Exploration of Interactionism in the Culture of Political Elite of Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI)

Ghaffar Zarei, Seyed Ali Mortazavian, Mohammad Tohidfam, Mohammad Ali Khosravi

1,2,3,4Department of Political Science, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

ABSTRACT

Culture is a subjective aspect of civilization and the latter is objective dimension of a culture. Culture refers to a set of moralities and customs in sociopolitical dimension of a community. Based on the cultural type and content of every community, its identity and authenticity is separated from other ones. Due to having diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious layers, Iranian community has always been accompanied by its own specific cultural identity and requirements. Dual concepts of conflict and cooperation across political elite have been among the key issues in Iranian political culture since Constitutional Revolution. The interactive culture of the political elite is accompanied by such concepts as political resilience, democratic culture, and tolerance. The main research hypothesis presumes that party-based interactive culture of elite can lead to inter-subjective action among political elite and also contribute to stability and continuity of the political system of Islamic Republic of Iran. Accomplishment of such culture requires institutionalization of intellectual and value attitudes among elite of available political parties and groups in Iran. Otherwise, as long as emotional and irrational attitudes exist among the political elite, elimination of political rivals would be the only solution. This problem demands modification and refinement of the elite’s political culture which is the focus of the present exploration.

INTRODUCTION

Culture refers to the ways and methods by which people collectively and individually give meaning to their life through mutual connection. Many have called 21st century as the century of culture and cultural paradigm [10]. As a result of globalization, social relationships have been intensified throughout the world, and so distant communities have become closer. Therefore, culture in many ways is the most direct, obvious, and visible element through which these daily life connections are experiences. It can be an outcome of mutual understanding and appreciation, and cultural power in recent developments. There are, at least, two political cultures within the political systems [20]: Elite and mass political culture. The elite’s political culture deals with privileges, emotions, behavioral patterns that have taken on active role in the political system, and directly affect system's outcomes. The masses’ political culture is comprised of peoples' attitudes and orientations (as a whole) towards the policies, which considerably control system's outputs. In some countries, there might be several political cultures, rather than a single and shared political culture, separated based on class, region, ethnicity, or social classifications. IRI's system is established based on Islam and Shia doctrine [8]. The concepts of norm atavism and ethicity in all political, economic, and cultural aspects are of the main and authentically feature of Iranian culture and Shia. Respecting others’ beliefs and thoughts, and how to communicate and interact with other people and communities are repeatedly highlighted in many hadith, traditions, and remarks of religious pioneers and leaders. IRI's religious, political system stems from Islamic revolution and is shaped in result of a specific interpretation (a combination of three patterns, namely the era of Imam Mahdi, justice, and democracy) of Shia school. This has made it a different political system [16]. To the author, modification of the elite's political culture is the most important factor in preventing events and circumstances that are threatening to IRI's system. In addition, modification of elite’s political culture should be accompanied by such concepts as cultural rationality, valusism, legalism, humanism, emphasis on kindness, justice, and respecting others' rights. With shedding light on the capacities and capabilities of aboriginal, national culture, extracting its embedded meanings, and applying them scientifically and rationally, we will observe the formation of a new process of socialization of political, interactive culture within the elite.
**Definition of Interactionism:**

