



Political participation under conditions of (democratic) duress

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pol**Lien Pham** 

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Abstract

Drawing on Amartya Sen's concept of agency and capability, this article explores political participation in three dimensions: individual dispositions, opportunities for participation, and processes of participation. It presents an analytical approach that examines these dimensions in relation to practices of participation as interactions between the State and citizens within and outside of political institutions. Two examples are used to illustrate the utility of this approach in states where democratic institutions are deficient. The first example historically traces the evolution of tribal informal institutions in Jordan to demonstrate how and why they mediate people's participation in the public sphere. The second example uses narrative inquiry to explore community activists' aspiration for and commitment to political expression through social media in Vietnam. Both examples suggest that a country's political institutions and its rule of law may shape political cultures and societal values of participation, but it is the individuals' recognition and response to these structures that ultimately create their motivations and the opportunities for them to participate. The article emphasises the importance of understanding the contexts in which the respective tradition of political participation takes place in order to understand the outcomes as well as the conditions for participation, especially in contexts that theoretically qualify as authoritarian.

Keywords

authoritarianism, civil society, Jordan, political participation, political regime, Vietnam

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Introduction

In an age of globalisation, increasing inequality, emerging power of autocratic states, and their rising economic dominance, the world has experienced a sharp escalation of new

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forms of political ideologies and representation reflecting variably on people's political participation. While existing autocracies continue posing challenges to their citizens' opportunities to enact political change, scholars have recently drawn attention to how democratic norms and institutions may be eroded from within seemingly democratic polities (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018), even alerting to a 'third wave of autocratisation' on the way (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019), creating new and more sophisticated forms of autocracy. Given these trends, it becomes even more crucial to study and understand political participation in contexts where democratic forms of governance may be under duress. In this article, we propose a novel approach that draws attention to the specific circumstances in which people come to understand traditions of political participation and take choices to participate. We argue that it is important to understand the contexts of political participation because contexts create conditions for and eventually outcomes of participation, which may take numerous forms and may be disguised as individual or collective action aimed at bringing about political change, but not necessarily changing the political regime itself. A pluralistic approach towards political participation can help to appreciate the significance of such practices for people living under democratic duress, where formal channels of participation are often denied or incapable of adequately reflecting people's preferences.

A pluralistic approach to political participation

As noted by Pippa Norris (2002), contemporary interpretations of political participation tend to understand the notion solely in terms of free and fair electoral voting, voting turn-outs, or citizens' attitudes towards their political systems (Bennett and Robert, 2000). Such an approach is problematic because the aforementioned dimensions of political participation are underscored by values and institutional formations stemming primarily from 'Western' political systems and their history of political experience. It would be erroneous to assume that these dimensions would operate in ways that suggest political agency anywhere. Diamond and Gunther (2001) have noted that globally, there has been a dramatic increase of elections, free or not, with an increasing number of states adopting seemingly democratic electoral institutions, yet this is not necessarily a sign of democratic triumph. Often, instead of providing credible checks on the power of the ruling elite or symbolising citizens' political agency, the presence of elections may strengthen the existing regime (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Geddes et al., 2014) amounting to 'electoral' or 'competitive autocracies' (Levitsky and Way, 2010), or various kinds of 'hybrid regimes' where democratic and non-democratic institutions coexist producing results favourable to political elites.

Participation in various civil society organisations is likewise often interpreted as evidence of political participation. Union membership, community groups, and voluntary or professional associations are commonly avenues for mobilising people's political activism, yet the political influence of these institutions are significantly different across the globe. In many cases, labour unions, professional syndicates, or even political parties are incorporated within the system of state corporatism (Gohar, 2008; ILO, 2018; Wrest, 2017) and function as the basis of state-sponsored and state-controlled political participation (Albrecht, 2005). In fact, state-sponsored corporatism is often carried out to legitimise the existing regime by organising participation activities aligned with the State's policies (Pham, 2019). Viewing civil society groups as somewhat autonomous from the state overlooks that the state-society relations are often intertwined and overlapping, and

neglects the importance of conditions under which these relations may actually enable independent political participation. Furthermore, under conditions where formal civil society groups are closely observed by State authorities, participation in informal groups, such as friendships and family networks, is more important as forms of autonomous actions and may equally play a role in understanding politics (Pham, 2019). Accounting for plurality of political participation, as Huntington and Nelson (1976: 28) observed, 'requires a consideration of the notion of authority because the attitude of political elites towards political participation is probably the single most decisive factor influencing the nature of participation in that society'.

