Mediterranean Politics

ISSN: 1362-9395 (Print) 1743-9418 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fmed20

The politics of anti-corruption crackdowns in autocracies: Evidence from Jordan

Sean Yom & Steve L. Monroe

To cite this article: Sean Yom & Steve L. Monroe (05 Nov 2025): The politics of anti-corruption crackdowns in autocracies: Evidence from Jordan, Mediterranean Politics, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2025.2582243

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2025.2582243

MEDITERRANEAN POLITICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2025.2582243

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The politics of anti-corruption crackdowns in autocracies: Evidence from Jordan

Sean Yom [a] and Steve L. Monroe [b]

[a]Department of Political Science, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA;
[b]Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT

Many autocracies pledge to curb corruption within public institutions—and fail. Yet the burgeoning literature on this topic overlooks an intriguing puzzle: while anti-corruption campaigns often do not clean up politics as promised, they still punish at least some perpetrators for their financial and political abuses. What determines how much corruption autocrats target, and whom they punish? We provide novel answers with a multi-method analysis of a crucial case, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. We leverage new data from public investigations, local media sources, and municipal audits to assess how the Jordanian regime has tackled corruption over the past two decades. We find that Jordan's limited anti-corruption efforts prioritize punishing petty corruption involving low-level civil servants, rather than grand corruption by powerful regime elites. We argue that such selectivity reflects the personalistic nature of Jordan's regime, given the importance of sustaining a solidary loyal elite that supports the king. We further find through statistical tests that despite their selective nature, these anti-corruption measures still abide by a strategic logic of timing, which underscores their political value. Anti-corruption investigations are more likely to occur after major protests and prior to elections, reflecting a desire to win over public sympathy.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received May 2025; Accepted October 2025

KEYWORDS Corruption; authoritarianism; personalism; democracy; Middle East; Jordan

Introduction

Corruption, defined as the abuse of public office for private gain, abounds in all political systems. In democracies, electoral pressures and legal safeguards help limit corrupt practices like bribery, graft, and embezzlement. Authoritarian regimes have weaker incentives to uproot such illicit misdeeds, given their lack of accountability and transparency. Nonetheless, domestic and international pressures can prod autocracies to enact anti-corruption reforms. Since the 1990s, for example, many non-democratic

CONTACT Sean Yom seanyom@temple.edu
Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2025.2582243

governments have created official anti-corruption agencies (ACAs) to reduce corrupt abuses within state institutions. Yet such efforts tend to have ambiguous effects. While they seldom generate indiscriminate crackdowns that eliminate corruption, some autocracies do enact meaningful anti-corruption measures that selectively punish public officeholders for wrongdoings.

Herein lays the puzzle: in non-democratic settings where rulers tackle some—but not all—corruption, whom do they target and how much corruption do they eliminate? The anti-corruption literature provides enticing ideas but little guidance for this question. This article helps to fill this gap by unpacking the politics of anti-corruption in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Jordan has experienced systemic corruption since the early 2000s under King Abdullah II, coinciding with neoliberal economic reforms and widening inequality. In response, the government has established a national ACA and pursued other anti-corruption measures. Our multimethod study is the first to systematically track these efforts, deploying both historical knowledge and several original data sources, including annual reports by Jordan's ACA, English and Arabic media coverage of corruption-related cases, and a rare dataset of public sector audit investigations. These data are not perfect because by nature, most corrupt acts are hidden from public view. Political considerations often dictate which corrupt acts become public or even permissible within popular discussion; our sample of publicly known corruption cases is not perfectly representative of all corruption. Nonetheless, we triangulate these streams of evidence to generate four novel findings regarding the origins and dynamics of anti-corruption efforts in Jordan.

First, the Jordanian experience corroborates extant theories in showing how domestic opposition and international pressures can compel authoritarian leaders to implement anti-corruption measures. Such efforts intend to bolster their legitimacy and stability by pacifying public concerns and external donor criticism. Second, such commitments to curb corruption often produce modest results. In Jordan, not only do popular perceptions persist that corruption remains rampant, but relatively few public officeholders have faced punishment for misdeeds. Less than six percent of all corruption-related investigations since 2010 have resulted in judicial action.

Third, Jordan exemplifies who autocrats target in their anti-corruption strategy—low-level civil servants accused of petty transgressions like small-scale bribes, rather than high-ranking cronies and officials who grandly abuse power. We link this low-level bias to conditions of autocratic personalism. In a personalistic regime, as in the Hashemite monarchy, incumbent leaders not only command extremely concentrated power, but rely upon a narrow elite cadre bound by loyalty and solidarity. There is no ruling party to replenish these elite reserves. Thus, it

makes little sense for personalistic rulers to sacrifice too many entrusted ministers, security chiefs, and other elite subordinates on the altar of reform.

Finally, even if they result only in the modest punishment of petty abuses, anti-corruption strategies in authoritarian settings are not randomly implemented. They are strategically timed to maximize their public impact, which underscores their political value. In Jordan, data show that officials have launched significant campaigns against corruption during sensitive periods to rally popular support, such as before municipal elections and after major protests. This suggests that autocrats can programme the timing of anti-corruption efforts for deliberative ends.

These four findings deepen our knowledge about the hidden world of anti-corruption policies. They explain why authoritarian regimes often reduce systemic corruption only marginally; why personalistic autocracies prefer curbing low-level corruption over pursuing high-level elite abuses; and how even limited anti-corruption programmes can be timed to sway public opinion. In turn, these multi-layered arguments have a critical implication. Corruption experts have long argued that ACAs and other anti-corruption institutions must have sufficient capacity to battle abuses of power. Yet the success of anti-corruption efforts turns on not just questions of capacity but also the *politics* of authoritarianism, including the institutional constraints and strategic incentives that sway rulers. Empirically, this analysis also represents the rare study of how anti-corruption politicking reflects regime dynamics in Jordan, a Middle East case more commonly analysed in Western political science through topics like contentious protests, political repression, or foreign policy. Our data sources regarding corruption-related cases in Jordan are also novel: none have been collected or used before in any published work.

This paper proceeds in four sections. First, it harnesses existing scholarship to explain why many non-democratic states have created anti-corruption agencies and other transparency-enhancing initiatives in the post-Cold War era. Second, it dives into the Jordanian case. It reviews the scope of state corruption since the 2000s, and the mix of domestic blowback and international pressures that compelled the Hashemite monarchy and its government to create anti-corruption measures, including the national ACA (the Jordanian Integrity and Anti-Corruption Commission, or JIACC) and other judicial innovations.

The third section applies theory to data. We creatively generate different streams of evidence to assess our arguments. Drawing upon the JIACC's annual reports and local media coverage of corruption-related cases, we illustrate that anti-corruption efforts are not only limited in scope, but almost wholly target low-level bureaucrats and public servants rather than prominent political and business elites—a finding that corroborates how autocratic personalism prefigures who is putatively 'caught' for corruption.

The final section ascertains the strategic timing of anti-corruption measures with a multimethod approach. The JIACC's reports show a marked increase in investigations after major protests in 2011–12 and 2018, suggesting that officials sought to allay popular unrest with corruption-related efforts. To further show such sequencing was not coincidental, we adopt a different method more appropriate to a new data source. We conduct quantitative analysis on a new dataset of JIACC audits into public corruption between 2013 and 2015, a period of time overlapping with the August 2013 municipal elections. Statistical tests show that the Jordanian government was more likely to investigate corruption in municipal councils in the months prior to the municipal elections. Such findings complement the broader argument made here. The analysis suggests that far from being haphazard or meaningless, even modest anti-corruption actions in Jordan were timed to benefit the government by winning popular trust and enhancing electoral turnout during periods of uncertainty.

Anti-corruption politicking under authoritarianism

Corruption such as bribery, nepotism, kickbacks, embezzlement, extortion, and graft exists everywhere. However, such criminality thrives more under autocracies than democracies, because dictatorships incubate weaker legal safeguards and often reward rent-seeking predation (Klitgaard, 1991; Treisman, 2007). In many authoritarian regimes, corruption can become normalized into the routines of public administration, despite its corrosive effects on economic development and social cohesion (Johnston, 2006; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016).

Yet while many dictatorships feast on corruption, they can also rein it in. Anti-corruption agencies (ACAs) are one ubiquitous example of such efforts. ACAs are specialized judicial bodies that monitor, investigate, audit, and sometimes prosecute political corruption (De Sousa, 2010). ACAs exist in over 100 countries, of which one-third are authoritarian (French Anti-Corruption Agency, 2020). Ten Arab states—Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia—have created ACAs. This, by itself, is surprising: the Middle East ranks as one of the most non-democratic regions in the world, distinguished by resilient authoritarianism that, excepting Tunisia, outlasted the 2011–12 Arab Spring and its 2018–19 aftershocks (Bank et al., 2022).

