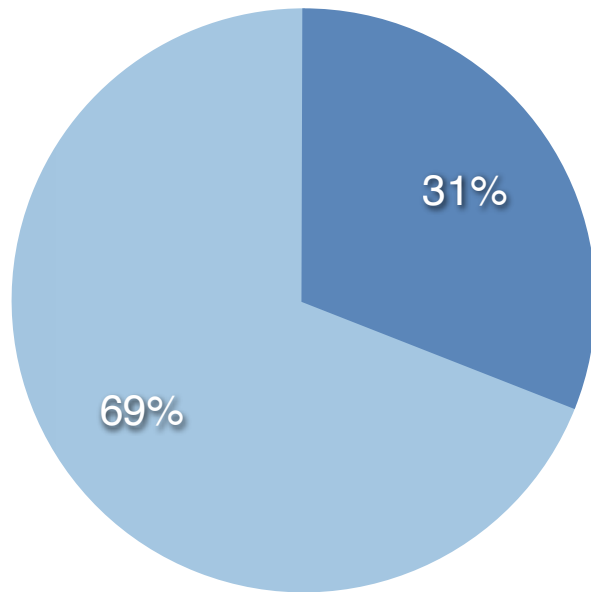


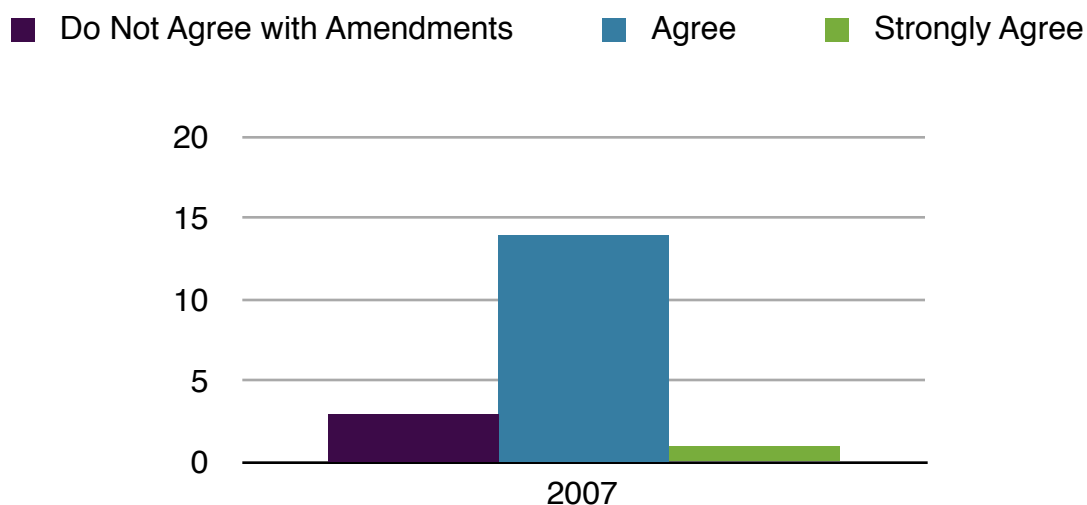
Figure 3

● Females Aware of Amendments ● Females Unaware



Of the respondents who were aware of the amendments, approximately 68% agreed (12 people) or strongly agreed (3 people) with the reforms. Approximately 27% did not agree (4 people) or disagreed strongly (2 people) with the reforms, while one respondent did not answer. (See Figure 4 below).

