

Document #2048702

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Jordan 2020

The authorities announced a state of emergency in March to combat COVID-19, giving the Prime Minister sweeping powers allowing for the detention of at least 13 journalists critical of the government and the King, and those accused of “spreading panic about COVID-19”. The COVID-19 lockdown saw a spike in domestic violence. Migrant workers were left stranded with unpaid wages. Child labour increased as the economic impact of the pandemic pushed many families into poverty. Children of Jordanian mothers and non-Jordanian fathers were left without access to emergency state funding. Some Syrian refugees were left without humanitarian aid, and many others lost their jobs and returned to government-controlled areas in Syria.

Background

In March, the King enacted Defence Law No. 13 of 1992, declaring a state of emergency and giving the Prime Minister sweeping powers to take “all measures necessary” to combat COVID-19. The Prime Minister pledged to implement it to the “narrowest extent” and in a manner that would not impinge on political rights, freedom of expression or private property.

Jordan remained a member of the Saudi Arabia-led coalition in the armed conflict in Yemen.

Freedoms of expression and assembly

The authorities continued to curtail freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

The crackdown on journalists and activists continued, including through harassment of journalists in relation to the government’s COVID-19 measures.

On 15 April, following the declaration of the state of emergency, the Prime Minister issued a decree stipulating that disseminating news that could “cause panic” over COVID-19 would carry a penalty of up to three years in prison. By the end of the year, at least 13 journalists had been arrested under the decree, most of whom were released soon after. In November, Fares Sayegh, owner of Roya TV, and its news director, Mohamad al-Khalidi, were arrested for airing a segment “criticizing the King”, after they showed Jordanian residents complaining about the economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown. The two men were detained for 14 days.

On 1 and 23 July, the Ministry of Education blocked access to popular social media apps throughout the country for several hours, saying, according to the Jordan Open Source Association, that the measure was to curb cheating during school examinations.

On 28 July, Tujan al-Bukhaiti, a 17-year-old Yemeni refugee, was found not guilty of the charges of “blasphemy” and “insulting religious feelings” after an eight-month trial. The Juvenile Police had summoned her for questioning following a report by the Cybercrime Unit over social media posts that included re-posts of Facebook statuses of her father, Ali al-Bukhaiti, that discussed cultural and religious topics in December 2019.

In August, journalist and cartoonist Imad Hajjaj was arrested over a caricature criticizing the deal to normalize relations between the United Arab Emirates and Israel. His case was referred to the State Security Court for “carrying out acts undermining Jordanian relationships with a friendly country”. According to findings by Human Rights Watch, after the enactment of Defence Law No. 13, the General Intelligence Directorate regularly contacted several journalists, asking them questions about their work and warning them against covering certain issues. Journalists said that the authorities intentionally withheld permits and/or permission for them to attend and cover certain events. The authorities also used gagging orders on various human rights issues, including those involving domestic violence.

Workers’ rights

On 25 July, after a protracted dispute between the government and the teachers’ union over a pay increase, security forces raided 13 union branches, arresting 13 board members. In the following days, the authorities also arrested dozens of union members. The Attorney General then issued a gagging order, which banned any public discussion of the case, and an order to shut down the union for two years. Tensions had resurfaced over the government’s decision to freeze public sector pay until the end of 2020 due to COVID-19, breaching a commitment to increase salaries by 50%. The union’s closure triggered new protests in early August; two journalists covering the protests were arrested and held for a few hours, while two others were beaten.

On 31 December, a court in Amman ordered the dissolution of the teachers’ union and the arrest of its board members, following investigations into accusations of “corruption” and “incitement over social media” that began in August. Soon after, four board members were arrested but then released on bail after the union’s lawyer filed an appeal.

Women’s rights

Provincial governors continued to use the Crime Prevention Law to administratively detain women, often for months and for discriminatory reasons, such as for being “absent from home” without a male guardian’s permission, or for having sex outside marriage (*zina*), begging or homelessness. Dar Amneh, a shelter for women at risk of being killed by family members, continued to provide an alternative to the administrative detention of women at risk in “protective custody”. However, women were not allowed to leave the shelter without the approval of a provincial governor.