ACAs are not new. Singapore pioneered this institution with its Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) in 1952. However, ACAs rapidly spread around the world in the post-Cold War era due to the diffusion of transparency norms embodied by the 2003 United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), transnational NGOs like Transparency International, and the World Bank and other multilateral institutions. Many ACAs now

receive technical support from these external actors, which assist in drafting anti-corruption strategies, creating oversight mechanisms, and formulating laws (Sampson, 2012). Thus, when autocracies like Jordan announce anti-corruption campaigns, they typically do so by launching ACAs first.

In comparative perspective, such anti-corruption reforms often falter in eradicating widespread abuses. Many researchers attribute this for endogenous reasons relating to the logic of authoritarian rule. Since many non-democratic regimes benefit from corrupt practices, truly eradicating corruption would endanger their stability and survival (Johnston, 2012; Wang & Dickson, 2022). They have little rational desire to harm themselves. Dictators thus ensure their ACAs and other measures lack the financial or legal capacity to uproot the bribery, embezzlement, and other misdeeds that plague the political system (Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2022).

However, countervailing pressures can incentivize autocrats to invest in effective anti-corruption strategies. Some need to allay popular dissent and signal their virtues to the public, as in China and elsewhere (Chen & Weiss, 2019; Tsai, 2021). Demands for transparency can also emanate from business allies of the government, as in Asian developmental states seeking to modernize their economies (Carothers, 2022; Yadav & Mukherjee, 2015). Some authoritarians use anti-corruption charges to purge their political rivals, as President Putin did in Russia during his consolidation of power during the late 2000s (Chen, 2020; Pavroz, 2017). Finally, poorer governments may undertake anti-corruption reforms to please foreign aid donors, who worry about the moral hazard of financing unbridled political abuses (Charron, 2011; Lawson, 2009).

Between these two sets of findings resides underappreciated nuance. Fighting corruption is not a dichotomous measure, as if autocrats either wipe out financial misdeeds or ignore them altogether. For instance, it is true that in many dictatorships, ACAs do not operate independently from executive power, thereby ensuring that they cannot weaken rulers. However, neither are they ephemeral agencies. Because they are networked into a global community of anti-corruption watchdogs, many ACAs boast well-trained staff with substantial budgets capable of aggressively pursuing corruption-related cases (Doig & Recanatini, 2020). Moreover, when autocracies create ACAs, they also usually enact stricter legal and financial regulations that raise the cost of corrupt behaviour. In sum, anti-corruption reforms are best seen as institutional innovations that limit some wrongdoings—just not all.

The anti-corruption dilemma

This leaves a critical inquiry: when they choose to address corruption with measures like ACAs, whom do autocratic regimes target? Answering this

question requires conceptualizing corruption through two categories—petty versus grand. Petty corruption occurs when low-level agents of the state, such as clerks, teachers, and bureaucrats, engage in bribes, kickbacks, and other localized graft. Such mundane misconduct can proliferate because many public servants work for the state, and each abuse is small (Nieto-Morales et al., 2024). By contrast, grand corruption entails the large-scale abuse of public resources by high-ranking elites better known to society, such as cabinet ministers, party functionaries, security chiefs, directors of state-owned firms, and public financiers. At the top is the ruler and their entourage, whose political immunity enables them to not only massively profit, but also exploit transnational financial networks to engage in money-laundering and other illicit schemes (Cooley & Sharman, 2017).

Curbing each type of corruption carries costs and benefits. When autocracies limit petty corruption, they focus upon the totality of administrative misdeeds: they target large numbers of faceless civil servants relatively unknown to the public. This mass-oriented approach leaves most elites unscathed, and could produce more effective governance felt by citizens in their daily lives. However, targeting low level bureaucrats is not ostentatious. For a discontented public, it lacks the shock value of potent regime elites falling from grace. Low-level perpetrators also likely have stronger social ties to their local community than national powerholders.

Conversely, reducing grand corruption by punishing elites brings different payoffs. Autocrats will never indict themselves, but can still rebuke their cronies and associates. This may generate public and international applause, given the appealing sight of aloof politicians long suspected of plundering the public having to face criminal prosecution. However, this can weaken the regime by destroying trust and cohesion among elites, who may fear being arbitrarily targeted. The luminaries being eliminated—such as security heads, party leaders, and financiers—may also possess skills and capital essential for the dictatorship.

This conflict represents the mirror image of what Christopher Carothers has called the 'corruption dilemma': much as autocrats must gauge the trade-offs of tolerating a little versus widespread corruption, so too can different types of anti-corruption imperatives yield non-substitutable risks predicated upon whom is being punished (Carothers, 2023). Of course, moving against petty corruption versus grand corruption is not mutually exclusive. However, keeping these approaches distinct helps us envisage intermediate cases like Jordan, in which authoritarians must do something about corruption—but not everything. It also highlights that not all corrupt actors and kinds of corruption bear equivalent costs of punishment.

One explanation for how autocracies reconcile this anti-corruption dilemma stems from their institutional configuration, in particular *personalism*. Personalism constitutes a distinctive subtype of authoritarian rule. In

such systems, leaders hold vast concentrated power sustained by a narrow base of dependent elites who head key ministries, bureaucracies, and coercive institutions (Geddes et al., 2018, pp. 190–92; Meng, 2020). A unitary elite bound by personal loyalty rather than the organizational strength of mass-mobilizing parties or military corporatism thus keeps personalistic autocrats in power. As the Arab Spring showed, a factionalized or disgruntled elite that no longer trusts their leadership can doom such regimes by simply refusing to repress society and defecting to opposition (Brownlee et al., 2015, pp. 40–63; Grundholm, 2020). This also accounts for why high-level, grand corruption tends to fester in personalistic autocracies: rulers must constantly patronize and enrich their subordinate elites as part of their bargain in supporting political order (Chang & Golden, 2010; Jung, 2022).

This explains why only rarely do personalistic dictatorships engage in anti-corruption reforms that target high-ranking elites. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman's infamous purge against hundreds of prominent political and business figures during 2017–18 was motivated by unique incentives to crush rival factions in a generational moment of royal succession. Absent such extraordinary conditions, it is reasonable to assume that most personalistic autocracies prefer a *regressive* anti-corruption strategy—that is, the mass-oriented approach against petty corruption. ACAs and other anti-corruption reforms will corral lowly bureaucrats and civil servants, because targeting powerful elites poisons their regimes' political lifeblood. This strategy also makes authoritarian rulers better placed to absorb the trade-off of such limited measures, namely unrest from an exasperated public demanding more aggressive action. Should more popular dissent erupt, a loyal elite sheltered from indiscriminate anti-corruption politicking will follow orders to repress opposition and defend political order.

Critically, this theoretical prediction does not connote that personalistic autocracies are deaf to mass concerns. Most non-democratic leaders prefer citizens accept their rhetorical promises to improve transparency, because repression is costly. This generates a corollary proposition. However modest, anti-corruption measures still have political value in convincing at least some of the public that the leadership is cleaning up politics. Though limited in purview, crackdowns on petty corruption are not arbitrary; they can be *timed* to assuage opposition during periods of heightened uncertainty. Timing certainly matters in democratic contexts. In Argentina, for instance, politicians have more frequently called attention to corruption prior to elections to sway voters and attract positive media attention (Feierherd et al., 2023). The same reasoning can hold in authoritarian systems. Dictatorships may ramp up anti-corruption efforts following major protests, because publicly punishing some perpetrators can stem the tide of popular anger. They can also do so prior to elections. Even in rigged or meaningless elections, autocrats covet high

turnout because it signals mass approval of their power (De Miguel et al., 2015).

In sum, this theoretical framework lays several principles for focused, structured analysis of anti-corruption efforts in autocracies. Many authoritarian regimes attempt to combat corruption by creating ACAs and other mechanisms, but they also choose whom to punish. Personalistic autocracies prefer to fight petty corruption by targeting low-level civil servants, not high-level elites committing grand corruption. Such selective crackdowns can palliate public opposition during opportune periods. Evidence from Jordan corroborates these expectations.

The case of Jordan

Jordan constitutes an important case for two reasons. First, its regime qualifies as a personalistic autocracy. A ruling monarchy, the Hashemite dynasty, has held preponderant power since independence in 1946. Hereditary succession regulates the transfer of leadership, and the current incumbent, King Abdullah II, has sat on the throne since 1999 after the passing of his father. Within this system, most decision-making power emanates from not a ruling party, but a small cluster of unelected institutions and actors. The Jordanian king occupies the apex of this regime. He wields broad executive prerogatives, from appointing the cabinet-based government to conducting foreign policy. He controls other influential institutions, such as the royal court, the military, and security forces. Eminent political elites such as advisers, ministers, ambassadors, and security chiefs vertically depend upon the king for their positions and authority, having ascended the ranks by accumulating royal confidence and patronage. While elected municipal councils as well as parliament allow for some popular participation, the monarchical regime presides over the paramount decisions regarding major domestic and foreign policies.