Figure 4

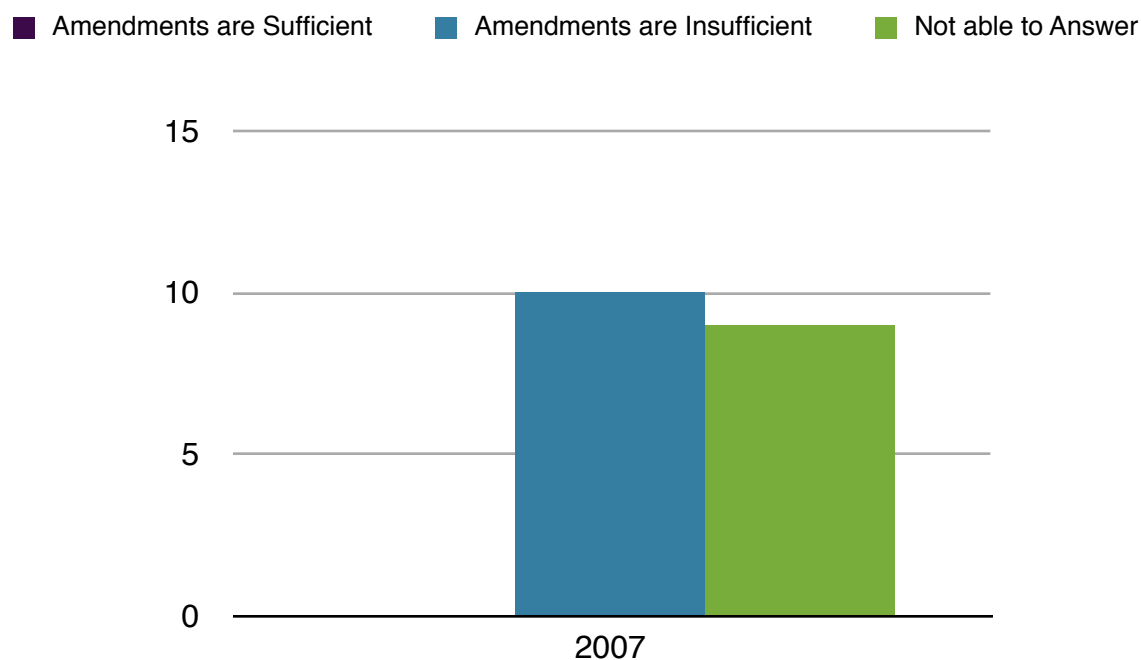


The male college student that I spoke with, agreed, like a majority of the young people surveyed, with the reforms. When asked to elaborate why he agreed with the reforms he said that even though the reforms are “not perfect,” they are still good changes because at least “they are changes.”²⁰ The survey respondents seemed to agree with this male student that the reforms are “not perfect,” as no respondent said yes when asked if they thought the amendments were sufficient political reform. Approximately 45% (10 people) said no, the reforms are not

²⁰ Male Student, Interview.

sufficient. Nine respondents, around 41%, said that they were not able to determine if the reforms were adequate and three respondents did not answer this question.

