

## Religion and Political Culture in Eastern Kurdistan

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### Abstract

This article is going to study how religion affects the political culture in East Kurdistan. For this purpose, the theory of Almond and Verba among the relevant theories is used. On this basis, the situation of political culture in Kurdistan and the impact of religion are explained. By studying the socio-political functions of religion and religious government in Iran and the ways in which they affect the political behavior of people in the political process, the article tries to clarify the role of religion in the genesis of a special type of political culture in East Kurdistan. It shows that religion as a part of social culture, on the one side, and religious government, on the other side, have prevented the formation of a participant and civic culture in Kurdistan. Therefore, in comparison with the ideal types of Almond and Verba, a subject-dominated political culture has been created because of the politico-religious obstacles, though there is a potential in Kurdish society to go towards a civic culture.

**Keywords:** Religion, Political Culture, Kurdistan, Iran.

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## **Introduction**

Kurdish society is still a relatively traditional society in which religion is one of the main sources of its culture. Besides, religion is one of the factors that plays a role in determining the cultural and political identity of individuals and groups (Mofidi 2017, 5). Through these ways, religion has often affected the political culture of this society. Indeed, a part of the ideas, beliefs and attitudes dominated on the political culture in Kurdish society has been derived from religion. This situation has been the cause of some manners of action and political behavior of Kurdish society to face politics and political power especially the acceptance or rejection and critique of the relevant political system. That is why it is necessary to consider the relationship between religion and political culture. In this regard, this article is going to answer this question: How does religion affect the political culture in East Kurdistan i.e. that part of Kurdistan dominated by Iran?

For clarifying the effects of religion, and how it affects politics, political space and eventually political culture, the Almond and Verba's theory of political culture is applied. For this purpose, at first, political culture and the situation of society, the role of people in politics and political system and the role of government in the various political cultures are explained. Then, the situation of Iranian and Kurdish societies is socially and politically studied to specify the role and functions of religion and their political cultures. Finally, by comparing this situation with the situation of

Almond and Verba's ideal types, the type of political culture in Kurdistan is explained. By this method, it is tried to clarify the impacts of religion on this political culture and to explain how it acts as a barrier to prevent the growth and change of political culture in Kurdish society.

Therefore, based on the above-mentioned method a glance on the concept of political culture is necessary. According to the prevalent definition, political culture is a set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments that gives order and meaning to the political process and provides objective assumption and rule to behave in a political system. It includes both political ideas and applied norms in a political society. Thus, political culture shows the psychological and subjective aspects of politics (Pye 2017). Every political culture is a special diffusion of political attitudes, values, senses, knowledge and skills (Almond et al. 1997, 71). It is a vision and attitude on authority, governmental responsibilities and the ways of political socialization (Qawam 2001, 71). In the other words, according to Diamond's definition that is based on Almond and Verba's ideas, political culture consists 'basic beliefs, attitudes, values, senses, and the people's valuations about their countries' political system, and their role in that system'. Hence, political culture is not only about the individual understanding of politics, but also is related to a vast political arena such as national politics (Haynes 1999, 8). However, there are various definitions and categories for political culture that in this article, the Almond and Verba's theory is considered to explain the situation of political culture in Iran and Eastern Kurdistan.

### **Political Culture in the Almond and Verba's view**

The political sociology of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba is strongly under the effect of structural functionalism that emerged in the context of many social changes and the advent of shaker and transformer political mass movements because of the industrial operation and the political right of voting at the last 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Emile Durkheim was one of the most important sociologists that studied how these societies can preserve social solidarity and unity during these quick changes. While Durkheim felt a threat on social solidarity during the industrial revolution, Almond and Verba felt the same threat in the regime changes during the second wave of democratization and weaponry threat of the Cold War. So, they talked about "civic culture" for retaining the democracies. The constituent elements of their structural theory include a set of individual attitudes and orientations related to the political aims. The orientation takes three forms: epistemological and cognitive orientation (knowledge and trust on the political system, rules, its roles and agents of these roles, inputs and outputs); affective orientation (feelings about the political system, its rules, roles, agents and actions); and evaluative orientation (judgments and opinions on political aims that normally needs a combination of standards and criteria in relation to values, information and feelings). Moreover, the political aims include the general political system, the special roles and structures in this system (such as legislature and bureaucracy), authorities of roles (as king and legislators), and the public policies (decisions or implementing the decisions) (Pavone 2014).