Second, Jordan has also witnessed worsening systemic corruption over the past several decades, following neoliberal economic reform. In 1989, the Jordanian economy collapsed due to budgetary shortfalls and chronic indebtedness. This necessitated IMF and World Bank bailout programmes, which in turn introduced market-oriented reforms. The 1994 peace treaty with Israel untethered a new wave of US-led Western aid and support that facilitated this economic transformation. Under Western sponsorship, King Abdullah shortly following his 1999 ascension directed a barrage of technocratic policies to modernize the economy, such as privatizing state-owned industries, deregulating financial transactions, and liberalizing trade and investment policies (Knowles, 2005).

These neoliberal changes restructured the previously state-led economy. However, they also unleashed a new era of corruption that shook state-

business relations. To be clear, knowledge of quotidian corruption had long permeated public life, well before the onset of these capitalist shifts. During the long reign of King Hussein, popular complaints hovered around the exploitation of 'wasta', meaning the leveraging of personal, familial, or tribal ties to facilitate access to public resources, which privileged not just monied elites but also many Transjordanians (i.e., tribal Jordanians, as opposed to the Palestinian-Jordanian majority) who received the lion's share of government jobs, development spending, and other divisible goods (Kilani & Sakhija, 2002).

What made the neoliberal era under King Abdullah so distinctive was that rapid neoliberal shifts produced crony capitalism, which both eclipsed antecedent perceptions of favouritism with systemic corruption (Monroe, 2025). An unprecedent influx of financial flows saturated the Jordanian state and business sectors due to private investments, public selloffs, free trade activity, real estate developments, and industrial licencing opportunities. The 2003 Iraq War and subsequent US occupation infused Jordan with US military financing, smuggling profits, and Iraqi expatriate wealth—yet more capital to sustain rent-seeking behaviour (Parker & Moore, 2007). Government ministers, security heads, administrative directors, and even royals allegedly gained vast riches during this period; so did merchant families traditionally allied with the crown, joined in profitability by a new technocratic class of insider elites that leveraged state networks to carve out lucrative business monopolies. At lower levels, bureaucrats and civil servants exploited laxer regulations to extract their own bribes, kickbacks, and favours from the public, including individuals as well as small businesses (Loewe, 2008).

The origins of Jordanian anti-corruption policies

This new wave of corruption sparked popular outrage and international condemnation, which triggered anti-corruption measures. Domestically, popular perceptions that thieving officials had orchestrated economic injustice deepened among a middle-class embattled by rising inequality and unemployment. Accusations of corruption perpetuated by various political elites began saturating public debates in the mid-2000s (Yom, 2014). This also became a defining theme of Jordan's 2011–12 Arab Spring protests, in which activists demanded anti-corruption crackdowns alongside democratic reforms and economic relief (Ryan, 2018, pp. 19–42). Thousands of demonstrations during those heady years brazenly denounced the monarchy and its government for mismanaging the country and enriching themselves with public funds.

Colliding with domestic opposition was international pressure. In the early 2000s, the World Bank and IMF voiced concern about increasing corruption as they delivered more aid to Jordan (Harrigan et al., 2006, pp. 286–87). The US

did the same. America was, and remains, the Hashemite Kingdom's largest donor and foreign patron. For instance, the US shielded Jordan from the financial fallout of the 2003 Iraq War with billions of dollars of economic and security assistance. However, US officials also worried about the 'seismic growth' of kleptocracy destabilizing this crucial Arab ally amidst the post-9/11 War on Terror and Iraqi occupation (Glain, 2005). Diplomatic pressures mounted for the Hashemite palace to 'demonstrate commitment to broad reforms' given the chronic 'misuse or siphoning off of government money' that could incite domestic instability (US Embassy-Amman, 2005). In 2007, US human rights observers decried the imprisonment of a well-known tribal activist, who posted an online letter to US Senator Harry Reid complaining of royal corruption (Daragahi, 2007).

These domestic and international pressures compelled Jordan's regime to create new anti-corruption mechanisms. Previously, the only state institution that monitored financial misdeeds in the public sector was the Audit Bureau, created in 1952. In 2003, the government ratified the UNCAC, and in 2006 it inaugurated its ACA – the Anti-Corruption Commission. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) supported this process early on by providing legal funds, technical assistance, and capacity-building exercises (US Agency for International Development [US], 2003). In 2007, the commission unveiled Jordan's first National Anti-Corruption Strategy, promising to implement 'principles of integrity' (Jordan Anti-Corruption Commission, 2008). Officials further established an Ombudsman Bureau in 2008, which in 2016 merged with the Anti-Corruption Commission to form the current ACA—the JIACC, or Jordan Integrity and Anti-Corruption Commission (*Hay'at al-nazaaha wa-mukaafahat al-fasaad*). The government likewise enacted new laws that explicitly defined acts of corruption, required financial disclosures from public officeholders, and imposed stricter penalties for crimes like bribery. Battling corruption also became a ubiquitous theme in royal speeches and official media.

Two decades later, such endeavours have had only modest effects. Jordan's ranking in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index has barely budged over time, from 37 (out of 158 states) in 2005 to 59 (out of 180 states) in 2024. Likewise, the Jordanian public still perceives systemic corruption as a pressing problem. In 2007, the Arab Barometer reported that over 31 per cent of Jordanians believed that most or all politicians were corrupt whereas in the 2023–24 survey round, a staggering 82 per cent of Jordanians believed that corruption existed to a medium or large extent.[1] Moreover, anti-corruption activism has continued catalysing protests. Anger over corruption is the rare issue that unites Jordan's ideologically disparate opposition, such as tribal activists, civic organizations, the Muslim Brotherhood (prior to its April 2025 ban), leftist political parties, and youth movements. For

decades, such diverse groups have shared the common grievance that too many public officeholders have engaged in corrupt acts with impunity. This has facilitated large demonstrations demanding cleaner governance, such as the May-June 2018 anti-tax protests (Ababneh, 2018). That event constituted the greatest disruption of public order since the 2011–12 Arab Spring, as it entailed a national strike organized by the professional unions followed by months of grassroots protests that lasted well into 2019.

It is impossible to identify whether such broad-based anger among ordinary people stems from actual experiences with corruption, or merely the belief that corruption exists. This distinction remains elusive given the difficulty of obtaining unmediated data about political deeds that are, by definition, secretive or illegal. Moreover, legal restrictions keep some highly sensitive issues off the public agenda. An official media blackout, for instance, prevented popular discussion of the 2021 Pandora Papers document leaks, which revealed the king's extensive private wealth – a controversial move intended to halt any allegations of royal corruption (Kuttab, 2021). Likewise, Jordanians hold ambivalent attitudes towards *wasta*: some see personal connections as a marginal necessity in accessing public resources, while less privileged citizens see it as legal corruption that magnifies their moral exclusion from political order (Jones, 2024).

Regardless of such ambiguities, though, it remains indisputable that the Jordanian public has become more angered about corruption over the past two decades. That, combined with international pressures, forms the likeliest reasons why the government launched a bevy of anti-corruption institutions and strategies after the mid-2000s. Unsurprisingly, corruption still persists. Yet more interesting is *how* it persists. As the next section shows, Jordanian anti-corruption efforts are not fictitious. However, these efforts have addressed petty corruption rather than elite wrongdoings, and with limited results.

The selective targeting of petty corruption

To assess Jordan's anti-corruption efforts, this section introduces data from the JIACC and public media reports. These reveal how Jordan's government has achieved only limited results, given the small number of corruption-related complaints resulting in criminal indictments and prosecutions. The data also suggest that when authorities do combat corruption, they focus upon low-level officeholders rather than powerful regime elites—a mass-oriented approach that confirms our theoretical expectations for how personalistic autocracies should behave.

Limited results

Jordan's anti-corruption agency, the JIACC, receives state resources. It employs hundreds of staff working across dozens of specialized departments. It also receives technical assistance from Western donors like the European Union and, prior to its 2025 dismantling, USAID. The JIACC treats corruption cases in a straightforward way. The commission first receives complaints, either through its public hotline or by referral from state institutions like the royal court, Prime Ministry, or Audit Bureau. Staffers then launch investigations into these complaints. An investigation can result in legal charges against the suspected individuals, at which point the JIACC forwards the matter to the judiciary for prosecution. The commission can also dismiss or defer the case, which effectively closes the matter and results in no legal action.

While the JIACC theoretically functions as an independent state body, it is also vulnerable to political pressures. The commission is subordinate not to the elected parliament but the royal executive: the king appoints its governing board, while the royally-appointed Prime Minister oversees its work (Faqir et al., 2011). Neither parliament nor civil society organizations can monitor the JIACC's internal operations, which leaves space for regime stakeholders such as the monarchy and senior ministers to influence its investigations. Moreover, as Jordanian legal experts themselves have complained, the anti-corruption laws that established the JIACC leave many state institutions outside its jurisdiction. For instance, the commission cannot investigate judges, military personnel, intelligence officers, and the police (Obeidat, 2010). In a state that devotes nearly a third of its annual spending to military and security spending, this renders an enormous area of potential financial abuse immune to legal inquiry.