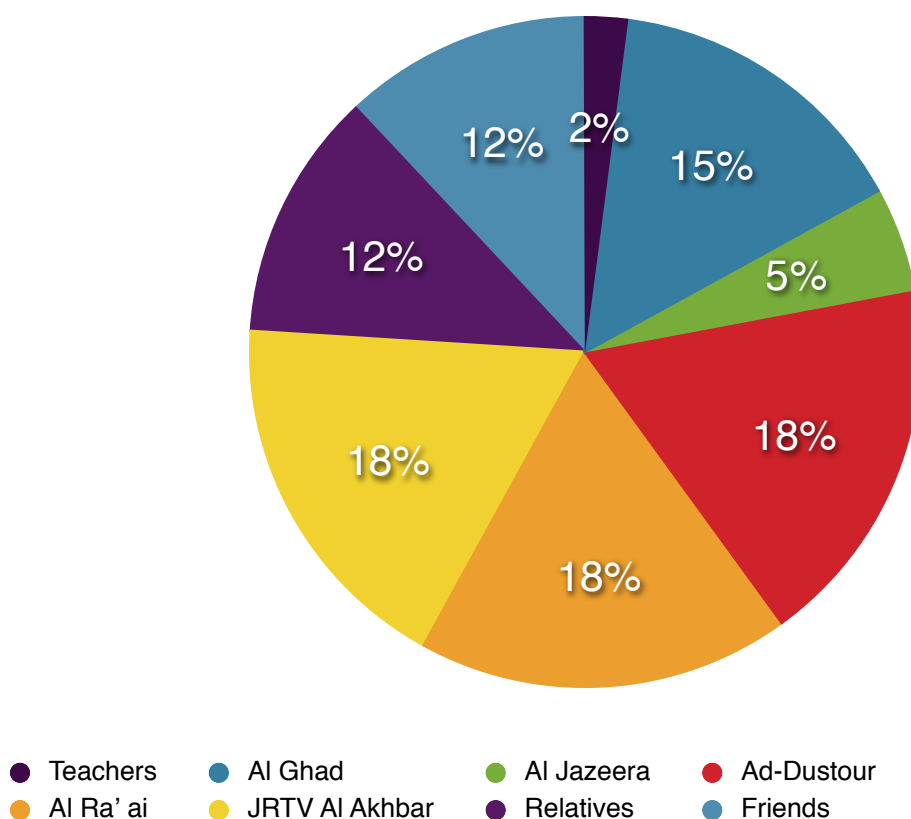
Figure 5



When asked how they were informed about the constitutional amendments and political news in general, respondents listed a variety of news sources. The top eight news sources are shown on the following page in Figure 6. As you can see, the three main sources of news the participants listed are the Al Ra'ai newspaper (18%), run by the government-owned Jordan Press Foundation; the Ad-Dustour newspaper (18%), owned by the Jordan Press and Publishing Company (which the Jordanian government owns shares in); and the news program, Al Akhbar (18%), on the government-owned Jordan Radio and Television Corporation.²¹ These sources are followed closely by the Al Ghad newspaper (15%), an independent daily paper owned by the

²¹ Jordan Radio and Television Corporation Website, <http://jrtv.gov.jo/Arabic/AboutJOTv/Pages/MissionandVision.aspx>, accessed April 22, 2012.

United Jordan Press Company, friends (12%), and teachers (12%). Finally, 5% of respondents cited Al Jazeera as a source of political news and only 2% of respondents listed relatives/family.²²



From these results it can be inferred that a majority of young Jordanians are not aware of the recent constitutional reforms. It can also be inferred that, among young Jordanians who do know of the amendments, a majority of them agree with political reform (68% of my survey respondents agreed) and significant portion of them believe their needs to be further reforms (45%). However, nearly as many young Jordanians (41%) do not feel capable of saying or do not

²² Freedom House, "Freedom of the Press 2011 - Jordan," 23 September 2011, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4e7c84f328.html>, accessed 4 May 2012.

know if they believe the reforms are sufficient. These results offer interesting insights into the status of the public sphere in Jordan.

According to Lynch, citizens ability to “articulate and express” their interests and opinions in the public sphere depends on the institutional means for such expression.”²³ I believe that the lack of awareness of young Jordanians of the recent constitutional reforms, their beliefs that the reforms are not sufficient, and even their inability or unwillingness to state their opinion on the efficiency of the reforms shows that the youth are only able to articulate and express their political opinions and concerns within a very limited public sphere. I will evaluate Jordan’s political public sphere to more clearly demonstrate the constraints on the youth’s access using the four main characteristics of the public sphere outlined by Habermas: common interests, inclusivity, equal status, and critical-rational debate.

Barriers to the “Common Interest”

According to Habermas, the ability of private persons to publicly discuss and “problematize” common concerns is a key component of a healthy public sphere. He explains that private people are more able to demand that the state address their issues based on the authority of their mutual concerns.²⁴ In the case of Jordan, I discovered through my research that a main barrier to the development of what Habermas would call “common interests” is the decentralized political structure of Jordan.

Jordan has historically been comprised of numerous tribes and ethnic groups that were consolidated by a centralized, bureaucratic government; however, Jordan has over the last couple of decades become increasingly politically fragmented because of initiatives imposed by the

²³Lynch, *State Interests*, 21.