The Internet is often saluted in contemporary politics as a force that enables political participation due to its potential to challenge and criticise those in power. Yet, there is little evidence to support the idea that the Internet poses a credible threat to autocratic rule or enable political change (Kalathil and Boas, 2001). Indeed, social media can serve a dual function by not only enabling ordinary people to express opposition to the existing regimes (Heng, 2004) but also empowering political elites to strengthen dominant political ideologies and nationalist populism. Analysing the impact of the Internet on political participation thus should account for contexts in which participation occurs to illuminate its actual beneficiaries.

Theoretical insights from authoritarian governance present further reason to re-examine contemporary approach to political participation. Autocrats are acknowledged to rule and maintain power through three primary 'pillars of stability', namely, repression, co-optation, and seeking legitimation – understood here in a non-normative way as a degree to which institutions are perceived as successful in the pursuit of collective interest (Gerschewski, 2013; Merkel et al., 2013). Authoritarian rulers must not necessarily be repressive, but they can also rule and maintain power through institutions that are perceived as successful in delivering people desired outcomes or increase people's procedural freedoms, resembling a rise in political participation, albeit under controlled circumstances. Given autocrats' potential advantages of expanding channels for people's political agency, political institutions in autocracies, as noted by Pepinsky (2014), cannot be analysed in isolation from incentives that motivate regime behaviour.

A rapprochement between political science with anthropological and sociological perspectives offers a more convincing path towards studying political participation, going beyond the formal 'rules of the game' to incorporate assessment of informal institutions that locates participation within the contexts of people's social practices. Examining participation outside of formal or in informal institutions has broadened the understanding of political agency and participation in more cross-cultural, pluralistic, and diverse societies dominated by a variety of traditions, beliefs, and expectations directed towards political authority. For example, Mahmood's (2001) hermeneutical approach towards analysing the activities of the women's Islamic movement in Egypt has suggested that although individuals may operate under coercive conditions, they may still be equipped with political agency and capacity for action that their specific contexts create. Yurchak (2006) has located people's constitutive agency in the Soviet Union, underlining that beliefs of Soviet impregnability stemmed from more than people's blind obedience to the regime. Several studies that have focused on the role of informality in the political domain have been located particularly in countries where political and societal hierarchies are significantly dominated by Confucian ideals (Dittmer et al, 2000; Rodan, 2018). According to Fukui (2000: 11), informal politics is

much more than a deviation from the orthodox expression of formal politics – in fact, they underscore politics on all levels influencing significantly ‘who gets what, when, how and at whose expense’. Just as formal rules of the game are permeated by informal norms that determine ‘appropriate’ behaviour and even political conduct, socially shared norms, even without being legally codified, may exert equally strong influence on people’s understanding, exercise, and outcomes of political participation. Rodan (2018) has recently underlined this point, arguing that regime dynamics in multiple South East Asian states can be better understood through a focus on ways in which political conflict is structured, maintained, and organised, beyond the formally institutional avenues for participation.

The importance of informality in political participation and, indeed, formal politics itself is by no means limited to autocracies alone. Scholars have located participation in supposedly apolitical and informal institutions even in countries with a long-standing democratic tradition. Verba et al. (1995) underlined the role of various voluntary religious and community organisations in America, in equipping individuals with knowledge, skills, and resources for political participation, as well as mobilising individuals for political action. Informal networks such as kinship, family, or tribal networks have always been an inherent part of people’s participation. Their importance may be exacerbated by the inadequacy of democratic political institutions, but their presence is not contained in authoritarian settings alone. Extending the conceptual scope of political participation to encompass informal networks beyond the directly ‘political’ may not only help to better understand political agency in countries where democratic institutions are under duress but also come to appreciate people’s practices of participation as a multifaceted phenomenon done within and distanced from political institutions, and the myriad of innovative and creative ways in which people exercise their political agency and rationalise their circumstances, beliefs, and even opportunities for inflicting political change.

Along these sentiments underlined by the aforementioned authors, this article explores how political participation is embedded within the relations between the state and its citizens, how participation shapes and is shaped by formal and informal institutional structures, and how citizens respond to these structures and relations. We are interested in who participates; how, where, and why they participate; and the ways in which they participate in the public sphere. We use two country examples of Jordan and Vietnam, typically classified as autocracies, to put forward a case for understanding political participation contextually rather than assume that people are robbed of their political agency because of inadequate democratic institutions, and illustrate how political participation can simultaneously be a mechanism for and result of political contestation. The first example historically traces the evolution of tribal informal institutions to demonstrate how and why they mediate people’s participation in the public sphere. The second example uses narrative inquiry to explore activists’ experience of political expression through social media in Vietnam. Both examples suggest that a country’s political institutions may shape political cultures and societal values of participation, but it is the individual recognition of and response to these structures that ultimately create people’s motivations and opportunities to participate. They illuminate how various forms of organisations, even if they operate in informal ways, shape people’s perceptions about what is ‘political’ and create conditions for participation within and outside the formally codified set of institutions that officially determine who rules or can engage in politics.

