المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Ninth Social Sciences and Humanities Conference

The Concept of "Political Culture" and Political Culture in the Arab World

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Background Paper

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies has chosen Political Culture(s) as the theme of its ninth Social Sciences and Humanities Conference. Despite the importance of this topic, it has been conspicuously absent from the Arab research agenda as a standalone subject with specific definitions, concepts, problematics, approaches and interpretive propositions. Where it has been given due attention, it has largely been the object of negative polemic, within attempts to refute claims that Arab culture is incompatible with democracy because of the power of religion. There has been almost no positive discussion of theoretical studies on political culture or political cultures as they actually exist. And despite some studies that have sought to understand Arab society from a cultural standpoint, whether patriarchal or religious, these studies tend to do so unconsciously and fail to contend with the question theoretically.

The absence of questions of this kind has meant that many other related questions have not been asked either, including the relationship of political culture to the attitudes of social actors and their political behaviour and the categorisation of social culture in accordance with the social groups that act as its vehicle or in accordance with ideology and prevailing value.

The concept of "political culture" first emerged in the mid-20th century, but its roots can be traced back to the 1900s, when the European social sciences first looked in depth at the role of values in social action under the penmanship of Saint-Simon, August Comte, Emile Durkheim, and later Talcott Parsons. The most important contribution, according to the political scientist Gabriel Almond, came from Max Weber, whose *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* identified religion as a key factor in European societies' adoption of capitalism. Weber's approach was used to understand the influence of different types of religiosity in behaviours that either promote or impede economic rationality, and also helped to explain the special relationship between Protestant countries and democracy.

The concept was not given a theoretical framing, however, until the American comparative politics academics of the 1960s and 1970s. The timing and location provide crucial intellectual context here. The concept of political culture was not merely a new approach to political science, representing a move away from the study of institutions and towards the factors that influenced policy and political behaviour – but an approach linked to the behavioural school, which gave far more significance to human and social behaviour (the role of individuals) as determined by worldviews. It was also a sally against Marxist economistic materialism (particularly in its Soviet articulation), which dismissed values and culture in favour of the simplistic formula of structure and superstructure. The rise of "political culture" is thus indelibly linked to the Cold War climate. It was in this climate that Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture*,[1] generally held to be the founding work of "political culture" studies, first appeared.

Nonetheless, this context does not mean that political culture is an ideological concept. It cannot be claimed that it lost its intellectual force with the end of the Cold War. It has constantly evolved since its emergence, under the influence of continual academic debate. It has been argued, for example,

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[1]   Sidney Verba & Gabriel Almond, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (California: Sage Publishing, 1963).

that the concept is very fluid, reducing its explanatory power, and that it is difficult for culture to act as a single explanatory factor, relying heavily on how it is measured, in keeping with the predominance of quantitative methods in US political science. It has also been criticised for its tendency to produce very localised results which are then presented as universal. It has been accused of ethical biases, of justifying the status quo, and of implying that re-education must precede any social change, which is impossible under current circumstances and thus leads to a vicious circle. We must be wary of any approaches that deal with culture as though it is a fixed, essential phenomenon, from which the nature of political systems in different countries is derived, approaches which have invited sharp criticism of "political culture" as a concept.

Political culture must thus be rescued from an ideological culturalism, which ultimately differs little from racism. At the same time, it is no longer possible to explain many phenomena associated with political systems without taking into account the prevailing or extant political cultures and distinguishing between popular and elite culture or cultures.

In any case, the intellectual legacy of "political culture" is now part of the social sciences broadly defined: the idea that political systems cannot be studied in the abstract, as an institutional product, but that there are various factors beyond institutions (and beyond the state), material and psychological, economic and cultural, that contribute to their emergence – and, more importantly, to their entrenchment. It is difficult for a political system to take root and achieve long-term stability simply by force alone if the prevailing political culture in elite and popular circles is ethically incompatible with it.