Based on the aforesaid constituent elements, Almond and Verba mention three exemplar types of political culture: parochial, subject and participant cultures. In the first one, the citizens have low cognitive, affective, and evaluative attitude and orientation towards the above-mentioned four types of political objects. In this simple traditional society, there are no specific political roles and the expectation for political change is very low. Here, the individuals think on their family's interest as the only aim to follow or see their role in the political system in relation to the family. In the second culture, there is high cognitive, affective and evaluative orientation towards the political system and policy outputs, but the self as an active participant and orientation towards input objects (by political parties) are minimal. Thus, orientation towards the system and its outputs is channeled through a relatively detached, passive relationship on the part of the citizens. This type of culture is most compatible with centralized, authoritarian political systems. Here, the law is something the citizens obey, not what they help shape and have role in its shaping. In the third culture, the citizens have high cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientation towards the political system, the input objects, the policy outputs, and recognize themselves as an active participant in the politics. The social actors have tendency to be activist and mobilized. This culture, generally, is most compatible with democratic political systems. Here, the citizen is expected to obey the law and to be loyal, but he is also expected to take some parts in the formation of decisions. According to their view, political cultures rarely conform to the ideal-types and mostly there are mixed cultures. Besides, "political culture does not always map onto functional

political structures: political systems may be characterized by high congruence between culture and structure (which engenders allegiance), weak congruence (which engenders apathy), and incongruence (which engenders alienation)” (ibid.).

From another angle, three levels of political culture are the levels of system, process and policy-making. On the first level, the citizen’s view on values and constituent organizations of political system, the way of selecting leaders, and citizens’ obedience of laws are considered. The aspect of government’s legitimacy is one of the important aspects of this level. In those countries that the level of legitimacy is low, the citizens often harbor to violence to solve the political conflicts. The three problems of legitimacy are: not accepting the national political solidarity, not accepting the ways of leaders’ appointments and writing policies, and not trusting to leaders’ fidelity for performing their duties. The collapse of some countries has been for the existence of these three legitimating problems together (Almond et al. 1997, 71-72).

On the second level, the tendency of individuals to involve in the political process, i.e. bringing up demand, obedience of laws, supporting some groups and opposing the others and the different ways of participation, is considered. The above-mentioned three kinds of political culture including parochial, subject and participant cultures are often related to this level. In the various societies, the three kinds are seen, but their measures are different. In the developed society, the rate of participant culture is high. In some others, the rate of participant and subject cultures is relatively equal. In the backward societies, the rate of participant culture is lower and of

parochial is higher (ibid., 71-74). So, the mixed types of political culture have been mentioned such as parochial-subject, subject-participant and parochial-participant (Qawam 2001, 73).

On the third level, the citizens' expectation of government's policies, their goals and the way to achieve them are considered. In relation to the public policies, policy-making and the existent viewpoint on government's legitimacy, the political culture may be compatible and comfortable or problematical and incompatible. In the first one, the citizens are normally consonant about the appropriate ways of political decision-making and solving the basic issues and problems of society. But in the second one, the citizens are sharply got involved in multiplicity about the regime's legitimacy and solving the basic problems. In this situation, the society has political subcultures (Almond et al. 1997, 71 & 77).

One of the manifestations of political culture is civic culture, in which the participant political culture is balanced by parochial and subject orientation about political issues (Qawam 2001, 74). The civic culture that Almond and Verba talk on is compatible with the democratic political systems and it is most appropriate culture to them (Pye, 2017). This culture is a mixed culture of parochial, subject and participant cultures. The specifications of the rationality-activist model of democratic citizenship taught in civics classes with informed, rational and active citizens are actually components of the civic culture, but furthermore the role of subject and parochial cultures remain. Thus, the participant role has been combined with the subject and parochial roles, whereby citizens preserve their traditional,

parochial bonds such as going to the mosque and church membership as well as their more passive political role like subjects accepting of elite decision-making. The mixed characteristic of the civic culture mediates the inherent inconsistencies in democratic systems; i.e. the tension between government authority or effectiveness and government amenability or responsiveness. First, the parochial/subject bases of the civic culture incentivize modification and these orientations moderate the severity of the individual's political activity and involvement. Political activity is just one part of the citizen's concerns, and generally not a very important part at that. Thus, the citizen in the civic culture is 'the potentially active citizen, not the active citizen' (Pavone 2014). This facilitates the decision-making of elite and effective governance. Nevertheless, elites must be held in check. The citizen's opposite role, as active and influential executive of the responsiveness of elites, is maintained by his firm commitment to the norm of active citizenship and his understanding that he can be an influential citizen. In such a way, the civic culture accommodates the need for consensus, which prevents social fragmentation, and for cleavage, which organizes politics and gives political activity meaningful. By the contradiction between participatory norms and participatory behavior, this tension is negotiated and diffused. However, via the potentially active citizen and the responsiveness of government, an "equilibrium mechanism" can be shaped and the problems are solved. Hence, the civic culture is a concept to dominate the problems of democracy and some orientation to the system (affective, cognitive, and evaluative) is essential for a democratic government (ibid.).



