

Government Legitimacy and Social Dissatisfaction

Issues of governmental legitimacy and social dissatisfaction are not new. In point of fact there was a particularly useful bit of research done by Grabbendorf, Krumwiede, and Todt that posed some interesting hypotheses. The political significance of the acceptance, by the populace, of the regime is a key component of the stability of the nation state. One of the concepts that emerged from their research into the political situation in Latin America was a functional concept of legitimacy of the governments. They point out the apparent link between the viability of a government and the perceptions of the governed regarding the legitimacy of the government.

I would offer a couple of examples for your consideration. First, consider the fall of Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran. From a western perspective we looked on in non-comprehending disbelief and consternation. The country of Iran had, after all, made significant progress just prior to the ouster of the Shah. Iran had undertaken major modernization projects on the highways and numerous building projects. They had instituted a secular court system that was administering the laws. The nation had even made some progress in the area of human rights for women. The veil had begun to disappear and there was talk of more responsible roles for women in society and government. How could all this be happening? In our 20-20 hindsight it is a little more clear. We were suffering from a bad case of mirror imaging – you look like me so you must think like me. As the Iranian people began to look more and more western we began to assume they were adopting western philosophies and thought patterns. In fact, there was a Rand study done at about this time that was 12 volumes in length and that made only one mention of the Ayatollah Khomeini, as a footnote on one page.

A rudimentary analysis might lead one to posit that the Shah was never a legitimate ruler in the eyes of the people. The people did not share his vision of a newly emerging Persian Empire. They were for the most part a simple people with a fundamentalist religion who wanted a religious leader and the Shah was not him. The highways did not impress the general population and local decision makers were neither comfortable nor happy with the changes nor the rate of change. The secular court system had in effect taken power from the hands of the local religious leaders who had previously exercised authority. To add insult to injury, the Shah's government had also begun to tax the church lands which had always been used for the benefit of the poor. A large and influential segment of the population was in fact being disenfranchised and alienated by the actions of the government that we in the west saw as very progressive. Against this political backdrop there was the added societal irritant of watching as Iranian Islamic women began to adopt the improper, immodest, and pagan ways of the west. What the Ayatollah offered these people was a return to a more legitimate form of government.

Before we shift gears, this seems a good place to revisit another idea – the concept of social dissatisfaction. The literature indicates that when social dissatisfaction is high there exists a greater probability of a coup attempt. In the previously cited case of Iran, one can see the basis for a good deal of social dissatisfaction beginning to brew. In the situation we have just described of a disenfranchised mass with a governmental form of questionable legitimacy, and high social dissatisfaction the only thing missing is the presence of a catalyst. The Ayatollah offered that catalyst and some have theorized that more than offer it, he may have engineered it.

If this theory holds true we should be able to see similarities in other places and a reasonable fit as a framework to discuss them. By contrast, consider conditions in the United States in the mid-1960s where, I can safely say, there was a high degree of social dissatisfaction. This manifested itself notably among a disenfranchised, economically depressed, subculture who was not buying in to the American dream. The riots and the burning of Watts, the eloquent speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, the marches in Selma, could easily have provided the catalysts to ignite the situation but one thing was missing. The basic governmental legitimacy, as an institution, was never seriously questioned by the population. More specifically, even in the worst of the race riots no majority of the citizenry stood up and said "Excuse me! I'd like a dictator now!!" No one asked for a potentate; no one asked for a theocracy. In fact, those of us who lived through the period just wanted to change some of the people in charge in the various stations of the government. The basic institutions of the government were not under fire by the mainstream just the people in them.

One could argue that this is driving the demonstrations in Tehran in the 2009 elections farce as well as the ouster of Mr. Zelaya in Tegucigalpa. With very little in common (dissimilar people, ethnicity, culture, religion, and political system) both nations have seen significant demonstrations on the street in recent weeks expressing opinions not about the system itself but the people within the system. Tehran looks like a stolen election or at least a heavy case of election fraud and the people appear dissatisfied with a result they perceive as lacking legitimacy.

In Honduras we watched an elected President Zelaya attempt to fire a Chief of Defense (CHOD) only to have the Constitutional Court re-instate him and then tens of thousands of people march on the street to support the CHOD. A few days later we saw that same CHOD, under orders from the Constitutional Court remove Zelaya from office and not seize power but report back to the Court which then instructed the Congress to select a new President. They did so and subsequent demonstrations have been anywhere from a 5:1 to a 10:1 ration of support en masse for the Congressionally elected Mr Micheletti versus the extremely unpopular Mr. Zelaya. In both of these most recent cases the people have not openly challenged the political structure but have aggressively expressed their displeasure with the people in power and demonstrated an opinion of the legitimacy of their rulers that none can miss.