Moreover, this concept is linked to a deeper theoretical question which, even if it was first articulated in a particular context, is of enduring theoretical and intellectual importance: what is the relationship between political action or attitudes to the prevailing regime and ideas, values and beliefs (religious and ideological), and socialisation? To what extent are they a product of these ideas and values? How does political culture affect governance and the forms that it takes? How do human and social relationships and interactions affect the production of the values, ideas and concepts that define political action? Do these differ between cultures and societies? Or have the differences begun to fade away in a world of technology and digital communication? Is the world heading towards a globalised political culture in this sense? Or does the sense of threat encourage defensiveness, introspectiveness and emphasis of difference?

In the mid-1960s, Almond and Verba defined political culture as "the specifically political orientations—attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system."[2]

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[2] Ibid., p. 12. Almond had already introduced the idea of political culture in the early 1950s, in his Gabriel A. Almond, "Comparative Political Systems," Journal of Politics, vol. 18, no. 3 (August 1956), p. 3.

Almond subsequently expanded this definition in an article written with Bingham Powell, characterising it as "Political culture is the pattern of individual attitudes and orientations toward politics among the members of a political system. It is the subjective realm which underlies and gives meaning to political actions. Such individual orientations involve several components, including (a) cognitive orientations, knowledge, accurate or otherwise, of political objects and beliefs; (b) affective orientations, feelings of attachment, involvement, rejection, and the like, about political objects, and (c) evaluative orientations, judgments and opinions 'about political objects, which usually involve applying value standards to political objects and events."[3]

Alternatively, it can be said that political culture is "that [thing] which strengthens or weakens (promotes or undermines) a particular system of political institutions",[4] following Azmi Bishara, who has also noted that the elements of pro-democratic culture emphasised by modernisation theorists are the product of decades, even centuries, of democratic development, rather than a precondition of it, and who rejects cultural essentialism, folding the question of political culture into that of the "elite". In his *Democratic Transition*, in keeping with his reservations about the modernist assertion that popular culture impedes democratic transition, and his rejection of the idea that it can be held responsible for failed democratisation in the Arab World, he talks repeatedly about "elite political culture" and its effects on transition.[5]

It goes without saying that there is more than one political culture. There are as many political cultures as there are societies, and within a given society it is possible to identify youth cultures, elite cultures, marginalised cultures, masculine cultures, ethnic cultures and so on. And political culture is ever-changing and never fixed. Political culture in this sense has not been studied in Arab culture – that is, a study of political culture rooted in this clear and specific theoretical definition – although it may have been studied under other names, such as "political imaginary", "the role of religion in politics", "culture policy",[6] "the political thought of parties and sociopolitical movements".

Perhaps the most important concept that has served as a vehicle for the study of political culture in the Arab world is "ideology", although these two concepts differ theoretically: ideology is not merely a group of collective values and beliefs about political action but a doctrine defining the ideal society, and culture is thus broader. Most people have ideas and values that help determine their political attitudes, but which do not necessarily belong to a particular ideology. The political culture that governs political behaviour is broader than ideology, whether it is dominant or otherwise. But political culture is certainly influenced by ideology.

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3   Gabriel A. Almond & G. Bingham Powell Jr., Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1966), p.50.

4   Azmi Bishara, *Fī al-Masʾala al-ʿArabiyya: Muqaddima la Bayān al-Dimuqrāṭa al-ʿAraba* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2018).

5   Azmi Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dimuqrāṭa wa-Ishkāliyyātuhu: Dirāsa Nazariyya wa-Tatbīqiyya Muqārana* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2018).

6   A concept concerned with the role of party-political, social and educational institutions in producing new cultural, ideological and political meanings seeking cultural hegemony.

Interest in the distinct cultures or structures of communities has led to a reconsideration of many concepts and cultural-political axioms prior to politics. And although there is a gap in Arab studies of political culture, it is possible to recast these questions, or parts of them, as questions of political culture.