In the Almond and Verba's view, briefly, the political culture includes cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientation and attitudes on political system. The three types of political culture are: parochial, in which there is no cognitive orientation towards political system and the individual is narrow minded; subject, in which there is cognitive orientation towards the outputs of system; and participant, in which there is cognitive orientation towards both the outputs and inputs of system. These three cultures are respectively compatible with traditional, authoritarian and democratic systems. The civic culture is a truthful and loyal participant political culture. The stable and effective democratic government depends on those orientations that people have towards political process – i.e. political culture. For them, USA and Britain have reached the level of participant and deferential civic culture (Almond & Verba, 1963; Fisher 2017).

### **Religion and political culture**

There are a bilateral, meaningful and tied relationship between religion and culture, in general, and political culture, in particular. The political culture has various sources. In the other words, beliefs, desires, aims and the attitudes that shape the political culture, are under the influence of some factors specially religion. The religious beliefs of people affect their view and political culture, and they deal with politics and political power (Motalebi 2013). Religion and religious institutions, on the one side, affect the political culture and also the people's conservatism and generally their obedience through socializing the individual in society. Religions convey the cultural and moral values that have political consequence and impact on the political

issue and public policies. On the other side, the religious stratum affects the political culture through dominating the political power and building a religious government that totalitarianism is one of its characteristics.

In relation to the above-mentioned second point, political religion, within which “religious actors overtly concerned with socio-political issues” (Hynes 1999, 6), is still clearly there in the undeveloped countries. And the existence of radical religious fundamentalism in some societies, especially Iran, has had highlight impact on the society and politics, and has given priority to the social, moral and religious conservative views on the policy making work (Almond et al. 1997, 65). In this regard, for both Huntington and Fukuyama, the non-Christian political cultures in the third world are both cause and consequence of non-democratic political system (Hynes 1999, 13). This situation has been clearly seen in the contemporary history of Iran so that the present Shiite-dominated political culture is partially the outcome of the non-democratic system of king’s period and itself also is a cause for the emergence of a non-democratic system after the Islamic revolution.

### **Religion and political culture in Iran**

The Iranian society has been a religious society from the ancient covenant until now, and religion has been one of the main sources of the culture in this country. In Iran, politics and religion have been in a tight relationship and it has had great effect on the political culture of the people especially after the victory of Islamic revolution, 1979. The political function of religion in Iran has a long history. Historically, in Iran, before and after coming Islam, religion

has been a means for legitimizing the political system and shaping the attitude, view and political behavior of people. After the Islamic revolution and merging religion and politics, this function of religion was strongly used as a tool for justifying and legitimating the power of rulers and the behavior of politicians. In such a way, religion became the most important tool for controlling the orientation, political action and reaction of society's members, then imitation and subjection became a leading way in political behavior (Karimi 2010). Indeed, the religious government of Iran has followed a Machiavellian politics. In Machiavelli's thought, the loyalty of citizens to religion causes to the stability of state, since religion scares people out of penalties and it leads to obeying the ruler (prince). Thus, religion is a means to rule people (Bashiriyeh 2003, 43). Such a situation happened in Iran and religion helped shaping a subject political culture. In this regard, after the Islamic revolution, some new Islamic institutions were emerged and activated that had great impact on political processes. In this situation, the mosques, monasteries, shrines and the religious groups took more places in the political culture of Iran and the Islamic thoughts have been reproduced (Motalebi 2013). Besides, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the emphasis on "Shariate" was changed to the emphasis on "Faqih" (cleric or jurisconsult) and the last result of this shifting has practically been giving priority to politics, through merging some religious and secular concepts and practices so that they can still claim an Islamic legitimacy (Ayubi 1999).

