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Freedom of peaceful assembly continued to be curtailed, including under sweeping emergency legislation introduced in 2020. The authorities also restricted freedom of expression, both online and offline. Gender-based violence increased in the context of worsening economic conditions and Covid-19 restrictions, as well as due to the continuing lack of legal protection against such crimes. Jordan continued to host over 2.7 million refugees, all of whom were eligible for free Covid-19 vaccinations, but food insecurity among refugees rose sharply.

Background

Jordan began its Covid-19 vaccine roll-out in January and, according to UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, was one of the first countries to offer free vaccinations to all, including refugees and asylum seekers.

In April, former crown prince Hamzah bin al-Hussein was placed under house arrest, accused of planning a coup, which he denied.

In June, King Abdallah ordered the formation of a 92-member royal committee to “modernize the legislative system”.

Jordan’s economic situation continued to deteriorate, partly due to the impact of Covid-19 measures. In September, the government reopened the country, but maintained the sweeping emergency law enacted at the start of the pandemic in 2020.

Freedom of assembly

The authorities continued to curtail freedom of peaceful assembly, including by arbitrarily arresting people protesting against the government’s Covid-19 measures.

In March, protests erupted in the cities of Irbid, Salt, Aqaba and Karak after at least 10 Covid-19 patients died because of a shortage of oxygen in a government hospital in Salt. Protesters demanded accountability for the deaths and a halt to Covid-19 restrictions such as night curfews that they criticized as ineffective. In December, five individuals were sentenced to three years in prison after being found responsible for the patients’ deaths. The protesters also blamed the government for worsening economic conditions and called for an end to the emergency law, known as the defence law, which was used to limit civil and political rights. Security forces met demonstrators with force, including heavy use of tear gas.

To mark the 10th anniversary of the 24 March Movement, a 2011 youth-led movement calling for reform, protests were set to happen in Amman and the northern cities of Irbid, Mafrqa and Ramtha to call for the end of the defence law and the cabinet’s resignation. However, security forces prevented individuals from joining the protests and arrested dozens of others. The interior minister stated that the government “would not tolerate protests that would worsen the health crisis.” All those arrested were released shortly afterwards.

May witnessed several days of protests in solidarity with Palestinians in East Jerusalem’s Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood. On 14 May, Jordanian riot police used tear gas and fired live ammunition in the air to disperse protesters near the King Hussein Bridge in the Jordan Valley.

On 30 June, authorities arrested members of the teachers’ trade union, including its head Nasser al-Nawasrah, hours before a planned march in solidarity with teachers forced into early retirement. Authorities had also arrested teachers protesting about the same issue in early January. All those detained were released soon after arrest.

Freedom of expression

Civic space continued to shrink as authorities tightened arbitrary restrictions on online and offline expression.

On 25 March, authorities effectively banned Clubhouse, a social media audio app used to discuss topics, including civil and political rights. In response, several human rights organizations published tips on using specific virtual private networks (VPNs) to access the app, which the authorities subsequently blocked.

Several human rights organizations and workers told Amnesty International about internet disruptions in March, including banning Facebook Live to limit coverage of protests.

In April, in the aftermath of the alleged planned coup, a two-day internet shutdown affected parts of western Amman. Several organizations reported to Amnesty International that this adversely affected the vaccination programme and businesses. On 6 April, the public prosecutor issued a gagging order on traditional and social media regarding investigations into the alleged planned coup. The gagging order remained in force at the end of the year.

Between 24 June and 15 July, the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission, in coordination with the Ministry of Education, disrupted messaging apps to “preserve the integrity” of examinations taking place.

On 1 July, Ahmad Tabanjieh Kinani was released on bail after being held for almost a year for peacefully showing solidarity with the teachers’ syndicate. He had been detained in August 2020, accused of acts criminalized by the Counter Terrorism Law.

Workers’ rights

The economic crisis led to an unprecedented spike in unemployment, rising to 25% in the first quarter and up to 50% for young people.

A total of 146 teachers were forced into early retirement in 2021, including several members and/or board members of the teachers’ syndicate, a development widely believed to be retribution for their participation in protests in 2019 and 2020. Early retirement pushed families already under strain because of Covid-19 measures further into poverty.

On 28 March, the prime minister issued Defence Order 28 ending the practice of imprisoning individuals for debt and providing for a travel ban instead. Thousands of people fled Jordan fearing imprisonment for debt. On 14 July, minister of justice Ahmad al-Zeyadat submitted a draft law offering indebted individuals more flexibility in paying off their debts, but the law had not been enacted by the end of 2021.

Women’s rights

Gender-based violence continued, with legal protections and accountability for such crimes remaining weak.

In the first half of 2021, several women’s rights organizations, as well as the UN, reported that incidents of gender-based violence had increased by over 50% compared to the previous year. By the end of September, 14 women had been killed due to domestic violence according to the Sisterhood is Global Institute in Amman.

Gender-based violence increased in the context of worsening economic conditions largely exacerbated by Covid-19 measures. However, the gradual reopening of services and the removal of movement restrictions improved survivors’ access to gender-based violence specialized services. Gender-based violence agencies continued to provide their services remotely and in person, and increased the capacity of their hotlines.

Refugees’ and migrants’ rights

As of 30 September, according to UNHCR, Jordan was hosting 670,637 Syrian, 66,665 Iraqi, 12,866 Yemeni, 6,013 Sudanese and 696 Somali refugees. It was also hosting 1,453 refugees from 52 other countries registered with UNHCR, in addition to over 2 million Palestinian refugees registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency.

In March, at least four Yemeni asylum seekers were deported to Yemen without due process; they had applied for work permits and were detained for over a month before their deportation. As of April, eight others faced deportation orders. Humanitarian workers reported that asylum seekers

faced deportation if they did not give up their asylum-seeking certificate before applying for work permits. In November, Syrian journalist Ibrahim Awad was arbitrarily arrested and subsequently detained in the al Azraq refugee camp 100km east of Amman.

In May, the government announced it would allow all refugees with expired documents to renew their papers at UNHCR until the end of the year, and that expired documents would not prevent their access to services, including healthcare and schooling.

By June, according to UNHCR, more than half of eligible refugees in Jordan had received at least one Covid-19 vaccination.

In July, the World Food Programme announced that 21,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan would no longer receive food assistance due to a shortage of funds, and that food insecurity among refugees had doubled in the past year to reach 25%. Nearly two in three refugees were on the brink of food insecurity.

Death penalty

Authorities continued to hand down death sentences; no executions were carried out.

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