

Reading Ibn Khaldun in Machiavelli: Asabiyyah, Its Relationship with Military and Religion

Ibn Khaldun, considered as the father of modern sociology, is known for his work *The Muqaddimah*. One of the most intriguing parts of his work is the concept group feeling, namely asabiyyah. By definition, asabiyyah is one's feeling of affiliation to a group and the members of this group. It allows solidarity and cohesion in that group. In this work, examination of the concept of asabiyyah in Machiavelli's text *The Prince* is done with regarding its military and religious aspects. The first argument will pursue the goal of demonstrating the similarity of their ideas about military reflection of the group feeling. This argument will be followed by an investigation of the impact that religion has on asabiyyah. Their agreement on the issue that religion strengthens group feeling will be given.

To introduce the concept of group feeling(asabiyyah) he gives the example of tribes living on the desert. He illustrates the significance of asabiyyah with these words: "*Their defense and protection are successful only if they are a closely-knit group of common descent. This strengthens their stamina and makes them feared, since everybody's affection for his family and his group is more important than anything else.*" (p.97-98) The quotation above strictly imposes the condition of close connection, namely asabiyyah for military success. This is due because stronger asabiyyah means higher endurance and vitality for members. For Ibn Khaldun, as ties between the group members gets stronger, their emotion of belongingness increases. This tellingly encourage members to sacrifice in favour of group because for the member, there is nothing more valuable than the group. He continues to expand this notion by indicating its influence such as reciprocal support.

"If the direct relationship between persons who help each other is very close, so that it leads to so close contact and unity the ties are obvious and clearly require existence of a feeling of solidarity without any outside prodding." (p.98)

Another memorable point is that asabiyyah is shown as the reason for mutual support and aid among people in group. Thus, it paves the way of solidarity and social cohesion. According to his thoughts this cohesion among the group tellingly constitute basis for governments and dynasties. Moreover, he links asabiyyah with kinship and puts forward the necessity of strong bond. He suggests “*Group feeling(asabiyyah) results only from blood or something corresponding to it*” (p.98). In other words, to have asabiyyah there should be an explicit and solid connection such as kinship or something comparable to that. A comparable social connection apart from kinship may originate from the similarity in religion, culture, language, life goal among the individuals constituting society. It is clear that he treats the feeling of asabiyyah as a product of kinship or equivalent bond. Moreover, he extends his observations on this issue by arguing the role of asabiyyah in any kind of social organization. He credits the role of asabiyyah in this respect with following sentence: “*The goal to which group feeling leads is royal authority*” (p.107). In other words, the ultimate target of group feeling is to acquire royal power. Asabiyyah actually represents the desire to transform from a primitive society to royal authority which is superior form of organization. This is the link that urges individuals to alter their organization. Therefore, asabiyyah forms basis for political and social organizations.

The concept of asabiyyah may not be seen clearly in the first sight in Machiavelli’s work, *The Prince*. However, after careful scrutinizing, concept of asabiyyah hiding behind some of his works might be seen. One of the many topics related to concept of asabiyyah in *The Prince* is mercenary and auxiliary troops. These types of groups are paid for their military service rather than doing it voluntarily. Machiavelli’s opposing attitude towards mercenary and auxiliary troops can be examined from chapters 13&43. He explains his opposition by referring mercenaries:

“They have no reason to stand firm apart from the little bit of pay that you give them. This is not and cannot be a strong enough motive to make them faithful, and it cannot make them so devoted to you that they are prepared to die for you. In an army where the soldiers do not feel enough affection for the ruler for whom they fight to become his eager supporters, you will never find sufficient firmness of purpose for them to withstand an enemy who is at all determined” (p.140)

As seen from the excerpt, Machiavelli is wise to discover that for being a soldier of a group, there must be an absolute affection towards that group. Otherwise, the soldier is act like a regular employee and he will not have the incentive to devote his effort and his life, if necessary. This opposition stems from the observation that mercenaries have lack of affection to the ruler representing the group. Actually, here exists an implicit reference to concept of asabiyyah under the term affection. Machiavelli seems to define the group feeling implicitly by naming it affection. Machiavelli points that the affection among soldiers should be as solid as to renounce his life for the group. While Ibn Khaldun calls the vitality of troops as stamina, he calls it as firmness. However, this choice of word lead to same way as other.