²⁴ Habermas, *Structural*, 17.

government. During the later years of the 1980s and the early 1990s, the Jordanian government initiated political and economic liberalization programs. These reforms were prompted by series of bloody riots that broke out initially in the southern city of Ma'an in 1989 after the government had cut subsidies and other types of welfare payments in a structural-adjustment agreement with the IMF, which led to a sharp rise in the price of several basic commodities.²⁵ In the aftermath of the riots, King Hussein called for new parliamentary elections; however, political parties were still banned until 1992 and even then were expressly forbidden from having financial or organizational ties to any outside bodies. This clause on the financial funding was implicitly aimed at diminishing the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and pan-Arabist parties that existed in other Middle Eastern countries. These parties could be considered to be “tied to outside bodies” and prevented from participating in Jordanian elections. Finally, before the 1993 elections, the government adopted the “one-person, one-vote system.”²⁶ Glen E. Robinson explains the political significance of this new electoral law:

In prior elections, each citizen could vote for as many candidates as there were seats in the electoral district... [e]ach voter in Jordan had between two to nine votes to distribute among candidates in [their] district. It was widely believed that the impact of this system in the 1989 elections was the election of more “ideological” candidates- Islamists and leftists- as people could cast their “first” vote for a clan member and then cast their “second” vote on ideological grounds... Making voters choose between these was rightly seen by the government to favor tribal gatherings at the expense of political parties.²⁷

Thus, as Robinson explains, these new election laws were a means by which the government diffused the power of Islamic or leftists parties and solidified decentralized, tribal political ties. Mr. Akram Idrees, a political reformist and leader of an Amman debate club, agrees

²⁵ Robinson, “Defensive,” 391.

²⁶ Robinson, “Defensive,” 395.

²⁷ Ibid.

that the election laws of 1989 and 1993 significantly fragmented Jordan's political society. Mr. Idrees stated that the regime "worked to segment" Jordanian society and consequently tribal influence and power in the political process is "getting worse."²⁸ Mr. Zeidan, a free-lance translator and founder of an Amman-based book club, also agrees that tribalism is "stronger than ever in Jordan."²⁹

The political identification with tribal affiliation, which has by many accounts become significantly worse over recent years, is a clear barrier to the development of strong national or party-affiliated interests or platforms. According to Islamic reformist, Tayseer Klob, this is precisely the issue the reform movement is facing right now in Jordan. Mr. Klob, explains that while many Jordanians are concerned with single issues that "affect them directly"- including nationality laws, gender discrimination, labor union rights- they are not able to see the systemic political crisis that cause all of these problems. For example, he cited the recent electrical workers' strike and the teachers' strike as examples of how widespread corruption and unfair political and economic policies are not understood and acted upon collectively. Rather, each affected group is concerned with the political issue that affects them personally. He concludes that within this climate of political decentralization and single-issue movements, it is difficult to raise awareness and gain support for significant political and economic reform.³⁰

Thus, the ability of Jordanians to actively determine, verbalize, and act upon "common concerns" on a national level is limited. The election laws of 1993 in particular created political decentralization in Jordan, which had caused tribal affiliation to become the most prominent

²⁸ Akram Idrees, Interview.

²⁹ Mohammad Zeidan, Interview.

³⁰ Tayseer Klob, Interview.

political identity. In addition, past and present laws concerning parties diffused the power of these political groups to participate in government. These political realities make it extremely difficult to develop cohesive, politically salient “common concerns” in the Jordanian public sphere. Political and economic problems are more generally broken down into single-issue movements that are discussed and acted upon by relatively small segments of the population.