These institutional constraints matter for a singular reason: the data illustrate that the JIACC has not produced the sweeping anti-corruption clampdowns promised with its establishment. The JIACC's annual reports from 2010 through 2022 (at the time of writing, the last year for which data are available) divulge the total number of cases investigated each year, as well as investigated cases forwarded to the judiciary for criminal prosecution. As Figure 1 illustrates, of the 21,202 cases that the JIACC investigated, the commission forwarded just 1,187 to the judiciary for potential prosecution—a ratio of 5.6 per cent—with the remainder dismissed or deferred. This low judicial referral rate varies marginally over time. The highest mark came in 2021, when the JIACC sent 11.2 per cent of its cases to prosecutors; the lowest came in 2018, when less than 1 per cent ended in the judiciary.

Furthermore, of the cases referred to the judiciary, no data exist regarding how many resulted in criminal prosecutions or convictions by the courts. Jordanian legal experts have noted that despite the judiciary's nominal

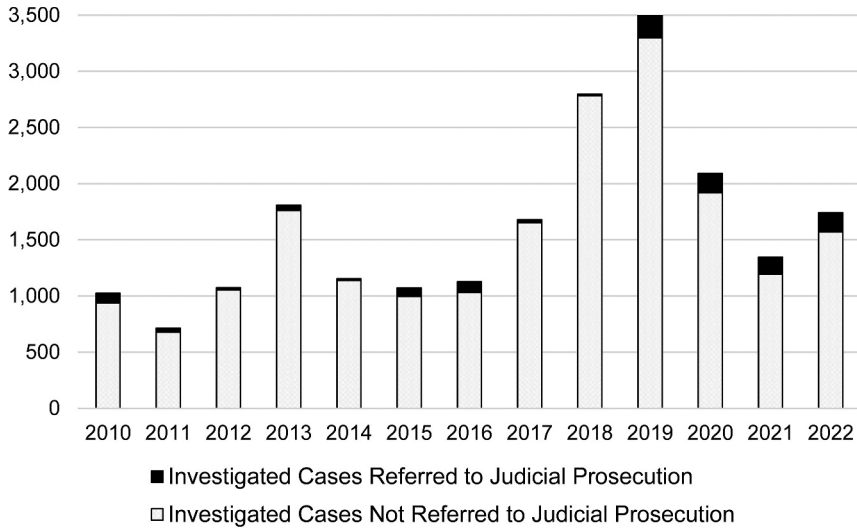

Figure 1. JIACC cases and judicial prosecutions, 2010–2022. Source: Jordanian Integrity and Anti-Corruption Commission, *Annual Report* (Amman: JIACC, serial) (2010-2022).

independence in some legal areas, political pressures from the regime have influenced the criminal justice process in sensitive cases involving politically influential figures, such as conduct of their trials and outcomes of rulings (Shnikat, 2023). It is not unreasonable to infer that such external pressures operate when the judiciary hears cases forwarded from the JIACC concerning corruption. This likely renders the conviction rate substantially less than the JIACC's 5.6 per cent referral rate. By contrast, the most respected ACAs—even in authoritarian states—maintain extremely high rates of punishment. Singapore's CPIB, for instance, boasts a 99 per cent conviction rate, with almost all its investigations resulting in some form of criminal sanction against the accused (Tan, 2024).

Why have Jordan's anti-corruption strategies produced such modest results? Perhaps there is far less corruption than presumed, and most allegations of bribery, graft, embezzlement, and other abuses are false. However, this is unlikely given the finding of external monitors like Transparency International as well as the Jordanian public's own worsening perceptions. More likely, political interests from within the regime preclude the wholesale implementation of far-reaching anti-corruption campaigns—for instance, by influencing which cases the JIACC can investigate, and whether its findings result in judicial punishment. The JIACC's staff rebuffed multiple interview requests from the authors when they inquired about such interference. However, this is a persuasive explanation given not only the nature of authoritarian rule, but the findings of

Jordanian academic specialists themselves, who have noted 'weak investigation, prosecution, and court proceedings of corruption, and a lack of control and follow-up mechanisms' that plague the JIACC (Abuhummour, 2023). Foreign aid donors lament this as well. One USAID report from the mid-2010s noted that while Jordanian authorities had quickly developed the capacity to crack down upon corruption, they lacked the political *will* to do so thoroughly (US Agency for International Development [US], 2013, p. 7).

Fighting petty corruption

Jordan's anti-corruption initiatives overwhelmingly target low-level civil servants rather than prominent regime elites. Put another way, Jordan's royal autocracy is reluctant to completely clamp down upon corruption – but when it does so, it targets petty corruption rather than the grand corruption of high-ranking officials and cronies.

Since JIACC annual reports do not reveal the identity of those investigated for corruption, we indirectly ascertain this mass-oriented pattern by parsing out Arabic and English online news stories from Jordan starting in 2003, when local media first began reporting corruption-related investigations and trials. The sources perused include the two leading government-controlled dailies (*Jordan Times* and *Al-Rai*), two Arabic online newspapers (*Al-Sabeel* and *Al-Saraya*), official JIACC press releases republished in Petra (the state news agency), and finally a handful of early *Al-Jazeera* stories from the early 2000s penned by local writers. Certainly, no informational sweep will ever be comprehensive in authoritarian states. Jordan's media environment is not free, not least because officials impede access to many websites, restrict independent newspapers, and forbid reporting on sensitive issues (Mahadeen, 2020). However, this makes the semi-official Jordanian news sphere even more insightful. The data collected reflects corruption-related cases that officials *allowed* to circulate freely. They hence reveal the regime's underlying preference regarding what type of anti-corruption strategy it wished to offer for public consumption.

As Table 1 outlines, we excavated 210 online news stories on corruption-related punishment in Jordan during 2003–23, which are listed in entirety in the Appendix (Media Data). Each news clipping mentions, either by name or occupation, at least one person implicated within an ongoing anti-corruption case, such as their investigation, indictment, prosecution, or conviction.[2] Table 1 categorizes such mentioned individuals into two groups – low-level targets, such as unnamed civil servants and bureaucrats; or elite targets who are usually named, referring to those holding senior government positions such as ministers and directors, or else their business cronies who lead large corporate entities connected to the state.

Table 1. Anti-corruption reporting from local media in Jordan, 2003–2023.

	Total Stories	Low-Level Targets	Elite Targets	Sample of Elites and Corruption Cases
2003	4	1	3	Samih Al-Battikhi (GID Director): fraud and embezzlement
2004	0	0	0	
2005	3	2	1	Saad Kheir (GID Director): unspecified allegations
2006	2	11	0	
2007	0	0	0	
2008	0	0	0	
2009	1	1	0	
2010	4	3	3	Khalid Shahin (business magnate): bribery and embezzlement
2011	2	3	0	
2012	5	4	1	Muhammad Dahabi (GID Director, Intelligence): money laundering
2013	4	4	3	Walid Kurdi (Chair of Jordan Phosphate Mines Company): embezzlement
2014	10	63	0	
2015	5	77	0	
2016	4	12	0	
2017	16	45	3	Three former Ministers of Agriculture: graft
2018	34	132	7	Waddah al-Hamoud (General Director of Customs): bribery and money laundering
2019	20	44	4	Former commissioners of Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority: embezzlement
2020	5	11	1	Agriculture Minister Ibrahim Shahahdeh: misallocation of COVID-19 permits
2021	22	53	0	
2022	37	94	3	Unnamed CEO (major public shareholding firm): fraud and embezzlement
2023	30	52	0	
Total	210	612	29	

Sources: *Jordan Times; Al-Rai*; *Al-Sabeel*; *Saraya*; *Al-Jazeera*; JIACC press releases. All named individuals have been convicted in Jordanian courts, and so are public knowledge. For full dataset, see Appendix.

These data do not constitute a perfectly representative sample. This is to be expected when combing through public media under authoritarianism. However, precisely because officials shape the content and distribution of news, they do elaborate how the Jordanian regime has publicly framed and packaged its anti-corruption measures for popular consumption. This is especially important given concerns that petty corruption may be simply more prolific, which may explain the predominance of such cases. Yet while small-scale misdeeds are likely more widespread than grand corruption, autocrats must still *choose* how much legal action to publicize against these abuses—and conversely, whether to subject high-ranking elites to equal scrutiny.

