

Barriers to Democracy: The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World

by Amaney A. Jamal
Princeton University Press, 2007, 192. pp.

Rob Jenkins

Amaney Jamal's concise and thought-provoking book stands in a long and somewhat depressing tradition in the study of political change. Since the late 1950s, when political scientists and area specialists began studying the development of state institutions and party systems in countries then emerging from colonial rule, one school of thought has consistently emphasised the almost insurmountable barriers facing fledgling democracies. The root of the problem is that democracy is not a single thing, but a complex bundle of institutional mechanisms, individual orientations, and social attributes – the choosing of representatives through competitive elections, to be sure, but also respect for the rule of law, independent oversight bodies, a free press, the willingness of people to participate in civic life, legal protections for minorities, a culture of tolerance, and much else besides.

For the first generation of post-colonial leaders, the sheer length of this list, and the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding each item, made the enterprise of building a democratic state challenging enough. It didn't help that democracy was identified with a civilisation (broadly, the West) that had ruled its former imperial possessions in anything but a democratic fashion. But what made democracy appear all but unattainable – what pushed would be democracy-promoters to despair – was a creeping recognition that not only was attempting to acquire democracy's component parts all at once far too ambitious; attempting to obtain them one by one – on the equivalent of an installment plan – was no more realistic. A broadly tolerant culture without effective institutions to punish those who violated specific legal protections for minorities, for instance, would slowly become less tolerant, just as the absence of social norms valuing probity in public life would, over time, undermine the operation of oversight bodies designed to punish transgressors. The uphill task of building democracy one element at a time, which seemed a long but worthy struggle at the outset, began to appear downright Sisyphean. If each component of the democratic package was a precondition for the others, if no subset of the liberal reform agenda could generate a self-perpetuating momentum toward genuine democracy, then there was little point in pursuing an incremental strategy.

Not everyone succumbed to despair, of course. Running in parallel to the belief that democracy was a bundle of mutually supportive elements was a counter-tendency that persists to this day: the insistence that it is possible to navigate sequential pathways by which democratic states could be constructed. The route might not be the most direct, and breakdowns along the way were inevitable, but with fortitude and a bit of luck the destination could be reached. The most powerful argument in the arsenal of the optimistic incrementalists has always been historical. The world's first democracies certainly did not obtain the entire package all at once. Yet, somehow, they ended up with a more or less full

complement of democratic components. The first wave of democracies had no road map, either, and in many cases only the dimmest idea of where they were headed. Surely, latter-day seekers of democracy, furnished with a range of models to emulate, and urged on by countries that had blazed the trail ahead of them, could succeed.

This line of thought is evident in the democracy-promotion strategies expounded by aid agencies and development organisations during the nearly two decades since the cold war began winding down. Deriving lessons from the wave of democratisation that began in the late 1970s (in Spain and Portugal initially, followed by much of formerly authoritarian Latin America, and then spreading to Eastern Europe and beyond), both theorists and practitioners identified what they saw as the most promising routes to democracy. Among the most deeply entrenched of the orthodoxies about how to engineer a sustainable transition to democracy (to a government of and by the people), and then how to make democratic rule produce outcomes that benefit the great mass of ordinary citizens (making it a government *for* the people as well), concerns the role of civil society. Civil society is perhaps best thought of as a combination of (a) a political space in which people can freely associate on the basis of shared ideas or interests, and (b) the sum total of the associations thus created, including labour unions, literary clubs, sports leagues, charitable societies, advocacy organisations, and the many other formal and informal groupings that make up the fabric of what is often called 'civic life'.

Civil society is a key starting point in democratisation strategies in part because it is often the one thing that foreign agencies can 'promote' in countries whose governments refuse to hold multiparty elections, or reform their judiciaries, or adopt international human rights standards, or indeed take any of the other measures that a comprehensive process of democratisation would require. (Indeed, the willingness of authoritarian regimes to tolerate aid agencies' civil society-promotion programs should be a clue of their ineffectual nature.) The other reason why architects of democratisation begin their sequences with the promotion of civil society is more theoretical than practical: a belief that forming associations, and working within them, helps to build the kind of active, engaged citizenry that can keep a newly founded democracy up and running. In other words, civil society creates citizens as much as citizens create civil society. Once in place, the combination of citizens and the network of associations in which they participate presents a formidable check on governments that seek to abuse their power, whether this has been obtained by non-democratic means (in the early stages of a democratisation sequence, where elections have not yet followed the consolidation of civil society) or at the ballot box (once the institutions of democracy are up and running).

This reigning orthodoxy – in which civil society is held up as the key to the dilemmas of sequential democratisation – receives a devastating body blow from Jamal's well-researched and carefully constructed book. Jamal's key finding, based on research in the territory governed during the 'Oslo period' of 1993-1999 by the Palestinian National Authority, is one that will resonate with anyone who has been suspicious of the starring role accorded to civil society in democracy-promotion programs: to create the kind of civil society that can advance the cause of democracy requires one crucial ingredient – the existence of a democratic state. Supporting the creation of civic associations in societies where the state is an overwhelming force in the lives of ordinary people produces not the associational life that Tocqueville saw as the incubator of democratic citizenship, but a civil

society that mirrors the authoritarian tendencies of the state itself. If what we hope for in non-democratic societies is the inculcation of democratic habits and the creation of independent centres of societal power that can act as a counterweight to overweening governments, we are in for serious disappointment, Jamal contends, if the means of bringing this scenario into existence is to support the creation of civic associations.