The Obstacles to “Inclusivity” and Equality of “Status”

The other key characteristics of the public sphere, according to Habermas, is the inclusive nature of the public sphere. However exclusive certain aspects of the public might be in a given instance, the public sphere is never entirely closed off to all private citizens that wish to participate. Furthermore, the public sphere “disregards status” in that no matter a private person’s status, they enjoy a degree of social equality in terms of their ability to share ideas, gain information, or participate in the public sphere.³¹ In Jordan, the youth in particular are faced with significant obstacles to the political public sphere because of social and political realities that diminish inclusivity and equality of status.

The Jordanian government has up until very recently, made it very difficult to publicly organize for even non-political gatherings. The Public Gatherings Law, which required government permission to hold public meetings or demonstrations was only amended in March of 2011.³² Mr. Idrees’s experience as a founder of an Amman-based debate club exemplifies the ramifications of these policies. According to Mr. Idrees, it was still very difficult for him and his colleagues to establish their debate club that he in Amman, even after the Public Gatherings Law

³¹ Habermas, *Structural*, 16.

³² Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2012.”

was amended. He explains that at all of his debates the police register the names of everyone participating, including people are merely part of the audience.³³

Mr. Idrees believes that this kind of government action make it difficult to get young Jordanians involved in public activities like the debate club because they are apprehensive of being “in the system” or of being affiliated with political or subversive groups. After evaluating the statistics on youth involvement in community clubs or activities, it is apparent that young Jordanians indeed seem reluctant to engage in the public sphere. According to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Higher Council for the Youth, less than 10% of Jordanians participate in civil society organizations (like student councils, profession organizations, and political parties), while only 1.2% of the survey sample listed “youth clubs/organizations” as a preferred activity.³⁴ Clearly, Jordanian youths are to a large extent excluding themselves from participating in institutions in the public sphere, whether they be political or not. I believe that many of the causes of this self-exclusion are rooted in restrictive government policies and the apprehension and apathy that they have bred.

It is also important to note that women in particular are in many ways socially, economically, and politically excluded from the public sphere. According to the Higher Council for the Youth, young women in Jordan “experience significantly more restrictions” on their mobility than young men, as women are largely confined to activities “within education and the home.” Economically speaking, women in Jordan have very limited opportunities. Reportedly, almost two-thirds of females 15 and older are housewives and female unemployment is nearly three times higher than male unemployment. Part of the reason women seem to experience more

³³ Akram Idrees, Interview.

³⁴ Hashemite Kingdom, “National Strategy,” 6.

restricted mobility seems to be the social views about women and women's roles. According to the Higher Council for the Youth, Jordanians believe "rather unanimously" that husbands/fathers should provide family incomes and wives/mother should have the prime responsibility for housework and childcare.³⁵ Politically, women also are sheltered from the public sphere. According to Mr. Idrees and Mr. Klob, women are generally less involved in protests and reform demonstrations. Mr. Idrees noted that while women are a significant portion of the debate audiences, they usually only comprise about 10-20% of the people at demonstrations.³⁶ Mr. Klob similarly noted that women were not usually present for most of the reform protests, he felt in large part due to concerns for their safety.³⁷

Not only do women in Jordan face exclusions to the public sphere, but they also do not enjoy equal status with men in the public sphere. The most glaring example of this ties directly with the recent constitutional amendments. Reformers had demanded that The Royal Constitutional Committee revise article 6, which prohibits discrimination based on race, language, or religion, to include gender. However, the final draft did not include this revision.³⁸ Another example of women's unequal status before the law is Jordan's nationality law, which allows a man to pass his nationality to a foreign-born spouse and his children, but denies women this same right.³⁹ However, women's unequal status is not only legally, but also seems to be

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Akram Idrees, Interview.

³⁷ Tayseer Klob, Interview.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2012."

³⁹ Ibid.

somewhat socially accepted. The Higher Council for the Youth reported that 45.6% of males surveyed and 25.8% of females surveyed believe that women are not equal to men.

