CENTRO STUDI LUCA D'AGLIANO

Thirteenth Luca d'Agliano Lecture in Development Economics

RELIGION, POLITICS, AND DEVELOPMENT: IS ISLAM A SPECIAL ISSUE?

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1. Introduction

- Religion is not only a persisting phenomenon, but also a reviving one. This is running counter to the modernisation theory.
- One central angle under which economists have addressed the issue of religion is by looking at its effect on long-term economic growth. The underlying assumption is that religious affiliations have rather stable characteristics that influence economic behaviour.
- Max Weber for Protestantism and Bernard Lewis for Islam have proposed theories that support this approach.
- Muslim countries, Arab countries in particular, suffer from a severe 'democracy deficit', from a comparatively low development of their human capital, and from highly asymmetrical gender relations.

To what extent can Islam, the religion of the Muslims, be considered responsible for the predicament of the countries in which it dominates?

On the one hand, we disagree with the substantivist view according to which Islam is a major obstacle to modern development because it has always been associated with a merging of religion and the state, or a fusion between the spiritual and political spheres of life.

But, on the other hand, we reckon that Islam possesses a special feature, a highly decentralised structure, that tends to make politics comparatively unstable with the consequence that economic growth may be especially volatile or long-term growth performances hard to sustain.

2. The storyline

- Only in the times of the Prophet have religion and politics been truly merged in the history of Islam. This contradicts Lewis' and others for whom its main handicap lies in its being inseparable from politics.
- Since the birth of Islam, autocracy is the political system that generally prevailed in Muslim countries: religion is the handmaiden of politics, and religious clerics cooperate with rulers in a subordinate position. This subjugation of religion to politics is well justified in principle, despite the professed aim of Islam to establish a righteous world order and to provide guarantees against despotic rule.
- In the dominant pattern, the autocrat has complete control over clerics and the political regime is therefore stable. We characterise such a state in which the sovereign runs the territory without being contested by them as one of stable politico-religious equilibrium.

- By contrast, a state of crisis is a possible outcome of an unstable politico-religious equilibrium: it is obtained when a popular upheaval led by angry clerics shakes the ruling regime and creates a sort of political vacuum.
- A state of crisis can arise either because of adverse external circumstances or as the endogenous outcome of the autocrat's policies.
- In the second eventuality, control over the men of religion by the autocratic ruler was not complete.
- To better understand how he may choose to have partial rather than complete (or near complete) control over the clerics, it is important to see that he faces a trade-off between political stability and the extent to which he is able to pursue his own selfish interests, and that the clerics play an important role behind this trade-off.
- Religious clerics have two special features that distinguish them from other elites:
- (1) they hold values regarding social justice and human rights, or regarding proper behavior, that they draw from their religion;
- (2) they have a natural prestige and influence on the population as representatives of the supernatural world and as wise men possessing deep knowledge (theological and philosophical, in particular).
- Because of these two traits, the clerics are susceptible of playing a role as political actors or social leaders.
- But they are vulnerable to corruption: they can be "bought off", seduced or corrupted, by the autocrat. The price of their submission increases with the distance between their values and the policies or practices of the autocrat.
- Since the preferences of the clerics are heterogeneous, the autocrat chooses the proportion of them whom he wants to coopt.
- Cooptation of clerics constitutes only one arm of the autocrat's strategy. The other arm consists of the policies followed: policies that have strong disequalising effects and involve a great measure of elite corruption, or those that hurt religious values or interests, tend to arouse more opposition from the clerical body, for given levels of perquisites received from the autocrat.
- When choosing both policies, he pays attention to the size of his income and the probability of his political survival. Both variables are influenced by the extent of religious cooptation.
- The cooptation strategy has the effect of potentially creating a divide in the religious body: between official and self-appointed clerics.
- Such a division is possible in Islam because no church establishment exists.
- The (stable) politico-religious equilibrium is obtained when the autocrat's strategic choices consist of wide cooptation of religious clerics combined with moderately popular policies. An unstable autocracy prevails when the opposite choices have been made by the ruler. In particular, the autocrat has followed policies that blatantly favour his inner circle and the surrounding elite, surrender national

sovereignty to external powers, and/or antagonise traditional values cherished by religious representatives.

