Chapter 12

Public Spheres and Political Dynamics in Historical and Modern Muslim Societies

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Introduction

In this paper I would like to analyze briefly from a comparative civilizational point of view some of the characteristics of public sphere in Muslim societies as they developed in 'traditional' Muslim societies and to point out to some important tendencies of their transformation in modern ones.

For a very long time there has been prevalent in scholarly literature as well as in – especially Western – public discourse the view that in Muslim societies, in contrast especially to the Western societies, there did not develop a strong, autonomous public sphere or civil society. This view was closely related to the – Orientalist – conception of the political regimes that developed within them as epitomes of Oriental despotism – of Muslim (as well as Chinese and even Indian kingdoms) societies ruled by Oriental despots, in which all the power was seen as concentrated in the hands of the rulers and the various sectors of society were not granted any autonomy beyond purely local affairs, with even these affairs being often tightly regulated by the Great Despots. One of the best-known illustrations of this conception was Karl Wittfogel's book Oriental Despotism, in which he applied this term to the Chinese imperial system (Wittfogel 1957).

This line of argument was continued in the more recent discussion in which the absence or weakness of the public sphere and civil society in various Asian, including Muslim societies served often as an "explanation" for the difficulties of establishing democratic regimes within them. In this discourse two very strong assumptions emerged: first, that the development of a public sphere and civil society constitutes a critical condition for the formation and development of constitutional and democratic regimes; second that the concepts of public sphere and civil society are often coupled, overlapped, almost conflated, without clear distinction between them (Cohen 1999; Galston 1999; Mardsen 1999; Barber 1999). However a look at the available historical and contemporary evidence shows these assumptions to be very problematic. First, the relations between civil society, public sphere and the political arena are much more variable than is implied in these assumptions. Second, and closely related, the public sphere and civil so-

ciety should not be conflated. The public sphere must be regarded as a sphere situated between the official and the private, which expands and shrinks according to the constitution and strength of those sectors of society that do not share in the rulership. Civil society entails a public sphere, but not every public sphere entails a civil society – whether of the economic or political variety – as defined in the contemporary discourse or as it developed in early modern Europe through direct participation of corporate bodies or a more or less restricted body of citizens in the political process in which private interests played a very important role (Eisenstadt, Schluchter and Wittrock 2001). Whatever the differences with respect to the relations between the public sphere, civil society, and the political arena, in all societies these relations have entailed continual contestation about power and authority, as well as about their legitimation and accountability. The concrete ways in which such negotiations or contestations develop differ greatly among diverse civilizations – attesting to the different ways in which power and culture are interwoven – and shape their distinct dynamics.

The public sphere in Muslim societies: the role of the *ulama*

A closer critical look at Muslim societies does indeed indicate that there developed within them a very vibrant and autonomous public sphere that was of crucial importance in shaping the dynamics of these societies (Hoexter, Levtzion and Eisenstadt 2001). As stated by Hoexter and Levtzion:

> The picture is that of a vibrant public sphere, accommodating a large variety of autonomous groups and characterized by its relatively stable but very dynamic nature. The community of believers was the center of gravity around which activity in the public sphere revolved. Its participation in the formation of the public sphere was a matter of course; its well-being, its customs and consensus were both the motives and the main justifications for the introduction of changes in social and religious practices, in the law and policies governing the public sphere. The independence of the *shari'a a*nd the distribution of duties towards the community between the ruler and the '*ulama,'* established very clearly in Islamic history, were crucial factors in securing the autonomy of the public sphere and in putting limits on the absolute power of the ruler (Hoexter and Levtzion 2002).