Interactionism culture seeks freedom from dual, dogmatic, and fanatic frameworks which are practically unable to communicate and interact with other(s), move only within its intellectual and political borders, and are incapable of communicating others’ concepts and symbols. The most important principle of interactionism is recognizing and accepting others as activists with mutual rights. Acknowledging such principle converts the activist’s vertical view to horizontal standpoint. To Antony Giddens, every study in the field of social science should relate action (agency) to structure. It is incorrect to say that the structure determines action and vice versa [13]. Antony Giddens rejects both voluntarists and structuralists’ views in explaining social phenomena, and highlights agency of structure without considering their determinant roles, alone. In addition, Bryan Fay seeks to establish a dialectical relationship between structure and agent with emphasizing on structure-agency and the interaction between them. He, as one of the intellectuals of interactionism theory, encourages every political or nonpolitical group, party, attitude and opinion to find and reinforce their focus. They also should acknowledge and support others’ attempts in different sections, which results in their corresponding action. According to Bryan Fay, we all live within a structure and system where we share our political thoughts with some others. This structure and system differ from other ones. Based on this theory, the aim is to understand this fact and take it for granted. Political interaction and connection, and institutionalization of them in the society eliminate many political stresses and crises, which are the causes of removing and confronting legal or natural persons, leading to establishment of harmonious atmosphere, and coordinated and integrated strategies. A dynamic integration, where the parties are continuously developing, is the aspiration of interactionism. In this dynamic integration, differences are not overcome or remained unchanged. In contrast, they are recognized, criticized, and evaluated. They are put in their specific places, verified, and probably developed. According to Haber mass [24], language is the most important factor in establishing inter subjective relationship within cultural structure of a community, and acts as a converter. Since, mental processes such as senses, needs, and emotions or inter subjective structures find an appropriate language. In addition, internal accidents or experiences turn into intentional contents, i.e. understandings turn into expressions, and needs and emotional feelings turn into normative expectations (thoughts and values). With differentiating between survivorship values and those of self-assertiveness, Ronald Ingle hart considers cultural development, especially in postindustrial societies, as the cause of moving from survivorship values to self-assertiveness. The survivorship values have high priority for economic and physical securities, and are in accordance with social values. On the other hand, the self-assertiveness values highly prioritize freedom of speech, participation in decision-making, political activities, environmental protection, gender equality, and development of tolerance for ethnic minorities and different groups [2]. The more self-assertiveness values grow and develop in a society, the interactive relationship level of elite’s political culture will become more optimized. Interaction between elite leads to new norms. With respect to interactionism weakness in Iranian culture, the nature of relationship between Iranian citizens can be characterized as follows: distrust, weakness of meritocracy, lack of respect to others, materialistic view of others, weakness in the pursuit of collective goals, unfamiliarity with the rules of competition, disallowing others’ differences, limited capacity in understanding others’ demands, prioritizing of individual over collective needs, desire to harassment, humiliation and degradation of others. Sweeping divergent and attaching elements from this set, laying the ground for a respectful culture to achieve collective benefits, and seeking constructive interaction and relationship with people in Iranian society require modification and purification from the lowest class of citizens to the highest institutions and units. However, all of these attempts depend on educational development and application of healthy and rational political socialization in the society, which require years of cultural efforts (if Iranians are incapable in understanding others’ differences, it is not a genetic problem, but an issue from educational and social institutions and structures, and so can be modified and removed through proper education and breeding. Through cultural training and modification we can contribute to promote and develop interactionism culture in Iranian society at three levels: minor and individual level (mental, spiritual, and personal characteristics of elite), middle level (unions, parties, organizations, syndicates, and civil institutions), and macro level or social collectivity.

**Political Culture:**

Culture, comprised of values, norms, and belief system of a society, includes traditions, customs, religions, ideologies, religious rituals, legacy, language, and all habits or other common perspectives which may be exempt from these kinds of concepts [7]. The political culture is a part of cultural collectivity of every society, grounded in its historical and identity process. The political culture is: ideas and attitudes towards authority, governmental responsibilities, and political socialization related patterns [18].

Political culture acts like a mechanism where community members accurately imagine political relationships or, at least, are enable to comprehend it. Political culture of every country can be considered as specific distribution of attitudes, values, feelings, information, and political skills at mass and elite level, which affect citizens and political elite’s behavior and actions in social arena, and their political interactions. With political classification by Almond and Verba in 1963 in the USA, UK, Mexico, and Italy, three political
cultures, namely parochial political culture, subject political culture, and participent political culture, were evaluated and studied. In those studies, it was recognized that there was an apathetic and ignorance feeling towards national government, and the participation was limited to tribes and villages. In subjective or submissive culture, people have political awareness about government, but in passive form. In participatory political culture, citizens’ participation in political affairs has stemmed from volition and full exercise of their rights and tasks in political decisions. Almond and Verba in their work, Civic Culture, talk about selecting political culture approach: “We have chosen the term political culture as it enables us to use theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and anthropological, sociological, and psychological approaches” (p.82). Lusian Pye considers political culture as an appropriate framework for integration in psychological and sociological fields where political culture lays the ground for classification and comparing political systems, and determines its development through linking micro and macro approaches.