Thus, the political public sphere in Jordan faces significant problems in terms of its inclusivity and equality. In general, government policies have strongly discouraged young Jordanians from engaging in public activities, and women in particular experience significant economic, social, and political exclusion from the public sphere and are legally and socially unequal to men in the public sphere. I believe that these barriers to inclusivity and equality in the public sphere help explain my survey respondents lack of awareness of the constitutional reforms, as approximately two-thirds of my respondents were unaware of the recent constitutional reforms, with women having a higher rate of unawareness (69%) compare to men (50%). Essentially, I think it is understandable that young Jordanians, especially women, they do not follow or know of specific political developments because the political public sphere, where this information is available, is somewhat exclusionary and unequal.

Stifled Critical-Rational Debate: The Jordanian Experience of “Refuedalization”

According to Habermas, critical-rational debate is a vital component of the public sphere because it is through critical debate that private citizens discuss and verbalize common concerns and form “public opinion.” However, Habermas notes that when state and private interests are blurred, a process called refuedalization occurs in which the public sphere and rational- critical debate is replaced by mass media and powerful state interests in creating public opinion.⁴⁰ I believe Jordan, in its own way, is experiencing this process of refeudalization because laws

⁴⁰ Habermas, *Structural*, 36.

concerning freedom of press and freedom of speech, as well as the government's influence in mass media severely limits critical-rational debate.

Jordanian law imposes many limitations on speech and the press. Jordan criminalizes speech critical of the King, government officials and institutions, Islam, and speech deemed insulting to other persons. In 2010 a revision of the penal code increased penalties for some speech offense, and the 2010 Law on Information System Crimes extended these provisions to online expressions. The Press and Publication Law allows for fines of almost \$40,000 for speech that denigrates the government or religion. Furthermore, Journalists must belong to the Jordan Association to work legally, and those who are critical of the government have sometimes been excluded from this organization. The association does not include journalists who are working for internet-based news outlets, leaving them with limited legal protections.⁴¹

Recently, there have been new laws or revisions of laws concerning freedom of speech and freedom of the press. For example, in 2010 the government dropped clauses from the law that allowed for warrantless police searches at online media outlets. In addition, the constitutional reforms of 2011 included a clause that stated that any form of communication between citizens is private, and not subject to censorship or confiscation. The constitutional amendments also stated that violations of the law would be tried by civil courts, not the military-run State Security Court, which is now only supposed to try cases of treason, espionage, and terrorism.

Yet, these changes have not necessarily meant an increase in speech or journalistic freedoms.⁴² For example, a journalist for the *Gerasa News*, Jamal Al-Mutaseb, is currently set to

⁴¹ Freedom House, "Freedom of the Press 2011."

⁴² Ibid.

be tried by the State Security Court in connection with his coverage of a corruption investigation. According to *Reporters Without Borders*, Al-Mutaseb was arrested after quoting an unnamed parliamentarian as saying that he had been given royal directives not to indict the former government minister in the “Sakan Karim” corruption case. According to the stipulations of the recent amendments, Al-Mutaseb’s speech should be protected under the Jordanian constitution and he should not be tried by the State Security Court but by a civilian court.⁴³ Mr. Klob also mentioned this case as indicative of the fact that despite these new supposed reforms, journalistic freedoms and free speech is still severely limited in Jordan. Mr. Klob says that even in alternative spaces like social media sites and online outlets where people feel more free to express their opinions, there is still a risk of being censored or punished.⁴⁴

There is also the issue of the government’s pervasive role in mass media, as many of the major news outlets in Jordan are partially or fully owned by the government. One of the main television news programs in Jordan, Al Ahkbar, is run by JRTV, which is owned by the Jordanian government. Indeed, on the JRTV’s website it explicitly states that one of its “core values” is “loyalty” to “the nation and the king.”⁴⁵ Many major newspapers in Jordan have similar ties to the government. The popular daily newspaper, Al Ra’ai is run by the government-owned Jordan Press Foundation, and the government also holds shares in another major newspaper Ad-Dustour. These media sources were all listed as top sources of news by the respondents of my survey, indicating that a large number of young Jordanians receive their political news from government influenced and regulated sources.