These public spheres were arenas in which different sectors of the society could voice their demands in the name of the basic premises of Islamic vision. Indeed the dynamics of these public spheres cannot be understood without taking into account the crucial importance in them of the place of the community, rooted also in the basic premise of Islam – the equality of all believers and their access to the sacred. These conceptions have necessarily given members of the commu-

nity a right to participate, if not directly in the central political arena, certainly in the communal and religious ones, in the promulgation and voicing of norms of public order. It was indeed the *ulama*, however weak their organization, who were the guardians of the pristine Islamic vision, upholders of the normative dimensions of the umma, and keepers and interpreters of the *shari'a*. They were the religious leaders, the custodians of the divine law, and through it of the boundaries of the Islamic community. They performed important juridical functions but mostly acted in concert with other social actors, with the representatives of families and members of community or communities as well as, of course, with the rulers. As Hodgson has indicated, it was the *ulama* who, through their activities in schools of law, the *waqf* (charitable endowment), and the Sufi orders, constituted the public spheres in Islamic societies and provided arenas of life not entirely controlled by the rulers (Hodgson 1974).

From among the many organizations that developed in Muslim societies, it was mainly the schools of law, the *waqf*, and the different Sufi orders that constituted the most important components of the public sphere. While the relative importance and scope of these institutions did change in different historical settings and periods, some combination of them seems to have existed in all cases. Many aspects of the institutional arenas constituting the public sphere varied in different societies and periods; though regulated by the ruler, they were yet autonomous and could exert far-reaching influence on the ruler: an influence that went far beyond simple subservience to official rule or attempts to evade it.

It was indeed the central place of the *ulama* – its relatively high symbolic standing despite minimal organizational autonomy – that distinguished Muslim regimes from other traditional patrimonial regimes in South or Southeast Asia or in the early Near East. Truly enough, this highly autonomous religious elite did not develop into a broad, independent, and cohesive ecclesiastic organization. The religious groups and functionaries were not organized as a distinct, separate entity; nor did they constitute a tightly organized body – except, and even then only partially, in the Ottoman Empire (Gibb 1968; Inalcik 1973; Gerber 2002), where large sectors of the *ulama* were organized by the state, or in different modes in *Shi'a* Islam (Arjomand 1988). Yet even in the Ottoman Empire the *ulama* were largely autonomous, in that they were constituted according to distinctive – even if highly informal – criteria of recruitment and were, at least in principle, independent of the rulers. It was these religious leaders who created major networks that brought together, under one religious – and often also social-civilizational – umbrella, varied ethnic and geopolitical groups, tribes, settled peasants, and urban groups, creating mutual impingement and interaction among them that otherwise would probably not have developed. And it was the *ulama*, acting through different, often trans-state networks, who were the crucial element forming the distinctive characteristics of public spheres in Islamic societies.

The *umma* and the political community

Most important among the factors bearing on the constitution of public spheres in Islam were the ideal of the *umma* – the community of all believers – as the major arena for the implementation of the moral and transcendental vision of Islam, the strong universalistic component in the definition of this Islamic community, the closely connected emphasis on the principled political equality of all believers, and the continual confrontation of this ideal with the political realities of the expansion of Islam.

This pristine vision of the *umma*, probably implicit only in the very formative period of Islam, entailed a complete fusion of political and religious collectivities, the complete convergence or conflation of the sociopolitical and religious communities (Cook 1983; Hodgson 1974; Lapidus 1997; Schluchter 1987: 11-124; Gibb 1968). Indeed, the very conceptual distinction between these two dimensions, rooted as it is in the Western historical experience, is probably not entirely applicable to the concept of the *umma*.

In this vision strong tensions developed from the very beginning of Islam's history between the particularistic primordial Arab components, seemingly embodied in the initial carriers of the Islamic vision, and the universalistic orientation. Such tensions became more important with the continual expansion of Islamic conquest and incorporation into its frameworks of new territorial entities and ethnic groups (Lapidus 1997).

The final crystallization of this universalistic ideology took place with the so-called Abbasid revolution of the 8th century AD. Paradoxically, also in this period – indeed, in close relation to the institutionalization of this universalistic vision – there developed, especially within Sunni Islam, a de facto separation between the religious community and the rulers. This separation, partially legitimized by the religious leadership, was continually reinforced, above all by the ongoing military and missionary expansion of Islam: expansion far beyond the ability of any single regime to sustain it (Shaban 1970; Sharon 1983; Lapidus 1975; Lapidus 1996).

