

Policy Paper

Increasing Democratic Political Engagement among University Students in Jordan

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Introduction

This paper examines issues which are limiting the democratic perception of Jordanian university students' political engagement in university life.

Historical background

The present level of political participation in Jordanian Universities cannot be analyzed without looking at the history of the Jordanian students' movement. This is complex and has been subjected to much political interference, which has had a direct impact on the current reality for student participation in Jordanian Universities. The policies regulating students' participation within the universities were created in an atmosphere of the wider conflict between the parties of the Jordanian political process. As a result, these policies to a large extent diminished the political participation of university students both inside and outside the universities.

While an unofficial students' movement existed before among university students and Jordanians studying abroad, 1962 witnessed the launch of The University of Jordan, and with it, an official university students' movement within the Kingdom. It also witnessed the beginning of the end of the students' movement in schools and colleges. Although the foundation of the University of Jordan was viewed as a historical and national event, politicized students' organizations were critical of the absence of a democratic framework in the university policies regarding both the academics and the students' activities.

In the mid-seventies, Yarmouk University was founded as the second official Jordanian university. This was soon followed in 1986 by the civilian section of the University of Mu'ta and in the same year the Jordanian University of Science and Technology. The number of Jordanian universities grew in the nineties, including the foundation of the Al Al-Bayt University in Mafraq, the Hashemite University in Zarka, and the Al-Balqa' Applied University which has faculties' across Jordan. In the same period, the foundation of a number of private universities was also established. The number of official and private universities has continued to grow, reaching ten official universities and at least double that of private universities.

Despite the obvious increase in the number of the Jordanian universities and accordingly, in the number of the Jordanian university students, the policies of admission, education and student activities continued to face sharp criticism, especially regarding the high cost of study both in the official and the private universities.

While the first university based organization started in the early 1960s, students' organizations first appeared in schools a decade earlier the birth of the "Jordanian Students' Conference" and it may be considered the actual beginning of the organized students' activity in Jordan. Both the Communist Party and the Baath Party played a big role in pushing the formation of the groups and the most prominent demands of the conference was the formation of a students' union in Jordan, the establishment of a national university, and the lowering the tuition fees in private schools. Shortly after the demands were announced, a number of the founding students were dismissed by their schools.

Later in 1959, the "General Union of Jordanian Students" was founded and was based in the Egyptian capital, Cairo. The Baathists were predominant its foundation and assumed its leadership. This domination, however, direct effect on the organization was political developments changed in the region, especially regarding the split between Egypt and Syria. The group was split into a two headed boy, one in Cairo controlled by the Nasserites, and the other in Damascus controlled by the Baathists. A third part of the Union appeared when the Baath party reached power in Baghdad, Iraq. All attempts to restore unity to the Union were not successful. In Jordan, the "General Union of Jordanian Students" had no real presence despite attempts by a number of Baathist students who succeeded to a small extent to form students' groups inside the University of Jordan. A number of the Baathist students were arrested in 1966 and others left the country. In 1968, the "General Union of Jordanian Students" was declared in the University of Jordan and its headquarters to be in Amman. In actuality, the leadership was under the control of the students' leadership in Damascus. This Union, however, was ended completely by the 1970 September war in Jordan.

In 1963, representatives of Jordanian students' associations in the Eastern European countries held a unifying conference which resulted in the announcement of the creation of "The Union of the Jordanian Students in Europe"; six months later, a number of Jordanian students who belonged to the Communist Party announced in the city of Jerash (north of the Capital Amman), the establishment of a "Jordanian Students' Union" with its headquarters in Amman. At the international level, the "Union of the Jordanian Students" became a member of the International Students' Federation and had remarkable activity in Europe, but this was not replicated in the Arab countries or Jordan due to the security prosecutions and campaigns against the communists, especially after 1979. The participation of students who belonged to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine added momentum to the Union in terms of organization and presence in many countries. It is worth mentioning, that the

name of the Union was changed upon the accession of the Democratic Front to become the “National Union of the Jordanian Students”.

