

Special Issue on Informal Challenges to Mediterranean Politics

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Guest Editor's Note

Silvio Berlusconi's continuous scandals have shown how politics in Italy is dominated by a vast web of *clientelismo* (patron-client relations)¹ between politicians, businessperson, and voters. The most recent scandals of Berlusconi do not just point a bohemian lifestyle but a degenerated form of *clientelismo*: young charming women accept this humiliating situation for a return, not only a conspicuous sum but also a help for their career from Berlusconi, who was the leader of the ruling coalition as well as a media magnate. With friendly and informal relations Berlusconi strengthened economic relations and assured contracts to many Italian firms, which are his clients. Moreover, Berlusconi's foreign policy also has shown how he preferred informal politics with leaders like Putin, Erdoğan, and Qaddafi.

Berlusconi's political style is not so innovative, and probably can be dated back to the foundation of united Italy. Berlusconi's political mentor was Bettino Craxi, the leader of the defunct Socialist Party. In 1992, Craxi was invested by a series of investigations that took the name of *Tangentopoli* (Bribesville scandal) or *Mani Pulite* (Clean Hands). *Tangentopoli* brought to light a vast web of relations between politics and business: on one side, politicians were helping in assigning state bids, and with new legislation, on the other, companies financed political parties illegally. As a result of these scandals the Italian political systems dramatically changed in matter of months. Craxi himself eventually escaped to Tunisia to avoid persecution and after a mob tried to overwhelm him. The ousted President Ben Ali of Tunisia was a client of Craxi. The big difference between recent scandals and *Tangentopoli* is the public reaction to it. Even if *Tangentopoli* lost momentum in 1994, it was popular when hitting high profile politicians. The reason is not just the emergence of a new political class by Silvio Berlusconi, that de-penalized some of the crimes. Berlusconi represented a changing mood in public opinion. Gherardo Colombo, one of the leading prosecutors of *Tangentopoli*, explained the end of this phase in this way:

I believe that Mani Pulite ended, not because as generally thought a different attitude of the media; yet because citizens started to identify themselves in the people involved progressively in the investigations. At the beginning no one identified himself with people in so high position, who were so intimate with power. Because they were too different. So everyone attacked them. Progressively, though, evidences and what appeared brought us to involve... the labour inspector who took money and eventually did not check the firm's regularity in the respect of health and safety regulations. Or the policeman who takes food from a shop without paying. Then the Italian citizen started to think something... to identify himself with those progressively involved in the investigations. So the body of citizens kept aloof.²

Tangentopoli, then, failed because a widespread culture of informality was part of the daily life of Italians. Consequently today, Italians seem to accept Berlusconi's political conduct. Even the sex

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scandals apparently left the Prime Minister's popularity untouched and the penal charges against him do not apparently rage the greater majority of the public. Despite the democratic anomaly, the reason behind this is not Berlusconi's control of private and public media. The reason can be found in the widespread political culture that accepts that the *res publica* and economy must be handled among friends, clients, relatives, even if that means a higher level of inequality and lack of transparency.

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Informality is part of widespread political culture. An institutional analysis gives us only a partial image of the mechanisms of politics. Thus, again, an analysis of the Italian political system and its decision making process without an understanding of *clientelismo*, namely of the influence of informal relations on the electoral process and the financing of political movements will lead to an incomplete and misleading representation of Italian politics. Political scientists and sociologists should then look at informality to may understand the real mechanisms of politics.

In his analysis of Italian political culture, Putnam argued that Italian *clientelismo* is really much the result of a long and stable Hobbesian equilibrium which favoured the vertical organization of political and social organization. Mutual suspicion and corruption was regarded as normal. Involvement in civic associations was scanty. People particularly in the *Mezzogiorno* felt powerless and exploited.³

The Middle East resembles really much Italy in this analysis of Putnam. The Middle East has a weak political culture as in Italy. A historical legacy of authoritarianism has deeply influenced the evolution of powerful centralized civic institutions. Since the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, the many dynasties that succeeded to each other adopted strongly centralized and paternalistic form of rule where citizens kept on being considered *ra`āyā* (flock and, later, subjects) in front of *al-sā'is* (manager or trainer of horses, camels) who makes *siyāsa*, word shared by all the languages of the area, which, however, its root indicates the meaning of to tend, to manage.

Since the early decades of the nineteenth-century, the process of modernization, the rise of Western power and influence in the area, colonial and semi-colonial rule, neo- imperialist, and cultural policies have transformed political institutions and behaviours generally taking European political systems as models. Society and political practices, though, were transformed, yet not evanesced (as Marx or Weber might have expected in a process of modernization), maybe because 'social context and history profoundly condition the effectiveness of institutions.'⁴ What emerged were *hybrid states*.⁵ At the core of these processes was the injection of Western institutions and values by domestic and external actors. In this process, the traditional political structure was amended according to the Western model, but with the actors' newfound rules and institutions. This brought to the emergence of hybrid states that oscillate between the Western and their traditional formats. However, hybridity was behind the failure of Middle Eastern states to create models which fit their multicultural society, lack of national identities, impersonal political systems. The European nation- state model, for instance, was adopted by many countries in the region but demonstrated to be inadequate. Jordan was an 'invented' country that goes much further the capabilities of 'imagination' (to use Anderson terminology) of Beduins, Circassians, and, later, of Palestinians. Turkey also, following the nation-state model, has failed in finding an identity common to all its ethnic and religious minorities but also common to the urban and peripheral masses.