In that vein, the data reveal striking patterns. First, high-ranking elites are seldom touched. During 2003–2023, the 210 published news stories about Jordanian anti-corruption actions implicate at least 612 low-level individuals but just 29 elite figures. Elites represented only 4.5 per cent of the total pool of officials publicly linked to corruption, substantiating our theoretically-guided belief that personalistic dictatorships prefer to leave their elite pools

unscathed from public punishment. It is reasonable to infer that if the Jordanian regime did earnestly pursue grand corruption at the highest levels, this number would be higher.

Second, diversity characterizes those publicly implicated in petty corruption. Media reports have mentioned educators who sold academic tests; health ministry employees who forged medical supply contracts; bureaucrats bribed to approve small property purchases; civil servants facilitating local tax evasion; municipal officials laundering funds; and other unlawful conduct. The elite figures likewise span the political gamut. They include several former chiefs of the intelligence directorate (GID), ministers of tourism and agriculture, the general director of customs, several regional commissioners, and executives at several state-related enterprises, including the phosphate mining company and other public firms. While their punishments varied, most received some form of imprisonment after felonious convictions through the courts.

Given that personalistic autocrats should blanche at sacrificing their elite coalition, a reasonable conclusion is that for each targeted high-ranking figure, the Hashemite regime felt compelled to act because withholding punishment would have wrought significant political costs. For example, while reasons remain murky regarding why several former GID heads were outed as corrupt, one rumour—prevalent among Jordanians, albeit impossible to verify—holds that each questioned the authority of King Abdullah, and so suffered the consequences. At other times, public scandals regarding corruption allegations became so ferocious that authorities needed to mitigate mass outcry. For example, in 2013, Jordanian courts convicted the king's uncle by marriage, Walid Kurdi, of embezzlement in the context of tenacious tribal protests that personally attacked him as a royal profiteer who had ruined the state-owned phosphates company (Lacouture, 2021). Likewise, in 2018, public pressures compelled criminal action against several dozen individuals, including the former customs director and Water Minister, caught in a scheme involving the illegal manufacture and sale of counterfeit cigarettes (Andrews, 2019).

More salient are elite actors *not* mentioned in local media stories, which likely reflects the regime's role in insulating them from scrutiny. Such high-ranking figures were implicated in corruption scandals by independent Jordanian news sites later shut down by authorities, like *Khaberni.com*, but not mainstream media outlets influenced by the government. One example is erstwhile minister Bassem Awadallah, King Abdullah's close confidante during his time in government in the 2000s, and who shrugged off perpetual complaints that he had embezzled hundreds of millions of dollars (Badarneh, 2020). Awadallah was imprisoned in July 2021—not for corruption, but for unrelated involvement in an alleged coup-mongering conspiracy. Another is a notorious affair from the mid-2000s called Casinogate, which entailed

a failed kickback-laden project to construct a casino resort on the Dead Sea. While the Tourism Minister, Osama Dabbas, was indicted for his role by the courts, other government officials involved with the deal, including the Prime Minister Ma'rouf Bakhit—a notable conservative entrusted by the king—faced no sanction or punishment (Milne, 2011). In 2016 as well, the GID itself attracted controversy after Western media revealed that Jordanian intelligence agents had siphoned off US-supplied arms destined for Syrian rebels to sell on the local black market (Mazzetti & Younes, 2016). Licensed Jordanian news outlets, again, were forbidden from investigating or publishing this.

From targeting to timing

As the data show, political and institutional factors explain why authoritarian regimes gravitate towards limited and targeted measures. Personalistic autocracies like Jordan tend to punish easy targets, meaning low-level perpetrators, rather than high-level elites. As the data reveal, almost all publicly mentioned targets of anti-corruption investigations in the Hashemite Kingdom over the past two decades have been nameless public servants who can be easily replaced. By contrast to this facile approach, punishing one's narrow but vital elite base can bring higher political costs, especially given that the monarchy does not have a mass-mobilizing party from which to easily recruit loyal replacements.

The selective targeting of petty corruption in Jordan contains another analytical twist. However ineffective they seem to be, such middling anti-corruption endeavours do not occur erratically. They emerge most frequently after periods of intense public unrest or in the run-up to elections, which presents a final insight. This suggests that this autocratic regime finds anti-corruption measures useful in quelling public opposition—and so *times* these petty crackdowns accordingly. The next and final section unpacks this argument through statistical tests.

Timing matters: Petty crackdowns and political opportunism

If autocrats' mass-oriented strategies of punishing faceless bureaucrats for corruption were completely meaningless, then the timing of such crackdowns would be random and irrelevant. In Jordan, however, the opposite holds true. Authorities here tend to increase anti-corruption activity during sensitive periods, such as after popular protests or prior to important elections.

These patterns crystallize when comparing different evidentiary streams. Consider, firstly, the frequency of JIACC investigations displayed in Figure 1. A sharp increase follows two episodes of national unrest —2011–12, the Arab Spring; and 2018, which produced anti-tax strikes

and civic protests. Second, the media coverage adumbrated in Table 1 likewise tracks alongside these two upticks. The 2012–14 period shows 19 local stories about corruption involving at least 75 individuals, whereas the eight years before the Arab Spring generated 16 news stories implicating around 28 figures. Likewise, media mentions of corrupt-related cases steeply increase starting in 2018. Whereas the three years preceding the 2018 anti-tax demonstrations produced 25 news stories invoking roughly 137 individuals, the 2018–20 years resulted in 59 stories implicating at least 199 figures—far more coverage. The latter comparison notably underestimates the difference, because spring 2020 marked the onset of Jordan's draconian COVID-19 lockdowns, which greatly slowed anti-corruption investigations until the resumption of normal government activity later that year

These partial correlations highlight a familiar sequence of autocratic strategizing that extends beyond the issue of corruption. Authoritarians frequently respond to public unrest with limited reforms intended to restore some goodwill by making them appear responsive to mass grievances. Thus, an increase in official anti-corruption measures following major anti-corruption protests in Jordan would be entirely expected. However, an alternative explanation for such strategic timing cannot be discounted: rather than undertaking more anti-corruption measures for political gain, Jordanian powerholders may have simply chosen to divulge more information about such modest efforts to the public, while keeping the actual number of corruption-related investigations and cases constant.

To eliminate this possible bias and further establish that authorities indeed time anti-corruption measures for political gain, we scrutinize another source of evidence—a dataset of publicly-released Jordanian government audit investigations into public corruption, including at the localized municipal level. These investigations occurred between 2013 and 2015, and the Jordanian government only shared their content and outcomes in 2017. The remainder of this section presents a crucial finding, namely that municipal councils were more likely to be audited in the months preceding the August 2013 municipal elections. Such evidence suggests an attempt to secure public buy-in before a crucial political event. Moreover, corroborating the regressive nature of Jordanian anti-corruption crackdowns, elites were less likely to be targeted during this period. This analysis allows us to discount the alternative hypothesis that this could be all the work of government manipulation. Because these audit data were released four years *after* the 2013 municipal elections, it is highly unlikely that officials would have embellished the frequency of reported corruption or the number of public audits after this amount of time.

Audit investigations and municipal elections

Financial audits are specialized JIACC investigations that originate from the Audit Bureau. The Audit Bureau monitors public expenditures across a range of public institutions, such as national ministries, municipal councils, public universities, and state-owned enterprises (Aloran, 2017, pp. 92-–95). Upon discovery of alleged financial violations during routine audits, the Audit Bureau forwards the matter to the JIACC. The commission then determines whether the initial audit merits investigation, and afterwards whether the matter should be referred to the judiciary with formal criminal charges. Like the JIACC, the Audit Bureau operates under political restrictions; for instance, it falls under the purview of the royally-appointed Prime Minister, and lacks the authority to investigate royal institutions and the defence sector.

In 2017, the JIACC publicly released information on 200 audit investigations of public agencies where the Audit Bureau found financial irregularities and violations. These investigations were conducted between 2013 and 2015, and were posted in Arabic on the JIACC's website, which we translated into English (Appendix, Audit Dataset). This JIACC/Audit Bureau dataset discloses the public institutions audited, the nature of the violation, the date and time of the audit, and whether the investigations resulted in a judicial referral. Based on this information, we code whether investigations involved petty corruption and thus targeted low-level public servants, such as municipal council employees, or else pursued more senior officials, such as national-level administrators or senior executives at state-related firms. Critically, because each investigation pertains to alleged abuses that transpired *before* the audit, the data captures JIACC activity rather than underlying levels of corruption during that period.

These data are uniquely specified to 2013–15 for a quotidian reason: the Jordanian state has not released any other audit data that we could collect, including in other years that overlap with general elections for parliament. Such national-level elections could provide an equally useful opportunity to test hypotheses about the strategic timing of anti-corruption campaigns. However, as with all scholarship within authoritarian countries, we must make do with what data exist, and maximize its explanatory value within a multi-layered framework.

