

Jordan tour: Forms of imperfect government

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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One of our Bedouin drivers [in Wadi Rum](#) also served us tea and dinner at the campsite and stayed there with us. Later he shared his [nargile](#) with me while we sat around the fire.

Our tour guide informed me that this young man's grandfather is a member of Parliament.

It's difficult to imagine the offspring of a member of the U.S. Congress working a service job. While Jordan's constitutional monarchy theoretically affords citizens many liberties, there are mixed reports as to what this looks like in practice. (The freedom of the press in particular [has seen some setbacks](#) of late.) Yet it's impressive that several seats in the parliament are designated to represent not just specific places but specific people groups—a more straightforward approach to representative government than the U.S. House's system of gerrymandered districts, with their double-edged sword of ensuring that people of color win a few seats but not many.

In Jordan, the king appoints people to the senate. In the U.S., rich people largely buy their way there—to seats that don't fairly represent the population in a body that refuses to function democratically. Neither upper-house system is exactly a beacon of rule by the people.

Earlier this week we had a press briefing with Akel Biltaji, formerly the minister of tourism and now a senator. An advisor to and strong supporter of the king, he told us that Abdullah's wise rule has played a big role in preventing (so far) the Arab Spring from gaining all that much traction in Jordan. He pointed specifically to [the set of political reforms](#) the king proposed last year.

I asked Biltaji what he thought were some of the most significant reforms, and whether he would characterize them as the monarchy relinquishing a substantive degree of power. He responded by instead detailing Jordan's system of checks and balances already in place, emphasizing that the monarchy is not an absolute one.

He did this at considerable length; there wasn't time for a follow-up.

Maybe he misunderstood my question; maybe he dodged it. In any case, I am anxious to learn more about how the government affects people's lives in Jordan—Muslims and Christians alike, across economic classes. I wouldn't trade our representative democracy for any kind of monarchy. But it's clear that generally speaking, Jordanians live in a high-functioning monarchy—while we live in a democracy that's significantly broken.

*Disclosure: The Jordan Tourism Board is covering most of the expenses for this trip, though it is not trying to tell us what to say/write/blog about it.*