Analytical dimensions of political participation and agency

Rather than generalising from comparative politics, or applying theories or experiences drawn from mature democracies to other political systems, we want to explore political participation in its own right through three dimensions: people's *dispositions* for political participation, their *opportunities* to enter the public sphere, and the processes in which they undertake arrangements in that public sphere to bring about political change. We draw on Amartya Sen's (1985, 1999) concept of agency and capability to propose a novel approach to analyse these dimensions. Sen's notion of agency includes one's pursuit of their individual values and objectives, regardless of any external criteria that such pursuit be evaluated against. In this way, an 'agent' is someone who 'acts and brings about change' directly or indirectly through political, economic, or social actions in accordance to their individual beliefs, values, and aspirations (Sen, 1999: 19). For Sen, capability encompasses the substantive opportunities (or freedom) to *do* and *be* what a person values *doing* and *being*. Sen (1985) also acknowledged that social, economic, and political conditions impact a person's values set, thus must be accounted for and considered relative to their freedom and agency in any thoughts, or analysis of policy-objectives and processes through which social justice is furthered in any polity.

We apply Sen's thinking to shift the focus from directly identifiable political institutions such as political parties, elections, or the media to political agents (individuals or groups) and any mediums that they use to engage in the public sphere. In this article, institutions are understood as formal and informal constraints that shape human interaction, which may be officially codified through formal channels (such as parliaments, laws, or elections) or sanctioned through prevalent social norms, informally guiding people's behaviour. Following Sen, we assume that people partake in the polity through whatever avenues and structures available to them for the pursuit of their goals; their values and goals are shaped by and within these structures and relations, which can also be altered as a consequence of their participation. We employ Habermas' (1989) concept of 'public sphere' – a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space – to refer to the venues in which political participation may be observed. In this way, the public sphere extends beyond formal 'rules of the game' – electoral or otherwise – involving also the communal space, which may be only inadvertently 'political'. Consequently, political participation is understood in this article as people's *dispositions*, *opportunities*, and *processes* through which people pursue their reasoned political values and aspirations, influencing the state. We now define these three dimensions and how they will be applied in the two examples of Jordan and Vietnam.

The first dimension – *disposition* – is defined as a sensibility about politics and political participation, which is acquired through a person's lifetime of experiences and upbringing. Sensibility refers to an individual's or groups' values and attitude towards participation, in other words, what people consider to be 'political', and whether they have reason to value engaging in politics and participation. Factors that shape *disposition* include structural components like political rights, civil liberties, freedom of expression, mode of communication in the public sphere (e.g. social media), and civil society organisations or informal networks of families and friends. *Disposition* towards political participation also signifies people's shared understanding with the State and other citizens about these structures which may then motivate or hinder their political participation. Our examples will focus on people's values and motivations that guide their choice to participate in the polity, and the factors that shape these values and motivations.

The second dimension – *opportunities* – refers to perceived as well as actual *opportunities* to engage in political participation because people's perceptions may equally influence their decision to take up political participation or deter them from doing so. Distinguishing between perceived and actual *opportunities* is of crucial importance if we wish to examine not only the permissibility of a political act but also how an appearance of these *opportunities* affects people's motivations and intentions to exercise their freedoms (Sen, 1999). There are numerous instances where the institutional structures for political participation are in place, but the freedom to participate they imply is either not realised in practice or is curtailed by people's perceptions of how effective these structures are in bringing about change. These perceptions, in turn, influence their choice to participate. It is important to pay attention to the opportunities for political participation in specific contexts and situations, particularly the relationships that people have with their political systems and the State. At the same time, these relationships cultivate a certain political culture and ethos that could either deter people from speaking out against the authorities and political elites or enable them to do so. For many actors, it may be a 'rational' choice to cooperate rather than oppose the regime in trying to pursue their desired ends – such cooperation may be incentivised by formal rules that prohibit dissent, or others that offer advantages in exchange for compliance, even prompting collective forms of self-censorship. Political structures and participation work interdependently and do not always follow the same causal direction. Our examples will analyse (1) how societal structures (including but not limited to formal institutions) and political relations (between the state and society, and among citizens) play a role in creating actual *opportunities* to apply oneself politically and (2) how norms and beliefs (at a societal or individual level) may influence political agents' perceptions of *opportunities* available to them.