Jamal confines her analysis mainly to the Palestinian territories, with additional evidence drawn from Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan, but her arguments have relevance far beyond the Arab world. Associations operating under the conditions that prevail in many developing countries – even those that are merely 'semi-authoritarian' rather than completely autocratic – may not only *not* contribute to democratisation (or further democratisation, if one considers the existence of civil society at all a down payment on something like liberal politics); in such circumstances, the proliferation of civic associations might actually make things worse. Civil society in non-democratic contexts can inculcate attitudes and behaviours that undercut the creation of a democratic culture.

Jamal demonstrates these and other points through close examination of survey data and the responses of people she interviewed in the course of her research. She finds that the attitudes which feature so prominently in the social-capital literature – good things like high levels of interpersonal trust, a desire to engage in civic action, and indeed a belief in the desirability and efficacy of democratic institutions themselves – are not particularly widespread among people who belong to and work within civic associations in the countries she has studied. Moreover, the relationships among these individual orientations – for instance, between interpersonal trust and support for democratic institutions – is not what the social capital literature predicts.

This leads Jamal to the conclusion that Robert Putnam's work on social capital, which has been adopted by an army of followers in the development business to craft programs for spreading democracy and making it produce better governance outcomes, might well only apply in democratic settings – and *not* in the places where its transformative potential has been so heavily hyped. Putnam famously pointed to the high levels of social capital (dense associational networks that produced interpersonal trust and norms of reciprocity) in northern Italy as the reason why democratic political institutions there were so much more effective than they were in southern Italy, where democracy had failed to deliver the goods, and arguably existed in name only. Jamal turns Putnam's theory on its head, asking whether the lack of effective democracy in southern Italy might be the reason why civic virtue was so sorely lacking, rather than the other way around.

As Jamal puts it, because the dominant orthodoxy 'on the democratic skills learned through associational life focus solely on life in democracies, they rarely ask whether associational participation in authoritarian regimes is actually characterised by higher levels of interpersonal trust, higher levels of civic engagement, *and* stronger support for democratic institutions.' Jamal decided these were questions that did need to be asked, finding that 'while participation in associations did result in higher levels of trust it did not breed the second-order consequences we commonly expect to find, such as community engagement, political knowledge, civic involvement, and support for democratic institutions'. Her conclusion: 'these findings are just the opposite of what one might have expected to find. The results here fly in the face of expectations based on the existing literature on civic associations and democracies' (p. 76).

One of the strengths of the book is the strong theoretical foundation upon which these and other arguments are based, and the uses to which Jamal's conceptual apparatus is put when seeking to understand why her cases deviate so strikingly from the conventional wisdom. At the heart of her analysis is the role played by clientelism in the operation of civic associations in the 'state-centralized' societies she has examined. Rather than do what we might hope civil society would do – that is, advocate for better, more impartial, and indeed more democratic governance – civic associations operating in such settings tend to become vehicles for seeking special favours. They act as clients of powerful political patrons. This pattern of behaviour, which is perfectly understandable given the context in which these associations have been born, is then internalised within these organisations, whose leaders operate as patrons themselves, with rank and file members cast in the role of subservient clients rather than energetic agenda-setters. It is therefore no surprise that civic associations fail to impart democratic lessons – except perhaps through the power of negative example.

If Jamal's powerful account of the relationship between democracy and civic life has a weakness (beyond the domain of data analysis, the technical soundness of which I am unfit to judge) it is a failure to address the fairly widespread literature on the *uncivil* role of civil society even in democratic settings. Research on social capital formation is vulnerable even on its home turf, as it were. Civic organisations are notorious favour-seekers and norm-violators even in such model democracies as the United States and the United Kingdom.

Moreover, Jamal pays insufficient attention to the links between what are in effect two distinct roles that civil society can play, and is often expected to play – between civil society as the nucleus of a movement for democratic change in a non-democratic system, and civil society as a force for improved governance under conditions of democratic rule. This is important because it may well be that even if members of civic associations do not hold strong views in support of democracy in general – as they do not in the cases Jamal has examined – the existence of these associations can nevertheless provide an organisational infrastructure for the smaller band of people who believe in, and are actively working for, democracy, allowing them to travel, hold down jobs, keep informed of events abroad, and build wide-ranging networks at home. Where associational life itself is all but non-existent, people struggling for democracy are more exposed. Even civic associations that fail to inculcate democratic values or promote civic engagement – indeed, even when they model craven forms of political behaviour – their mere presence can provide a shelter for those of more democratic leanings. In a crisis, where an opening for a democratic transition arises, such actors have something on which they can build. These are perhaps issues that can be taken up in the future research of a scholar whose first book is likely to leave a huge mark.

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