In the Middle East also the individualised culture, which is the cornerstone of Western models, never emerged completely despite the sociological and economic transformation. As noted by Ayubi:

Neither individualism nor class analysis will if used exclusively provide a very useful paradigm when one is dealing with a society where neither the historic-intellectual prerequisites for individualism nor the socio-economic bases for a clearly differentiated class structure are present. In much of the Third World the

individual, even though he has often been forced out of his primary group, has not yet enjoyed the protection of individualism as a juridic-intellectual concept, nor has he been accommodated within a clearly differentiated class structure. Thus we have a state of flux whereby the human being is partly nuclearised but not fully individualised; he is partly member of his primary group and partly a member of an emerging class structure. The 'state' in such a situation cannot be 'derived' or deduced either from the presumably 'contractual' relationship that binds the individual to the government in liberal theory, or from the presumed class domination that is supposed to give the state its character in Marxist theory.⁶

Hybridity and the lack of individuality strongly contributed to the emergence of over-stated states. Despite the strong apparatus of security forces and controlled media, states that are weak and feeble in legitimacy, in their repressive system and very often in delivering economic development and redistributing resources. This is particularly true after the revolts that wiped out apparently indestructible regimes like the ones of Ben Ali and Mubarak in few days. It is also true in the case of Turkey, which is the only Muslim country of the area which advanced economically and democratically but kept in struggling in defining itself and the relations between the state and citizens.

What happens in hybrid and over-stated states? The ruling elites partly control the formal legal and institutional system but at the same time they need to recur to informal practices such as tribal solidarity and patronage to manage to rule over a population that may not recognize their legitimacy or the legitimacy of the institutions that they represent. On the other side, individual citizens or groups attempt to survive in a close system. To pursue their interests they go through a series of informal tools that go from the black market, to informal networks, and corruption.

Before to proceed further, we need to define, even if broadly, what we mean by informality. A first demarcation line between formality and informality is blatant: informal politics include the practices, acts, and networks not codified in official documents. Moreover political informality is made generally outside the 'rational system' of the state institutions and, many times, inside state institutions but outside the legal or formal procedures.

This does not mean that informality is a synonym of illegality. Yet informality usually stands in the grey areas of the law, exploiting vacuums in the legislation or states' incapability of unwillingness in enforcing the existing legal system. Informality is rather regulated by traditions, customs by loyalties built on the capability to deliver or primitive bounds. Informal politics may be sympathetic or supportive of the legitimate or illegitimate power; for instance, the networks built between political elites and local notables to strengthen state authority in peripheral areas of a country.

The present work is intended to focus on case studies on informal politics in the Middle East. However, it is important to specify that informality is not a peculiarity of a certain culture or specific geographical areas. Previous studies on informality were concentrated for example on urban informality in Latin America or on informal economic practices in Eastern Europe. Moreover, the remark on the importance of informality in the region does not allude to some sort of underdevelopment. If we read the phenomenon through Weber, certainly informality expresses a lack of rationalisation of Mediterranean societies and states. However, post-modernization all over the world appears to be bringing increasingly recourse to informality. Just let us remember the relations between corporation and politics in the US, and obviously the Italian case.

Moreover, in our discourse on informal politics, we should not forget its positive effects. It has positive consequences in economy because is a way to protect individuals from unemployment and devaluation. For instance, informal economy gives chances of second jobs and small commerce. Political informality, particularly in non-democratic contexts, is the only form to organize protest and civil society. It is also the only form to elaborate and divulge alternatives to state ideologies. The Arab Spring has been possible thanks to non-official and evanescent platforms to coordinate the protest as well as learn what was happening and to let the outside world know the unfolding events. Furthermore, informality favours the creation of networks of solidarity

to help individuals to survive sharp economic changes such as liberalization of the market, urbanization, or ideological discrimination. The phenomenon of the *cemaats* in Turkey may be a good example of this. However, as we will see in some case studies, informality can be used also by totalitarian regimes to strengthen unfair regimes and promote undemocratic practices.

Indeed, the word 'informality' refers to actions taking place behind the official scene which constitute a threat to fair and just treatment, resulting in favouritism, nepotism, patronage, and clientelism.⁷ Formal procedural democracy and rational universal administration, on the contrary, favour impersonality, transparency, accountability, and equality in the use of power.

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NOTES

¹ See Luigi Musella, *Clientelismo: Tradizione e Trasformazione della Politica Italiana 1975-1992* (Napoli: Guida, 2000).

² Lucarelli, Carlo (Producer). (2008, September 12). *Blu notte, misteri italiani* [Television broadcast]. Roma: Rai Tre. <http://youtu.be/bbK49JaE1kI> (Accessed 13/01/2014).

³ Rober D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁵ Gökhan Bacık, *Hybrid Sovereignty in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

⁶ Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State* (London-New York: IB Tauris, 1998), 34.

⁷ Barbara A. Misztal. *Informality* (London-New York: Routledge, 2000), 18-9.