In the period between 1967 and 1970, several students’ organizational frameworks appeared. The most notable, was the “National Union of the Jordanian Students” or the so called “Students’ Struggle Front” and the “Addiftain (the two banks) Students Union” which referred to the East and West Bank. These two organizations were directly associated with Palestinian factions. The Islamists, for their part, tried also to engage in the field of students’ activity through the “Muslim Students’ Union”, but this had no remarkable impact in the students’ arena, similar to many other students’ groups who had limited impact and members.

In 1972 “Union of the University of Jordan Students” was brought about through an initiative by the university administration at that time, to mark the first students’ body which no single political affiliation whereby its leadership was assumed by students who belonged to various parties. This union witnessed the first emergence of an Islamist focus, when in the fourth year of its existence, was led by a student from the Islamic movement. Owing to the fact that

this union was founded by an initiative of the university administration, there were many attempts to control its actions by the administration. The president of the university was given the right to request reconsideration of decisions by the Union. Efforts were also made to prevent the union from undertaking issues of sectarian, tribal and political nature. Nonetheless, the Union undertook activities of obvious political nature and as a result, clashed repeatedly with the University administration, especially over students’ demands for tuition fees. In 1973, the conflict escalated and resulted in security forces entering the university campus and arresting a number of the students of the Union who were organizing a strike in addition to the number of students dismissed from university for participating in the strike. The Union organized several other strikes which led to increased tension between the Union and the University administration. The tension led the administration to stop new elections. However, it did not announce the official dissolution of the Union.

Upon dissolving the “Union of the University of Jordan Students”, the idea of “Students’ Associations” was adopted. These were associations that existed in every academic department and were not attached to a unified organizational framework. Upon adopting this idea in the University of Jordan, it was applied in the universities of Yarmouk, Mu’tah, and the Jordanian University of Science and Technology. These associations continued to exist until 1992, a period which shows a significant decrease in student activity, especially in the political realm. However, this time marked a

period in which the Islamic students' movement emerged with the support of the Muslim Brotherhood, as a rival of the National and Leftist students' movement. The same period witnessed another two important events: the 1979 clashes, also known as the Land Day Exhibition Case, as well as the famous Yarmouk University clashes in 1986.

In 1990, following the removal of martial laws a year previously, a number of the active students' forces initiated demands to establish a general union of the Jordanian students to serve as a students' unionist body. They wanted to combine students from various universities and to be formally recognized by the state and the universities. Several coordination meetings were held and it was recommended to hold a referendum among the students of the University of Jordan to choose between the establishment of a general federation of the Jordanian students from all universities or the establishment of individual students unions separately at each university. The first option, "The Students' Unity Initiative," was backed by the Leftists, the National and the Islamic forces. The second option was supported by the "Independent Students Union," a government backed student body. The result of the referendum was in favor of the establishment of the "General Federation of the Jordanian Students", but this federation was not realized because official approvals were not granted and instead the single students' unions in the various universities were established and still exist to this day.

Legal Background

In order to avoid confusion, the legal background in this paper will address the major frameworks of students' representation and participation in the universities, which are clubs, unions and students' associations. It is worth noting, however, that most universities have almost identical frameworks for these institutions with only minor differences.

With regard to students' clubs, the regulations clearly indicate that establishment shall be under the direct supervision of the Deanship of the Students Affairs, who makes recommendations to the President of the University for a final decision. The regulations stipulate that the overall objective of these clubs is to support the students' hobbies inside and outside the university. In addition, the regulations address the detailed goals of these clubs and sum them up as follows:

- Encouraging voluntary trends, public service and teamwork among university students.

- Development and encouragement of talents and hobbies.
- Provide an opportunity for university students to participate in activities that suit their interests, abilities and aptitudes.
- Allow non-Jordanian students to participate in students' activities showing their cultures, interests and skills.
- Drawing students' attention to the aesthetic and appreciative aspects of student life.

Regulations of most universities explicitly forbid political activities in these clubs. For example, Article V of the first chapter of the regulations of the students' clubs at the University of Jordan stipulates that "students' clubs may not engage in political, sectarian or regional matters".

With regard to the establishment of these clubs, regulations require a minimum number of founding students, in addition to a minimum number of the general assembly members. For example, no elections may be held in the students' club at the Yarmouk University if the members of the general assembly are below 100 students.