- If rebellion occurs that succeeds in overthrowing the autocrat or in severely limiting his ruling capacity, a crisis situation arises. A significant number of self-appointed clerics have entered the political stage in order to protect the common people or rescue the nation.

- Pervasive corruption, cynicism, and aloofness of the elite around the autocrat seem to be far more damaging for political stability than reforming measures taken by an honest, equitable and dedicated ruler.

- The archetypal situation observed in many Muslim countries since the 2nd world war is best depicted as unstable autocracy. It is characterised by the combination of socially inequitable policies and pervasive elite corruption with partial co-optation of the religious elite resulting in a division between the official and the self-appointed clerics.

- Most public debates and controversies are then framed in religious terms. What the autocratic authority unleashes is a dangerous religious war in which both the regime and the opposition try to outbid each other in their claim to be the most legitimate bearer of Islamic values and principles.

- When the prevailing chaos ends in a military coup, the general result is the emergence of a secular regime resting on the use of coercion and repression. The corruption and cynicism of often secular despotic rulers are largely to blame for this sobering association between secularism and force.

- Why, since the second world war, Muslim countries have been characterised by an unstable, rather than a stable politico-religious equilibrium? *Role of the international context*:

- The supply of Islamist ideologies is facilitated by the abundant oil wealth of Saudi Arabia, the Iranian Islamist Revolution, and the ready availability of effective mass communication technologies.

- On the other hand, the demand for ideologies stressing the victimhood of Muslim people and demonising the Western civilisation has been stimulated by the one-sided meddling of advanced Western countries in the regional conflicts of the Middle East.

To these factors, add the threats and challenges arising from the pressure to catch up with the rapidly developing economies of the West and other emerging countries.

The effect of both changes in supply of/demand for Islamist ideologies and the felt presence of the challenge of modernity is a modification of the terms of the trade-off faced by Muslim autocrats. Religious clerics become harder to buy off and the autocratic regime becomes more unstable.

The predicted response of the autocrat consists of (1°) moderating his controversial policies, and (2°) increasing his efforts to subdue religious clerics, so that the political risk can be reduced (yet, not down to its level before the change brought by international forces).

- **Two remarks:**
    - Things may be more complicated than suggested so far. Intelligence and police forces (*the "deep state"*) may thus nurture and encourage extremist Islamist organisations on the condition that they directly attack leftist or other secular opposition movements operating on university campuses, inside trade unions, and professional associations.
    - When the religion is centralised, clerics dissatisfied with the compromising attitude of their church may choose to leave it and even join revolutionary movements. However, they cease to be members of their church and, therefore, they can no more avail themselves of religious credentials and to claim supernatural legitimacy.
- A major advantage of our theoretical scaffolding is that it allows us to bring out both similarities and differences between religions:
    - Like Islam, Christianity cannot be properly analysed outside a setup featuring the state, and this certainly applies to 17th century Europe when modern nation states were being formed.
    - Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity are endowed with a hierarchical structure under the form of a centralised church. A key prediction of our theory is that political instability is greater with a decentralised than with a centralised religion.
- Another line of explanation, propounded by Timur Kuran (2011), exists to highlight the impact of Islam on long-term development.

The effect is indirect and operates through certain institutions derived from the Islamic law or the classic Islamic system. Path dependence mechanisms then create an 'institutional trap'. An interesting link can nonetheless be made between Kuran's approach and the political economy approach followed here: it becomes apparent as soon as it is recognised that formal institutions are not necessarily enforced.

3. Supporting citations about the submission of the religious clerics to political power

In the Ottoman empire, "the entire religious establishment held office at the pleasure of the sultan" (Cleveland, 2004: 48). The "cozy relationship" between the religious clerics (meaning not only the ulama but also the Sufi orders) and the sultan "translated into significant economic and political privileges" for the former (Malik,

2012: 8). Offices typically involved lucrative functions which included revenue generation and the administration of religious endowments that controlled vast tracts of land.

