Clientelism in provincial Iran: evidences from some constituencies in Iranian Azarbayjan

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Abstract: in provincial Iran, in the absence of political parties and economical transparency, a relationship between voters and elected members of parliament emerges that can be safely described as clientelism. According to our research which is based on field study and interview with local elite, a candidate with assistance of his/her supporters/clientele wins election and in turn, manages to appoint his/ her supporters in public sector positions and offers them various kinds of rents throughout his/her membership in parliament and then their exchanges and relations endures and patron regards these appointments as a kind of investment. Weakness of generalized trust in Iranian political culture contributes to the formation and reproduction of this pattern of patron-clientele relations. These results demonstrate some of the challenges to the consolidation of democracy in Iran.

Keywords: Clientelism, patronage, Iran, Election, Democratization.

1. Introduction

Clientelism has been considered as a pathological form of democratic participation. But this overused term has lost its conceptual clearness. Clientelism, usually, is unparalleled exchange in which two parties i.e. patron and clientele have benefit. Patrons, by offering material or nonmaterial assistance to their clientele, receive vote and other services. In this paper, after clarifying our conception of clientelism and its differences with neighboring and similar concepts, we will have a glance at elections in Iran and our selected constituencies, and based on our field study and interviews with local elite, the particular model of clientelism of the this region will explained in some detail.

2. Clientelism and neighboring concepts

Due to the ambiguity of this term some scholars have tried to elucidate its proper meaning and usage.In the literature of democratization, clientelism sometimes is used interchangeable with political corruption. No doubt clientelism is a form of political corruption but these two terms aren't synonymous. Clientelism isn't also equal to vote-buying, which is not enduring relationship, while clientelism is not a transient agreement. Clientelism also should not be confused with friendship in which relationship is based on mutual respect and equal status. In sum as Tina Hilgers mentions, clientelism has at least four elements:

2-1. **Exchange**: both parties in clientelism give services and receive benefits and in our case the final source of offerings is the public property.

2-2. **Longevity**: patron-clientele relationship endures relatively a long time. Although it is not fixed, its fluidity is limited.

2-3. Clientelism is based on **face to face** interaction. Patron and his/her clientele know each other and they can trust in other party.

2-4. **Diffuseness**: clientele of patron has not any type of organization and familiarity with the patron is of personal character.

3. Elections in Iran and selected constituencies

In Iran elections begin with the Constitutional Revolution (1906), but elections were not open and democratic, except short interludes (e.g. 1941-1952) until Islamic Revolution (1979). From then, in spite of some criticisms, electoral campaigns have been fervent and enthusiastic. It seems necessary to remark some general notes about the elections in Iran:

- In Iranian system, parties in the strict sense of the term, are absent from Iranian polity. Some groups and cliques in the time of elections emerge and launch campaigns for their candidates but nearly all of them lack the characteristic features of political parties.
- Electoral system of Iran is a relative majority system.
- Council of Guardians (of Constitution) must approve the eligibility of potential candidates and then the ideological difference among them is trivial.

Our study is based on field study and interviews with well-known local elites whose attachment to the representatives/patrons was best known. Five constituencies studied here are located in southern parts of Eastern and Western Azarbayjan provinces in northwestern Iran. For some understandable reasons we do not mention the exact name of these constituencies and representatives. These are small constituencies and generally have one representative in Iranian parliament (Majlis). Interviewees did not conceal their special relationship with the representatives/patrons and even exaggerate about it (probably this makes them supposedly respectful and influential). We tried to infer general trends of clientelist relations pattern in those constituencies.

4. Clientelist relations pattern in selected constituencies

Researches on elections in Iran are generally concentrated on voting behavior and according to our search there is no specific and independent research on clientelist relations in provincial Iran (in micro level). Some papers published on clientelism in Iran are of general character and according to the principles we accepted here, cases they studied are not clientelist in the exact meaning of the word.

Clientelist relationship in our constituencies has cyclical nature; it begins by an electoral campaign and continues throughout the tenure of membership of the patron in the parliament. Any member of parliament, according to the constitution of Iran, is equipped with many powers (Articles 88-89) and the possible influence of every representative becomes greater with his/her membership history, profession and literacy, character and network of connections. When we take into consideration the political, economical and administrative centralism in Iran, one can estimate the influence a representative can exert upon local branches of administrative organizations and units in his/her constituency. A representative /patron utilizes his/her power in Centre(Tehran), to appoint his/her favorite persons as the head of local branches of administrative organizations(as local branches of universities, state-run banking network, health services network etc). These "patron-appointed" heads, rectors... act as the agents of patron and try to coordinate his/her decisions with the "directives" of the patron. In sum, patrons provide services below:

- Appoint their clientele to the critical and most important posts and positions in their constituencies. Patron by utilizing his/her power in Centre, manages to remove supporters of rival and failed candidates from their important positions and engage his/her own supporters.
- Providing employment opportunities for (generally) ordinary clientele: Supporters of victorious candidate, usually beginning from the formal announcement of results of elections until the next electoral campaign, appeal to him/her for finding jobs and a representative usually sends these requests to "appointed" heads and managers or businessmen who have special relations with him/her.
- Providing different kinds of rents: due to the "deficit" of transparency in the Iranian economy, rent-seeking is prevalent; access to important information, low interest loans, permit of operation for factories and industrial plants are among the range of rents a patron commonly provides. Even a representative managed to get low price rice from the Ministry of Commerce to sell it to his supporters and did not permit the other people to buy.

- Protecting law-breaker clientele: although the judiciary organ (along with military forces) is usually out of influence sphere of patrons, some cases of protecting culprits has been observed. For example, a dairy and food industries group was notorious for his unsanitary products and even the nullification of production license was among rumors. But when the candidate supported by managers of that group won in parliamentary elections, all the prosecution process stopped.

