

Opinion

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC - Political Culture, Institutions and Politics

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My father is one of the best drivers I know. He is very observant of driving rules in our home town of Cabrera and when he goes to NY; but in Santo Domingo, all bets are off! He drives like a maniac. This anecdote shows the power of both political culture and institutions on our behavior. My dad behaves differently in Santo Domingo because there is, seemingly, a different culture and set of institutions than in our small town or NY.

Many theorists claim that culture and political systems go hand in hand. That is true. Governments cannot persist when public sentiment is desynchronized with the political system and when the public has mobilized against it. Moreover, students of political change argue that changes in a people's attitude (culture) lead to changes in the political systems. Again, I agree. But how can we change people's attitudes?

Before trying to answer that question, let's ask what factors help fashion the public's attitudes. Jim Scott's *Seeing Like a State*, which I encourage people to read, shows the importance of government institutions in patterning society. In his book, Scott looked at how government land management policies in Russia partition land ownership and introduced the concept of private property. Similarly, he discusses how the forest ministry in Germany created a "modern," productive forest. These efforts, among other examples, were aimed at making society more "legible." In turn, these efforts shaped how the public interacted with the forest, their land, and with each other. The point to take away here is that institutions have an immeasurable impact on shaping the public's behavior and their attitudes.

Another example how institutions shape our culture and behavior is the family. The concept of "the family" may not seem like an institution for many, but it is. Institutions are not only big organizations led by politicians; they are any stable practices, beliefs, or organization that patterns our behavior. Families are stable structures that pattern our behavior and beliefs. How many people belong to a political party or a religion because they were born into it?

I hope I have provided enough support for my claim that institutions are very important in shaping our culture and behavior. For lack of space and time, I must leave it at that, but I am happy to continue the discussion. Just to clarify, I am not saying that institutions are the ONLY factors in shaping people's behavior and culture. There are other salient variables, which I won't get into right now.

So, if we accept the importance of institutions in shaping culture and behavior, then we need to change political institutions in order to change culture, right? But there is a problem here, institutions are VERY conservative. They only care about their own survival. That is why many myths, stories, and subsequent institutions are created to buttress and ensure the continuity of existing institutions; e.g. political systems create educational institutions that develop "good citizens", that don't question the hegemony of the dominant political structure. They also support religious organizations that help maintain a docile public. In all, a hydra, supported by formal and informal institutions, emerges that seeks and ensures the perpetuity of the status quo.

Is there then no hope for change? YES THERE IS! According to Gaetano Mosca, a conservative theorist

from the early 20th century, even though the ruling change is inevitable. Mosca holds that when new elements are introduced into a society, "there comes a period of renovation, or, if one prefers, of revolution, during which individual energies have free play and certain individuals, more passionate, more energetic, more intrepid or merely shrewder than others, force their way from the bottom of the social ladder to the topmost rungs." However, in a democracy, the ruling classes have developed processes to control/stymie significant political change by usurping or incorporating insurgent movements into their ranks. This is Mosca's conservative theory of democracy...

But don't lose hope yet. As just alluded, among the oppressed mass, individuals with extraordinary capacities emerge and make use of "democratic" rights to build a bottom-up social movement to challenge the hegemony of the existing institutions that support the oppressive power-relations. The key thing is that these individuals and social-movements need to be protected from being usurped by dominant groups. They also need to be supported, because the legitimate dominant groups will use existing myths and mechanisms of discrimination to try to discredit these new social movements. They will be labeled enemies of the nation, vende-patria, or heretics - does this sound familiar? These new movements are challenging existing institutions and need our support to get their voice heard.

In the DR, we have a political clientelistic system that limits political debate to issues that will not change/challenge existing power relations, protects cronies, impinges our political, economic and human rights, and maintains the public preoccupied/distracted in meaningless symbolic gestures and by generating the conditions that lead to crime and instability. How can I demand to be more included in politics when I'm in constant fear of being mugged, or a Haitian raping my wife, or drug lords controlling half the country? These are all distractions, some more real than others - crime in Santo Domingo is out of control; but even this can change, if the government invested more in the public sphere, and less in legislators' salaries or highways going to fancy resorts in the eastern part of the country.

If we want to change politics, we need to support the right of social movements to be heard. We may not agree with their message, but by remaining silent while these social movements are persecuted, labeled traitors, or bought out, we are supporting the status quo. As individuals, we also need to become more active. We need to go to party meetings and demand that our leaders become more publicly oriented. Who knows, maybe some of us are the individuals- more passionate, more energetic, more intrepid or merely shrewder than others- that will lead the social movements to change existing institutions and subsequently our political culture to become more equitable, transparent, inclusive, public oriented, and just.