King Abdullah replaces Jordanian cabinet

Patrick Martin
2 February 2011

In what appears to be preparation to confront, rather than appease, rising popular discontent, King Abdullah II of Jordan fired his current prime minister, Samir Rifai, 43, and replaced him Tuesday with a former prime minister, Maruf Bakhit, 64, who headed the government from 2005 to 2007.

Bakhit is identified with the blatantly rigged parliamentary elections of 2007, and with the security crackdown that followed a series of bombing attacks in Jordan during his tenure in office. He also served as an ambassador to Israel, Jordan's most powerful neighbor.

A statement issued by the palace declared, "Bakhit's mission is to take practical, quick and tangible steps to launch true political reforms, enhance Jordan's democratic drive and ensure safe and decent living for all Jordanians."

The principal bourgeois opposition party in Jordan, the Islamic Action Front, denounced the appointment. Bakhit "is not a man of reforms," an IAF spokesman said. "He carried out the worst parliamentary elections in Jordan in 2007. He is not the right person to run things at this current state and get Jordan out of crisis."

The IAF is a not-very-dissident faction of the ruling elite in Amman, loyal to the monarchy and seeking only a prime minister and cabinet based on a parliamentary majority derived from new elections. The current regime was selected by King Abdullah, who succeeded his father, King Hussein, in 1999.

IAF leader Hamzeh Mansur declared Monday, "There is no comparison between Egypt and Jordan. The people there demand a regime change, but here we ask for political reforms and an elected government."

There have been several large demonstrations in Amman in recent weeks, voicing popular discontent over high unemployment, poverty and low wages. Unemployment in Jordan stands officially at 14 percent, and, as in most of the Arab countries, young people under 30 are the vast majority of the population—in this case, 70 percent.

The Hashemite monarchy has maintained its rule through the time-honored method of divide-and-conquer, perfected by its former chief sponsor, British imperialism. The regime works to pit the local Arab population against the Palestinian refugees, who actually comprise the majority of the country's residents, brutally exploited economically and largely deprived of all political rights. The Jordanian army and security services are drawn largely from among the non-Palestinians.

The replacement of Rifai by Bakhit is one of a series of preemptive measures taken by beleaguered dictatorships and monarchies throughout the Middle East, as Arab rulers seek to forestall the spread of the mass movement that began in Tunisia and is now galvanizing Egypt, the most populous Arab nation.

In Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in power for 32 years, summoned an emergency session of parliament for Wednesday, as well as of the Shoura council, a consultative group. He called the session in a nationally televised speech on Sunday, where he denied reports that he was grooming his son as his successor and declared himself "in favor of change."

Saleh announced he would propose cuts in income taxes, and an increase in social security payments for needy families, tuition exemptions for students at state universities, and measures to provide job opportunities for young people. He also has raised soldiers' salaries.

This follows a series of rallies in the capital city, Sana, last week, and further unrest in provincial centers. On Monday, several thousands rallied in the town of Maweya in Taiz province, in southern Yemen, where a separatist movement has been active since the merger of North Yemen and South Yemen in 1990. Another 1,500 rallied in Dhammar province in the central part of the country.

The bourgeois opposition coalition, called the Joint

© World Socialist Web Site

Meeting Parties, has called more demonstrations for Thursday, including in the capital city. The JMP has not called for Saleh's ouster, but has publicly opposed plans by the ruling party to modify term limits that would require Saleh to leave office in 2013.

Saleh is a key US ally who has permitted US commando raids and Predator drone attacks on alleged Al Qaeda targets in rural Yemen. His party has offered to coopt the JMP into the cabinet with a handful of ministries, as well as to negotiate on term limits, but the JMP has not yet agreed to formal talks with the government. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for April.

In Algeria, the ruling bourgeois-nationalist FLN has banned all demonstrations "for security reasons" since the protests erupted last month next door in Tunisia. The government of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika is the current representative of the military dictatorship that has ruled since the FLN took power in 1962 after the eight-year guerrilla war against French colonialism.

A newly formed bourgeois opposition coalition, the National Co-ordination for Change and Democracy, has called a march for Saturday, February 12 in Algiers to demand the "departure of the regime." Until now, street protests in Algeria have been spontaneous responses to price increases and unemployment, or in celebration of the fall of the Tunisian dictatorship.

In Syria, where a military-backed dynasty has ruled for 40 years, the government has made a number of minor economic concessions to the population in the wake of the Tunisian upheaval, including increased subsidies for home heating. Since he succeeded his father Hafez in 2000, President Bashir Assad has pursued policies aimed at opening the Syrian economy to foreign capital and the market.

President Assad gave a rare interview to the *Wall Street Journal*, published Monday, in what appeared to be an effort to reassure Western investors that Syria would not be affected by the mass radicalization sweeping the Arab countries. He claimed that his country was politically stable, despite "more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries," because his government was more associated with popular opposition to the United States and Israel.

Assad promised the business newspaper that his government would continue its policies of economic "reform," i.e., the same free-market measures that have provoked mass opposition in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site