

Political Authority in Contemporary Muslim Societies

**A UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE (USIP)--
MUSLIM WORLD INITIATIVE
WORKING GROUP AND STUDY PROJECT**

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Project Content

As part of its "Muslim World Initiative," the United States Institute of Peace launched a workshop on how attitudes about political authority might retard or advance democratic progress in select Muslim societies. The general purpose of the project is to provide a new perspective on the problem of democratization in the Muslim world by focusing on the status, functions, mechanisms, and ideological foundations of political authority. Whether political authority is formal or informal, based on ad hoc commissions or permanent institutions, rooted in customary practices or a particular religious doctrine... could be a decisive factor in explaining regime change and continuity. Yet, this dimension has been largely neglected in the study of regime change in predominantly Muslim societies.

Scope of Study

The study covers six countries (Morocco, Libya, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia) and includes a comparative analysis of public attitudes about political authority in three or four predominantly Muslim societies. The case studies will examine four broad issues: (i) the relative power of formal and informal political institutions in each country, (ii) their respective areas of intervention (i.e. identify a possible division of labor between formal and informal institutions), (iii) explain the logic of this division of labor (i.e. is it dictated by strategic, cultural, or ideological considerations?), and (iv) the relevance of each state's authority relations to understanding regime change and continuity.

Given the diversity of states and societies under consideration, participants in the first workshop meeting underlined the importance of theoretical and methodological flexibility. Theda Skocpol's *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (1984) was

suggested as a useful point of reference as well as departure on the theoretical and methodological issues authors may be facing.

The suggestion that informal political authority continues to shape and determine the formal political process in the Muslim World is not new. What remains unclear is the distinction between what is “formal” and what is “informal,” and whether the predominance of informal institutions of government depends solely on power and effectiveness. To address these issues the project considers specific areas or instances of “political authority at work.” The question is whether in Muslim societies formal institutions of government is a particularly bad arena (i.e. uninformative, uninteresting, even misleading) to capture political authority at work. In other words, formal institutions of government are not considered a legitimate public arena to settle social, political, or economic conflicts within Muslim states and societies. My “hypothesis” is that the absence of democratic representation alone does not explain this lack of trust in formal institutions of government. Something else may be going on.

To provide a concrete context, here are some examples of the ambiguous role and status of formal political authority in different Muslim societies.

Morocco exemplifies how a traditional political institution, the monarchy, can undermine the formal, modern political process, despite the growing role of modern political institutions (parties, trade unions, legislatures, etc...). The Moroccan monarch has successfully removes the most important and substantive political issues from the formal political institutions by creating royal councils, commissions, institutes, and a whole array of institutions whose members, agenda, and prerogatives escape the formal process. This is not just an issue of power. Constitutionally and symbolically, the Moroccan monarch has enough power and symbolic capital to manipulate and dictate policies on their formal government and state representatives. That he chooses informal, discretionary political networks to “bypass corrupt and inefficient political institutions” a common justification, suggests that the undermining of the formal political process is not just about power. Something else is at work. Recourse to royal commissions, etc... to get the work done suggests the ambiguous role and status of formal political authority. Royal Commissions were established to deal with sensitive and important issues such as compensation for human rights violations, the reform of the civil code relating to the status of women, the cultural demands of the Berber populations, and even social issues (capital/labor disputes, poverty, etc...).

Libya exemplifies how a populist political regime, whose apparent goal is to keep “corrupt government officials” under check, undermines formal political authority. Qaddafi’s People’s Committees, which at one point constituted parallel, discretionary structures to the government, reflect the ambiguous role of formal political authority in a Muslim state and society. The Libyan regime presents a radical version of the rejection of formal politics. I study how Qaddafi undermines formal structures of government by creating some 2,500 People’s Committees in every important economic, political, and administrative sector. I link the discretionary character of these committees to Qaddafi’s aversion to formal hierarchies that I identify and analyze in his writings and domestic

policies. For example, Qaddafi destroyed all normal administrative structures in the name of “direct democracy.” Here again, it is difficult to argue that the main purpose of the People’s Committees is to concentrate political power in Qaddafi’s hands. These committees have ambiguous mandates, they are badly organized, inefficient, and difficult to control. These committees, I would like to suggest, undermine the formal process as the legitimate arena to manage public affairs.

Iran exemplifies the problems of political authority in a theocratic state where religious councils play a predominant role. These councils oddly recall the royal councils in Morocco and the popular committees in Libya. While Iran has all the accoutrements of formal democracy – regular and transparent elections, multi-party politics, a dynamic parliament, etc. – the struggle over the nature of political authority has not been settled. Discretionary clerical bodies continue to exert tremendous power and control over the political process. Constitutional politics in Iran could provide an open and advanced stage of contestation over the nature of political authority in the context of the Muslim world. The powers and strategies of the clerically selected Council of Guardians, Expediency Council, Assembly of Leadership Experts, and Special Court for Clerics could provide great insights. The 1997-2001 period may be particularly interesting to study the conflicts and negotiations between *hokumat-e qanun* (the formal rule of law) and *velayat-e faqih* (the mandate of the jurist).

In a nutshell, the argument is that the predominance of royal commissions, popular committees, religious committees, or tribal councils in the exercise of political authority is not just about power -- “who gets what, through what means,” the standard question in political science. Rather, the interesting question is: what is the legitimate arena to resolve differences and conflicts within the community? For some historical and theological/philosophical reasons, there is a great deal of suspicion and skepticism about the neutrality of formal political institutions in the Muslim world. Yet, this presumed neutrality – whether real or mythical -- constitutes the foundation of liberal democracy.

Product and Timeframe

The centerpiece of the workshop will be an edited volume that will consist of six country studies, two comparative case studies, and an introduction and a conclusion authored by project director. Final drafts are expected on September 15, 2005. The Institute will publish the book following a thorough internal and external review process in Spring 2006.

In addition, the project director will write a 15 pages USIP “Special Report” that summarizes the book’s contents and main arguments. A conference may also be organized to present the workshop’s findings shortly after the publication of the volume or the Special Report.

Project Participants

Authors:

Ali Ahmida, University of New England: Libya

Dan Brumberg, Georgetown University: Iran

Steven Cook, Council on Foreign Relations: Turkey

Guilain Denoeux, Colby College, and Abdeslam Maghraoui, U.S. Institute of Peace: Morocco

Chris Fair, U. S. Institute of Peace: Pakistan

Robert Hefner, Boston University: Indonesia

Brian Katulis, Freedom House: Comparative Data Analysis

Abdeslam Maghraoui: Overview Chapter

Jean-Francois Seznec, Colombia University: Saudi Arabia

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Discussants:

Lisa Wedeen, University of Chicago: Libya

Hadi Semati, Tehran University: Iran

Stephen Cohen, Brookings: Pakistan

Guilain Denoeux, Colby College: Comparative Data Analysis

Clement Henry, University of Texas at Austin: Project Overview

Stephane Lacroix, Institut d'Etudes Politiques, Paris: Saudi Arabia

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