Regarding the data culled, a few caveats apply. Out of the 200 audit investigations, 54 do not disclose the year and month of the audit, and are thus removed from the dataset. Moreover, because no data exist on the timing or frequency of Audit Bureau audits that did *not* result in JIACC investigations, we treat the number of total audit investigations as an imperfect proxy for a total number of audits. We also assume that the rate of audit investigations per total number of audits is constant across time, since

auditors are unlikely to have known that their audit would lead to an investigation prior to the fact.

These audit investigation data overlap with a crucial political event—the August 2013 municipal council elections. In that contest, Jordan's 2.5 million eligible voters were asked to choose among 2,800 candidates vying for nearly a thousand municipal council seats across 100 municipalities in an election monitored by Western observers (Al-Jazeera, 2013). These elections held importance for three reasons.

First, most broadly, Jordan's royal autocracy prizes elections as a tool of political order. They are not credible contests over power, because repressive restrictions prevent outright opposition victories, while elected institutions like parliament and municipal councils lack independent authority. Nonetheless, elections allow state authorities to redistribute public resources and provide loyal supporters an opportunity to voice their preferences (Lust-Okar, 2009). High turnout holds particular value for another reason: they signal to Western aid donors and human rights monitors that Jordanian citizens are readily participating in electoral exercises, boosting the credibility of the monarchy's perpetual promises for democratic reforms.

Second, municipal councils are fundamental to many Jordanians' day-to-day interactions with the state. Funded by the national government, they distribute many social services and public goods at the local level, from administrative jobs to building licences and trash collection. At the same time, municipal councils are hubs for petty corruption. Many incubate clientelist networks in which local officials regularly benefit from bribery, nepotism, graft, and other misdeeds (Gao, 2016). Third, the August 2013 elections were the first local elections in six years, and critically came at the heels of the Arab Spring.[3] During the Arab Spring protests, the Hashemite monarchy pledged not just anti-corruption measures but also democratic reforms—including decentralizing power to make local councils more powerful and representative.

For all these reasons, these municipal elections provide a window into whether Jordanians saw official promises of anti-corruption reforms at a tense political moment as credible. For the government, high turnout would signify the return of stability by showcasing public buy-in for its reform pledges. Thus, it is reasonable to view increased pre-election efforts to purge corruption, especially from municipal bureaucracies and agencies, as a means to generate more support and voter participation. This stands on robust research, as comparative work in other contexts has shown that perceptions of prolific corruption tend to depress voter turnout by aggravating widespread apathy and cynicism (Dahlberg & Solevid, 2016). To be sure, that still occurred in Jordan, since the Muslim Brotherhood pointedly boycotted the municipal elections to signal their dissent. Nonetheless, Jordanian officials

played up the electoral contest as further proof that they were achieving better, more transparent governance.

Descriptive analysis

The 146 dated audit investigations in our original dataset divulge several patterns. First, they cover a wide breadth of public institutions and potential violations. For instance, the JIACC investigated officeholders within the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority for paying the corporation Oracle over JD 200,000 ($282,000) without signing a clearance agreement. The Ministry of Health fell under scrutiny after the mysterious disappearance of medical records of patients who owed money. In Amman, a municipal staffer provoked an audit investigation after hiring a relative's company to procure empty garbage bins. The Ministry of Education's Rural Development Centre came under inquiry after an audit disclosed that 16 beehives were missing after a spot inspection, a problem resolved when the centre informed the JIACC that it moves the beehives to different locations in the summer and winter.

Second, most of all, municipal councils underwent the most audit investigations, representing 44 per cent of the dataset's investigations (Appendix, Figure A1). More than a quarter of the audit cases pertained to national ministries. Another 17 per cent involved state-owned enterprises. The remaining 14 per cent targeted other public institutions like universities. Third, geographically, half the audit investigations occurred outside the capital of Amman (Appendix, Figure A2). Though Jordan has 12 governorates (i.e., provinces), Amman is by far the largest, holding half the populace and serving as Jordan's political and economic centre. Thus, bureaucrats in more rural governorates—areas traditionally favoured by the state given their preponderance of tribal communities—were not spared from anti-corruption inquiries.

Finally, the number of audit investigations varies over time (Appendix, Figure 3). On average, four such probes occurred per month. The minimum is 0 and maximum is 10—the latter of which occurred in July 2013, the month before the municipal council elections.

Statistical analysis

We test the likelihood of a municipal council audit investigation occurring prior to the August 2013 municipal elections using several statistical models. The unit of analysis is audit investigation ($n = 146$). The independent variable is time before the elections. We measure this as a bivariate pre-election monthly time window, with the main measure being a three-month pre-election window from June to August 2013 (*Pre-Election Period*). There were

18 total audit investigations during this period, roughly 12 per cent of the total. Of those 18, half involved municipal councils. We shorten and expand this time window from two to six months before the elections in robustness checks.

We expect the likelihood of a municipal investigation to increase during this pre-election window. Our models' dependent variable is a binary variable equal to one if an investigation involves a municipal council (*Municipal Council Investigation*). The variable equals zero if the audit investigation pertains to an institution that is not a municipality, such as a ministry or state-owned firm. Roughly 40 per cent ($n = 64$) of audit investigations in our dataset centred on municipal councils.

Control variables

We account for several confounding factors that could influence the onset of an audit investigation. All our models use governorate fixed effects to account for demographic and socioeconomic differences across Jordan's 12 governorates. Since the scale of the violation could also matter, we control for the number of legal charges brought against suspects in each case. Though audit investigations on average result in one charge, 15 involve more than two charges, with one case soliciting 23 charges. We log this variable because of its skew. We thirdly control for whether audit investigations resulted in judicial referrals for prosecution, as this could reflect distorting political pressures. The JIACC recommended prosecution in 27 per cent of the cases. Lastly, our models control for whether audit investigations targeted low-level bureaucrats or higher-ranking authorities. This is a binary variable equal to one if an audit investigation probed high-ranking officials like ministers or mayors, or heads of corporations and state-owned firms. Roughly a third of the audit investigations targeted the elite. Considering that elites are more likely to be managing public expenditures that surpass the minimum JOD100,00 (roughly $189,000) in public expenditures necessary for an audit, the low percentage of elites audited in the dataset reflects the non-elite skew of Jordanian anti-corruption efforts. The Appendix's Table A1 provides summary statistics of these variables.

Model

Our main model uses a standard Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression. The unit of analysis is audit investigation (i). *Municipal Council Investigation* is the binary dependent variable (Y_i), *Pre-Election Period (3 Months)* (X_i), is the binary independent variable, alongside the aforementioned controls and governorate fixed effects. The error term is ϵ. We use robust standard errors.

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta Pre - Election\ Period(3Months)_i + Controls_i + Governorate_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Though the outcome (*Municipal Council Investigation)* is a binary variable, we prefer an OLS model as linear regressions can yield unbiased estimates of binary outcomes (Gomila, 2021; Huang, 2022) and are easier to interpret. Nevertheless, we complement the OLS model with a binomial logit model. In robustness checks, we use a *Poisson* count model to assess whether the number of municipal investigations is more likely to increase during the *Pre-Election Period*. Under this model specification, month becomes the unit of analysis and number of monthly *Municipal Audit Investigations* is the outcome, with *Pre-Election Period* remaining the explanatory variable. Because the data only covers 36 months and this count model overlooks many differences across cases, such as the number of legal charges and governorate population, the OLS and binomial logit models are the main models of analysis.

Findings

The findings confirm our theoretical expectations in several ways. First, there is a positive association between the pre-election period and the likelihood of a municipal council audit investigation. Figure 2 plots the number of monthly municipal audit investigations as a subset of total investigations across time. The monthly number of municipal audit investigations are plotted with dashed lines. The box outlines the three-month

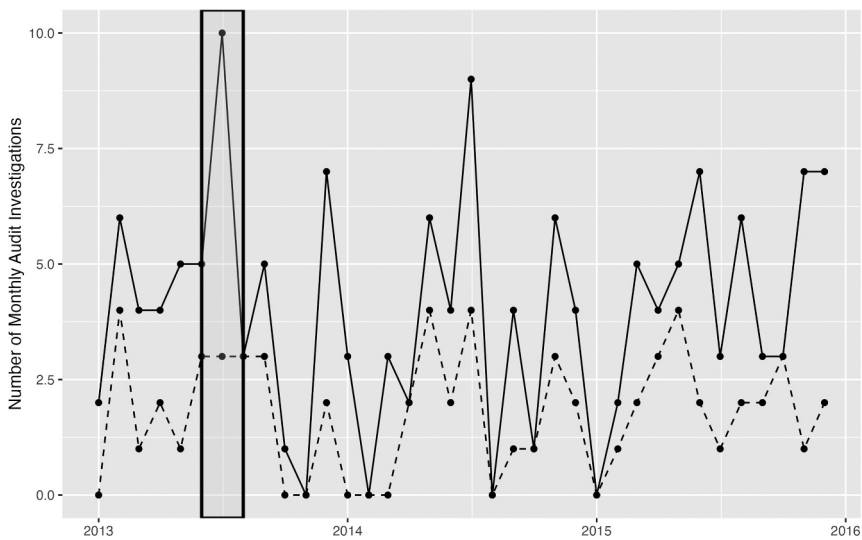

Figure 2. Audit investigations in municipal (dotted) versus all (straight) public institutions in Jordan, 2013–15. Source: Author's dataset (see Appendix).