The third dimension – *processes* – refers to the mechanisms or procedures in which people engage in political participation. It is underpinned by Sen's (1985) idea of 'process aspect of agency' that centres on a person's power, which Sen defines as a person's ability to choose to take up an action in order to achieve an outcome. To understand the *processes* of participation, we have to understand the person's power position within various political structures and State–society relations. This dimension attends to the ways in which State officials and institutions make and implement policies, rules, and regulations and the ways in which political actors respond to such policies, rules, and regulations. We are interested in whether the *processes* of participation legitimise these rules of the game thereby keeping the government in power, or whether the people have the power to deliberate their own voices and activities to keep the government accountable in autonomous ways. Our analyses will focus on the mechanisms, avenues, and activities which political actors choose to take up to deliberate their political values and voice in light of their power position within the public sphere, and the consequences of these *processes* for future participation.

These three dimensions operate in interdependent ways together framing the conditions, avenues, and outcomes of political participation. People's *opportunities* for political participation are guided by the *processes* enabled by institutional structures and power relations between the state and society. Such processes determine the space within which people are expected to deliberate their goals and values, influencing also their perceptions about whether, why, and how to engage in the public sphere. People's response to these structures and their experiences of political participation in turn also foster their *dispositions* to pursue their agency and carry expectations for future participation. In other

words, political participation is an expression of people's values and (advertently or inadvertently) political aspirations; at the same time, it is also a formative experience that shapes values and aspirations. Understanding the interdependent workings of these three dimensions opens space for a wider and more context-dependent analysis of political participation – one not limited to certain procedures and mechanisms (like elections) but extended to cultural and informal networks which may equally present opportunities or pose obstacles to political participation.

In explicating these concepts through our examples, we argue that people's interactions with the surrounding political structures and relations can enable, create, and explain political participation. These interactions portray a dialectic relationship between political agents and environments in which people exercise political agency. These environments are not static, but subject to continuous debate and contestation. We suggest the three dimensions of *disposition*, *opportunities*, and *processes* carry important implications for understanding political participation. We also acknowledge that this analytical approach may not be a great fit everywhere, especially when scholars seek to compare participation globally. The relevance of the approach is thus limited not so much by types of governance, rather by scholars' ontological and epistemological positions guiding their methodological approach and the aims of their research.

Tribally mediated participation in Jordan

This example illustrates, from a historical perspective, how people's *opportunities* to participate, their *dispositions* towards political participation, and their choice of *processes* through which to express political agency in the Jordanian public sphere are heavily influenced by informal institutions rooted in tribal values. Family, tribal, and kin networks are justifiably recognised as pervasive forces in Jordanian society, which permeate people's social relations. On a governmental level, Bedouin and tribal values are asserted as the main pillars of Jordan's cultural heritage, and tribal membership informs people's voting patterns (Lust-Okar, 2009). On a societal level, unparalleled importance is still attached to *wasta*, which as an informal institution associated with tribal life, is typically referred to as 'having connections', 'favouritism' (Harmsen, 2008), or exchanging beneficial treatment based on pre-existing social capital (El-Said and Harrigan, 2009). Underlining the importance and even necessity of maintaining good relations with one's family, kin, or tribe, *wasta* serves as a crucial social currency exchanged for accessing multiple advantages to lead a life in the Hashemite Kingdom.

Formal institutions in Jordan have not been exclusive determinants of 'who gets what, when and how', to borrow Harold Lasswell's (1936) definition of politics. Instead, the actual responsibility of distributing access to opportunities has come to be legitimately located also within social structures, which at times enable people's access to socio-economic and political freedoms or hinder them by creating collectively justified practices for discrimination (Kaleja, 2019). Rather than asserting such structures as innate cultural attributes of Jordanian society, this example draws primarily on secondary sources to situate the role of tribal values within a historical context, tied also to the monarchy's strategies for legitimising its rule. The example traces the evolution of political power acquired through group membership, so although it perceivably influences individual behaviour, people's collective *dispositions*, *opportunities*, and choice of *processes* are in the centre of this analysis. It demonstrates why and how informal norms of behaviour have come to mediate

people's shared beliefs about the relations between the state and the society, contemporary attitudes towards politics, and views about permissible and 'appropriate' participation.

