

The Democracy of Corruption and the Tentative Nature of Civilization in the Middle East

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Last year I sat in my first departmental meeting as a new employee in one of the “prestigious” western universities somewhere in the Middle East, having returned to the region after more than three decades away living in the United Kingdom and Australia. Half an hour into the meeting, the newly appointed, imported department head brazenly announced that she had been recording the meeting and that she had forgotten to tell us about it from the start. Taken totally by surprise, I strongly protested that surreptitious recording was against workplace ethics, best practice and local and international laws, let alone the system of beliefs and values of the country they were in and which most of them ostensibly espoused. The colleagues attending the meeting, a motley crew of Arab, Middle Eastern, African, British and American expatriates, did not really mind the recording of the meeting. In protestation, the African colleague, having experienced real democracy in his own country, proclaimed that it was the tradition at that workplace to record meetings, without consent. Seeing the commotion and anger her underhand action had caused, the department head put to it the vote, and all ten male and female members, except one other colleague, voted for continuing to record the meeting despite my protest. A show of hands and majority rule, they all exclaimed. An Egyptian national, who also experienced true democracy under the Mubarak rule, protested my protestation: “Since we voted on it, why are we discussing it”. The matter for him and the others was settled. They put it to the vote and the majority won the vote. Did that make it right? It didn’t help the soldiers of Nazi Germany to claim they were just following orders in their quest to exterminate the Jews, did it? Another senior colleague waited to see where the vote was going to go, looking left and then right, and slowly raising his arm and sliding it up against his flank to show hand, supported the motion to keep recording the meeting. Our African friend, assuming the role of custodian of the unwritten, mercurial, vaporware constitution, claimed that it had been the culture, tradition and practice of the group to record meetings. Of course! And so is female circumcision. But does it make right if it is the culture, tradition and practice of those tribes to commit such a heinous act?

I was totally shocked that a group of educators, who had studied and lived in the west for varying lengths of time, and who were entrusted with the younger generation at that institution, could actually condone such a practice. Not only that—probably resigned to the notion that things were done differently in the Middle East, the two western colleagues, like most expatriates on a working vacation who probably didn’t give a hoot about the place, didn’t even bat an eyelid. The test of the fish is not in the pond but in the sea, the old saying goes, and those two fish miserably failed the test of civilization. People might call it pragmatism and self-preservation, but there is a fine line between pragmatism and indifferent and unprincipled behavior. It is an old doctrine that those who accept an act are the same as those who commit it. Those two and their Middle Eastern-African-Arab fellows who voted in favor of the practice were practically partners in the crime. But that was only the tip of the iceberg!

Incensed by that episode, I complained to the dean. An American, on his first assignment in the Middle East, feeling the euphoria of his newly acquired power, dismissed my complaint claiming that recording the meetings was meant to help the administrative assistant, who was at the meeting, with minute-taking, because as he claimed, her English was poor, unknown to him that she held a BA in English. So instead of addressing the real problem of the supposed incompetency, the dean and his protégés chose to change the culture of the organization and violate the privacy laws and rules along the way—a fundamental error autocratic and inexperienced, pre-scientific managers and organizations make. It is a federal crime in the United States, where that man comes from, to record meetings without the full informed consent of all attendees. The presumption of consent only applies to the recording of speeches and conversations that take place where the parties may reasonably expect to be recorded—not covertly in a departmental meeting. However, one can only “record, videotape, or broadcast any conversation if all parties to the conversation consent. The consent of all parties is presumed if, during a face-to-face interview, your recorder is in plain view.”¹ That was never the case and, for all I know, people used their mobiles to stealthily record meetings. It is true that legislation governing the use of new technology always lags behind, and the availability of recording functionality on mobiles makes it easy for people to covertly record conversations. It is also true that new technology is always put to illicit use by unscrupulous users. In this instance, recording the meeting by the department head is an open-and-shut case of unconsented recording. Yet our postmodernist dean was not bothered that his employees were breaking the local and US laws. For him, different people lived in different realities and recording the meetings was “a wise administrative decision. Two persons looking out of the window will see the same thing differently.”...grasshopper!