Table 2. Modelled results, municipal council audit investigations prior to August 2013 elections.

	Dependent variable		
	Municipal Audit (1 = Yes)		
		OLS	Logistic
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Pre-Election Period (3 months)	0.21*	0.27**	1.53*
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.89)
Elite		0.19**	0.92*
		(0.09)	(0.47)
Corruption (1 = Yes)		−0.01	0.01
		(0.10)	(0.54)
Charges (Logged)		−0.03	−0.11
		(0.08)	(0.42)
Constant	0.37***	0.31***	−0.89**
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.38)
Governorate Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	146	134	134
R^2	0.24	0.28	
Log Likelihood			−68.32
Akaike Inf. Crit.			168.64
F Statistic	3.55***	3.00***	

*$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

pre-election period. A stark increase in the number of municipal council and total investigations occurs during that period, followed by a swift decline.

Table 2 shows a positive association between the three-month pre-election period and the likelihood of a municipal council investigation. This association is statistically significant at the 10 per cent level using both the OLS (Models 1 and 2) and logit models (Model 3). The coefficient estimate of three-month election period variable is statistically significant at the five percent level when the OLS model includes controls (Model 2). The magnitude of the coefficient of the three-month pre-election period is also substantively important. Model 2 estimates that the likelihood of a municipal audit investigation increased by almost 27 per cent during the three months before the August 2013 municipal council elections, holding all else constant.

The positive association between the pre-election period and the likelihood of a Municipal Council Audit remains statistically significant at the ten percent level when the pre-election period is extended (Appendix, Table A2). These findings hold when applying a Poisson count model as well (Appendix, Table A3). We also conduct a placebo test on the likelihood of *ministerial* audit investigations during the pre-election period. Given that the local municipal elections had little bearing on national ministries' day-to-day governance, we expect and find no statistically significant association between the pre-election period and the likelihood of a ministerial audit (Appendix, Table 4).

We also find that elites across all government institutions are less likely to be targeted during the pre-election period (Appendix, Table 5). The statistical significance of this negative association, however, is sensitive to different pre-election periods (Appendix, Table 6). There is no evidence of the regime disproportionately auditing elites prior to elections.

Contextualized implications

This quantitative analysis complements the general pattern observed, namely the non-random and politicized nature of anti-corruption actions in Jordan. Much as the JIACC undertook more corruption investigations across Jordan after the 2011–12 Arab Spring protests and the 2018 anti-tax uprisings, a parallel pattern holds with municipal audit investigations in the months before August 2013 municipal council elections. We surmise that Jordanian authorities wished to demonstrate a public commitment among incensed citizens that they were curbing corrupt abuses and punishing wrongdoers before a key election. The likeliest goal was to secure popular support and boost turnout, which in turn would legitimize the overarching democratic promises made by King Abdullah during this period of popular crisis.

That turnout ultimately reached just a meagre 30 per cent does not detract from the broader implication. Officials saw corruption-related actions, however restrained, as a potentially useful tool-one that they would exploit again after the 2018 anti-tax unrest. That a common logic of strategic timing manifests across two very different sources of data and methodology is significant. Moreover, if this were *not* the case, then the frequency of government investigations into even petty, local corruption should have no relationship with major political episodes like protests and elections. Our analysis here, however, strongly favours the opposite conclusion.

Conclusion

This article explored the political dynamics of how autocrats address corrupt practices, while presenting the most systematic analysis of corruption in Jordan yet published in political science. Given the scarcity of comprehensive information about this topic, we deployed multiple streams of new evidence from hitherto untapped sources. Our multimethod analysis underscores several core findings from Jordan.

First, the Jordanian case confirms that domestic and international pressures can induce autocracies to establish new anti-corruption reforms, such as ACAs. However, those efforts often fall far short of their lofty goals to transform politics, as Jordan's low rate of judicial prosecution demonstrates. Second, even middling anti-corruption work abides by informative patterns. Crackdowns on corruption are selective, because whom authorities target reflect underlying institutional

constraints. In Jordan, anti-corruption campaigns focus upon low-level public servants committing petty corruption. Personalism explains this approach, given the importance of maintaining a coherent base of loyal elites to support the highly centralized leadership. Finally, the analysis here reinforces how autocracies can exploit even these selective campaigns against petty corruption for strategic reasons, such as winning more popular support during periods of crisis. That not only did JIACC investigations surge following major protests, but that Jordan's municipalities were more likely to be audited for corruption in the run-up to the August 2013 municipal council elections suggests that officials time the deployment of anti-corruption measures. They serve higher political ends.

These findings highlight a broader implication that links the literature on comparative authoritarianism to ongoing work on corruption. Anti-corruption institutions and strategies abide by a political logic, in that authoritarians must choose how much corruption is targeted—and who is ultimately punished. This hints at new research opportunities. Whereas our analysis used Jordan's personalistic autocracy as an empirical case, other types of non-democratic states may present divergent anti-corruption patterns. Single-party dictatorships or militaristic regimes, for example, incubate different processes of elite recruitment and institutional practices, which may in turn induce distinctive preferences for how to regulate corruption.

Finally, these results signal that the role of international actors merits greater investigation. Like other Global South states, Jordan has faced pressure from international organizations and Western aid donors to improve its governance. Unlike some other regimes, however, the Hashemite monarchy is also a close US ally within the cauldron of Middle East geopolitics. This imbrication within American hegemony often dilutes international pressures for democratic reforms in Jordan, given the possibility that unpredictable political change could endanger Western interests. Given that corruption persists in other Global South states whose stability is prized by Western powers, explaining how geopolitical considerations shape domestic anti-corruption efforts remains an important task.

Notes

1. Data from the Arab Barometer, online: https://www.arabbarometer.org/.
2. Some stories describe JIACC cases as involving many suspects, without specifying a number. In such cases, we conservatively impute the *least* possible number of suspects (e.g., 'dozens' means 12, not multiples, while 'employees' in the plural means 2 rather than 20), so as to not overestimate the sample.

3. National parliamentary elections occurred in January 2013. This was prior to virtually all the audit investigations in our dataset, and so had no plausible relationship with public anti-corruption actions during 2013–15.

Acknowledgements

We thank two research assistants who contributed vital work: Peyton Allen of the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, who helped collect corruption-related media stories, and Joanna Gladys of Yale-NUS College, who helped assemble JIACC and Audit Bureau data. We also thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Yale-NUS College by a political science research grant.

ORCID

Sean Yom http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2369-2156
Steve L. Monroe http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7206-3041

Data availability statement

Replication data and additional figures and tables are available online in the Appendix via Figshare at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.30496763.

References

Ababneh, S. (2018, June 30). *Do you know who governs us? The damned Monetary Fund*. Middle east report online.

Abuhummour, A. M. (2023). Summative evaluation of implementation of Jordan's national anti-corruption strategy, 2013-2017, in the perspective of public choice theory. *Poverty & Public Policy*, *15*(4), 402–430. https://doi.org/10.1002/pop4.384

Al-Jazeera. (2013, August 27). Bada'a al-intikhaabaat al-badaliyyah fil-urdun [local elections begin in Jordan].

Aloran, K. S. (2017). *A comparative study of Jordanian anti-corruption law & the UN Convention against Corruption* [PhD diss]. University of Gloucestershire.

Andrews, F. (2019, August 21). *Fake cigarette ring exposes Jordan's corruption woes*. Organized crime and corruption reporting project.

Badarneh, M. (2020). Discourses of defense: Self and other positioning in public responses to accusations of corruption in Jordan. *Discourse Studies*, *22*(4), 399–417. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445620914670

Bank, A., Bellin, E., Herb, M., Wedeen, L., Yom, S., & Zerhouni, S. (2022). Authoritarianism reconf igured: Evolving forms of political control. In M. Lynch, J. Schwedler, & S. Yom (Eds.), *The political science of the Middle East: Theory and research since the Arab uprisings* (pp. 35–61). Oxford University Press.

Brownlee, J., Masoud, T., & Reynolds, A. (2015). *The Arab Spring: Pathways of repression and reform*. Oxford University Press.

Carothers, C. (2022). *Corruption control in authoritarian regimes: Lessons from East Asia*. Cambridge University Press.

Carothers, C. (2023). The autocrat's corruption dilemma. *Government and Opposition*, *58*(1), 22–38. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.23

Chang, E., & Golden, M. (2010). Sources of corruption in authoritarian regimes. *Social Science Quarterly*, *91*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2010.00678.x

Charron, N. (2011). Exploring the impact of foreign aid on corruption: Has the 'anti-corruption movement' been effective? *The Developing Economies*, *49*(1), 66–88.

