

## Political Reform in Jordan (2011 & 2022): Positioning Youth Political Participation in Large Power Distance National Culture

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### Abstract

*The engagement of youth in the formal political process is essential not only in building stable and peaceful societies but also in developing policies that respond to the specific needs of younger generations. This paper focuses on modeling the impact of the large power distance dimension of culture in developing youth political participation in Jordan. The study also made a comparison of the efforts of Jordan in promoting political participation among youth in 2011 and 2021 as part of political reform strategies. It also provides potential solutions that will lead the way to a more inclusive national culture. The study utilized the power distance index of Hofstede's cultural dimension. The result of the study revealed that the Jordanian culture is dynamic, and as such may witness a level of transformation, while keeping the power vertical. This is accomplished through the active involvement and engagement of youth in the political process and decision-making through unconventional participation. However, the establishment of both committees clarifies the placement of youth in political participation in large power distance natural culture, where the gap is wider than expected. It was recommended that youth should take bold steps in establishing promising networks in their field of expertise, social circle, and beyond. They should eliminate barriers to engagement in political participation including the creation of parties that are based on ideologies and aspirations.*

**Keywords:** National Culture, Large Power Distance, Youth, Political Participation, The Jordanian National Dialogue Committee 2011, The Committee for the Modernization of Political System 2021

### INTRODUCTION

Youth has always been a keyword for Jordan. Social, economic, and political development and reform have been linked with the amount of attention given to this social component that makes up nearly one-third of the country's population, which are aged between 16 to 30 years. Jordan's population is relatively young (UNICEF, 2021). Thus, this is an indicator of both opportunities and liabilities when it comes to the way and manner official authorities interact and involve youth within the dynamic processes of national building and growth.

Consequently, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (current Jordanian political system) celebrated its centennial this year (1921-2021) as an absolute (absolute/complete) constitutional monarchy with a relatively large power distance culture based on the vertical distribution of power. On the one hand, the king, who is the head of state and commander-in-chief, directly appointed 65 members of the upper Senate and 130 elected members of the lower House of Representatives. On the other hand, the Jordanian constitution has gone through three stages starting from the Basic Law of 1928, the Constitution of the era of independence in 1946, and the current amended constitution of 1952 (Al-Mashaqbeh, 2018).

The year 1989 marks an important date in the history of the kingdom's journey towards democratization and political reform. After being paused in 1967, parliamentary elections took place in 1989 after protests in Ma'an and other southern towns asking for the lifting of martial laws, reforming electoral laws, and removing restrictions on freedom of the press and freedom of expression. Therefore, the widespread social unrest provided the main impetus for substantive and even rapid movement in the long-discussed political liberalization process. Nonetheless, the austerity plan which brought about a rise in the prices of goods such as fuel was what triggered those riots in many parts of Jordan (Ryan, 1998).

Consequently, Late King Hussein of Jordan responded to those demands by lifting the existing martial laws. He was able to achieve this by dismissing Zaid Al-Rifai and appointing Zaid ibn Shaker to form a new

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government. In 1986, a new electoral law was passed and the decision to reintroduce parliamentary elections went smoothly (Lucas, 2012).

Back in 2011, when the Arab Spring wave swept into the region, Jordan underwent reform movements by demanding not for regime change, but a rather greater and more genuine democratization. Thus, these movements were led by many actors including the youth movements (Ryan, 2011). Taking this as an example, it can be noted that youth who are demanding greater opportunities and the provision of their basic rights intersect, to a great extent, with the large power distance culture. As a result, this created a rift between the system and the youth.

Furthermore, more democratization within a large power distance culture must involve reform processes that do not only need to be executed through constitutional amendments but rather through an intentional upgrading and updating of various leadership models based on political, economic, and social levels.

### **THE PROBLEM OF THE STUDY**

The subject of youth development in Jordan is of great importance when discussing reform at political, economic, and social levels. Both the government, internally, and other external agents aiding Jordan in development processes, such as the World Bank, IMF, UNICEF, USAID, and various European Union organizations, understand the roles youth can play to become well integrated into the system. They are also aware of the gaps that need to be filled for youth to receive a fair share of their needs as lawful citizens and their responsibilities as active agents of change. The main problem of the study lies in addressing the impact of large power distance national culture on youth development in Jordan. Modeling the large power distance dimension of culture in youth development in Jordan will clarify the relationship gaps between Jordan's youth and Jordan's political system. It will also underline failures that led to the lack of substantial development for youth while offering a probable solution focused on upholding leadership strategies that will lead the way to a more inclusive national culture. Thus, the aim here is to expand horizontally towards a more balanced level of distribution of power.