Respect for one's family and kin throughout different periods has been fostered from above as a valued and even necessary social structure imperative for one's survival. The monarchy's interest in empowering tribal relations rests primarily in its approach to ideologically legitimise the Hashemite rule, the grounds for which were laid even prior to the country's independence in 1946. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Abdullah of the Hashemite family was designated by the British as the desired leader of territories encompassing the Emirate of Transjordan (Ryan, 2002; Wilson, 1987). Given that Abdullah (who would later become king) was neither of Transjordanian origin, nor shared a Bedouin ancestry with the majority of the population, he opted to legitimise the rule by emphasising his religious authority granted by the Hashemites' genealogical lineage to the prophet Muhammad and hence distinguished the locally powerful Bedouin tribes as strategic allies to the regime. Alongside material advantages tactically distributed by Abdullah to tribes in exchange for compliance (Wilson, 1987: 72), tribal representatives were also granted access to *wasta* through administrative positions in the emerging state structures, bureaucracy, and the government (El-Said and Harrigan, 2009). Therefore, in contrast to many other emerging states in the region, tribes were given a stake in the process of state-formation and established as the primary frameworks 'for channelling and allocating resources and services originating from the central government' (Alon, 2006: 79). Tribesmen in these privileged positions served as the arbitrators between the state and the society, competing for and distributing resources acquired from the state to others in their respective tribal allegiances (Lust-Okar, 2006, 2009). Thus, a peculiar approach to socio-political life and participation was introduced, which remained tribally mediated, making one's good standing with their family, tribal, and kin networks imperative and even necessary for one's survival. Due to this arrangement, the state was never separated from the tribes or religion, sanctioning informal institutions associated with tribal customs to play a part in how individual and collective problems were perceived, or what responses were considered appropriate to solve them even after electoral institutions were introduced.

Through different periods of Jordanian history, the partnership between the regime and the tribal population has been reinforced by different monarchs in power, considerably affecting the *processes* for people to express themselves politically. Elected parliamentarians possessed limited decision-making authority, which remained supervised by the palace, so candidates would primarily be motivated by gaining potential access to state resources or *wasta* and improving their social standing among the community (Lust-Okar, 2006). The society, consequently, came to view elected representatives above all as service-providers, able to deliver benefits due to their shared membership in tribal networks and therefore relied on informal processes to ensure their needs and opportunities rather than entrusting the responsibility with the state.

Shortly after acquiring independence, the importance of participation through formal channels was further undermined by decades of martial law whereby political parties were banned in 1957 and elections ceased to take place in 1967. Although electoral processes were not reintroduced until 1989, martial law did not annihilate people's *opportunities* to participate in the public sphere. Formal channels for participation were admittedly limited, but collective forms of participation under the guise of associational life emerged as a means to protect people's interests and gain access to opportunities. Due to their perceived potential to challenge the rule and its legitimising narrative, civil

society organisations were subject to state coercion exercised through strict bureaucratic regulation (Wiktorowicz, 2000). But by subscribing to surrender their explicitly 'political' aspirations to oppose state sovereignty or the monarchy, the civil society nevertheless retained *opportunities* to channel 'apolitical' demands to decision-makers and improve their individual well-being through membership in collective associations. Labour unions and professional associations advocated for their members' interests through negotiating the terms for the protection of their economic and social interests with the state, and independently introducing various welfare services extended to their members (Larzilliere, 2012: 16). The number of voluntary and charitable organisations likewise grew under martial law (Harmsen, 2008: 151), legitimising inter-communal networks of support and mutual assistance as means to deal with socio-economic hardship. Rooted in ideas of tribal reciprocity and Islamic duty to help those in need (El-Said and Harrigan, 2009: 1238), such exhibitions of social solidarity only strengthened the importance of tribal relations and *wasta* in Jordanian public sphere.

Meanwhile, the revitalisation of associational life paradoxically consolidated the legitimacy of the monarchy even in the absence of electoral institutions, as it too remained justified through a religious and tribal narrative. The regime supported strengthening tribal loyalties by emphasising tribal values as the central tenant for nation-building, articulating the palace's view that 'whatever harms our tribes is considered harmful to us, and this has been the case all along, and it will continue to be so forever' (King Hussein quoted in Layne (1987:190). Such proclamations elevated the role of *wasta* as legitimate social currency in the public sphere and endorsed people's *dispositions* towards attaining their political objectives through participation in collective avenues, strengthening the need to nurture tribal affiliations.

Taking into consideration that, for decades, people's actual *opportunities* to ensure their needs depended on membership in communal, tribal, and family networks, their perceived notions about the 'appropriate' channels to deal with problems typically entrusted to the state were also affected. Therefore, after martial law was lifted and electoral channels for participation made available in the 1990s, informal networks often took precedence over elections as people's voluntarily chosen *processes* for solving their issues. This choice was, first, strengthened by the fact that the introduction of democratic institutions coincided with economic liberalisation and recession, characterised by a sharp decline in people's living standards. With an increasing number of people facing a dire need for socio-economic support, the supposedly 'apolitical' welfare function continued to be entrusted to the society, reviving horizontal channels for distribution as mediated by family, tribal, and kin affiliations.

