

POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST (SYRIA AS AN EXAMPLE)

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to come up with a description based on the political changes and civil war in Syria and how to find a realistic solution to put an end to this war and how to facilitate political transformation of armed groups in Syria against each other by formulating strategies to cope up with the complexity of the political transformation. Using the categories actors, issues, structures, processes, once again, allows a more comprehensive and systematic analysis of the stumbling blocks providing resources when formulating strategic solutions to stop the ongoing war.

Keywords: *political transformation, Middle East, cosmopolitan, arabisation, institutionalization.*

Syria is experiencing serious difficulties in overcoming its systemic problems due to the bureaucratic nature of the political institutions that have been shaped since the creation of the Republic in 1945. As a result of these conditions, Syria is increasingly unable to keep up with the complex changing structure, needs, and demands of the Syrian society.

In addition, the persistence of the state-centered structure of the policy has become too centralized, restrictive, and authoritarian. Hence, neither individual, nor group expectations and demands (including cultural freedoms) are fully understood or met by the central authority (the state). The detachment of the "centre" has led to the estrangement of society from the state. As a result, this has had an adverse effect on the political unity and social solidarity.

Furthermore, there is an established belief that "Whatever the state does give, or decides is good; neither its motive nor the consequence of its needs can be questioned." The state is sacred (this statement was in the preamble of the Syrian constitution until ...etc...). Its actions cannot be criticized. Its mistakes cannot be questioned and corrected. The perception of any popular demand or objection government policies represents an

unjustified rebellion, underserved demand, or outright subversion. The centralist system looks upon the emergence of new social power centres or alternative policy proposals as extraordinary, subversive, and even deviant. As a result popular demands are addressed inadequately, tardily or are simply suppressed (Wanli, 2006).

The fact that the social expectations are met callously or simply suppressed, causes violence in society: The social fabric is seriously damaged when both the official method of problem-solving and the method of conveying popular demands to the central authority are both violent. Violence "from above and from below" reinforces and legitimizes each other.

At the root of this society's problem lies the process of our nation - building which progressed not from the nation towards the creation of the state, but rather evolved as a process of building a nation with the initiative of the existing state apparatus and bureaucracy. Following the Syrian example, the state preceded the nation. (Wanli, 1963)

The forbearer of the Republic of Turkey, the Baath state, is not a nation-state. It is a cosmopolitan political union of diverse nationalities, ethnic and religious groups. The Republic of Syria was founded as a nation - state. However, the already existing state and the powerful bureaucracy took on the mission of creating a new concept of nationhood which was created and shaped by the state. The state's role as the creator, rather than the coordinator, still persists. This phenomenon renders the state omnipotent and omnipresent vis-a-vis the society. While a culturally rich and diverse society needs to develop both in size and complexity, the authoritarian state structure that was created to meet the needs of the early 1945

remained very much loyal to its policy of uniformity over unity which resulted in an increasingly incompatible relationship between state and society.

The tension and conflict which arises between the tutelary central authority and the population can be likened to the immature son (the population) of the house (the state) in which the latter induced the former to be rebellious. Further problems arise from the perception that the "son"- who is neither satisfied nor free in his father's house wishes to leave. Moreover, the Republic of Syria has several children! Some of them believe that they are treated like stepchildren.

One of Syria's major political problems emanates from what we confer to the notion of nationhood, a fundamental concept in our political culture. At the time of the declaration of the republic, the pluralistic nature of the population and the multi-cultural richness of society inherited from the France Empire were accepted by various parts of people. Disregarding their ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic heritage, the "nation" was deemed to be the political union of all groups living in Syria. This understanding could have created a pluralistic political organization that should inevitably be democratic. However, creating a nation based on pluralist principles out of a poor, backward, uneducated and cosmopolitan population was not accomplished by the political elite of the time (Aqil, 2006).

The urgent need to create a common political culture as the basis of the envisaged nation prompted the ruling elite to adopt the policy of uniformity (liquidating the cultural differences) rather than unity (respecting and reconciling the differences). The preference led the republican elite to the acculturation of the "nation" with the qualities of the majority, namely Arabism and Elawis- sunni, even Haneti branch of Islam (Moraru, 2010).