Discussing large power distance in describing Jordan's national culture, and its effects on youth development while exploring the hierarchal system in the country, aims at pointing out the levels and aspects of improvement that can take place within the existing system. However, this would help to scale out and reach out to key factors that can play a major role in bringing the desired reform and sustainable growth. Therefore, rather than changing the hierarchical internal structure, the current system stands a chance to improve by building "supported networks to work alongside the existing hierarchy." (Ehrlichman, 2021, p.35) Hierarchies can be good in achieving specific results but, at the same time, they create unequal access to information and power which erodes trust (Ehrlichman, 2021, p.34). Culture is dynamic, not static, and change and improvement are part of the cultural cycle of growth. Revising and bringing in new dimensions to national culture must be intentional and focused. Instead of allowing large power distance to bring more friction between the top of the pyramid and the base of the pyramid, clear solutions that aim at minimizing the gap and creating larger points of linkages is one way to bring more efficiency to the system. This is especially because "hierarchical structures are limited in their ability to address complex and multifaceted issues." (Ehrlichman, 2021, p.32)

The idea of creating effective networks among youngsters and promoting positive participation for youth has been present as part of the modernization process in the country. Subsequently, the system is highly aware of the importance of youth participation in maintaining stability and bringing growth to the country. The All Jordan Youth Committee, established in 2006, is an example of a royal initiative to pool and attract young people from all governorates of the Kingdom. In addition, it opens its doors to all volunteers and beneficiaries to strengthen feelings of belonging and loyalty and allow them to promote initiatives that could serve their communities (Jordan Youth Commission, 2021). However, such initiatives aim at developing youth and investing in their potential.

The study problem aims to identify and compare two political reform initiatives in the large power distance national culture on youth development in Jordan. While looking at the various efforts to include youth, the paper aims to track youth political participation within a high power distance culture by comparing two political

committees: the Jordanian National Dialogue Committee 2011 and The Committee for the Modernization of Political System 2021 as part of political reform. It also shows how youth participation within a hierarchical system is possible, and yet it is still confined within the control of the top of the pyramid and its political elites.

### **The Study Objectives**

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Model the impact of the large power distance dimension of culture in developing youth political participation in Jordan.
2. Compare Jordan's efforts to promote political participation among youth in 2011 and 2021 as part of political reform strategies.
3. Offer potential solutions that will lead the way to a more inclusive national culture.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

National culture is socialized through the agency of various national institutions (Schwartz, 2014). National culture is built by the nation-state as a political entity under which people identify with and belong to its system of values, beliefs, attitudes, and the multitude of aspects underlying the concept of culture. A culture, as a complex and deep concept, is "a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms using which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." (Geertz, 1973)

According to Hofstede's onion model of culture, the multilayers of culture from symbols, heroes, rituals, and values are all reflected in the practices of that specific culture. To make sense of any national culture and its practices and preferences, there is the need to also recognize that culture is learned, and not initiated, dynamic not static, and continuously changing. Thus, this is a point of "hope" in this paper where we are trying to suggest that a change in the culture is one way to achieve development and support youth to be part of the nation's growth.

To answer why and how cultures behave and act in certain ways, and to understand the various aspects of cultures, Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture was one of the earliest attempts to use statistical data to examine cultural values. In his study, he surveyed more than one hundred thousand IBM employees from 50 countries and three geographical regions. After careful analysis, each country and region was assigned a rank of 1 to 50 in four identified value dimensions (individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity/femininity) (Samover et al., 2013). The dimension of power distance is related to the different solutions to the basic problems of human inequality. Power distance index scores were higher for Eastern European, Latin, Asian, and African countries and lower in Germanic and English-speaking Western countries (Samover et al., 2015).

In large power distance in particular, power is a basic fact of society; hierarchy means existential inequality; subordinates are expected to be told what to do; corruption is frequent; and income distribution in society is uneven (Samover et al., 2015). That being said, it is normal to find the main component of culture - The People - dependent on the nation-state and lacking a sense of initiation and motivation to be active agents of change. The hierarchy in large power distance portrays a vertical relationship, and the gap between the people on top and the people at the bottom is wide. Equality is absent in large power distance cultures, however, even with the presence of this hierarchy and a national culture that depends on this kind of relationship. Hence, the political system does have the ability to dynamically execute different strategies that aim to tighten the gap and grow into a more inclusive culture built on mutual interest.