The study of political culture in Arab contexts is of particular importance, compared to other international contexts, insofar as the prevailing explanations for Arab countries' "resistance" to democratic transformation (the "Arab exception" or the "Arab-Islamic exception"), not least in the democratic transition literature, are political-cultural. While some elements of these explanations certainly can be found in Arab contexts – the "sheikh and supplicant" schema, communitarianism vs individualism, patrimonialism and neopatrimonialism, religious condemnations of *fitna* and rebellion and so on – these explanations of democracy's failure in the Arab World are reductive, because of the complexity of democratic transformation and the non-inevitability of any cultural transformation. This is quite apart from the fact that cultural transformations do not take place *before* democratic transformation but develop through the transformative process, "learning by doing"; as Yerkes says in the case of Tunisia, "Tunisia is building the democratic ship as it sails"[7] This should come as no surprise: all historical democracies have developed gradually, with a culture supportive of democracy developing alongside them, a point confirmed both by the troubles currently facing many Arab countries where major cultural shifts are taking place among the younger generation.

Furthermore, it is important to look at "political culture in the Arab World," to study it and analyse it with specialised, overlapping and interdisciplinary academic approaches, in order to cast light on its complex aspects and help enrich an Arab understanding of it.

It is for this reason that the Conference, to be organised by the ACRPS, is calling for an academic reconsideration of Arab political culture, disregarding the many imprecise and inconsistent usages of the word, while also incorporating the many related questions.

Such efforts are not merely an intellectual exercise to impose a global theoretical concept onto Arab material. They will draw out the extent to which political culture has affected and interacted with the modern Arab political experience, as systems and institutions. This experience encompasses the great influence of ideological (leftist, nationalist, Islamist) parties whose political projects were based on packages of values and ideas.

Study of the Arab case, of course, may in turn contribute to a review of global theories.

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7   Sarah Yerkes, "The Tunisia Model: Lessons from a New Arab Democracy," Foreign Affairs (November/ December 2019).

Themes

- Cultural approaches to the political phenomenon and their position within other theoretical approaches: institutional, public choice, etc

- Theoretical-critical review of "political culture"

- Political culture and similar concepts: ideology, public opinion

- Categorising political culture

- Measuring political culture

- Applied political culture: how to study political culture methodologically

- Political culture: an independent or dependent variable?

- The muzzling of political culture and its systemic problems

- Changes in political culture and how to measure them

- Political culture and the principle of universality of values.

- Political culture and the political system.

- Political behaviour of individuals and groups.

- Political culture in homogeneous societies and in multi-ethnic societies.

- Elites and their culture: How is it formed?

- Political culture and identity.

- The relationship of political culture to inclusive national identity.

- Political culture and the legitimacy of the state.

- Political culture and democratic transition.

- Political culture and political violence.

- Political culture and political stability.

- Political culture and socialisation.

- Political culture and globalisation: the impact of new means of communication on the formation of political culture.

- Is there a sub-political culture?

- The impact of institutions, systems, practices, conflicts and processes of change in political culture.

- Political culture and issues of integration.

- Have Arab researchers used cultural approaches to understand political phenomena?

- A review of Arabic literature on political culture.

- Features of the current political culture in the Arab world.

- Sources of current political culture in the Arab world.

- Classification of political culture in the Arab world.

- Political culture and Arab public opinion indicators (Arab Opinion Index model).

- The impact of political culture on Arab political action.

- The impact of political culture on movements and processes of political change and democratic transition during the 2011 and 2019 waves.

- Elite culture and democratic transition.

- Political culture constitutes a pro- or anti-authoritarian public opinion, post-2011 revolutions.

- Political culture in the Arab world and global influences.

- Political culture and attitude towards minorities.

- Educational policies and political culture.

Application guidelines

- The conference committee will consider research proposals (1,000-1,500 words) distinguished by novel approaches to their topic or which contribute to knowledge of their topic. Proposals must follow the ACRPS guidelines and must be submitted no later than 15 December 2021.

- Proposals should be sent via email, with a copy of the author's CV, to the email address: annualconference@dohainstitute.org

- Proposals must present a basic outline of the research, including a hypothesis, the central arguments, methodology and sources.

- The academic committee will write to researchers telling them whether their proposal has been accepted or rejected by 1 January 2022 at the latest.

- Full manuscripts (6,000-10,000 words) must be submitted to the Committee by 15 October 2022 at the latest.

- All manuscripts will be subject to peer review.

- The ACRPS will cover travel expenses, but there is no financial renumeration for any paper submitted. The papers will be the intellectual property of the Conference.

- All papers will be eligible to win the Arab Prize.