

Authoritarianism and the Dokkan Mentality

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Authoritarianism is a sociopolitical system of near absolute control that prevails in Arab societies in general as well as in most other Third World states; it starts at the family level and extends vertically and horizontally to encompass all organizations and states. Authoritarian rulers in such states have unlimited powers to rule over their subjects, leaving people with no legitimate tools to claim their rights and lead normal lives in their homelands. Citizens, for example, have no right to question their rulers or second guess their decisions; they are in fact often reminded that whatever rights they may enjoy should be viewed as a grant from their ruler, not given to them by birth. Subjects are almost always expected, sometimes required, to obey their rulers and submit to their will without questions. Because of such powers, authoritarianism has become the system to oppress people, confiscate their collective rights and individual freedoms, denigrate them, and show no respect for their intelligence or dignity, sometimes their humanity as well.

At the family level, the father, according to old Arabic and tribal traditions and customs, acts as the head of the household whose duties include taking all important decisions that affect the family's welfare and the future of its members. The father usually feels that he possesses the wisdom needed to lead his family and therefore has the obligation to take all decisions related to family affairs. Fatherhood in traditional Arab society grants the head of the family many privileges and does not hold him accountable for any of his actions. In addition, family members are required to praise fathers, respect them, and avoid criticizing them even when their decisions turn out to be misguided and their actions cause much harm to the family and its future prospects. Arab traditions, moreover, tend to place much value on old age and thus entitle fathers, who are older than other family members and oftentimes older than their wives as well, the right to be in control. Other family members, being younger, are considered

lacking the life experience and knowledge and wisdom that comes with old age to participate in running family affairs.

Authoritarianism is caused by a narrow minded view of everything in life that traditionalism dictates; it originates primarily from, and is an extension of what I call the “*Dokkan Mentality*.” A *dokkan* is a mall grocery store, or a family owned corner store operating in a small village or community and managed by one person. This person, often a father, sometimes orders one of his male children, usually the older one, to help in storing goods and keeping records and assisting customers. However, sons are not allowed to second guess their fathers and have no right to express their opinions regarding the pricing of goods or dealing with customers, or determining operating hours. Nevertheless, it is the older sons that usually inherit the responsibilities of fathers after they die, including the running of the business and deciding for other family members that sometimes include mothers. Dokkans usually have no daily operating hours; it is the “*dokkangy*” (owner of the *dokkan*) who determines when to open in the morning and when to close in the evening.

Members of the neighborhood tend to trust the “*dokkanji*” because of his proven knowledge; he knows how to deal with government officials and city merchants, how to buy goods and get them shipped to his place, and how to keep records of those buying on credit. Due to such a trust and often the lack of banks in the neighborhood where the *dokkan* operates, the *dokkanji* often serves as a banker for many members of his customers. People, having no better alternatives, tend to use the *dokkan* as an address to receive mail and the *dokkanji*’s expertise to receive funds from abroad and transfer money to relatives residing outside the community or the country. But while many people do put their trust in the *dokkanji*, the *dokkanji* places little trust in other people, even his children. No matter how old his children may become, the *dokkanji* treats them as children for the duration of his fatherhood life. When the *dokkanji* goes to pray or to hospital, attend a wedding or funeral, or feels the need to travel, he usually closes his *dokkan* until he returns.

The dokkanji, being a father, or a company manager, or an organization director, or a state ruler usually develops a superiority complex that makes him feel that he is entitled to claim most, if not all, available wisdom is obligated to use whatever powers he may have to control the dokkan and everything and everyone related to it; to advice subordinates, run their lives, control their meager savings and determine their destiny. While the dokkanji in his fatherly role tends to see all members of his family as children who are not old enough to run their daily lives, the dokkanji in his ruler role tends to see citizens as children who are not mature enough to understand the complexity of the world; and thus they are not worthy of trust; he therefore tends to monopolize all important decisions and delegate almost nothing to his subordinates and the public. As a consequence, none of the Third World parliaments plays the political or legislative role it is supposed to play in a democratic society.

The dokkan mentality is today the most dominant mentality in Arab society; every institution, being a small business, an organization, an official agency, or a government, is managed as a dokkan, and every director, manager, minister and even head of state acts as if he were just a dokkanji running a small corner store. As a consequence, all important decisions related to the business of the dokkan are concentrated in the hands of one person and therefore, no decisions would be made in his absence or contrary to his will. All business of the dokkan, the company, the organization, the ministry, and the state are subject to the will of the dokkanji and must wait for his return in case of his temporary absence.

In order to realize the predominance of the dokkan mentality in Arab society, just imagine for a second how an important decision in any Arab country could be taken while its king, president or amir is vacationing overseas. The business of the sate, the future of the people, and all national security issues have no priority over the desires and whims of the ruler; it is always the man in control that sets priorities, takes decisions, and determines the future of the country and the direction of the nation he is supposed to lead by consent. Authoritarianism in the Arab world is not a political system or a political philosophy only; it is also a sociocultural tradition. As such, it makes genuine change hard to initiate and harder to institute in society; it

causes freedoms and opportunity to be limited, and transforms all democratic institutions into show cases with little impact or meaning. In Arab lands in general, most countries are not ruled by families; most ruling families own countries.

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