Power distance is defined as "the extent to which members of society accept the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally." (Hofstede, 1980). Travaglino (2017) highlighted that cultural values, especially when applied to the political sphere, is a significant third route that drives an individual's engagement decision. Hence, this third route is beyond the use of instruments and emotions. Hofstede's work has been shown to have high validity and reliability as indicated by robust factor analysis results (Shane, 1994).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research models Hofstede's cultural large power distance dimension in youth development in Jordan. Hofstede's dimension of power distance deals with the fact that all individuals in societies are not equal. It also expresses the attitude of the culture towards these inequalities amongst us and the "extent to which less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally." (Hofstede & Bond, 1988).

Moreover, Jordan scores 70 in the national culture dimension of power distance, while youth development is facing multiple challenges on the ground. This research explains the effects of the hierarchal system of a large power distance culture on youth's lack of development and minimal integration into the system. The research focuses on the centralization of power within a limited political elite as a natural production of large power distance culture, which consequently leads to a multitude of challenges faced by youth. Most importantly, this includes the slight youth involvement in the political reform processes, economic strategies, and the alarming unemployment rates in the country. This paper, however, is focused on the involvement of youth in the political reform process.

### **The Establishment of the Jordanian National Dialogue Committee 2011**

A committee was formed in Jordan after the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions in 2011. The idea behind the establishment of these committees is to draft two new laws for the establishment of parties and the organization of elections. Factually, it faced several problems that caused the resignation of many members (Aljazeera, 2015).

The Jordanian National Dialogue Committee was formed in early March 2011 under the directive of King Abdullah II of the government to hold a national dialogue on political and economic reform in the country. This was amid the demands for political and constitutional reforms that have swept the Jordanian streets since the end of 2010. Therefore, this is in coincidence with the Arab revolutions that swept through Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and others (Aljazeera, 2015).

It was formed by the government of Marouf Al-Bakhit, which came after the dismissal of King Abdullah II, the government of Samir Al-Rifai, in the wake of the demands for its dismissal during the sit-in and the marches witnessed by the Jordanian street (Aljazeera, 2015).

The committee carried out its work intensively, and over weeks of national meetings and dialogues within the committee, and with popular activities in the different governorates. Hence, the committee accomplished its work through three main committees, namely: The General Framework Committee, the General Election Law Committee, and the Party Law Committee (Jordanian National Dialogue Committee, 2011).

The most important achievement of the committee is its proposals on organizing the process and constitutional amendments related to elections, and the relationship between the legislative authority and the executive authority. This is done so that an independent body undertakes the supervision and elections process. Also, According to (Shteiwi, 2011), in his article "After the King's Speech" published on Thursday, June 16, 2011, this body refers complaints to the court instead of the House of Representatives.

Constitutional Amendments of 2011 in light of the committee's work were authorized by King Abdullah II after the councils of senates and deputies' approval. In his book titled "Jordanian Political System", Amin Al-Mashaqeh includes the complete amendments in Chapter II on pages 23 all through 31.

Some take on the outcomes vary between not giving the Parties Law the needed attention. It also includes the missing separation between politics and religion in partisan work, by not allowing the establishment of political parties on religious grounds to take place in Egypt after the revolution. Politics is about power and interests, and the management of public affairs involves competition and conflict that religion must not be allowed to be used by any of the parties in this worldly struggle (Shteiwi, 2011).

Consequently, the Jordanian government has drafted new laws and has amended existing laws to conform to constitutional amendments. Theoretically, for political participation to flourish, a country must establish laws

that support citizens to be part of the political process and should support civic society organizations and movements for political participation to become part of the citizens' role to influence political decisions in the country (Al-Mashaqbeh & Al-Khalayleh, 2016).

In short, the lengthy report prepared by the committee is focused on several main axes of which the most important is the need to strengthen the human rights system in the country by reviewing relevant laws and tightening penalties for human rights violators. It also spoke about the need to strengthen the authority and independence of the judiciary, and the importance of working to achieve social justice and ensure equal opportunities for all citizens alike. It stressed the importance of fighting corruption and strengthening the integrity system through the issuance of the Illicit Gain Law, and encouraging academic institutions to establish an anti-corruption observatory (Aljazeera, 2015).

### **The Establishment of the Committee for the Modernization of Political System 2022**

The Royal Committee for the Modernization of the Political System is a committee formed by a royal will after King Abdullah II sent a letter on June 10, 2021, AD to Samir Al-Rifai. He was entrusted with chairing this committee, whose task will be to draft a new election law and a new draft law for political parties. The committee is to consider the related constitutional amendments judging by the two laws and mechanisms of parliamentary work, in addition to the empowerment of women and youth, and the search for ways to stimulate their participation in party and parliamentary life.