Second, as the primary value for kin-based organisations has been to pool communal resources for redistribution, the tribal institution has itself adapted significantly expanding criteria for membership to accommodate people with wider variety of loyalties than that of the immediate tribe. Baylouny (2006) notes how informal groups increasingly invented their associational identities tracing lineage back to a common ancestor, place of origin, or even across several centuries in order to attract non-relatives. Potential beneficiaries were, in turn, urged to 'adapt their practices' (Bouziane, 2010: 41) and align their values with the respective groups in order to ensure access to these otherwise unavailable resources. Such flexibility of the tribal institution has endorsed people's preference of extra-institutional *processes* for participation.

Third, even under electoral 'rules of the game', the monarchy continued showing support for constituents embracing their tribal identities by strengthening the representation

of tribes in the parliament (Lust-Okar, 2009). Electoral rules have been altered four times since 1989 so as to appease the monarchy's tribal support-base (Muasher, 2011) and incentivise people's voting behaviour towards casting ballots for tribal candidates as opposed to those from political parties. King Abdullah II who ascended to the throne in 1999 has likewise reiterated the mutual reliance between the tribes and the Palace, proposing amendments in the constitution to recognise family as the 'foundation of the Society' built on religion, morals, and patriotism, and ascribing the law to strengthen this 'legal entity'. Consequently, Al-Attayat et al. (2005: 18–19) note that '[t]he idea of the deputy as a representative of the entire people, exercising legislative authority and able to hold the government accountable, is far from citizens' minds'. As people's *disposition* to participate in elections is informed by their expectation of receiving *wasta* and services from those they have helped elect, the candidates' allegiance is likewise shaped by these reciprocal obligations.

In brief, this example illustrates the interdependence of *opportunity*, *process*, and *dispositional* dimensions for shaping people's participation in the polity. Kin and tribal networks have established themselves as effective channels for solving individual and collective problems in Jordan, so although people's actual *opportunities* to participate in the public sphere have admittedly expanded over the period of democratisation, the perceived power to successfully enact change remains located primarily within these informal social structures. People's sensibility about 'political' agency notably excludes outright conflict with the monarchy, but there remain a multitude of supposedly 'apolitical' functions still exercised by the Jordanian society in applying their agency through informal networks (Lust-Okar and Zerhouni, 2008). As distributing access to opportunities and providing mechanisms for people to meet their needs remains legitimately located within social structures, it is understandable how people are *disposed* to value participation in and through these structures and endorse practices that socialise individuals into *doings* and *beings* embedded within them. With little incentive to express participation outside of tribal and kin networks (Baylouny, 2006), these informal institutions have become people's preferred *processes* for engaging in the public sphere, attaining one's needs, ensuring access to opportunities, and influencing their motivations for participating.

Political activism through social media in Vietnam

In 1986, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) approved *Doi Moi* (Renovation) reform, allowing Vietnam to operate a market-based economy. To accord with this policy shift from the centrally planned economic model, circulation of information was relaxed in Vietnam. The Party actively encouraged openness by allowing editors and reporters to be less timid in exposing nepotism, corruption, and bureaucracy (Marr, 1993). There has been a significant increase of books published since 1986. Censorship and other media controls in radio, television, and films were also relaxed. With the growth of the Internet and social media in the 21st century that coincided with Vietnam's entering in to the global economy and declaration of openness to the world, online discussions in Vietnam flourished. Some scholars have said that open discussion is more fervent in Vietnam than other democratic countries (e.g. Heng, 2004), while others, particularly people inside the country, have claimed that social media platforms are venues for open exchange by government officials and Party members to promote themselves or attacking counterparts. At the same time, a glance of Vietnamese social media presents numerous examples of citizen groups set up to discuss policy issues.

The example illustrated here is based on a research project conducted in 2015 that investigated community activism in Vietnam. Using ethnographic narrative inquiry methodology, the first author shadowed three community activists for a period of 6 months. The following is an account of observations of their activities mainly blogging on Facebook, analysis of their blogs, and in-depth interviews with the activists. Given the scope of the article, the account presents a summative overview of the participants' reflection on their 'political' self, which departs from the presentation of narratives through quotes typical of narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008).