In the various Muslim regimes that developed under the impact of the continual expansion of Islam, a separation took place between the *khalifa* and the actual ruler, the sultan, heralding de facto separation between the rulers and the religious establishment mainly represented by the *ulama*. This process culminated in the 11th century and became further reinforced under the impact of the Mongol invasions. The *khalifa* often became de facto powerless yet continued to serve as an ideal figure – the presumed embodiment of the pristine Islamic vision of the *umma* and the major source of legitimation of the sultan – even if de facto he and the *ulama* legitimized any person or group that was able to seize power. Such separation between the *khalifa* and the sultan was reinforced by the crystallization (in close relation to the mode of expansion of Islam, especially Sunni Islam) of a unique type of ruling group – namely, the military-religious rulers, who emerged from tribal and sectarian elements. It also generated the system of mili-

tary slavery, which created special channels of mobility – such as the ghulam system in general and the Mamluk systems and Ottoman devshisme in particular, through which the ruling groups could be recruited from alien elements (Ayalon 1951; Ayalon 1996; Pipes 1981; Crone 1980). Even when some imperial components developed – as was the case in Iran, which became a stronghold of *Shi'a* Islam in which relatively continuous, strong patrimonial regimes developed – a complete fusion between the political ruler and the religious elites and establishment did not ensue (Rosenthal 1958; Arjomand 1999).

The decoupling of the public sphere from the political arena

It was in this framework of continual tension between the ideal of the *umma* and the sociopolitical realities that there developed a continuous yet variable vitality of the public spheres in Muslim – especially but not only *Shi'a* – societies characterized by the autonomy of the *ulama* and the hegemony of the *shari'a*. But the vibrancy of these spheres did not however imply a direct autonomous access to the political arena, i.e. to the domain of rulership, as they did in European parliaments and corporate urban institutions. Needless to say some – often very strong – attempts to exert such influence did develop in many Muslim societies. But in concrete matters, especially foreign or military policy, as well as in such internal affairs as taxation and the keeping of public order and supervision of their own officials, the rulers were quite independent from the various actors in the public sphere.

Indeed the separation between *khalifa* and sultan was in a way taken as given in the mainstream of Islamic (Sunni) religious thought which tended accordingly to legitimize any ruler who ensured the existence of the Muslim community and the upholding of the *shari'a*. At the same time this mode legitimated – indeed assumed – the possible coercive nature of such rulers and their distance from the pristine Muslim ideal regarding the moral order of the community. But while rulers, even oppressive ones, were legitimized in the seemingly minimalistic tone necessary for the maintenance of public order and of the community, they were not seen as the promulgators, guardians, or regulators of the basic norms of the Islamic community. Whatever the extent of the acceptance of their legitimation, it usually entailed the rulers' duty to uphold the social order and to implement *shari'a* justice – and hence also the possibility of close scrutiny of their behavior by the *ulama* – even if such scrutiny did not usually have clear institutional effects. Paradoxically enough, the fact that political problems constituted a central focus of Muslim theology was to no small extent rooted in this disjunction between the ideal of the Islamic ruler as the upholder of the pristine transcendental vision of Islam and the reality of his rulership (Rosenthal 1958).

Thus in Muslim, especially Sunni, societies there developed a very interesting decoupling between the make-up of the public sphere and access to the po-

litical arena proper and the decision making of the rulers. This decoupling was manifested in the combination, on the one hand, of large sectors of the society, the major actors in the public sphere having rather limited autonomous access to concrete policymaking, and on the other hand, the fact that the upholding of the moral order of the community was vested in the *ulama* and in the members of the community, with the rulers playing a secondary role.