The Jordanian House of Representatives approved the draft amendment of the constitution as stated by the government, with some amendments being made, most notably about the National Security Council and foreign policy.

According to Jordan News Agency, the deputies refused that the King chairs the National Security Council, and approved that its meetings be at the invitation of the King when necessary, in his presence or with whomever he delegates, and that the Council's decisions are enforceable upon approval by the King. This is in addition to including the Director of Public Security as a member of the Council, and renaming it as the "Security Council" and "The National Council and Foreign Policy" for more inclusiveness related to security, defense, and foreign policy. Thus, the functions of the Council, according to what was stated by the government, were all issues related to the defense of the Kingdom, national security, and foreign policy.

According to Jordan News Agency, the House of Representatives, they approved the decisions of the Legal Committee, which rejected the government's draft for several amendments. Thus, it was represented in Article 3 of the amendments by adding paragraph 2 "The King is the President of the National Security and Foreign Policies Council," as well as not approving paragraph "J" of Article 4. Hence, this is related to the appointment of the members of the National Security Council and the foreign policy, acceptance of their resignations, and the termination of their services by the King.

The Council also rejected Article 9 related to amending Article 56 of the Constitution by canceling the word "ministers" in it and replacing it with the phrase "working minister". This was done so that the government project was violated, and returning to the original text in Article 56, which states: "The House of Representatives has the right to refer ministers to the Public Prosecution with justified reasons." Therefore, the referral decision is issued only by a majority of the members who make up the House of Representatives.

The Council also voted on the decision of the Legal Committee not to approve the government's project to amend the second paragraph of Article 10 of the amendments, which was stipulated in Article 59 of the Constitution "The Constitutional Court has the right to interpret the provisions of the Constitution if it is requested by a decision issued by the Council of Ministers or by a decision taken by a majority of the National Assembly. Its decision shall be effective after its publication in the Official Gazette."

The amendment came by canceling the phrase "one of the two houses of the nation by a majority" and replacing it with the phrase "no less than 25 percent of the members of either the Senate or the House of Representatives," which was rejected by the parliament resulting to a return to the original text.

The Council also voted to approve the decision of the Legal Committee not to approve Article 23, paragraph 1, which stipulated the abolition of the phrase “and he shall not be tried” and the phrase “or to try him or unless he was arrested,” which allows deputies to be tried while the parliament is in session without arresting them, and to return to the original text in Article 86 of the Constitution, paragraph 1, “No member of the Senate and the House of Representatives shall be arrested or tried during the session of the Assembly unless the Assembly to which he is affiliated issues a decision by an absolute majority that there is sufficient reason for his arrest or trial, or unless he is arrested in flagrante delicto. In the event of his arrest in this manner, the council must be informed of this immediately.”

The Council also approved the decision of the Legal Committee to approve Article 28 of the amendments with its reformulation, “The National Security Council shall be established,” instead of the National Security Council and foreign policy. He delegates it, and the council’s decisions are enforceable upon approval by the King.

With the completion of the discussion of the draft amendments and their approval, the House will have closed the curtain on those amendments to be submitted to the Senate. The approval of the House, which was voted on by 55 of its members and one abstention, comes after the House of Representatives approved Article 20 of the draft amending Article 75 of the Constitution, as it came from the Senate.

The “project” is the fourteenth amendment to the Jordanian constitution since 1952, and it included 25 articles. However, this is in addition to including the phrase “Jordanian women” in the title of Chapter Two of the constitution.

### **Comparison between The Jordanian National Dialogue Committee 2011 and The Committee for the Modernization of Political System 2021 in terms of Power Distance and Inclusion of Youth in the Political Process**

Ten years was the period that brought a higher level of inclusion for youth in the political system. The author believes that although The Jordanian National Dialogue Committee 2011 came as a result of the youth’s movement on the ground asking for political and economic reform, nevertheless, the amount of inclusion for youth and the new blood has not materialized at the stage. As a result, the whole political reform scene was run by the political elite who have been part of the Jordanian political system. Nonetheless, the sub-committees, established under the umbrella of The Jordanian National Dialogue Committee 2011, took into account the public opinion trends that crystallized during visits to the governorates and meetings in various gatherings and forums, including university students and faculty members. The National Dialogue Committee had formed teams in line with the directives of His Majesty the King on the necessity of conducting an extensive dialogue. It visited eleven governorates that were programmed in coordination with the administrative rulers. It has conducted many meetings with party and opinion leaders, representatives of the press, and the media, in addition to participating in various activities in partnership with youth clubs and representatives of federations and organizations According to the outputs of the National Dialogue Committee (2011), as found on their official website.

