Shura and Decentralization : Urgently Needed Planning Tools in Arab Countries

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring how the concept of *shura*, along with the concept of decentralization, can be used to improve planning and decision-making practices in Arab nations. The paper starts by discussing the concepts of *shura* and decentralization, highlighting their connotations, rationale, typology, limitations and outcomes. The paper argues that limited application of decentralization and *shura* in Arab towns has led to many urban problems and to ineffective policies. It concludes that the Islamic teaching of *shura* can –and indeed should- be incorporated into decentralized forms of governance to improve planning and decision-making practices in Arab countries.

Introduction

Planning and decision-making systems adopted around the globe represent a continuum from highly centralized systems on one end to highly decentralized ones at the other, with varying degrees of centralization in between. In recent decades there has been an evident global trend towards decentralization due to its perceived as well as empirically proven advantages. It has been largely advocated as a panacea for many of the societal problems besieging developing countries in particular. Many treaties therefore were advanced to justify its wide adoption and to advocate the advantages it promises.

Shura (consultation) is a deeply rooted principle that has been advocated by Islam some 1400 years ago. It represents a flexible consultative framework that sets the stage for decentralized systems of governance in Muslim societies. Although many Arab countries have adopted some form of decentralization in recent years, they remain invariably centralized states. The negative impacts of this high degree of centralization are evident everywhere in Arab countries.

What exactly are the advantages of decentralization? What is the rationale for embracing it? What are its limitations? Is it yet a new ideology or grand theory advanced by international development agencies? What are the similarities between *shura* and

decentralization? To what extent can they be adopted to improve planning and decision-making practices in Arab countries? These are the major questions addressed in this paper, which concentrates on intellectual and philosophical analysis of abstract concepts (s*hura* & decentralization) in order to contribute to development of planning practices in the Arab world. The data for this study is based entirely on secondary data assembled from books, reports and relevant studies. Primary data was found to be inappropriate for this research. The paper, thus, adopts an analytical, comparative and inferential research methodology.

Shura

Shura is one of the main tenets of Islam, which was revealed in the Holy Quran [1] and was applied by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) during his lifetime, and became common practice after that. He was ordered to consult Muslims in the issues affecting them, then to apply his judgement to formulate a decision that takes the outcome of the consultation into consideration The consultative process of *shura* adopted then included all Muslims, whenever that was possible; or their illustrious, knowledgeable and pious elites and leaders at other times. This was a clear indication that the form s*hura* could take may vary depending on the social and political context, and the prevailing conditions at a given time. Indeed, any method deemed appropriate by legitimate actors to consult with the masses is within the framework of *shura*. This includes conventional forms such as *shura* councils, parliaments, district and neighbourhood councils, as well as non-conventional ones such as Internet-based consultations and discussion boards.

Substantively, the domain of *shura*, as implied throughout the paper, is limited to humanistic issues on which no stipulation was revealed in the Holy Quran or the Prophet's *sunna* (i.e. sayings, deeds and approval of actions done by his companions). This encompasses all issues that are open to rational judgement *(ijtihad)* – including, *inter alia*, mundane issues such as trade, agriculture, civic administration etc.[2] Given the limited scope of this paper, the discussion will be focused on *shura* aspects pertaining to urban planning and policy. Although *shura* is sometimes equated to democracy, there is a fundamental difference between them. Democracy, as conceptualised by Greek and

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[1] C.f. Chapter (Sura) 2, verse 159 and Chapter 42 verse 38. This latter Chapter is called Shura.

[2] For more details on *shura* refer to Abadel Khaliq (1998), Al-Khateeb (1999), Al-Ghamdi (2001), Al-Shawi (1992) and others.

Roman philosophers several centuries ago, attributes the supreme power to the people on whose behalf rulers govern.   On the other hand, the supreme power in *shura*, as stipulated in Islam, is attributed to the Divine (Allah), on whose behalf Muslims govern.[3]

Qadri (1986:9) has identified many of the elements which may be explored under the framework of *shura*. These include the indispensability of *shura* to Islamic polity, the domain of *shura*, and its methodology. S*hura,* he argues*,* is an indispensable element of the Islamic polity because its lack may lead to societal instability (Ibid: 22). Because s*hura* requires consultation on the part of the decision makers, it can lead to an effective participatory process whereby citizens have a say in the policies, plans and programs affecting them. Indeed, abiding by the concept of *shura* will lead to a satisfied citizenry and peaceful relationships among society's members, because they will feel part of the decision making process. S*hura* will also result in more responsible decisions. Since a collective decision agreed upon by decentralized actors (e.g. communities' leaders) and centralized actors (e.g. a central planning authority) will be more rightful, on average, than if it were adopted solely by the centralized actor. Qadri went further to suggest that it is healthier to adopt the collective opinion--as opposed to the opinion of a single actor--even if the former is wrong and the latter is right. This encourages collective participation and reduces singular control over the decision making process (Ibid: 25).

 Shura's domain may be extended to identify the characteristics of those who are to be consulted. When it is not feasible nor practical to consult all community members, a sub-set of the community (e.g. its leaders) is usually consulted. These may represent the different communities and interest groups in a city or a region for which a plan is being prepared. The moral conduct, knowledge, and wisdom of the consultees should be the main criteria for their selection. Ideally the individuals who possess the mentioned qualities, ought to be at leadership positions in their communities, and be its representatives in a consultative *shura* process.. Within the *shura* concept those individuals are preferred to actors elected through the electoral process of representative democracy, or any other political system, who may not always best respond to average people's need.[4]

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[3] For an extended discussion on the differences between Shura and democracy see Al-Nahwi, (2001)

[4]. Sometimes they mainly respond to those powers which are capable of influencing the election

Although *shura* may seem as an ideal concept to be adopted, its application requires a genuine desire by all participants to do so. In fact even if a concept is too ideal to ever prevail, it might be useful as a source of inspiration and guide for actions. Krieger has explicitly subscribed to such a notion:

> "Utopian plans and designs are ever present in city planning and architecture. We know that they are likely to fail, but we need them anyway to guide our actions" (Krieger,1981: 115).