Furthermore, the regulations stipulate membership conditions such as a minimum academic mark and a certain number of years at the same university. Most regulations prevent first and last year students to join. Another regulation ensures students are never subjected to any university penalty which prevents a person from joining any students' club.

With regard to the administrative and financial independent of these clubs, the regulations clearly constrain them. For example, the regulations of the students' clubs at the University of Jordan stipulate that a faculty member be put in charge to supervise the decisions of the administrative committee, although they do not have the right to vote. Financial matters are linked completely with the university administration. The administration determines the budgets and holds the power to approve or disapprove the amount of the membership fees. In addition, the signature of the Dean of Students' Affairs is required on all bank transfers upon disbursement and the university administration holds the power to dissolve the club.

Upon reviewing the students' unions situation, instructions regulating their activities in the universities are similar. The electoral system, perhaps, is the most prominent issue in the legal background of the students' unions. The regulations adopt the voting mechanism known as 'the one vote', which means that the student voter may vote for one candidate only and most universities prevent candidates from running through

alliances or lists, or even holding joint electoral campaigns combining more than one candidate.

In students' representation in the unions, there are differences between the universities. For example, the University of Jordan adopted a representation scheme based on the number of departments within the same college, so each department is represented by one seat, provided that the number of seats of each college is not less than three. Yarmouk University allocated one seat for each five hundred students and also required that the number of seats of each college not to be less than three.

The objectives of the unions are similar among the universities. Whilst regulations in some universities allow a broader and more comprehensive margin of activity, the common denominator is that the objectives and activities of the unions should not be inconsistent with the laws and goals of the university.

As for the financial and administrative independence, the circumstances are similar to the students' clubs. The unions enjoy greater autonomy than the clubs, especially regarding their administration. The financial side remains linked to the management of the university who has the power to determine the union's budget.

The students' associations have a less representative formula than the students' councils, whereas each college has its own students' association whose members are selected through direct election. A coordination committee is formed comprising heads of student societies in each college. The objectives of these associations are limited to leisure trips, sporting and artistic events, and strengthening the ties between students and teachers.

The Core Issue

This paper examines the issue of boosting the democratic perception of the Jordanian university students' political engagement in university life, an issue directly linked with both students' freedom and representative bodies. Upon analyzing the students' reality in connection with these two topics, we can categorize the following problems:

- **Security Intervention:**

A security mentality still dominates the universities. Despite the closure of the official security offices, the security intervention in the students' affairs has never stopped. There are numerous cases of student interrogation in connection with their political activities or party affiliation and some students were even

interrogated in connection to comments they wrote on social networking websites. The security intervention in university life is considered one of the factors why students are reluctant to participate, especially in activities of political nature, and even sometimes with nonpolitically affiliated activities. This is obviously affecting the students' freedoms.

- **Weakness of the Students' Clubs:**

Despite the existence of students' clubs in the Jordanian universities, the students' turnout to join these clubs is very limited. The failure of the university administrations to inform students, especially new ones, to these clubs is probably the reason of the lack of interest on the students' part. In addition, most university regulations prevent students in the first year from joining these clubs. Hence, the students remain ignorant of what clubs exist. Moreover, the interference by the university administration in these clubs, and lack of administrative and financial independence limits the members' ability to undertake their activities in a democratic atmosphere.

- **Election mechanisms of students' councils:**

Elections of students' councils in most universities are still conducted in accordance with the one vote system, which forces the students to vote for one candidate even if there is more than one seat allocated for the department or college. The regulations, further, prevent the formation of electoral lists or even the joint electoral campaigns combining more than one candidate. This electoral system leads to exploitation of narrow tribal, regional and provincial loyalties and consequently voting becomes focused upon these loyalties rather than on candidates' platforms or intellectual and political attitudes and capabilities. Regulations in some universities prevent the distribution of students' written material, even during the election campaign, which leads to the selection of weak students' councils who are unable to represent the students and are unable to defend their demands and requirements. Furthermore, all university administrations develop election systems without consulting the students, neither through the students' councils nor the active students' powers, effectively leaving them out of the important process. Some regulations even prevent students who have been punished for prior misconduct from running, regardless if they have completed their punishment.