Several youth activists, who were calling for change on the ground, became part of the committee and the process of creating political change. This confirms the importance of youth activism and participation in the political scene and the political systems’ understanding of this social component. However, there has not been a substantial change on the ground that could be seen as a result of youth activism as a leading power. Thus, the hierarchy is still present in the formation and execution of the youth’s demands.

According to high power distance cultures, the relationship between citizens and officials is vertical. Therefore, this is represented by the fact that citizens were not the ones initiating those meetings but rather being invited as subordinates, being listened to not as decision makers but rather testing their directions and orientations based on which the political elites may decide the direction to be taken.

In comparison with The Committee for the Modernization of Political System 2022, 92 members were chosen by the King of Jordan to engage in a wide political dialogue that will eventually lead to reform and advancement in political life in Jordan, especially based on the fact that the country has entered its new centennial in 2021. The royal letter to the President of the Committee, Samir Al-Rifai, stressed the importance of the role of youth

and guided them to find effective ways of encouraging their participation in the political experience, including political parties and parliaments (Abdullah II, 2021).

According to the first meeting of the committee, its members were divided into six sub-committees, namely: Election Committee, Party Committee, Youth Empowerment Committee, Women Empowerment Committee, Local Administration Committee, and the Constitutional Amendments Committee related to the electoral laws, parties, and mechanisms of parliamentary work. Besides the wide range of topics tackled by those committees, the idea behind bringing Jordanians from various backgrounds exemplifies powerful networks that could be established based on those committees. Therefore, those committees comprised names that have a history in the political life in Jordan, including names of Jordanian youth and activists. Subsequently, this reflects the authority's realization to shed light on the youth's position in the political sphere.

In Large Power Distance National Culture, the vertical positioning of authority and the people makes it hard for them to organize and create structured efforts to have positive participation within the system. Individuals in those cultures prefer being told what to do, and they avoid initiation since power is a basic fact of society as Hofstede puts it (Samover et al., 2015)

## **RESULT**

As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the national culture like any other culture is dynamic and some layers of that culture may witness a level of transformation going through certain realization for the need for change, while keeping the power distance gap vertical. Also, some processes of inclusion for the base of the pyramid can provide a level of transformation in dynamics if applied willfully by the top of the pyramid. For instance, this can be achieved by allowing a wider space for the grassroots to be recognized and active in political processes and decision-making through unconventional participation like voting. Creating both committees clarifies the positioning of youths in political participation in large power distance national culture, where the gap is wider than expectations and demands.

In the case of the Committee for the Modernization of Political System 2021, for example, the choice of the head of the committee reinstates the high power distance dynamic and the centralization of power taking place since the head appointed for this committee is a political elite figure. Thus, this happens to be the same prime minister being dismissed by the king from his Prime Minister position bowing to anti-government protests inspired by a wave of unrest across the Arab world. King Abdullah II of Jordan dismissed Prime Minister Samir Rifai and his cabinet. Hence, he ordered a new premier to carry out speedy political reforms through which the Committee of National Dialogue was established (Greenberg, 2011).

Consequently, this realization that large power distance cultures will maintain this level of systemic hierarchy must lead youth to generate new ways to be present on the ground and create a movement in the political and social sphere through the activation of building networks on the youth level. Thus, this will be eventually connected to different types of networks where proactivity and positive engagement can start to reflect positive effects on the social and political level. Non-governmental organizations have a great deal of work that can be done within this sphere by supporting those networks logistically and financially.

“One of the most serious problems is the lack of new political leaders or even new people on the political scene, despite a large youth population that is highly educated and engaged. They are rather denied their legitimate role in building their society. This marginalization was one of the reasons for the expanding gap between public policies and people's expectations, as well as for the negative perceptions of some of the so-called political elite.” (Sabileh, 2022)

## **Recommendation**

As part of the Committee for the Modernization of Political System 2021, youth members could take courageous steps towards establishing promising networks in his/her field of focus and expertise in their social circles and beyond. This helps to dismantle the barriers that youth assume when it comes to being actively engaged in public work and political participation, including the creation of parties based on clear visions and aspirations. The structured work for achieving goals, be it political social, or economic, is no longer possible