All three activists were in their mid-30s, living and working in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam. Two were professionals working for foreign-owned companies and one was an academic teaching at a public university. All three had obtained postgraduate qualifications overseas and undergraduate degrees in Vietnam and have returned to Vietnam for about 3–5 years. Quan, the academic, came from a family of the Revolution – political elite family with generations of Party membership. Both he and his wife were loyal Party members. Prior to going overseas, Quan had wanted to pursue a political career in Vietnam with the aim of upholding socialist ideals, an aspiration which he attributed to his grandparents' and parents' aspirations. He joined Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union in eighth grade, where the norm in Vietnam is ninth grade for a dedicated Party idealist. The other two had no affiliation with the Party.

Quan felt that his sojourn in Germany changed his political views significantly. Although his *disposition* to participate was shaped by his Revolutionary background, which motivated him to voice his opinion publicly, his goals had changed from ascendancy in the CPV to political contestation. In reflecting on this new 'political' desire, he spoke about Vietnam's political system and its injustices. He realised that making change to bring about social justice would be impossible if he continued to be conservative with his thoughts about Vietnam's political thoughts. Quan's view echoed Minh and Lam (the other two activists) who also spoke about Vietnam's history being framed by the State for its own objectives. As a collective, they were cognisant of the idea that the State portrays itself as the 'right' regime because the State is protecting it. As Lam remarked about his time overseas, 'Sometimes, we are blind to the regime because we are living within that regime. When I stepped out of the regime, I could actually see the regime for what it is'. This suggests that one's values sets are normalised within specific conditions, which, if recognised, could allow them to understand their positionalities within that set of codified rules and beliefs.

These activists have always had strong aspirations for political participation and viewed political expression in the public sphere to be a way to advocate for social change. Speaking out on a public domain had an intrinsic value for them which instituted their *disposition* to political expression. For Quan, such *disposition* was attributable to his Revolutionary background. For others, it was related to self-actualisation where suppression of voice was a marginalisation of their agency and autonomy.

All three used Facebook blogging as an avenue to deliberate their political voice and be heard. They saw the *opportunity* for stimulating a public debate about the CPV's political ideologies, and that they could influence other Facebook group members towards a potential movement. Quan started off by writing about his observations of Germany's political systems, their right-wing and left-wing party movements and outlooks, social welfare policies and their contentions, and their market-based economies, which he felt were more equitable and thus more Marxist-oriented than in Vietnam. A fervent discussion on the subject took place between his friends, members of the Facebook group, and other

followers. A thread of conversation between Quan and some members of the group was observed, which revealed the members' negative responses and hostility towards Quan's expression. Quan's account of these responses was that they were not based on ideology; rather, they were dependent on the person's social position in society, which was intimately connected with their relationships with State officials. Similarly, Minh pointed out that in the public forum, there was consensus about the State's socialist ideologies and their misdirection in policies and practices, and contentions about the need for change. Those who objected to the activists' call for change wanted to protect their benefits, their vested interests, and ultimately their pursuit of a political class. These activists spoke loudly about the culture of harmony by maintaining the status quo – the silent culture.

These activists spoke about the sense of alienation from their group, many of whom were their friends. Their sense of social disconnection stemmed from the perception that their expressions were inappropriate in the immediate political contexts. Rejection of their ideas was not because of the blog content itself but rather the space in which the content was placed. Although they felt that there was a shared understanding of the issue at hand, which allowed them the *opportunity* to deliberate their voice, the *process* of deliberation in this particular public forum did not enable their ideas to be effectively mobilised. While they all engaged in the same public sphere, their *dispositions* were differently instituted and enacted: Quan's *disposition* stemmed from his political background as much as his acquired learning in Germany; others' *dispositions* were shaped by their perception of the freedom to speak. All three felt their expressions were conditioned on the appropriateness of what they spoke, and 'appropriateness' was determined by political ambitions of those around them. In this regard, the *opportunity* for political participation was intimately tied to the contexts that shape each person's conception of political freedom or *opportunity*, and *processes* of participation; both were dependent on the individual's political position in society and their relationships with each other.

This example suggests that members of a collective group can have different *dispositions* for political participation. These activists were inclined to take up political participation because of their held values. They saw and grasped the *opportunity* to participate in an advertently 'political' way. However, other members of the group were motivated by individual political interests, which in the context of Vietnam meant accordance with the State ideologies, which paradoxically led to 'non-political' actions. The choice, action, and outcome of the activists' political participation were dependent on their perceived *opportunity*, which were shaped by their power position in relation to the Party and each other, and within the broader political structure. The State's strict rules about opposing the Party's ideologies (Hannah, 2007; Nguyen, 2008) preclude any conception of *opportunity* or that the *opportunity* is not perceived to be available equally to the people; the latter is suggested through these activists' experiences.