It was this decoupling between the make-up of the public sphere and access to the decision making of the rulers that gave rise to the wrong perception of the rulers of Muslim societies as Oriental despots. This image is wrong because in fact the scope of the decision making of these rulers was relatively limited. Even if the rulers could behave in despotic ways in their relations with the officials most close to them, or even towards any single subject, in internal affairs beyond taxation and the keeping of public order their process was limited, and not only because of the limits of technology. Their power was limited also because, unlike the European experience, rulership ("politics") especially in Sunni dominated societies did not constitute – contrary to the pristine image of the Muslim ruler as the embodiment of transcendental vision of Islam – a central ideological component in the upholding of the moral order. Moreover the "political" weakness of many of the major organizations in the public sphere, as Arjomand has shown, is to be attributed not to the despotic tendencies of the ruler but to the absence of legal concepts and of corporations (Arjomand 1999).

This decoupling of an autonomous and vibrant public sphere from the political arena – or to be more precise from the realm of rulership – which differed greatly from its counterparts in Europe, especially Western and Central Europe, constituted one of the distinctive characteristics of Muslim civilization. It was distinct, too, from the relations between the public sphere and the arena of political rulership that developed in other, non-Muslim Asian civilizations. It differed from India, where the political order did not constitute a major arena for the implementation of the predominant transcendental and moral vision, sovereignty was highly fragmented, and rulership was to a large extent embedded in the very flexible caste order, giving rise to a public sphere with relatively strong access to the rulers. And it differed from China, where the political order constituted the major arena for the implementation of the transcendental vision but where it was the rulers who, together with the Confucian literati, constituted the sole custodianship of this order, leaving very limited scope for an autonomous public sphere (Eisenstadt 2002).

Characteristics of Islamic public spheres

The constitution of the public spheres in Muslim societies and the mode of interaction between different actors within these spheres were very much influenced both by some of the basic premises of Islam as well as by the relative distance

from direct involvement in political decision making. This mode of interaction was characterized by close physical interaction between different actors, by the development of some common modes of dress and food and of many strong informal, labile ties, often cutting across more formal institutions, which even when porous were yet very forceful. These ties were of crucial importance in the continual constitution and activities of public spheres in which many people and social sectors could interact.

Concomitantly, there developed within this public sphere a very strong potential for what may be seen as crowd-like outbursts. It was often the oscillation between the continual informal ties and membership, and outbursts that characterized many of the public spheres in Muslim societies. Such outbursts could also serve as important signals of political discontent – and in more extreme cases they could serve also as components or bases of sectarian activities which presented themselves as the bearers of the pristine Islamic vision and which constituted a very continuous component of the socio-political dynamics Muslim societies.

It is in the framework of these developments that the specific combination of a vibrant public sphere with highly limited autonomous access of the major social actors to the rulers' decision making gave rise in Muslim societies to a quite paradoxical situation with respect to the impact of these actors on changes in the political arena. The most important fact here – one that seemingly strengthens the view of these regimes as despotic – is that despite the potential autonomous standing of members of the *ulama* no fully institutionalized effective checks on the decision making of the rulers ever developed in these societies. Therefore there was no machinery other than rebellion through which to enforce any far-reaching "radical" political demands.

And yet in contrast to other – for instance South-East-Asian or Meso-american – patrimonial regimes, the potential not just for rebellion but also for principled revolt and possible regime changes was endemic in Muslim societies. True, as Bernard Lewis has shown (1973: 263-93), a concept of revolution never developed within Islam. Yet at the same time, as Ernest Gellner indicated in his interpretation of Ibn Khaldun's work (Gellner 1981), a less direct yet very forceful pattern of indirect ruler accountability and the possibility of regime changes did arise. This pattern was closely connected with a second type of ruler legitimation and accountability in Muslim societies that was embodied in the ruler's perception as the upholder of the pristine, transcendental Islamist vision. This conception was promulgated above all by the different sectarian activities that constituted a continual component of the Islamic scene. These sectarian activities were connected with the enduring utopian vision of the original Islamic era, and with the fact that this vision was neither fully implemented nor ever fully given up. Such sectarian-like tendencies have indeed existed in the recurring social movements in Muslim societies; and one of their distinctive characteristics has been the importance within them of the political dimensions, frequently oriented toward the restoration of that pristine vision of Islam, which has never been given up.