Religious appointments were all the more coveted as the associated incomes were exempt from taxes. Religious families possessing long-standing honourable ancestries competed for religious offices, titles and tax farms and, when successful, became a core component of the Ottoman nobility and a linchpin of provincial administration (Hourani,1991: 224-25; 1993; Malik, 2012: 8; Coulson, 1964).

In the words of Ira Lapidus:

"The biographies of scholars show that, with the elaboration of a bureaucratic hierarchy, interest in careers outweighed genuine piety and learning. The influence of entrenched families enabled them to promote their children into the higher grades of the educational and judicial hierarchies without having reached the proper preliminary levels, while theological students who could not find patronage were excluded. In the course of the eighteenth century the ulama became a powerful conservative pressure group. As servants of the state the ulama no longer represented the interests of the people, nor protected them from the abuses of political power. No longer did they represent a transcendental Islamic ideal opposed to worldly corruption. Their integration into the Ottoman empire made them simply the spokesmen of Ottoman legitimacy" (Lapidus, 2002: 268).

In the Mamluk state, many ulama served not only as religious functionaries but also as administrators and full-fledged members of the state bureaucracy. In particular, the qadis (Islamic judges) were commonly employed by the Sultan in his private secretarial service, in his private treasury, and in the military bureaus. Some even became viziers and, in many cases, "the post of qadi was itself the culmination of an ocial rather than a religious career" (Lapidus, 1984:137-8).

We can sum up the situation by citing Zubeida (2011) for whom the ulama "as figures of power and influence... acted like other politicians, participating in patronage, control of resources and factional struggles, but with the advantage of being able to invoke religious sanction" (p. 15).

Since they were thus subservient to the interests of the ruler and his clique, their religious autonomy was seriously compromised and they would always be able to formulate legal justifications for whatever decision the ruler wished to make.

"Public order, which is a prerequisite of all what is socially desirable in society (*maslahat*), has always seemed to the ulama preferable to the demands that politics should be completely open to the promptings of religion" (Roy, 1990, p. 49).

All these statements are remarkably close to the conclusion reached by an authority in Islamic law: "Might, in fact, was right, and this was eventually recognised by the scholars in their denunciation of civil disobedience even when the political

authority was in no sense properly constituted" (Coulson, 1964: 83; see also Hourani, 1991: 144; Lapidus, 2002: 260).

Similarly for Catholic Christianity, priests were discouraged from expressing dissent against even tyrannical governments. It is St. Augustine who established the key principle in this matter. According to him, despite all its imperfections and the 'sinful' behaviour of those who govern it, the 'earthly city' exists for the sake of protecting the 'city of God', and its role is therefore vital for people's salvation.

To oppose worldly rulers amounts to opposing God's plan and Roman Catholic believers should avoid attempting to overthrow governments even if they turn out to be tyrannical (O'Daly, 2004).

This belief in the God-given authority of monarchs was central to the Roman Catholic vision of governance in the Middle Ages, Renaissance and the Ancien Regime.

Thus, for example, the kings and emperors of medieval Christendom had always invoked divine blessing on their rule, and by the 14th and 15th centuries the parish clergy were called to disseminate news of military victories and lead prayers requiring God's help for further success (Gunn, 2001: 124).

Even tighter intermeshing of politics and religion occurred after the Reformation and Counter-Reformation led to the emergence of truly 'national' religions. Secular and ecclesiastical bureaucracies then expanded in parallel and became intertwined in such a way that changes enacted from the top of the state could reach every subject down to the parish level.

4. The role of the international context

4.1   The worldwide diffusion of puritan ideologies

*   Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792): a return to the ideas of Ibn Hanbal.

    His significance came from his link to the Seoud tribe which was to conquer the Arabian deserts. Opportunistic adoption by the Seouds of the puritanical doctrine of al-Wahhab was a decisive factor in modern Muslim history.

*   Abû al-A'lâ Mawdûdi (1903-1979) in Pakistan:

    There is legitimacy in God only and the whole political realm must be reduced to the divine realm: the religious principle must be put back at the heart of social life.