With regards to the *processes* of participation, the activists' encounter of opposition in social media suggests an asymmetry in political expressions due to different political views. The Vietnamese communication culture fosters a different understanding about what is permissible 'talk' in the public sphere. Vietnamese people carry out their roles in accordance with the hierarchies of personal relations (Pham, 2019). Confucius-oriented behaviours foster 'speaking' in line with one's role. The State–society relations eschew the Confucius rule where citizens and government officials do not occupy the same communication privileges, nor are such communication exchanges mutually respected. Communication tends to be one way from the authoritative (government) to subordinates (citizens), or from senior/older leaders to junior/younger subordinate. Compounded with

the forbidden hostile expressions against the State, the communication mechanisms employed by Facebook groups reflected the embodied culture of seeing the State as an authority and with that were constructed boundaries of 'permissible expression' about the State. Furthermore, these kinds of behaviour displayed the secretive ways of communication between government officials and citizens (Wischermann, 2005), which the activists referred to as a systemic practice of 'silent culture'. The silent culture was manifested not only by the existing communication culture, levels of connections with elites, and rules and regulations imposed by the State, but also because of people's preservation of own interests as they responded to these structures and relations.

In summary, this example suggests that understanding citizens' *disposition* to political participation is an important consideration in understanding the *opportunity* dimension of participation. Those with the *disposition* to participate did so as long as they perceived *opportunity* to be available to them, that is, *disposition* alone was not enough. The *opportunities* that these activists perceived and the *processes* in which they engaged were conditioned by the norms of communication in the polity, their power relations with other members in the Facebook group, and their membership with the Party. Those who thought participation would improve their power position chose to participate and those who did not chose not to. Each activist had a different experience of open dialogues resulted from different understandings about what they could and could not do, which, in turn, instituted varied *dispositions* to political participation. Although the outcomes were not achieved in the ways they wanted, these activists felt that their choice and actions were more important than the outcomes because the action resulted from their 'reasoned values' about the worth of participation, and that they were agents who could bring about change. This suggests that participation has an intrinsic value for the person's agency, not only instrumental value in achieving political change.

Conclusion

The insights from these examples demonstrate the benefits of contextual analysis of political participation at the societal and individual levels. Both examples point to possibilities for political agency even under conditions of democratic duress and suggest the importance of understanding forms of political participation, avenues and venues in which they take place, and whether they offer prospects for democratic practices or reinforcement of current or past regimes. Individual and collective participation in the public sphere is of value not only if it disrupts the status quo but also when it perpetuates it, and such actions are overlooked when infusing the concept of political participation with a valuational disposition from the start. Such acts may not comprise rebellion or dissent, but they are nevertheless exhibitions of people's agency.

These examples illustrate the usefulness of an analysis that centre on people's *dispositions* to participation, *opportunities* to enter the public sphere to participate, and the *processes* which they choose to participate through. The analyses suggest that participation comprises continuous societal efforts as well as pressures from the authorities, who may be inclined to delineate and limit people's participation through one or more of these dimensions. Understandably, political participation contextualised broadly will have individual, collective, and eventually also national-level variations, many of which may defy global generalisation, but all of which will be crucial in understanding the ways in which people influence the political developments in the state, whether or not serving as political agents has been their intent.

Our approach, with emphasis on normative agency and the interactions between the State and citizens rather than the procedural aspects of participation, is more adaptable to research that orients towards pluralistic values and exploratory research objectives. At a broader level, this approach offers several advantages. First, it underlines that participation in the public sphere is contextual – delineated by the ‘rules of the game’ in the respective polity and shaped by accumulated power relations between the State and society. In this way, participation too is shaped by historical, regional, and cultural contingencies, resulting from the continuous interactive process of negotiating collective values and adapting individual goals, respectively. Second, it shows that there is plenty of space for political agency even outside the scope of opposition and dissent. By fusing the understanding of these concepts, it is possible to miss myriad ways that individuals may seek to bring about a socially just polity, even under delineated bounds of permissible activity. This is of particular value when examining political participation in conditions under democratic duress, for as the examples provided here have illustrated – political participation is better understood through the processes that shape it rather than its immediate result. It is a continuous societal effort intertwined with individual and collective values, power relations, and adaptive preferences of the actors involved, which influence how they seek to exercise their agency, what channels they use to do this, and what their aims are in doing so in the first place. This conceptual proposition is the article’s contribution to the current literature and debate about political participation.


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