Machiavelli advances on this topic by explaining the crucial reason why mercenaries have lack of asabiyyah. In general, mercenary troops are not hired from the citizens of nation but foreigners. Having known this, he attributes the absence of asabiyyah to their foreignness. To address this issue nations face, he tries to concretize the line between mercenary and normal troops. *“One’s on troops can be made up out of one’s subjects or one’s citizens or one’s dependents: All other either are mercenaries or auxiliaries.”* (p.45) This quotation above demonstrates that Machiavelli also takes one step further and alleges that there should be a solid tie between individual and group such as being citizen, subject or something corresponds to it. This correspondence may be the consensus on purpose of life among individuals, religious similarity or cultural unity. Everything other than this cluster is behaved as mercenaries. He

perceives mercenaries as deficiencies and proposes to hire citizens. This is owing to the affection feeling to group that citizens have. Machiavelli does know that for a soldier to share the same soul with state there ought to exist a bond and the existence of this bond only be proven by citizenship or being subject. In harmony with Ibn Khaldun, Machiavelli realizes that in order to have asabiyyah it is necessary to have kinship or a form of it, in this case citizenship. Being citizen of a nation stipulates group feeling towards that nation. This can be illuminated by Ibn Khaldun's vantage point about the link between group feeling and political authority. He contemplates that political authority only can be attained by group feeling with following words: "*Royal authority and large-scale dynastic power are attained only through group and group feeling*" (p.123). With these claims it becomes clear that their ideas on the necessity of asabiyyah and relationship between affection(asabiyyah) and kinship are closely related.

Another issue that may be explained with the concept of asabiyyah is the influence of religion on society. Ibn Khaldun regards religion as boosting factor to asabiyyah in societies. To illustrate the tie between asabiyyah and religion he states, "*Religious propaganda gives a dynasty at its beginning another power in addition to group feeling.*" (p.126). He strives for giving a logical answer to that change, increment in asabiyyah as product after adoption of religion. He pays attention to the social relations among individuals. He states:

"Religious coloring does away with mutual jealousy and envy among people who share in a group feeling. When people come to have the right insight into their affairs nothing can withstand because their outlook is one and their object one of common accord, they are willing to die for their objectives" (p.126).

As a sociologist, he examines members of the society and finds that religion is an effective tool which contributes to the feeling of asabiyyah. He ascribes problems precluding a complete comprehensive integration of the society to evil traits of persons. Since religion wipes

them away it paves the way of a group sharing the same soul, same accord. He likens the religion to coloring because at the end of the coloring process products will appear similarly. This similarity prevents the disintegration by converting divergent ones. As the sense of religion increases the disintegration weakens and the bond between group members tightens. This alteration results in stronger asabiyyah. For demonstrating the success of the model built, he puts forward a war occurred between Arabs and Persians during the time of prophet Muhammad. In spite of the fact that Muslims were outnumbered, they won the war. He attributes this success to the increased power and stamina of Muslims as a result of strengthened asabiyyah and religion colouring (p.126)

Moving on to Machiavelli, he allocates 3 chapters -11,12,13- for proving the effect of religion on societies. On more practical side, for continuity of any state he explains the necessity of new members to have asabiyyah. On that issue, Machiavelli gives place to Dante's expression which is short but intensive: *"It is rare for human integrity to be inherited. God wants it this way, so that people will turn to him for it."* (p.116). Machiavelli signifies the importance of the transmission of asabiyyah to younger generations. Even if a generation has well established social life and asabiyyah it does not necessarily mean the newer generation will have the same. Actually, there exists an inferential reference to the evil traits of individuals. For integrity every member should be cleared away his evil traits such as arrogance, jealousy and selfishness. This should be done in every generation by showing interest on God and his orders. To achieve collectivity people should be closer to God. Being more closer means to comply with that of his orders it signifies religion.

Machiavelli expands his thoughts by inspecting the policy of Roman Empire on religion. He reveals the missed chance by Roman Empire after the adoption of Christianity with the following words. *"If, when Christianity first became state religion, such piety had been encouraged, the Christian states and republics would now be more united and a good deal*

happier than there they are” (p. 117). What he is trying to say is if at the very beginning of the adoption of the religion, empire had promoted Christianity and its divine commands, the society would experience integrity and happiness stemming from it. Notice that his choice of word is united for reflecting the group feeling *asabiyyah*. He continues by giving examples from Rome where the religion is used as a tool of tightening the bond between individuals. On pages 119-120 he gives instances from commander’s use of religion to increase the motivation and affection of the Roman army. Similarity of examples both philosophers give is remarkable.

To summarize, the harmony between Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli can be seen from the excerpts and their interpretations. Both think that group feeling is derived from tangible bonds such as kinship and it is essential to have group feeling so as to create any kind of military or political constitution ranging from tribes to governments. Furthermore, their system of thought can be seen as the same on the issue of the bond between group feeling and religion. That is to say they analyze the impact of religion on the group feeling and both recognizes religion reinforces the group feeling. A remarkable difference may be their intention of writing. Ibn Khaldun tries to build a system of thought to be benefitted from Muslim community. This appears to arise from his sociologist identity. While Ibn Khaldun thinks so, Machiavelli appears to be more pragmatic person and he focuses on practical side. Another distinction is the definitions and the names of the notions (*affection, virtu, asabiyyah*) which is very natural.

Similarity of their conclusions may infer the similarity of their nourishment sources in terms of their system of thought. It may be interesting that even if they were lived in different centuries, realms, geographic zones and cultures their observations and evaluations are generally in parallel. This similarity may be a sign of universality in terms of the nature of the human beings.

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