Iranian Political Culture:

What is called Iranian political culture is the outcome of interaction between four elements, namely mass culture, elite culture, political-historical experience of the nation, and dominant political structure. Perception of elite and mass of political reality, the way leaders behave, practices of institutions, ideas emerged by political leaders and elite, modernization level, industrial development of societies, independent group status, and finally the way mass media perform all have important role in formation of political culture [23]. In relation to political culture in Iran, four historical eras can be mentioned. Pre-Islam, Islam, Safavid period until Islamic Revolution, and post-revolution. In the first three periods, the dominant element in Iranian political culture was despotism which controlled peoples' mind in form of divine splendor or oriental despotism or a combination of them. It means that three forms of legitimate authority in the thought of Max Weber, namely charismatic (in form of believing in divine splendor or light of God and ruling of this splendor through the charismatic person) and traditional (in form of oriental despotism), shaped the dominant being [21]. The political culture if Iran is affected by such sources as historical, geographical, economic, demographic, and religious situations, as well as ideologies, upbringing in family, specific cosmology of Iranian society, and persistence of authoritarian regimes [15]. Each of these sources has affected the formation and persistence of limited-subjective political culture in Iranian society. In the post-revolution era, with changes in sociopolitical structures, law, elite, values, and norms, Iranian society entered a new stage of interrelationship between people and government. With respect to holding election, even in the worst kinds of situation such as Iraqi imposed war on Iran and early revolution crises and chaos, Islamic Republic of Iran has had a brilliant background. Holding eleven presidential elections, eight parliamentary (Magilis) elections, three assembly of experts elections, and three City and Village Councils of Iran Elections, qualitatively and quantitatively are an important factor in creation and expansion of active and spontaneous political participation culture. In spite of several elections during the thirty years of the Islamic Republic, some political attitudes and behaviors in the field of political culture are still suffering from poor performance. There are several weaknesses in Iranians’ political culture, which can clearly be seen in their political actions. These features are: the power of mass and emotional-subjective political culture, affected by tribal political culture, nepotism, weak collective spirit, policy aversion, individualism, lack of trust and accountability, lack of tolerance, and finally the cult of personality [1]. Elimination of such set of weaknesses is to some extent possible through cultural education, especially at schools and universities level.

Definition of Elite:

The term Elite was employed in 17th century to describe high quality goods. But in a course of terminological evolution, it turned to a term which is used today [3]. Alain Birou in the glossary of social sciences defines elite as follows: "Elite, excelled from the Latin root Eligible, means election. Elite is assigned to whatever is better than others and deserved to be elected. The term elite refers to the most educated class of society, those who are powerful people in effectively managing their community". Elite are persons and groups that affect historical action of a society due to the power they gain, influence they have, and decisions they make, or emotions, ideas, and feelings they produce [12]. To some extent, the term elite has contextual and semantic affinity with the concept of aristocracy. Many thinkers, since ancient time, such as Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Montesquieu, and Rousseau have talked about aristocracy. Indeed, elitism is the continuation of aristocracy in political though. However, they differ in concept, nature, and goal. Aristocracy refers to the reign of wise and righteous minority. Elite are those with greater shares of political power and dominance in administering the political affairs. Due to this great share of power, elite are primary holders of body policy with higher benefits from it, compared with other citizens. Harold Lasswell defines elite as: primary holders of power who have gained the main part of what can be gained; others are the mass [5]. With expansion and development of politics and political theories in the West, elitism was given more attention from the thinkers. However, elitism is seen in the thoughts of Plato and Machiavelli, but as a social power theory, it is primarily known by the works of Getano Mosca, Rober Michels, and Vilfredo Pareto. They share this idea that in every society there are a limited number of elite who hold the power.
Demarcation and Survey of Elite:

The elite domain encompasses a large area of sociopolitical influences and economic-class base. For example, Gay Roche categorizes elite into six groups: traditional-religious, ideological, technocratic, ownership, Charismatic, and Symbolic (ibid, pp.121-125). In some categorizations, four main groups are mentioned: political elite, economic elite, military elite, and intellectual elite. Yet, most theorists consider political elite as one of the fundamental ones [5]. It is clear that the scope of this study deals with political elite, i.e. those with political influence on sociopolitical structure. Therefore, party elite as the holders of political power in making decisions and administration are investigated as the political elite. Political elite affect historical action in two ways: One, through decision-making and second, from modeling. Due to effective role in social decisions such as high level decisions, superior role, loyalty of followers, and domination over institutions, some elite are more influential in the political action. In addition, Elite, due to their power and appeal for people and social groups, seek to be imitated [12]. Therefore, decision-making power and loyalty of followers in political imitation are among influential characteristics of political elite, affecting the political growth and development of a society, institution, or construction. In Iran where the cult of political character and eliteness are stronger, this symptom can be seen more. There are three methods for studying and investigating elite and recognizing them in the society: 1) emphasis on political positions where elite are those with prominent official positions in different political institutions; 2) emphasis on reputation where the researcher forms a panel of informed people and asks them about people in power; 3) emphasis on decision-making where those who have a part in making major political decision are taken as elite (Bashiriye, p.69). It seems that two factors, namely decision-making and having political position are more common in party-related research in Iran.

Interactional Political Elite:

Max Weber, Germany sociologist, (1864-1920), categorizes different kinds of political actions into four groups: purposive rational action, value based rational action, traditional action, and emotional action [5]. Each of these types of political actions have specific features and characteristics, which are, to some extent, different in terms of means and goal and have different consequences based on the nature and type of action of political and social actors. In the purposive rational action, the goal of actors is to achieve specific goals by using appropriate means and means. In value-based rational action, values take priority over anything else, even the goals. These are values that determine the means and methods for achieving the goals, such as honor and ethics. The type of traditional action is based on the customs and habits formed in the past, which may be exercised spontaneous or imitated. Finally, emotional action which is more similar to traditional action, but the former actors use stimulating and emotional means and methods [22]. Each of these four actions are explaining a specific type of political-social relationship between people. Value based rational action, due to its greater moral and value orientation, is culturally and politically closer to the interaction-oriented elite’s idea. With respect to the main characteristic of the political elite, i.e. political competition, and in accordance with Max Weber's four actions (value based rational action as the best among them), the type and content of political action within Iranian political elite can be considered as one of the major political relationships. To Max Weber, actions are purely and rationally value based when actors, regardless of their predictable consequences, accomplish them based on their commitments to what to them is in accordance with task, honor, beauty, religious call, or virtue. Iranian political elite should replace antagonistic with value competition, as a fixed political pattern, to institutionalize interactional culture. Interaction-oriented elite can obtain this position by moving from power-orientation to culture-orientation. The interaction-oriented elite with cultural-ethical superiority over other political elite are equipped with cultural rationality. In Iran, some elite are more like the general populace. They assume that they are thinking, while they are actually representing emotions in form of rationales, which is dangerous. If the masses decide to fulfill their task, genuine elite who accept liability arising from the contemplation (i.e. risk takers) is required [19]. Therefore, interaction-oriented elite takes political action with other political rivals with the aim of moralization and developing political culture. The interactional actor respects others’ differences and interests, and enters political-electoral arena by having intersubjective understanding.

