

Che-Guevara T-Shirts and Changing Idioms of Popular Politics in the Arab Gulf Region

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Abstract

This work examines how the act of wearing Che-Guevara T-Shirts becomes a subtle but serious political statement and how does it contribute to the emergence of new mode popular politics in the Arab Gulf countries? It also examines how the concept of democracy enters the lives of youth through informal political expressions? Analyzing the relationship between the popular politics and democratization of the society in a circuitous fashion, this work uncovers the process through which popular politics gains legitimacy among the youth in the GCC States.

Key Words

Politics and Democracy in the Arab Gulf countries, Popular Politics, Civil Society, Informal Political Expressions, Che-Guevara T-Shirts.

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Analysis:

Introduction

Democracy according to the Italian political philosopher Agamben gathers sense in two ways; as a means of constituting the body politic and as a technique of governing.¹ In the contemporary political discourse, the term's use in the former sense seldom overpowers its apocryphal meaning as an 'administrative' practice with politico-managerial attributes. The situation in the Arab Gulf countries represents no exception to that. The scope of the discussion on democracy in the region is often limited to the creation of partially elected councils with the purpose of advising unelected monarchy and the power of the centralized state remains un-changed.

However, the region at present is an arena of new sorts of popular political expressions which collectively seem to contribute to the democratization of the society in a subtle manner. There are ample indications of the assertiveness of many hitherto sidelined social actors over the issues of gender and socio-political and citizenry status. As happens elsewhere, the development of popular politics revolves around the ideas and practices of people rather than around the institutional factors which in the normal case of Gulf States are projected as the major means of 'democratization'. This work, thus, intends to provide accounts only of non-institutional aspects of politics and democracy. That means, the ways in which values and practices of dissent and democracy become entrenched in popular politics and thereby in the political imagination of ordinary people in a subtle manner are to be examined taking cues from an innovative popular political practice.

Analyzing the experience of the Arab Spring-induced protests in the region Sadiki likes to see the whole debate as a part of "an inevitable conflict between two competing but interchangeable sets of legitimacy; democratic and revolutionary."² The latter revolves mainly around a romantic politics in societies, where the informal kind of politics is invalidated by long period of autocracy.³ The experience of popular politics in the Gulf goes beyond the procedural democratic legitimacy which often seeks formal structures, procedures and contracts that frame mainstream politics.⁴ Political practices associated with it often base their strength "on the principle of popular legitimacy which is often in

¹ Giorgio Agamben, "Introductory Note on the Concept of Democracy", in William McCuaig (ed. & tr), *Democracy in What State*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

² Larbi Sadiki, "Egypt Back to Square One: Tahrir or Dictatorship", www.aljazeera.com accessed on 16th July 2015.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

conflict with the conventional notions of legitimacy.”⁵ Judging them from the vantage point of institutional democratic legitimacy always fail to understand the dynamics involved in. Such a political imagination, thus, should not be limited by the matters of institutions and legality but be assessed by a different set of criteria.

The role of popular politics in democratization of the Gulf societies is often left unexplored or under-explored by the more formal and macro approaches of understanding the development of democracy. The question here is how the ways in which democracy as a means of constituting the body politic acquires social roots in the region and produces new political meanings which in turn energize new form of popular politics.

The key actors in the Gulf popular politics are youth and students, women’s groups, stateless tribes, ethnic minorities and expatriate labourers representing a wide spectrum of demands and practices. The new popular political activism which is on the rise especially among the young generation has given birth to serious concern among the rulers. The informal and unorganized kind of political activities and massive uprisings take the centre stage, while the process of political reforms in the GCC states has been pursued with more conventional activities and failed to convince the population.

The monarchic regimes are now struggling to hold back the new generation of nationals who appear less inclined to accept arguments appealing to religion and tribal tradition to explain why ordinary citizens should be shut out of decision-making. These developments may not seem surprising to outsiders, but the trend is towards a significant political advance, youth making possible avenues of expression that were previously precluded. Such fragmented and mostly single-issue oriented responses have collectively left a powerful mark on the democratization in the region.

Among the forms of popular politics perhaps more subtle but striking is alternative ways of dressing for making individual political statements through clothes. The dress and the way that the youth wear it has become a site of political struggle. This is more evident with many young *khalijis* who have chosen to wear Che-Guevara T-shirts with implicit political statements and found themselves unwittingly labeled as bearers of ‘new politics.’ Wearing Che-Guevara T-shirts is generally seen as a clear indication of youth’s new radical politics all around the world but in the GCC states it interprets youth’s not-so-open anti-imperial position, which they define as something subtly challenging the knee-jerking policies of the monarchies vis-à-vis the US administration.

⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: reflections of Popular Politics in most of the World*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p.40.

What is ‘political’ about Che-Guevara T-Shirts?

Taking cues from Indian experience, Chatterjee has defined popular politics as one that emerges in response to the neo-liberal developmental policies of government aimed at specific population groups.⁶ Many of these groups according to him transgress the strict lines of legality in struggling to live and work. Violation of law becomes a norm and civil disobedience and unlawful associations become their normal tools to mobilize people which the government cannot ignore as their demands contain serious political messages to the regimes.

The popular politics in the Gulf at present can be seen as a result of the deep disappointment of a large stratum of population. Frequent rejection of demands or delayed response by the authorities results in the formation of it. Deepening and widening of the apparatus of monarchic regimes, of course, have transformed the nature of expressing the disappointment of people in the last two decades. When the formal politics seems impossible for the ordinary persons to have access, people resort to popular means. The situation, in which all the possibilities of formal politics are closed, necessitates one to find new informal means. It was the street that emerged as the major theatre of urban dissent discussing sensitive political issues, though not so overtly.⁷ After the street, net (new media) has become the most vital locus for audible expression of collective grievances for the last two decades.

The inability of such politics to capture popular political imagination actually signals the presence of a weak civil society. Primarily, there is an issue concerning the very definition of ‘civil’. Who are qualified enough to become a part of the ‘civil’. The issue becomes very significant, especially with the powerful institutions of family, clan or similar structure operating in opposition to the concept of ‘civil’. In such a context, only the new middle class, an emerging group of liberal technocrats with a penchant for representative government, has the potential to form a civil society, though they are yet unorganized.⁸ Similarly, the civil society movements are mostly patronized by the government or sometimes with its elite social content is restricted to a small section of politically equipped citizens.⁹ “Although these groups are not private, they could

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Asef Bayat, “The Street and the Politics of Dissent in the Arab World”, *Middle East Report*, no.226, 2003, pp.10-17.

⁸ Jill Crystal, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, (Leiden: E.J Brill, 1996).

⁹ Even though a variety of important groups have emerged or survived, transformed for last three decades, almost all of them are having the patronage of state in some way or the other. See Caroline Montagu, “Civil Society in Saudi Arabia: The Power and Challenges of Association”, *Research Paper*, Middle Eastern and North Africa Programme, March 2015, pp.133-34 & Crystal, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, p.286.

certainly break with the state at the first opportunity”, notes Crystal.¹⁰ Associations of Journalists, lawyers, and academics are the most illustrious of such state-sponsored groups. Even though a variety of civil society groups emerged or submerged for few decades, almost all of them enjoyed protection of the state in some way or other.¹¹ Independent groups free from the control of the ruling dynasties are generally unimportant and associated life is weak except in the case of families and clans.

It is to this political vacuum popular politics steps in. While formal politics is constrained by dynastic sensibilities, the Gulf youth are developing powerful voices through symbolic means of political expression. They are indeed serious political actions but may not be described as challenging directly or undermining the legitimacy of the states.

Wearing Che-Guevara T-shirt is a result of a political condition in which the arms of administration are reaching deeper and wider into domains of everyday life hitherto untouched by government. When one is not able to express his/her political opinions openly, he/she express it using some metaphorical languages or symbols. Che-Guevara T Shirts are such symbols through which a serious political communication is made possible.

Mostly embossed on casual T-shirts, the image of Che Guevara is still alive as an anti-imperial icon of popular politics in most of the Asian and African countries. The image of Che-Guevara is an idealistic insignia for youth in the Western politics who maintain a longing for a sense of rebellion. But the revolutionary political legacy of him has not many direct takers in the Arab Gulf region. The popularity of Che-Guevara T Shirts, therefore, cannot be linked directly to the new mode of political consciousness getting evolved in the region. It rather, indicates a sort of resentment from the side of youth against the neoliberal reconfiguration of economy and also the pivotal position of the Gulf States in the US imperial expansionist political and security design.¹² Strangely enough, most of such micro-political expressions do not invite unfriendly and intolerant reactions from the state as the governments in the GCC countries are unaware of the serious political content of them.

There is nothing about the politics of the image itself as the picture is of a revolutionary who is probably unacceptable in the religio-political context exists in the region. But, it turns out to be a serious political action offering new avenues of subtle expression that are otherwise considered sensitive and threatening to the local dynasties.