⁴³ Reporters Without Borders, “Journalist to be tried before state security court for corruption case coverage,” 25 April 2012, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4f9a53df2.html>, accessed 4 May 2012.

⁴⁴Tayseer Klob, Interview.

⁴⁵ JRTV Website.

Thus, I believe it is accurate to say that in the Jordanian context, there are severe limitations to the ability of young citizens to engage in critical-rational debate. Jordanian press and speech laws make it difficult to offer critical perspectives to the public sphere, and even new laws designed to further protect these freedoms can still be side-stepped by the government in their interpretations of these laws. Furthermore, the pervasive role that the government plays in mass media suggests that the Jordanian sphere is experiencing what Habermas calls “refeudalization” in that the state has the power to influence public opinion.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, I believe my findings have shown that my initial assumptions were correct. Young Jordanians have low levels of awareness of the recent constitutional reforms and they do get a lot of their political information from official media sources. As I have argued in the previous section, I interpreted these results to mean that the political public sphere in Jordan is severely limited in several key ways. First, political decentralization, cause in large part by previous election and political party laws, has seriously inhibited the ability of Jordanians to articulate national common concerns. In addition, government laws concerning public organizations as well as policies and social attitudes towards women have made the public sphere somewhat exclusive and unequal. Finally, restrictions on press and speech freedoms as well as the government’s influence in the media has greatly limited critical-rational debate in Jordan. Although there are doubtlessly exceptions to these findings, I believe overall my research proves that in many respects, young Jordanians have limited access to the political public sphere and are therefore less likely to be very active or informed about politics.

The results of this study imply that the recent constitutional reforms, although intended and thought of by many as a sign of significant political progress in Jordan, are not necessarily a sign of greater political reform or democracy in Jordan. Clearly, even some of the most valuable reforms, like the relegation of legal cases to the civilian courts instead of the State Security Court, are not being implemented in ways that increase the political freedoms of Jordanians. I conclude, similarly to Robinson's interpretation of the political and economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, that the constitutional amendments of 2011 were largely initiated by the government as a way to appease emerging protest movements while still maintaining much of its power. That is not to say that the reform movements in Jordan are not important or cannot produce actual and significant political results. Clearly, the fact that Jordanians are engaged in reform movements or protests even at a limited level show that spaces do exist where Jordanians can engage in the political public sphere. However, I do believe that the reform movement in Jordan is definitely stifled because of the limits imposed on the political public sphere by the government.

Although I believe that these implications can be drawn from my study, there are still a variety of further questions that arose from my findings. First of all, I think that my research raises questions about the the legal and governmental systems in Jordan, specifically how laws are actually produced, passed through parliament, and then interpreted by the courts (especially the State Security Court). This is especially relevant to understanding recent reforms in Jordan. In addition, I think my research also led me to more specific questions about the youth in Jordan. For instance, I became curious as to the youth's opinion about women's inequality of status. Do most young Jordanians agree with the dominant legal and social realities that women should not

have the same rights as men, or is this younger generation more attune with notions of gender equality? Also, after seeing that most young Jordanians are not extremely active or interested in political life, I began to wonder what their primary interests and concerns are: for example, are they more concerned with their education, their economic status, marriage? I think the answers to these questions would offer a more complete picture of the youth in Jordan and the way they relate to their political system.

Study Limitations:

Although I feel that my research may offer insight into the awareness and perceptions of the Jordanian youth, there are couple important limitations to my study. First of all, though I feel that I collected enough survey responses to make a few conclusions that corroborated my other research, my sample size was relatively limited. In reality, 65 respondents is not representative of the whole Jordanian youth. Thus, even though I feel my survey results were reflective of realities that I found in my research, I admit that they may not represent the youth with complete accuracy. Furthermore, as the Arab Spring, and the reform movement in Jordan more specifically, is still a relatively recent phenomenon, it is possible that some of the ramifications of these events are not yet easy to observe or research. Although I feel that my research shows that even in the wake of the reforms the political public sphere in Jordan is still limited, there may be wider, more subtle effects of the Arab Spring that I was not able to detect.