Chen, C. (2020). What is behind anti-corruption? A comparison of Russia and China. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *53*(4), 155–176. https://doi.org/10.1525/j.postcomstud.2020.53.4.155

Chen, C., & Weiss, M. (Eds.). (2019). *The political logics of anticorruption efforts in Asia*. SUNY Press.

Cooley, A., & Sharman, J. C. (2017). Transnational corruption and the globalized individual. *Perspectives on Politics*, *15*(3), 732–753. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717000937

Dahlberg, S., & Solevid, M. (2016). Does corruption suppress voter turnout? *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, *26*(4), 489–510. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2016.1223677

Daragahi, B. (2007, August 14). In Jordan, family works to free scholar. *Los Angeles Times*.

De Miguel, C., Jamal, A., & Tessler, M. (2015). Elections in the Arab world: Why do citizens turn out? *Comparative Political Studies*, *48*(11), 1355–1388. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414015574877

De Sousa, L. (2010). Anti-corruption agencies: Between empowerment and irrelevance. *Crime, Law, & Social Change*, *53*(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-009-9211-3

Doig, A., & Recanatini, F. (2020). Anti-corruption agencies. In R. Bajpai & B. Myers (Eds.), *Enhancing government effectiveness and transparency: The right against corruption* (pp. 290–303). IBRD.

Faqir, R., Abu-Karaki, M., & Marashdah, M. A. (2011). The impact of corruption on human rights and the legal mechanisms for its compacting: Case of Jordan. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, *2*(3), 453–465.

Feierherd, G., Gonzalez-Ocantos, E., & Tuñón, G. (2023). Witch hunts? Electoral cycles and corruption lawsuits in Argentina. *British Journal of Political Science*, *54*(3), 629–648. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000712342300042X

French Anti-Corruption Agency. (2020, May). *Global mapping of anti-corruption authorities*. Online report. https://www.coe.int/en/web/greco/-/global-mapping-of-anti-corruption-authorities

Gao, E. (2016). Tribal mobilization, fragmented groups, and public goods provision in Jordan. *Comparative Political Studies*, *49*(10), 1372–1403. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414015621075

Geddes, B., Wright, J., & Frantz, E. (2018). *How dictatorships work*. Cambridge University Press.

Glain, S. (2005, May 30). Letter from Jordan: Kingdom of corruption. *The nation*.

Gomila, R. (2021). Logistic or linear? Estimating causal effects of experimental treatments on binary outcomes using regression analysis. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, *150*(4), 700–709. https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000920

Grundholm, A. T. (2020). Taking it personal? Investigating regime personalization as an autocratic survival strategy. *Democratization*, *27*(5), 797–815. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1737677

Harrigan, J., El-Said, H., & Wang, C. (2006). The IMF and the World Bank in Jordan: A case of over-optimism and elusive growth. *The Review of International Organizations*, *1*(3), 263–292. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-006-9490-8

Huang, F. (2022). Alternatives to logistic regression models in experimental studies. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, *90*(1), 213–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.2019.1699769

Johnston, M. (2006). *Syndromes of corruption: Wealth, power, and democracy*. Cambridge University Press.

Johnston, M. (2012). Why do so many anti-corruption efforts fail? *Annual Survey of American Law*, *67*, 467–496. https://www.law.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/upload_documents/NYU-Annual-Survey-67-3-Johnston.pdf

Jones, D. (2024). Clientelism and its discontents: The role of *wasta* in shaping political attitudes and participation in Jordan. *Mediterranean Politics*, *29*(1), 112–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2022.2114064

Jordan Anti-Corruption Commission. (2008). *National anti-corruption strategy 2008-2012*. ACC.

Jordanian Integrity and Anti-Corruption Commission. 2010-2022. *Annual report*. JIACC, serial.

Jung, S. (2022). Sources of corruption in authoritarian regimes: A cross-country panel data analysis. *Asian Perspective*, *46*(4), 733–753. https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2022.0029

Kilani, S., & Sakhija, B. (2002). *Wasta: The declared secret*. Arab Archives, Institute.

Klitgaard, R. (1991). *Controlling corruption*. Princeton University Press.

Knowles, W. (2005). *Jordan since 1989: A study in political economy*. IB Tauris.

Kuttab, D. (2021, October 29). How Jordan censors journalists. *Foreign policy*.

Lacouture, M. (2021). Privatizing the commons: Protest and the moral economy of national resources in Jordan. *International Review of Social History*, *66*(S29), 113–137. https://doi.org/10.1017/S002085902100016X

Lawson, L. (2009). The politics of anti-corruption reform in Africa. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, *47*(1), 73–100. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X08003662

Loewe, M. (2008). How favoritism affects the business climate: Empirical evidence from Jordan. *The Middle East Journal*, *62*(2), 259–276. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2217964

Lust-Okar, E. (2009). Reinforcing informal institutions through authoritarian elections: Insights from Jordan. *Middle East Law and Governance*, *1*(1), 3–37. https://doi.org/10.1163/187633708X339444

Mahadeen, E. (2020). The print and online media in Jordan-between liberalization and control. In N. Miladi & N. Mellor (Eds.), *Routledge handbook on Arab media* (pp. 125–134). Routledge.

Mazzetti, M., & Younes, A. (2016, June 26). C.I.A arms for Syrian rebels supplied black market, officials say. *The New York Times*.

Meng, A. (2020). *Constraining dictatorship: From personalized rule to institutionalized regimes*. Cambridge University Press.

Milne, S. (2011, September 12). Jordan supercasino secret deal was personally approved by Prime Minister. *The guardian*.
Monroe, S. (2025). *Mirages of reform: The politics of elite protectionism in the Arab world*. Cornell University Press.
Nieto-Morales, F., Peeters, R., & Lotta, G. (2024). Burdens, bribes, and bureaucrats: The political economy of petty corruption and administrative burdens. *Journal of Public Administration Research & Theory*, *34*(4), 481–497. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muae010
Obeidat, S. (2010, July). *Corruption in Jordan: It's the mechanisms, not manifestations, that matter*. Arab Reform Initiative brief. https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/corruption-in-jordan-its-the-mechanisms-not-manifestations-that-matter/
Parker, C., & Moore, P. (2007). The war economy of Iraq. *Middle East Report*, *243*(243), 6–15. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25164786
Pavroz, A. (2017). Corruption-oriented model of governance in contemporary Russia. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *50*(2), 145–155. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2017.05.005
Pozsgai-Alvarez, J. (2022). *The politics of anti-corruption agencies in Latin America*. Routledge.
Rose-Ackerman, S., & Palifka, B. (2016). *Corruption and government: Causes, consequences, and reform* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
Ryan, C. (2018). *Jordan and the Arab uprisings: Regime survival and politics beyond the state*. Columbia University Press.
Sampson, S. (2012). The anti-corruption industry: From movement to institution. In D. Schmidt-Pfister & H. Moroff (Eds.), *Fighting corruption in Eastern Europe: A multi-level perspective* (pp. 185–202). Routledge.
Shnikat, K. (2023). Istiqlal al-sultah al-qadha'iyyah al-urdun: Al-nusus wal-siyaasaat wal-tahdiyyat [The independence of the judiciary in Jordan: Texts, policies, and challenges]. *Hikama*, *6*, 69–89. https://hikama.dohainstitute.org/en/issue06/Pages/art05.aspx
Tan, C. (2024, April 30). *CPIB investigated higher proportion of reported cases in 2023*. The Straits Times.
Treisman, D. (2007). What have we learned about the causes of corruption from ten years of crossnational empirical research? *Annual Review of Political Science*, *10*(1), 211–244. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.081205.095418
Tsai, L. (2021). *When people want punishment: Retributive justice and the puzzle of authoritarian popularity*. Cambridge University Press.
US Agency for International Development. (2003, December). *Usaid/Jordan strategy 2004-2009. Gateway to the future*. Unrestricted government report.
US Agency for International Development. (2013, June). *Jordan rule of law and anti-corruption assessment*. Unrestricted government report.
US Embassy–Amman. (2005). *King Abdullah creates anti-corruption commission*. Wikileaks cable: 05AMMAN5623_a, July 14, 2005. http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05AMMAN5623_a.html
Wang, Y., & Dickson, B. (2022). How corruption investigations undermine regime support: Evidence from China. *Political Science Research and Methods*, *10*(1), 33–48. https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2021.27
Yadav, V., & Mukherjee, B. (2015). *The politics of corruption in dictatorships*. Cambridge University Press.
Yom, S. (2014). Tribal politics in contemporary Jordan: The case of the Hirak movement. *The Middle East Journal*, *68*(2), 229–247. https://doi.org/10.3751/68.2.13