Now, that was a matter of principle that could not be ignored or condoned. So the next course of action was to talk to the British human resources director, who surprise, surprise, claimed it was outside her jurisdiction. It was faculty against faculty and the matter should be taken up with the Senate. Separation of powers is a powerful thing in democratic societies! But the senate was just a bunch of teachers-cum-politicians and always toed the party line. In the words of one newly elected senator, “There are no guarantees of fairness in life when you're dealing with human beings”.

To go back to the issue of recording meetings—the practice is usually used in autocratic organizations to curb and control any dissident views and opposition. Compliance and complacency rule supreme, and those who are afraid to leave recorded messages on the telephone answering machine contrastively do not mind having the meetings recorded. Quell the opposition and you end up with a mediocre work environment, where everybody nods in agreement. It has been observed that where there is no effective opposition, there is no creativity or innovation. The status quo will be maintained; and disengaged employees will eventually leave. “To speak of democracy is to speak of a system of governance in which there is effective opposition to those who occupy the official seats of power”.² This means being able to express your views without fear or favor and without your voice being recorded without your permission for whatever purpose. We teach and train our students to be vigilant of research situations that involve human participants or invasive research techniques and we have ethical clearance procedures to ensure that the information collected is not misused or abused. Yet surreptitious recording of meetings is

sanctioned by the same people who are supposed to educate and inform students about such unethical conduct. Strangely, the chancellor, the provost and others in the higher echelons of power—all spreading democracy and leadership with a “T” in the Middle East—became aware of the incident of surreptitious recording and did absolutely nothing about it.

The elite of the so-called third world adopt democratic practices in their pursuit of corruption. When living in the west, they learn such practices alongside the worst habits and behaviors; and when they return to their countries they combine the worst of the two worlds. And there you have it—savages in safari suits with no scruples or restraints. Incivility and passive and active aggression are order of the day. Outside their holding original environments, these expatriates behave like sheer animals. Their only purpose in life is to grab as much money as it is possible, by hook or by crook and more by crook than by hook. Birds of a feather flock together and it is natural for corrupt people to jell together and form gangs along national, racial, ethnic, religious and sectarian lines that adopt false workplace democracy. Everything is run by majority rule and in the absence of accountability, checks and balances, and true leadership, power corrupts already corrupt people.

As for the western expatriates, it is even worse. This category of people is afforded the best salary packages and positions in a region that worships anything and everything western. Even those who openly hate the west are down deep fascinated by the west—so much so that foreign teachers are imported to teach the Arabs and Muslims Arabic and Islamic studies. In the environment above, they lord it over everybody. They turn into little Bremers of Iraq, flouting all rules and laws, whenever they can, and making policies on the go, to gain control and a better financial advantage through shortcuts, under-the-counter deals and virtual consultancy work. All policy violations are regarded as “wise administrative decisions”. So in effect, there are no violations. For those people to reign like dictators they need lackeys—and there is no shortage of parachuted agents and imported sycophants.

Certainly, corruption breeds corruption and when corrupt people adopt democracy without fundamental behavioral change and without sound governance it can only lead to more corruption. It seems that civilization is skin deep in most societies. A good apple in a crate full of rotten apples will soon rot and the only way in such a sad situation is to get out of the place. As the old Chinese wisdom confirms, when a person is born there are two things that do not need to be learned. The first is to breathe and the second is to eat. Other than these two things, there is nothing that is not the result of learning and habit.³ Democracy and corruption are no exception, especially in the Middle East.

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¹ <http://www.wingfielddaudio.com/surreptitious-recording.html> and <http://www.rcfp.org/handbook/?pg=3-1>

² William D’Antonio (1994). *Autonomy and Democracy in Autocratic Organizations: The Case of the Roman Catholic Church*, *Sociology of Religion*. 1994: 55:4 379-396.

³ Mawangdui manuscripts.