The emergence of Islamic Republic in Iran expanded moving towards a centralized and bureaucratic Shiism. The bureaucratization of religion has been a broad

phenomenon including all classes and strata in society. In the government, Islam has contributed to the social legitimacy of its centralization. Islam has particularly been an effective means to make a model of broad bureaucracy socially. The institutions and structures of religious culture during the course of their evolution have continuously changed into increasingly specialized organizations whose responsibilities are almost well defined and they receive economic supports and funds. For government decision makers, all religious institutions such as The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Education Ministry, the Organization for the Propagation of Islam in Qom, the Central Office of Mosque Administration, the Society of Preachers, the Friday Prayer Front, the Friday Prayer Council of the Imams, the Prayer Renewal Front, the Qura'nic Apprenticeship Society, the Front for the Ordinance of Good and Prohibition of Evil and other central councils of religious organizations, have been for managing the society in line with true Islam, in their own opinion. But, indeed, this institutional excess is directly related to their functions in preserving the regime. This administrative centralization and multiplication of structures within religious culture have made civil society very weak, inasmuch as it shows the ideology of an authoritarian regime that uses the Islamic codes as a tool arbitrarily (Adelkhah 1999).

In this regard, it should be noted that the contribution of religion in attracting people to the government's formal demonstrations does not fall within the framework of participant culture, since the government plans all the demonstrations. The politicians in power have used religion as a means to support the government. Because of

the lack of liberty, there are no active individual and society, and true participation. The people's support for the government has been non-cognitive, subjectness, passive and compulsory without transferring their demands into the system to get response. A religious totalitarian and monopolist government that has taken everything in hand including tools of socialization such as the education system, religious institutions, communications and so on, has made a parochial-subject political culture that is problematic and full of conflict too. Because of this, on the level of system also, there is the problem of government's legitimacy and the three already mentioned problems including true national political solidarity, selection of leaders and policies, and trusting to leaders, are seen in the Iranian society. The religion's interference in politics after the Islamic revolution not only prevented Iran to reach a civic culture, but also made a contradictory and problematic culture maintained by force. The situation now is such that if an appropriate opportunity and chance emerges, the political system of this country will face a crisis larger than its current crisis.

Hence, the political culture of Iran as an example of a non-democratic and authoritarian state has been more compatible with the kind of subject culture in Almond and Verba's model. During the king's regime, the lack of civic culture and the existence of a dictatorship system that had reinforced a parochial-subject political culture, and consequently the lack of "equilibrium mechanism" mentioned by Almond and Verba, resulted in political instability, collapse of political system and Islamic revolution. After the Islamic revolution also, because of the lack of freedom and the existence of a religious totalitarian

system, the parochial-subject culture and the risk to the system has been lasting. Consequently, most of the Iranian individuals as possessors of a potential for activity and of the participant attitude and orientation have not grown and the government has not also been responsible to the people. Therefore, in this country, the measure of subject political culture is the highest, the participant culture is the lowest, the civic society is very weak and the civic culture has not been achieved. Besides, because of the high political pressure emanated from ethnic and national conflicts and somewhere religious also, this situation in Eastern Kurdistan (Kurdewari) has been worse than the Persian and Shiite regions. However, one of the government's important tools is religion now that helps the promotion of conservative view and controlling any political movement. In such a way, the government wants to maintain its political domination on Kurdistan.

### **Kurdistan**

In all parts of Kurdistan, generally, for the existence of a relatively traditional society within which religion has become a part of social structure and the culture of Kurdish people and has too influence among people, it has impact on political identity, namely the political behavior and attitude of Kurdish individual. Some researches show that most of the Kurdish people introduce themselves as religious and for them, religion is necessary for society. In this regard, there are various religions and sects in Kurdistan that each one is a foundation for social identity of a group. So, religious identity in a way affects the political identity of most of the Kurdish people that for a considerable part of them, more than other social identities

determines it. The socio-political climate of Kurdistan shows that in the current Kurdish society, if there will be an open political space, the political identity of Kurdish individuals is at first under the effect of Kurdish national identity and then religion and religious ideology more than other identities. For example, religion has affected the political participation and behavior of Kurdish individuals in elections, as one of the arenas for the appearance of political identity (See: Mofidi 2017). However, religion along with the other factors has a leading share in shaping the political identity of this society's members and it has directly and non-directly affected the political culture of people.