Based on the decision to standardize the population, the political elite or the central authority took on the task of defining "Arabisation" and "Islam" as well as the qualities of an "Arab" and "Muslim". Once these qualities were determined, they became the arsenal of a nationalist and secularist standardization. This intense effort of the last seventy odd years has been partly successful.

However, it is becoming clearer that this process is flawed because it emanates from a fictive reality rather than the existing realities of the country/society. The failure to eliminate imbalances in life-styles due to differential development of regions (especially Western-Kurdistan= Eastern which still suffers from the Baath of tribalism and feudal landownership); the widening of inequalities among social strata; the perception and treatment of cultural differences as deviant (this policy exhibited itself as an exclusionist attitude against non-ethnic Arab and non-Muslims and non-Sunnis among the Muslims) were combined with underdevelopment, unemployment and the insensitivity and inefficiency of the state, thereby giving rise to the criticism of the system.

Successive military interventions, the first of which was staged in 1963, and the authoritarian laws could not stop the increasing opposition which from time to time took on a violent character. Violence, on the other hand, served as a dirty shawl concealing corruption and moral decadence.

Had the armed struggle been a conflict between security forces and Kurdish democratic movement, then the society would not have been much affected by it, and the matter would not be regarded as a national security issue. But we are confronted with a widespread economic and serious inflation.

Furthermore, the Syrian civil war has killed more than 250,000 people and uprooted more than 11 million, sparking a refugee crisis throughout Europe and the bloody struggle going on for 5 years has long ago become more than a mere conflict between two armed groups. It causes strike between the Syrian and Kurdish citizens of this country and damages social solidarity. On the other hand, this problem, which cannot be, or rather, is not solved domestically has become a regional (Middle- Eastern), and even international phenomenon which creates opportunities for outside Intervention. This very fact triggers the need to find an even more urgent solution.

Because the problem is seen merely as a security issue and not as a "political and social conflict", we suffer from an unnamed war fought on our own lands, amongst our own people in which citizens kill each other. Should this war not be controlled, it may migrate from the countryside to urban centres, further polarizing the society.

Every society may have its share of fanatics who choose violence as a means of political expression. Effective police measures are needed to deter such

people. However, when violence becomes a widespread method of protest involving thousands of armed people supported implicitly or explicitly by hundreds of thousands, then such a phenomenon is of a social character. Therefore, the social and political dimension of the conflict needs to be taken into consideration and the roots of the conflict need to be examined (Sulaiman, 2004).

Primarily and most importantly, the parties in the conflict should meet independently of the official institutions who are the creators of the conflict.

These parties should work together to define the problem and formulate solutions. Their common assessment must be translated into policy proposals and presented to the public, the real problem(s). It is with this vision and aim that we, the citizens of Syria and Kurdish origin of the Republic of Syria, got together motivated by the belief that watching the enfeeblement of our society, like a patient with internal bleeding, is partaking in the historical irresponsibility. We discussed our mutual problem(s) at length in environments clear of external political influences.

To sum up, a great majority of the Kurds are as loyal to the Modern Syria without Assad and Baath regime as any other citizens, but they want their Kurdishness to be respected. Unlike democratic and civilized countries, Kurds feel rejected and victimized as the state and the political institutions resist the needs of the Kurds. The feeling of being victimized and the feeling of wounded self-perception (identity) are the basis of society problems. It is impossible to establish stability and solidarity in a society which includes a major group or people who feel politically excluded or victimized, even if such people are of the same race or religion with the majority. The two pillars of stability are justice and equality. Social peace and stability can be achieved only through a democratic state organization and a constitutionally based rule of law which guarantees equality for all social groups. Poverty and underdevelopment, while aggravating the situation, are not the primary source of the problem. Citizenship and ethnic, religious, and cultural identity should not be confused. Citizenship is a legal phenomenon which includes existing diversities in society (Bey, 2007).

Official authorities should not intervene in these domains because any intervention would make the state a proponent of one side as it already has. This harms the social solidarity.

Freeing the private or cultural domain from the intervention of the political domain/institutions is presumed in a democratic society which preserves the political equality. These conditions must be met if the feeling of "pluralist nationhood" is to be cultivated. A reductionist nationalism based on the ethnic identity of the majority or a privileged minority cannot ensure stability. It carries, in itself, the seeds of exclusion and segregation. Then what is to be done is obvious: Institutionalizing respect for all ethnic and religious values and strengthening democratic institutions which safeguard cultural diversities and political freedoms are necessary steps.