Women’s rights groups noted an increase in domestic violence cases during the COVID-19 lockdown, including in Syrian refugee communities and among migrant domestic workers. The Family Protection Unit affiliated to the Public Security Directorate, which was established to respond to domestic violence and sexual assaults, had been overwhelmed. There was also a drop in cases of people seeking protection from the authorities or turning to women’s state shelters. Other measures were introduced, such as tele-counselling and a hotline, but women’s groups reported that these could only offer limited support.

Despite legislative changes in 2017 and some positive steps reported by women rights activists towards taking such crimes more seriously, there were no concrete measures to address domestic violence and so-called “honour” killings, both of which were particularly prevalent in Jordan. On 17 July, a widely disseminated video of the brutal public killing by her father of a woman named only as Ahlam triggered protests. The authorities failed to take any action to hold the father accountable or to respond in any other way.

Migrant workers’ rights

Migrant workers continued to be inadequately protected from abuse by their employers and agents and remained at risk of arbitrary detention. Their vulnerable situation was aggravated by COVID-19, as the pandemic led to a plethora of abuses, including arbitrary dismissals and unpaid wages. Rights groups indicated that many migrant workers lost their jobs and rarely had access to social protection or alternative employment, as only Jordanian daily workers and those with active social security accounts benefited from emergency in-kind and cash assistance. This meant migrant workers lost their residency status, a consequence of the *kafala* (sponsorship) system governing employment of migrant workers in the region, leaving them subject to arrest, detention and deportation. Migrant workers who wished to leave the country often could not do so because of travel restrictions imposed to curb the virus.

Migrant workers peacefully protesting for their rights were met with tear gas, as happened when Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers protested in July about the authorities continuing to ignore their demands.

Children’s rights

Citizenship laws continued to discriminate against children of Jordanian mothers and non-Jordanian fathers who, unlike children of Jordanian fathers married to non-Jordanians, were denied Jordanian citizenship. This effectively deprived those children from benefiting from the emergency fund set up by the Ministry of Social Development to counter the economic fallout of COVID-19, especially in cases where the mother was not present to apply for the aid herself. According to rights groups, the economic impact of COVID-19 led to an increase in child labourers.

Rights of refugees and asylum-seekers

Jordan continued to host approximately 655,000 Syrians, 67,000 Iraqis, 15,000 Yemenis, 6,000 Sudanese nationals and 2,500 refugees from 52 other countries registered with UNHCR, in addition to over 2 million Palestinian refugees registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency.

At least 10,000 Syrian refugees remained in the “berm”, a no man’s land in the desert along the Jordanian-Syrian border. In March, Jordan announced it would bar aid convoys from crossing through its territory to deliver assistance and medical equipment to the refugees, citing COVID-19 concerns.⁴ The authorities’ decision exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation, including by putting pregnant women at risk as no maternal health care was accessible there.

In August, Jordanian authorities forcibly transferred at least 16 Syrian refugees, including eight children, to an informal camp in the “berm”.² Many of them chose to go back to government-controlled areas in Syria as a result of the dire living conditions in the “berm”.

Syrian refugees were amongst the most affected by state measures to combat COVID-19 as a result of their largely informal employment and a lack of written contracts, social security and health insurance cover or valid work permits. According to UNHCR, one third lost their jobs while others saw a 40% drop in their income. Syrian refugees were barred from several employment sectors, including the health, teaching, engineering and technical professions.

Palestinian refugees from the Gaza Strip continued to be excluded from basic rights and services as they do not have Jordanian citizenship.

Death penalty

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

1. [Jordan: Authorities must allow urgent medical care for displaced Syrians in Rukban during COVID-19 \(Press release, 7 May\)](#)
2. [Jordan: Stop forcible transfer of Syrian refugees to a no-man's land in the desert \(Press release, 15 September\)](#)

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ecoi.net summary:

Report on the human rights situation covering 2020

Country:

Jordan

Source:

[AI – Amnesty International](#)

Original link:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/jordan/report-jordan/>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

7 April 2021

Document ID:

2048702

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