¹⁰ Crystal, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, p.262.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹² A student of University of Sharjah shared this view in anonymity during my field research in 2010.

Alternative ways of dressing in the context of West Asia and North Africa have always been a part of making political statements through clothes. The role of *keifaya* in popular politics had been immense symbolic importance for the whole Arab society and the Gulf society in particular in the 1970s and 80s. The question of Palestinian was then the major point for millions of Arab youth in the Gulf to rally around. The first generation of young men in most of the newly independent Gulf States in the 1970s was deeply ideologically committed to the cause of anti-Zionism and thereby to anti-imperialism. By choosing to wear *keifaya*, young *Khalijis* were reliving the life of their fellow Arabs from ‘the land of Palestine.’ During the Islamic revolution in Iran, women migrants from Iran in many of the Gulf cities were wrapped in dark blue mantles in a gesture of solidarity with the revolutionaries.

Al-Qasimi in her work “Immodest Modesty: Accommodating Dissent and the ‘Abaya-as-Fashion’ in the Arab Gulf States” illustrates how productions of ‘abaya-as-fashion’ are now being used as a symbol of passive resistance.¹³ The ‘abaya, normally in the Gulf context, is an institutionalized form of national dress that is socio-legally imposed by the state.¹⁴ Women across the countries in the region wear it with a sense of belongingness and solidarity. In the modern ‘secular’ liberal feminist debates, it has often been portrayed as another cycle of imposition of the patriarchal hegemonic religious and national order. But the new discourses have brought to “re-positioning of ‘abaya in new fashion models standing in opposition to the judicial nationalist and religious ones and embodying pleasure of female display.”¹⁵ Simultaneous to being approved and accommodated by the Islamic order, the ‘abaya, in its new avatars, constitutes a form of passive resistance in its reiteration of power.¹⁶ Along the similar lines, wearing Che-Guevara T-shirt for many in the Gulf is a subtle political statement; concerned with political meanings and with serious political communication.

What really happens is, wearing T-shirt with message becomes a political signifier generating some meanings. With Che-Guevara T-shirt the youth communicate to others the politics what they stand for in a subtle manner. There is perhaps a little point in taking the popularity of Che-Guevara T Shirts seriously in general terms; but in micro-political terms it profoundly transforms the very ground on which the routinized or institutionalized political protests and dissents are envisioned and operated.

¹³ Noor Al-Qasimi, “Immodest Modesty: Accommodating Dissent and the ‘Abaya-as-Fashion’ in the Arab Gulf States”, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter 2010), pp.46-74. P.46

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Deniz Kandiyoti, “Bargaining with Patriarchy”, *Gender and Society*, 2 (September, 1988), pp. 214-90, Noor Al-Qasimi, “Immodest Modesty: Accommodating Dissent and the ‘Abaya-as-Fashion’ in the Arab Gulf States”, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter 2010), pp.46-74, p.49.

The takers of Che-Guevara T-Shirt are mostly urban people educated outside the region mainly in Western Europe and North America.¹⁷ The author noticed during a series of fieldwork in the UAE and Qatar in 2010 and 2015 that Che-Guevara T-Shirt is popular in places where the locals closely intermingle with the Indian migrants.¹⁸ It, perhaps, may be seen as something spilled over from the Indian community.¹⁹

Having come from politically active backgrounds, expatriates from South India generally carry forward the anti-imperialist political legacies of the region with them and try to create a subtle replica of their political positions through informal organizations in diasporic settings. The anti-imperialist positions of these organizations are manifested mainly through their consistent but covert criticism over American policies in the Gulf and support for the boycott calls against American and Israeli products.

As a form of serious political protest, wearing Che-Guevara T-Shirt is yet to catch up the popular imaginations and people do not see any serious potential in it to challenge the legitimacies of the regimes. Those who wear it in certain cases are unaware of it or even the ideology of the political icon imprinted on the T-shirt.²⁰ However, wearing it, most of them think, is an alternative way of expressing politics in a covert fashion.

¹⁷ This view was expressed by many nationals and South Indian expatriates during my field visits in UAE between 2010 and 2014.

¹⁸ Cheguera T-Shirt as an alternative way of dressing has hardly made any inroads into Oman and Saudi Arabia where the role of Indian expatriates in the cultural process is marginal.

¹⁹ In a series of interviews in 2015, some shopkeepers in Dubai dealing with Cheguera T-Shirt agreed that wearing it shows the influence of Indian expatriates.

²⁰ In interviews certain respondents revealed that only thing they know about Che-Guvera is his ardent anti-American position.