We propose the expeditious implementation of the following legal and institutional infrastructure:

- a) To put into practice the requirements of all international agreement on human rights and basic freedom signed by (successive) government(s).
- b) To put into practice the steps of localism; local Administration in Kurdish region in Syria.
- c) To prepare the new democratic Constitution based on tolerance.
- d) To rapidly adopt more liberal laws concerning the election system, the political parties, and the freedom of expression and assembly, in order to widen the base of democracy. This will influence the decision-making mechanisms. To prepare a new constitution safeguarding such laws based on the principles of multi-culturalism, pluralism, and participatory democracy.
- e) To create systems for government accountability including the establishment of an ombuds to oversee whether administrations at all levels work in accordance with the law and are harmonized with their designated responsibilities.
- f) To establish regional development administrations in which local representatives, elected by regional councils and a body of experts carefully selected by the central government, will work together.
- g) To extend the constitutional guarantee of the country's cultural richness including the rights of other cultural groups. To safeguard their traditional values. To this end, the Syrian Army, the Kurdish and the Syrian Free Army have to stop their attacks and war against each

other giving a real chance for a peaceful solution without Assad!

The Syrian people (including Syrian opposition) under UN is more powerful than to fear the Federal System in Syria that will be the real support for modern policy in Middle East (in Fields of Economy as well as politics) which could enforce the democratic role and policy in Syria and the Middle East.

CONCLUSIONS

As a result of long and headed discussion free of prejudices and ready political views, we agreed that:

1. Arab and Kurds of Syria are not the citizens of two enemy states. They are members of the same state. The root cause of the existing conflict is not the two parties/communities, but the official institutions, practices, and ideology.
2. The official (political) institutions have lost their effectiveness. They have become unresponsive to local characteristics and exigencies of the people because of their ultra-centralized and hierarchic structures.
3. Official practices have so far reflected an unresponsive attitude to the existence of Kurdish and other cultural and political realities.
4. The official ideology adopted as the driving force of nation-building, i.e. (Arabic) nationalism has turned out to be perceived as exclusive rather than inclusive for non-ethnic Syrian citizens of the state contrary to the intention of the founder of the Republican regime. Indeed, citizenship has been based on Arabisation.

The republican regime has restored sovereignty to the people. However, due to inadequate democratization of the regime, the impact of people over the decisions concerning their own welfare has been minimal. The most important reasons behind the bottleneck in the system are that the state has never really transferred the power to the people.

Despite official doubts, the democratization of the regime is possible through the creation of a

pluralist structure without hampering the unity of the state. However, neither individual politicians nor political parties take responsibility for the achievement of this outcome. Social as well as political conflict continues because of their opportunistic and irresponsible attitude.

The people of Syria would have been able to solve their internal problems much more easily, we believe that, if the political parties had not supported political factionalism and raised change. The people wish to live together and have the common-sense to produce practical solutions to achieve this end through mutual consensus. Quarrels, lack of understanding, insensitivity, and resistance to popular demands stem from existing political structures and authoritarian mentality.

The presence of Kurds in Syria i.e. "the Kurdish reality", was unfortunately discovered after considerable bloodshed. Nevertheless, the recognition of the Kurdish reality represents an achievement in itself. What does the recognition of the Kurdish reality mean? It implies the acknowledgement of the existence of cultural group (people), which includes millions of people. The Kurds have been and are one of the main elements of the Syrian Republic. They lay claim to unique cultural as well as political characteristics and are sensitive about preserving them. Such acknowledgment of cultural distinctiveness is based not only on a scientific observation, but also on political realities. The Kurds want official/legal acknowledgment of their existence as a unique cultural group (people).

They would like this acknowledgment to extend beyond oral commitments to include legal warranties, having effect on the daily life including the free exercise of their cultural identity.

The Kurds do not want these rights in order to distance themselves from the state or to divide Syria. Neither do they want to alter the basic qualities of the state. But rather, they want to be able to preserve their cultural heritage and still live in safety as equal and respected citizens of Modern Syria in Future!, in spite of the fact that they are from an ethnic group other than the majority.

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