Recommendations for Further Studies:

To address some of these limitations, and to expand upon the findings of my ISP, I recommend further inquiry into the reform movement in Jordan and Jordanian's political system. I believe a thorough study of the Jordanian reform movement would offer a great deal more

insight into the effects of the Arab Spring in Jordan. In addition, I think it is important to explore the alternative spaces that Jordanians use to engage with the public sphere, like social media sites or informal groups/networks, in order to counteract the restrictions on more traditional institutions of public sphere like print newspapers or television programs. Finally, I think understanding aspects of the Jordanian educational system and the way political science is taught (or not taught) in schools may be a factor to Jordanian youth's perceptions and relationship with their politic system.

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Appendix A: Written Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Jordanian Youth's Political Awareness and Perceptions of Reform in Post-Arab Spring Era

Krista Vendetti, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, United States
School for International Training – Jordan: Modernization and Social Change

Instructions:

Please read the following statements carefully and mark your preferences where indicated. Signing below indicates your agreement with all statements and your voluntary participation in the project. Please ask the researcher if you have any questions regarding this consent form.

I am aware that this interview/survey is conducted by an independent undergraduate researcher with the goal of evaluating the Jordanian Youth's opinions and awareness of the 2011 constitutional reforms.

I am aware that the information I provide is for research purposes only.

I am aware that I have the right to full anonymity upon request, and that upon request the researcher will omit all identifying information from both notes and drafts.

I am aware that I have the right to refuse to answer any question and to terminate my participation at any time, and that the researcher will answer any questions I have about the study.

I am aware of and take full responsibility for any risk, physical, psychological, legal, or social, associated with participation in this study.

I am aware that I will not receive monetary compensation for participation in this study, but a copy of the final study will be made available to me upon request.

I [do / do not] give the researcher permission to use my name and position in the final study.

I [do / do not] give the researcher permission to use my organizational affiliation in the final study.

I [do / do not] give the researcher permission to use data collected in this interview in a later study.

**Date
Signature**

Participant's

Researcher's Signature

Participant's Printed Name

Thank you for participating!

Questions, comments, complaints, and requests for the final written study can be directed to:

Dr. Raed Al-Tabini, Mokhtar Bouba, SIT Jordan Academic Director
Telephone (962) 077 7176318
Email: raed.altabini@sit.edu

Appendix B: Survey

Researcher: Krista Vendetti

Program: SIT Jordan: Modernization and Social Change

Survey: Jordan Constitutional Reforms 2011

Please Note that Participation in this Survey is Optional!

1. Are you aware of the 42 Constitutional Amendments that were approved last year?

----- yes ----- no

2. Where/From who did you learn about these Amendments to the Constitution? (Check all that apply)

----- newspaper: please specify which paper (s):

----- television program: please specify which program (s):

----- radio program: please specify which program (s):

----- relative/friend/teacher: please specify:

2. Overall, are you in agreement with the proposed amendments?

----strongly agree ----somewhat agree ----somewhat disagree ---- strongly disagree

3. Please list the three amendments that you feel are most important to you:

a. -----

b. -----

c. -----

4. Do you identify with the citizens that called for these reforms?

----- Not at all -----Somewhat -----Very much so

4. Do you believe further reforms are needed?

-----yes -----no ----- I don't know

5. Do you usually follow politics/ political news?

----- constantly (several times a week)

----- often (1-2 times a week)

----- sometimes (1or 2 every couple of weeks)

----- rarely (once or less a month)

----- never

6. How are you informed about politics/political news? (please check all that apply)

----- newspaper: please specify which paper (s):

----- television program: please specify which program (s):

----- radio program: please specify which program (s):

----- relative/friend/teacher: please specify:

7. Please specify your gender: (optional)

-----male ----- female

Thank You for your participation