It is obvious that patrons do not provide all of these services to every supporter. Every patron has a circle or indeed circles of supporters whose accessibility to the patron depends on their intimate friendship, history of their familiarity and the political and economical weight of clientele. From internal circles to external ones, the quantity and quality of exchanges increase.

Supporters and clientele, also, provide services for their patrons. Most of these services are related to electoral process and campaign but this mutual exchange endures through the period of membership in parliament. The most important manifestations of these services are:

- Financing electoral campaign: generally wealthy and businessmen clientele provide this service. Some cases of presenting blank checks to the candidates have been reported and at least in one case a renounced and desperate candidate has proclaimed his candidacy with the encouragement of these businessmen. These types of clients naturally expect to get back their "gifts" in the form of various rents.
- Gathering information: supporters/clientele gather and report various kinds of information; information regarding the strategies, defects and disadvantages of present and potential rival candidates and information about possible scandals of rivals is of great importance. Gathering and analyzing information continues after electoral campaign and it seems that this "unity in plurality" network of supporters acts as a local branch of a political party.
- Launching electoral campaign: in this process, many people with different functions, participate; from distribution of propaganda materials(booklets, tracts, CDs etc) and hanging bills and posters, to transforming their shops or offices to a centre for propaganda activities, and to delivering public speeches in mosques and meetings in favor of candidates. This last service is expected from the literate and graduate supporters. As we mention earlier, in the absence of political parties this type of supporters are very important, especially when one notices that every constituency has many villages.
- Doing her/his best for employment of people whom patron introduces: businessmen and heads of public organizations who feel in a way they are indebted to patron, are faced with a relatively huge number a requests for jobs sent by patron. Generally the most influential and recommended "applicants" are employed even by breaching the rules and in expense of the more eligible people. Head of an organization who "appointed" by patron acts as the agent of patron in allocation of budget, employing new working force and even dismissing supporters of rival candidates and etc. Then in the empire established by patron, people employed in public sector are either approved by him or cannot support another candidate and criticize their present representative in parliament otherwise they will be punished by "dismissing". Dismissed people, sometimes cannot find another position even in adjacent constituencies (in public sector).
- Holding periodical sessions and supporting each other against supporters/clientele of rival patron: supporters of a patron in an organization hold (usually weekly) sessions and discuss developments inside their organization or in constituency in general and communicate their analyses and findings with patron (who generally does not participate in these sessions). By these sessions they consolidate their solidarity and support each other against probable actions of clientele of rival patron.

In sum, with this system of exchange, a clientelist model emerges which may be rare and unique. A patron (who may be an ordinary citizen and not necessarily a wealthy or graduate one) with different kinds of supports from his/her clientele or political customers, is elected as a member of parliament and in turn, manages his/her supporters to have access to public sector facilities and positions and offers them various rents and employment opportunities (one must keep in mind that private sector in Iranian economy is small and weak). In this pattern, the relationship is not limited to election period and a patron regards employment a supporter in an administrative unit as a kind of investment.

Our discussion of this model will be unfinished without mentioning two further important notes:

- Dependence of clientele to their patron is not eternal and rigid and it shows some flexibility according to environmental changes. But these changes are not commonly radical and spontaneous ones and can occur e.g. after the serious failure of a patron. In some cases, conflict of interest between patron and clients (especially the wealthy ones) has been emerged and their friendship has been turned into enmity. But in sum we observed considerable loyalty to patrons even when he/she has lost his/her power.
- The sphere of influence of patron is not limited to his/her own constituency and he/she can appoint some of his/her loyal supporters in adjacent constituencies, provincial capital and even in the capital of country(Tehran). Because the centre of power is unique and once one gain power in centre can affect periphery. We observed that the relationship between a patron and his/her client in another constituency has lasted more than 10-15 years.

5. A note on the social and cultural base of clientelism in our constituencies

Although we mentioned in the previous section that this type of clientelism, grows up in the absence of real political parties (and clientele carry out some functions of parties) and deficit of transparency in economical sphere, it should be noted that this pattern of clientelism, has deeper cultural and historical roots. Here we only mention the most important of them.

Weakness of trust in Iranian society has been emphasized by various researchers (e.g. Marvin Zonis). Prevalence of distrust in Iranian polity and cynicism among political elite has many political consequences. Weakness of trust has inhibited formation of civil society organizations and contributed to the feebleness of political parties (parties immediately after formation split) and weakness of civil society has prevented making states accountable and responsible. Scholars speak of two types of trust: generalized trust i.e. trust in humankind including trust in strangers. This kind of trust originates from weltanschauung, conception of nature of mankind and optimism about mankind (all of these elements have cultural roots); and particularized trust, which is based on positive past experiences and comes after determining the trustworthiness of people. The former contributes to democratic process and is useful for democracy while the latter is conducive to organizations or groups in them personal and informal relations prevail. It seems that the deficit of generalized trust in public sphere induces people to trust in individuals whom know face to face and can be assured of their promises. Model of clientelism under discussion, can be evaluated as a product of this culture of distrust. This pathological pattern, in turn, weakens trust in public sphere or generalized trust and as a result a vicious circle emerges.

6. Conclusions

In the absence of political parties and economical transparency, in provincial Iran or at least in the constituencies we studied, clientelist relations between voters and elected members of parliament take place. Both parties regard their services to other party as an investment and it seems that in an atmosphere marked by weakness of public and generalized trust and even cynicism and mistrust, face to face exchange and trust is supposed to be a functional instrument and a safety-net.

7. References

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