Training and Effectiveness of Political Elite:

Making Iranian interactional, political elite efficient is faced with a couple of obstacles. Improvement of political awareness of the society in Iran and increased sense of responsibility and participation in political affairs, especially within the youths, and political development, in general, considerably affect the future of politics and achievement in training political elite. Connecting politics, general education, and next generations training to such characteristics as mutual respect, rational assessment, paying attention to time and opportunities, being transparent and accurate, being sensitive to the future of ourselves and society, being capable of controlling the feelings, having scientific spirit and studying, and being integrated with law and freedom is among the most important factor regarding the Iranian elite efficiency. In such an approach, the political elite should have knowledge of historical, geographical, lingual, and social features of Iran, and know domestic,
regional, and global characteristics of a government-nation like Iran. The other point is related to policy in Iran, where however the majority of people lack adequate knowledge about political concepts and analyses simply opine about political issues and do not hesitate about making political analyses. It is seen in several cases that people with political positions are not adequately expertise in politics and do not have enough political knowledge, as their positions require. They fulfill their electoral rhetoric with help of their political-electoral consultants. Most of these people have majored in engineering and medicine and taken political positions after graduation. They usually handle administrative affairs through trial and error. The superiority of majoring in engineering and medicine over human science in Iran is indeed the superiority of discipline over knowledge, stemming from despotism. Domination of engineers and physicians over social, cultural, economic, and political management and decision-making areas is among the intensifying problems of Iranian society. Lack of familiarity with this range of educated people, and theoretical and behavioral complexity of human sciences, along with Iranians’ strong tendency to do analysis, have caused perspectives to comply with current conditions, misleading understanding of human and social phenomena [14]. Lack of full understanding of political phenomena in domestic and foreign areas by non-expert or less expert people causes publics have dubious view towards political interactions, attribute mistakes of non-experts to politics, and equate politics to lies and deceits. The other point in politics and its role in political elite’s efficiency is that Iranians have strong tendency towards political activities and seizing power. In comparison with cultural and economic works, Iranians are very interested in politics. There may be two reasons for such a claim: first, by political work there is more chance of becoming famous, being present, exploiting facilities, and appearing in the medias; second, there is no immediate results from cultural and economic works, while Iranians are not interested in long-term works and tend to look at phenomena and issues in a short-term period (ibid, pp.168-169). In addition to Iranians’ impatience, and their tendency towards political ostentation, taking political positions, and performing political activities, their willingness to seek profit by seizing power can be added. Every Iranian knows that entering into power territory and gaining political positions are accompanied with several interests and, at least, makes him/her capable of fulfilling his/her needs and those of his/her relatives and dependents. He/she assumes that there are others to do so in case of his/her absence. Therefore, he/she tries in any form or by any means to hold his/her position. This is why theoretical and practical challenges raise in abnormal forms after power transition and political positions occupation. Profit-seeking as an economic perspective causes one enters into the power network and effectively enjoys privileges of political system for the benefits of himself/herself and his/her dependents. The efficiency of political elite training is improved when one gets involved with political activities with respect to his/her expertise, commitment, and interest in public service, and employs his/her eliteness to improve and enhance his/her country by smoothing the path of development.

Conclusion:

Today, more than any time else, Iranian political culture requires interaction-oriented political elite, who respect others as the holders of political right by employing inter subjective understanding and thinking and recognizing differences. They avoid vertical thinking in the field of dialog and negotiation. Dialog refers to negotiation, speech and opposition tolerability, and increased internal capacities and competencies to shape peaceful behaviors within the political structure of Islamic Republic of Iran. Interactionism culture seeks a political solution for solving structural problems within the government by thinking positively, respecting opposite opinions and thoughts, avoiding intellectual dogmatism, and reaching common axes. In that, political elite and groups avoid fomenting intrigues and controversies by showing speech courtesy, and express their thoughts and views by providing their point of views, plans, and decisions in a rational, normative, and legal atmosphere. Political elite should move towards interactional thinking by modifying and purifying their behaviors and speech. Not tolerating others’ opinions paves the way for dogmatic thinking in the society. A large part of this though stems from authoritarian attitude, individual-oriented culture, avoiding collective and participatory work, and priority of priority of individual over collective interests. Skipping personal interests and desires is and important and essential factor in achieving dialogic culture which is an introduction of interactional culture.

REFERENCES