While the possibility of implementing the pristine vision of Islam, of achieving that ideal fusion between the political and the religious community, of constructing the *umma*, was given up relatively early in the formation and expansion of Islam, yet although never fully attained, it was continually promulgated, as Aziz Al Azmeh has shown, with very strong utopian orientations, by various scholars and religious leaders, in the later periods. Given the ongoing perception of the age of the Prophet as an ideal, even utopian model, the idea of restoration constituted a perennial component of Islamic civilization, promoted above all by some of the most radical; reformist movements. Muhammad's community in Medina became, in the apt phrase of Henry Munson Jr., the Islamic "primordial utopia" (Munson Jr. 1998). Many of the later rulers (the Abbasids, the Fatimids, and others) came to power on the crest of religious movements that upheld this ideal and legitimized themselves in such religious-political terms.

By virtue of the combination of this mode of Islamic expansion with such sectarian, reformist orientations, Islam was probably the only Axial civilization in which sectarian-like movements – together with tribal leadership and groups – often led not only to the overthrow or downfall of existing regimes but also to the establishment of new political regimes oriented, at least initially, to the implementation of the original pristine, primordial Islamic utopia. But significantly enough once these regimes became institutionalized they gave rise to patrimonial or imperial systems within which the "old" Ibn Khaldun cycle tended to develop anew.

Such orientations were embodied in the different versions of the tradition of reform, the mujaddid tradition (Lamdau Tasseron 1989), focused on the person of a *mahdi* and/or promulgated by a Sufi order in a tribal group such as the Wahhabites, or developed within a school of law. Such political, often reformist orientations could be directed toward active participation in the political center, its destruction or transformation, or toward a conscious withdrawal from it. But even such withdrawal, which developed both within the *Shi'a* and in Sufism, often harbored tendencies to pristine renovation, leading potentially to political action.

The fullest development of the political potential of such tendencies took place when they became connected with a tribal reassertion against "corrupt" or weak regimes, rooted in the mode of Islamic expansion. This tendency became closely related to the famous cycle depicted by Ibn Khaldun – namely, the cycle of tribal conquest, based on tribal solidarity and religious devotion, giving rise to the conquest of cities and settlement in them, followed by the degeneration of the ruling (often the former tribal) elite and then by its subsequent regeneration out of new tribal elements from the vast – old or new – tribal reservoirs. Such new "converts"– along with the seeemingly dormant tribes of the Arabian peninsula, of which the Wahhabites constituted probably the latest and most forceful illustration – became a central dynamic political force in Islamic civilization. Naturally the concrete thought of these reform tendencies varied greatly in different

Muslim societies and in different periods of their history, but they constituted a continual component in the constitution of public spheres in Muslim societies (Voll 1991).

In so far as such movements did not create, in the Ibn-Khaldunian mode, new regimes, their impact on Muslim societies, as that of many other groups, was through the continual reconstruction of autonomous and vibrant public spheres, especially of the schools of law, the *waqf* and Sufi orders. As we have seen, these public spheres were largely autonomous in the sense that they were constructed according to autonomous criteria of recruitment and action. They constituted also arenas in which different sectors of the society could voice their demands in the name of the basic premises of Islamic vision. Although these public spheres were, of course, de facto often highly dependent on the rulers, yet their development was to a very large extent autonomous, creating also wide, trans-state networks, and there could develop confrontational stances between them and the rulers.

It was indeed in these contexts that the construction of such autonomous public spheres gave rise in the historical experience of Muslim societies to specific patterns of pluralism that are characteristic of these societies. Such pluralism was characterized, even in imperial Islamic societies, by very strongly patrimonial features such as the existence of segregated – regional, ethnic and religious – sectors; and by a relatively weak permeation of the center into the periphery and impingement of the periphery on the center; as well as the prevalence of multiple patterns or bases of legitimation. But in contrast with those patrimonial regimes which developed in such non-Axial civilizations as Mesoamerica, the ancient Near East, or (Hinduized) South Asia, the Muslim patrimonial regimes were in constant tension with the more sectarian tendencies and they could be undermined by the more extreme proto-fundamentalists, who could attempt like, for instance, the Wahhabis to establish new "pristine" regimes.