*   Sayyid Qutb (1929-1966) in Egypt:

    The Qur'an is the source of all guidance for human life, and the rise of a universal Muslim society should mark the end of the Western world.

    The significance of Mawdûdi and Qutb arose from a critical conjunction of events in early 1980s in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Taliban (and, before them, some factions of the Mujahiddin) took over Hanbal's idea that only a uniform, rigid interpretation of the Qur'an can bring unity and restore order among the feuding tribes and warlords in Afghanistan.

4.2   A modernization crisis compounded by military defeats

Radicalization of Islamic ideology is a consequence of a deep economic, social and military crisis faced by Muslim societies.

Arabs are torn away between two models of civilization, the European civilization which challenges them, and the Arab-Muslim civilization which provides them with a response to that challenge.

Choice between the two models especially difficult because of a "psychic tension" amplified by the acute awareness of the reality of decadence of the Arab world (Mohamed Ferjani).

«Obsession with past grandeur» prevents most Arab thinkers from envisaging progress, modernization and development in terms of a rupture with the past. They prefer to think *"in magical and mythical terms"*.

This also applies to the deceptively secular ideology of Baathism in which:

"Arabism's most basic model always resided in its own past, and the consciousness of pan-Arabism has been ideologized in such a way as to borrow virtually nothing of the constellation of values associated with the European Enlightenment" (Makiya, 1989, pp. 189-212).

The identity crisis of the Muslim world, the Arab world in particular, was gravely accentuated by the double standard applied by the US and the western world:

"The events of 1967, and the processes of change which followed them, made more intense that disturbance of spirits, that sense of a world gone wrong, which had already been expressed in the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s. The defeat was widely regarded as being not only a military setback but a kind of moral judgement. If the Arabs had been defeated so quickly, completely and publicly, might it not be a sign that there was something rotten in their societies and in the moral system which they expressed?... the problem of identity was expressed in terms of the relationship between the heritage of the past and the needs of the present. Should the Arab peoples tread a path marked out for them from outside, or could they find in their own inherited beliefs and culture those values which could give them a direction in the modern world?" (Hourani, 1991, pp. 442-43).

These circumstances, coupled with the demise of progressive forces centered on individual emancipation, led to a romantic-restorationist view of the root causes of the crisis.

This phenomenon is not specific to Islam:

"Radical ideology looked attractive, especially to the young and semi-educated. It contained everything dreams are made of: the romance of conspiracy and mystery, feelings of personal involvement in 'making history', opportunities for direct action, hopes for prompt results, and simplicity of the doctrine, distinguishing 'good' from 'evil'. The way to do good was made clear, and there was the illusion of a back-to-one's-roots movement intended to purify, to restore healthy principles of life freed from distortions supposedly imposed from the outside. In fact, this possibility presumed to reconstruct the original form of the Golden Age in a system-centered way of life…" (Obolonsky, 2003: 92).

5. Illustrations: Five Case Studies

Case Study 1: Iran
= Construction of a complacent religious officialdom (looking like a national church), thereafter followed by the breaking of the prevailing stable politico-religious equilibrium.

Cases Study 2 and 3: Algeria and Saudi Arabia
= Richly endowed countries (oil and natural gas) but with different equilibria: a stable equilibrium for Saudi Arabia and an unstable one for Algeria.

Case Study 4: Egypt
= A country that does not possess natural wealth, and with an unstable politico-religious equilibrium (like Pakistan, Sudan, and Yemen).

Case Study 5: Iraq
= A country struck by a sudden change in the level of radicalisation of the religious clerics (similarity with Syria).

6. Conclusions

1. Like other religions, Islam can be used by the state and is generally subservient to the state's interests rather than the other way round. Instrumentalisation of the religious clerics is typically achieved through their co-optation and seduction.
2. Being decentralised, however, Islam is more likely to generate political instability under an autocratic system than centralised religions.
3. When this instability ends in a popular upheaval led by religious clerics, the men of religion come to the frontline of politics. In principle, their rise should be temporary until a new autocrat, better enlightened than his predecessor, is found.