- **Absence of a General Federation of Jordan's Students:**

The absence of such a federation means the absence of a Jordanian students' unifying body or an umbrella body which can rally the students' councils across the various universities. This is an obstacle which substantially impairs coordination among them and weakens the students' ability to achieve public demands, especially those related to educational policies. Had a General Federation of Jordan's Students existed, the university administrations would not have been able to marginalize the role of the students' councils, which is happening now.

- **Political and partisan action:**

Ironically, centers of political development are open in some universities, although most university regulations and instructions equate political action with advocacy of sectarian and regional ideas. Depriving the students of their right to express their political thoughts within the university contradicts with the right of freedom of expression guaranteed by the international conventions as well as the Jordanian Constitution. Furthermore, the aggressive treatment of partisan students is contrary to the Jordanian laws, especially the law of political parties, as well as the basic tenets democracy. Preventing political parties from being present in the universities may be justified by some opinions, but depriving students of their right to express their political and partisan ideas should not be acceptable by any standard.

- **Disciplinary regulations:**

Disciplinary regulations prevent students from forming blocs or students' clusters, and thus, they are prevented from carrying out any activity in the name of the students' blocs. It also prevents the students from distributing leaflets, issuing wall magazines or collecting signatures as these actions are a punishable violation which can result in final dismissal from the university. With the exception of some, most violations lack specific penalties and instead decisions are left to the interrogation committees. Penalties range from verbal warning to a final dismissal. Consequently, students are subjected to the mood of the interrogation committee, who may punish a student with a verbal warning for distributing a leaflet and punish another who committed the same violation by dismissal from the university. Additionally, the interrogation committees lack representation from members of the students' council or the students' associations, which means the total absence of students' representation in the interrogation committee, and therefore, the absence of their involvement in an essential communal process.

- **Violence in the universities:**

The absence of democratic concepts in the university life is one of the causes of the growing phenomenon of violence in the universities. The result of amplifying the narrow loyalties and affiliations through the electoral system of students' councils contributed also to an increase in frequency of violence. The absence of political activity on the part of the students led to a lack of common areas among the students to bring them closer through dialogue.

The points raised above represent major issues and problems concerning students' freedoms and representation. It may be useful, however, to mention here that these issues are largely harmonious with the abstracts mentioned in the fourth annual report of the National Campaign for the Rights of Students "Thabahtona" (You Slaughtered Us), the text of which is published within this paper as follows:

- In the midst of the Jordanian popular movement and the Arab revolutions, and in the light of official allegations that partisan governments are sought, administrations of universities continued to put all kinds of obstacles to prevent partisan action. Furthermore, the matter escalated that these administrations incited students against partisan action. The objectives of the students association of the Al-Balqa' Applied University stipulated: "to support preventing partisan action", keeping in mind that these objectives are determined by the university administration without consulting the students.
- In connection with legislations and laws related to students' freedoms, the report documented the continuous application by the institutions of higher education of laws and regulations that restrict freedoms without attempts to develop these laws to allow an area of freedom to students' activities. The rules and regulations related to the electoral process are still determined by the university administrations without consulting the students or inviting their participation in its formulation.
- The "one vote" system still exists within Jordanian university despite the recommendations by the National Dialogue Committee and the statements of all official authorities calling for the cancellation of this system in any upcoming parliamentary elections.
- The report period was characterized by the domination of university administrations of the students' councils, as well as the continuous absence in the Universities Law and the Higher Education Law of mentioning any mandatory presence of elected students' councils.

- The budgets of most of the Jordanian universities students' councils are still subject to the mood of the Deanship of Students Affairs and the University President, without specifying a clear budget for these councils, and without giving them any authority to use these budgets without prior permission and approval of the university administration. The same applies to students' clubs.
- The continuous influence of the university security officials during the period of the report, as this body continued its domination over the students and enjoyed more power than granted to it through interrogating the students, and using the method of threats and intimidation against the active students in the universities. Furthermore, this body tried in some universities to mobilize some students to report to it; the report noted also that the university security officials in some universities assumed the decision making role in issues related to students freedoms.
- The scale of security interventions in the students' councils' elections is still significant in spite of the decision by the Prime Ministry to close all security offices in the universities. The decision was challenged by appointing the security staff in administrative positions and guards. Candidates for the elections of students' councils continue to be threatened and intimidated to ensure the students' council is consistent with the government's vision.
- The oversight by the university administrations over students movements continued through increasing the spread of surveillance cameras horizontally (increase in numbers of universities are using surveillance cameras), and vertically (increase in numbers of cameras being used by universities); the campaign, further, spotted cases whereby the university administrations monitored the personal accounts of active students on social networking sites.