The impact of modernity on Muslim public spheres

Not surprisingly, the constitution of public spheres, above all in relation to the political arena, has greatly changed with the onset of modernity and with the constitution of modern states (Eisenstadt, Schluchter and Wittrock 2001). Many of the characteristics of the "traditional" Muslim public sphere – its very vitality, the multiplicity of informal ties, of direct physical encounters and interaction, is the strong emphasis on patterns of dress and on public appearance and interaction, and the possibilities of eruption of "crowd"-like confrontation– have continued, but given both the basic premises of the modern state as well as of modern means of communication, have became subject to deep changes. There developed multiple new "modern" social actors and associations such as professionals, intellectuals, media experts and the like, quite often in close relation with

new modes of political organization – be it social movements, or political parties. Concomitantly there developed many new religious groups or movements – be it the transformation of the older Sufi orders or modern religious movements, including the fundamentalist ones – not embedded in the traditional Islamic institutions. All these groups naturally attempted to carve out distinct new public social and even political spaces for themselves. The extent to which there developed contacts between the more "traditional" types of public action, grounded in the Islamic tradition and institutions and the modern actors varied greatly between different societies yet on the whole for a long time they tended to develop in separate niches; and it is only lately that there developed more intensive cooperative or competitive contacts between them. Yet another most important new development in the public spheres of Muslim societies in the contemporary era, both among more modern but also, significantly enough, also in the new religious groups, was the growing autonomous participation and visibility of women and women's movements.

Yet it was not only that the incorporation of the actors in the public sphere in Muslim societies has greatly changed in modern times – important as these changes have obviously been – but above all the very premises of this sphere, above all in its relation to the state, have been dramatically transformed. The single most important aspect of this change was, of course, that given the basic premises of modern polities the traditional separation, even if partial, between the public sphere and the political arena has seemingly almost disappeared. There developed a very strong tendency to a more direct engagement of the actors both in the public sphere and in the political arena. But while the tendency to the emergence of many new cultural or political actors in the public spheres attests to the potential democratization thereof, it did not necessarily always broaden the scope of autonomous political participation and of pluralism. Instead there increased also possible confrontations of the actors in the public spheres – rooted in the ideological premises of modernity with their strong emphasis on political homogeneity – with the newly constituted modern political regimes; with the state attempting to appropriate, control, and even monopolize it. Accordingly, the autonomy of the public spheres could also be greatly undermined and there developed continual tensions and contestations between the various actors in the public sphere and between them and actors in the political arenas.

Thus these modern developments have exacerbated the tensions and confrontations between pluralistic and totalistic tendencies in Muslim societies, "open" and repressive tendencies within them to a much greater extent than was the case in "traditional" Muslim societies. These problems became even more acute with the rise of contemporary fundamentalist movements that build on the older sectarian tendencies and politicize them into hitherto unknown extent. Many of these movements developed from within the public sphere and often combine the control mechanisms of the modern states with strong Jacobin tendencies, legitimized in terms of an essentialized tradition.

But the developments within the religious arena need not always develop in a totalistic direction. Indeed, some very interesting developments like among Sufi groups in Indonesia and elsewhere have led to greater pluralistic open spaces and directions, and also to the constitution of vibrant public spheres which disengaged to some extent at from the state (Howell 2001). These developments constitute part of attempts of many social sectors to develop new vibrant public spheres which in a "post-modern" way attempt to distance themselves from the state by carving autonomous spheres for themselves without direct political disengagement. Thus contemporary Muslim societies can be seen as moving between two poles: attempts to establish territorial states with some elements of pluralism that build on their earlier historical experience but are reconstituted in novel ways; and strong anti-pluralistic tendencies in the form of either extreme, secular, oppressive – often military – regimes or of Jacobin fundamentalist ones.

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