In relation to the Eastern Kurdistan, on the one hand, generally there is no liberty for political activity and participation on any level. According to the Iranian constitution, the non-religious and non-Shiite forces obviously do not have any place in politics and political participation. Since the government does not allow people to participate in politics with their Kurdish identity, the secular Kurdish parties are banned and what has more impact on political culture and identity is religion that it has also been limited to the pro-government Shiite sect. When there is no liberty for other ideologies, the ideology of political Islam of Iranian government as a dominant ideology has had a high impact on political behavior of people. The situation is as such that because of the political power of Shiite and its political Islam in Iran, even the other religious groups have felt a threat to their identity. By the advent of Islamic Republic, the religious discrimination increased against the Sunni people and the followers of the other religions and sects especially Baha'is and Yarsans as a

part of Kurdish people that it affected their political view, behavior and attitudes. Besides, they have not practically been allowed to participate in politics with their social identity; consequently, they have followed the politics of dominant Shiite Persian group by force. Even the Sunni Islamic trends cannot obviously participate in elections through their parties and organizations, while it is more likely that in a political free space their Sunni identity determines their political identity. However, because of the existence of a Shiite religious government, a religious climate dominated on politics and the religion and only pro-government religious people's monopoly on political arena, now the Shiite sect has a high share in political participation and elections so that there is no practically a political competition (Mofidi 2017). This situation has had impact on creating a subject-dominated political culture.

On the other hand, apart from the effect of religion itself as a part of this society's culture that still is a traditional one, through the religious government and the dominant political religion in Iran also religion has directly affected the political culture of Kurdistan. As a political tool in the hand of Iranian politicians, it has helped the government to maintain the status quo after the revolution, 1979 (Mofidi 2015a). The governmental and religious institutions in Kurdistan have extended a conservative view blended with fear of any social change among people. In line with and in the framework of the politics of Iranian government, most of the religious institutions and mosques are under the domination of government clerics to use in the political ceremonies and to implement the political-religious policies. The clerics by dominating the political and religious institutions, using the influence of religion in



society and opposing liberty and socio-political open space, have helped expanding and reinforcing a parochial-subject political culture in Eastern Kurdistan.

In line with the anti-Kurd politics, the government by various ways under the name of religion has prevented the activity of Kurdish society and extended a conservative, subject and non-active culture. Since, there is no any liberty and space for Kurdish activity in Iran, the civic society in Eastern Kurdistan is very weak. So, the lack of liberty of express, press and organizations, participation in power as Kurdish people, and consequently the existence of a non-democratic mechanism of elections, has paved a way to extend a subject political culture so that most of the Kurdish individuals have been inactivated, since there is no any space to do political activity. Besides, since the Kurdish people have no any legal political party to channel their demands and to participate freely in political process, they don't have any role in the input part of the political system to transfer the demands into the system, in investigating them, and also in the decision-makings. Therefore, they don't have a true support to the system too. The political climate is such that the Kurdish people are just under the effect of outputs and decisions of political system without affecting them and the system's response to the people, so most of the people think only about their family's interests. Because of this, the active and participant political culture in the political process has declined to its minimum level and a lowest degree in Kurdistan. The inactive and subject political culture has dominated this society, and just the outputs of political system are imposed so that people follow and obey them.

However, the great influence of religion in society, the existence of a religious government and the lack of a democratic society, have been among the basic obstacles for shaping a civic culture, because the government neither has been responsible nor has allowed the growth and increasing of potentially active citizens and individuals. This culture can grow in a society that human rationality is important for the rulers, but in the religious government of Iran, the officials consider themselves as representative of God and their power as God's power, so they do not recognize the other peoples as decision-makers who can determine their own destiny. That is way, the individual and collective wisdom of human in Iran and subsequently in Kurdistan is meaningless, and the participant orientation aspect has not grown so that there is no any equilibrium between the different kinds of political culture in this society. So, to achieve a civic culture, it is necessary that the political culture of people and society from a parochial and subject-dominated culture with inactive citizens goes towards a more participant culture that the individuals possess the potential of activity. Namely, the individuals actively participate in politics and they are decision-makers who aware and feel that they have impact on the decisions of the political system (Mofidi 2015b). In this regard, because of the domination of a non-democratic and totalitarian system, there is no such a situation in Eastern Kurdistan now, so the inactive and subject culture has a high quota in the society and the Kurdish people often inactively and unknowingly have to obey the outcomes of the political system.

## Conclusion

The Kurdish society is still a relatively traditional society within which religion has high influence. Through this cultural influence and also reinforcing religion and the religious institutions by the Iranian government for the political purposes, and using its political functions, religion has affected the political identity and culture of the Kurdish people. In comparison with the ideal types of political culture outlined by Almond and Verba, the political culture of Eastern Kurdistan now under the above-mentioned situation is a mixed culture that the subject political culture is dominant, though there is a potential in Kurdish society to go towards a participant culture. Hence, the lack of freedom for both non-religious or secular groups and non-Shiite groups, On the one hand, and the existence of a Shiite religious government and transforming religion into a political means, on the other hand, have prevented the formation of a civic and participant culture. It has led to the expansion of a subject-dominated political culture in Kurdistan.

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