Recommendations

1. Taking a clear decision supported by a political will to stop all kind of direct and indirect security interfering in the universities; including pressure on activists students with political and partisan backgrounds. This can be achieved through the following:
 - Issuing clear regulations to prevent any investigation against students who are politically active or members of political parties. The principle must allow the students to practice their right to express their political opinions

as guaranteed in the Jordanian constitutions and the international convention without punishing them for practicing this right.

- Students must be informed in writing about the reason of their investigation in nonpolitical cases and informed of his or her rights in advance.
- A representative of the students' council must attend the investigation to guarantee objectivity.

2. Activate the role of the students clubs and motivate the student to be more involved in the activities of these clubs through awareness campaigns organized by the universities management and the student councils. In addition, the participation of students in the clubs can be linked to the students' academic file through the following:

- Handing out awareness material about the student clubs to students at the beginning of each semester.
- Allowing first year students to be members of student clubs
- Considering effective participating in the clubs as a condition of graduation.

3. Changing the electoral systems of the student councils elections to achieve fair representation of the students in the councils and giving students the opportunity to vote for the candidates according to their electoral programs. In additional, allowing candidates to practice their rights in promoting their electoral programs in democratic ways and to replace the "one person one vote" system with the open proportional lists. To achieve that, the following points can be adopted:

- Allowing candidates to form electoral coalitions and run for elections in open proportional lists that give the opportunity to the students to vote for the list and the candidate at the same time.
- Adopting the international elections standards to organize the student councils elections to achieve integrity, fairness and transparency.
- The number of students must be the base of the number of seats for each faculty in the student council. A seat should be allocated for each 500 students to guarantee fair representation.
- To allow civil society organizations to monitor the student council elections at all stages and allowing students to form independent monitoring teams themselves.

4. Preventing interference in the students' councils by the university management and protecting the administrative independence of the councils by reforming the

regulations and bylaws of the councils to prevent any interfering in the councils' internal affairs. Additionally, financial independency should be enhanced through determining the value of the budget of the student council in advance. This budget should come through deducting one Jordanian Dinar from the registration fees paid by the students in each semester. The amount of the budget must be deposited in a bank under the direct control of the student council. The council must also publish annual financial documents to be audited by an independent auditor.

5. Establishing the General Union of the Students of Jordan as a constitutional right according to the article 16 of the Jordanian constitution. The Union should have authorities over the councils in the universities and colleges. Councils should be represented in the Union according the number of students in the university or college.
6. Allowing the formation of student blocs based on the right of assembly guaranteed by the Jordanian Constitution and international conventions and furthermore allow the blocs to participate in their activities within the university without harassment, based on the principles of pluralism and diversity.
7. Rewriting disciplinary regulations and linking penalties with violation directly to establish institutionalized procedures avoid the misuse of regulations.
8. Developing programs to integrate students in civil society to develop their abilities and to inform them about democratic values in public work. This can be done by signing agreements between the universities, the student councils and civil society organizations to give the students an opportunity to practice voluntary and civic actions inside and outside universities to benefit from the experience of the civil society organizations in supporting the values of democracy and pluralism and good governance. Participation in such activities can be a graduation condition to motivate students to participate in them.

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The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is a non-profit organization committed to the values of social democracy and is the oldest of Germany's political foundations. In Jordan, FES opened its office in 1986 and is accredited through a long-standing partnership with the Royal Scientific Society (RSS). The aims of the activities of the FES Amman are to promote democracy and political participation, to support progress towards social justice and gender equality as well as to contribute to ecological sustainability and peace and security in the region. FES Amman supports the building and strengthening of civil society and public institutions in Jordan and Iraq. FES Amman cooperates with a wide range of partner institutions from civil society and the political sphere to establish platforms for democratic dialogue, organize conferences, hold workshops and publish policy papers on current political questions.

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