Decentralization

Decentralization has been perceived as the optimum solution for most urban problems, and as a prerequisite for development. According to Smith:

> "Decentralization is widely regarded as a necessary condition for social, economic and political development" (Smith, 1985:3).

It is also often associated with democracy and public participation and considered as being indispensable for participatory democracy.

> "Participatory democracy is impossible without the extensive decentralization of public organization" (Hart, 1972:604).

It might be true that the general meaning of decentralization is within the intellectual reach of most people. However, a precise definition of the concept may not be as widely understood; perhaps because the concept converges upon different disciplines (namely public administration, political science, and administrative theory). Broadly speaking, the concept has been defined in one of its early concise definitions as "the delegation of authority within a larger organization" (Ibid:605). More, recently it has been conceived to entail:

> " … the transfer of responsibility for planning, management, and resource raising and allocation from the central government to (a) field units of ministries or agencies; (b) subordinate units or levels of government; (c) semi-autonomous public authorities or corporations; (d) area-wide regional or functional authorities; or (e) NGOs" (Faguet 1997, in ESCWA 2001:2).

Whereas Hart's interpretations of the concept is applicable to delegation of power within an organization, Faguet's clearly has spatial dimensions which fits well within our focus on *shura* and decentralization in urban planning. As Smith argues:

> " [i]n the study of politics decentralization refers to the territorial distribution of power. It is concerned with the extent to which power and authority are dispersed through the geographical hierarchy of the state, and the institutions and processes through which such dispersal occurs (Smith, 1985:1).

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outcomes. Indeed, moral, knowledgeable actors can be the best ones to lead societies. Unfortunately, many of them do not always aspire to leadership roles in the political arena.

A holistic perspective on the concept of decentralization has been suggested by Rondinelli and Cheema. According to them decentralization means :

> "... transfer of planning, decision-making, or administrative authority from the central government to its field organizations, local governments, or nongovernmental organization (Rondinelli & Cheema, 1983:18).

Although the above definition does not explicitly state any spatial dimension, it, nevertheless, has territorial implications,   by its reference to the delegation of power from a central government to its local governments, which are often located away from the center. By encompassing the concept of power delegation and considering the spatial dimensions, the previous authors have provided a definition that captures the essence of the concept of decentralization.

The word decentralization has been used with different associations in different countries. Fesler differentiated its usage in France, England and the United States :

> "In French usage, decentralization is a term reserved for the transfer of powers from a central government to an areally or functionally specialized authorities of a distinct legal personality (for example, the increase in the degree of autonomy of a local government or of a public enterprise corporation)..... [i]n both England and the United States "decentralization is the generic term and as such even has some currency in France. Adjectives such as "administrative", "political", and "governmental" serve to specify narrower usage, whereas "federalism", "local self-government", and "intergovernmental relations", are alternative terms for special purposes. " (Fesler, 1968:370).

One may conclude from Fesler's statement that there is some complexity as far as the global usage of the term is concerned. This semantic divergence could be partially resolved by adding an adjective to the term 'decentralization'. For example, the phrase 'administrative decentralization' has a clearer meaning than the word 'decentralization' alone.

Within classic Islamic thought decentralization has not been identified as a distinct category, although in practice Islamic states had been decentralized and composed of several provincial units (*imarat* and/or *wilayat*) to which a wide array of responsibilities are devoluted from the central authority. Furthermore, Islamic teachings do not specify certain procedures for *shura*, leaving it for Muslims to choose the system and model that suits their temporal, social and geographic conditions. The alleviation of a centralized control in the decision making process -advocated by decentralists- coincides well with the principles of *shura*, which discourage single-sided control over decisions.

Decentralization as an Ideology

Decentralization might be seen in the framework of an ideology as opposed to that of a value. An ideology may be seen as a doctrine, opinion or way of thinking of an individual or class. A value, on the other hand, is the quality of a thing according to which it is thought of as being more or less desirable, useful, important, etc. (Webster's Dictionary). Since decentralization is not a value in itself, it may not be a goal or an end, rather it could be a means for achieving a certain end. In planning, the goals to be achieved by applying decentralization include responsiveness, reliability, adequacy, and quality of the needed or requested services (Kochen & Deutsch, 1980:17). Decentralization, therefore, is only a means to achieve planning goals and should not be mistakenly perceived as an end. However, since decentralization has been associated with alleviating bureaucratic problems, it has been enshrined as an ideology especially where centralized organizations tend to bulk bigger and larger (Hart, 1972: 606).

Furthermore, it has been thought that decentralization will certainly lead to democracy by encouraging wider participation in decision making and fostering the principle of partnership among several partners (UNDP, 2002). In other words, all the positive components of democracy are expected to accompany the decentralization process. This may not always be the case, and such an expectation may lead to the idealization of decentralization as an end in itself. Additionally, it may lead to skewed forms of centralization at an intermediary level of government, or even at the local level. For instance, the Sudanese experience with decentralization in the 1970s, as reported by Hamid (2002), was characterized by centralization of authority at the province headquarters, while in the 1990s the ambitious devolution of power to local authorities has been hijacked by local elites whose actions alienated so many people (Hamid,2001).

Association between decentralization and democracy, therefore, may not justify perceiving them as synonymous or that the former will result in attaining the latter; hence, decentralization should always stay within the domain of means. Hart emphasized this argument when he stated :

> "... it is obvious that democratic processes do not necessarily result from, nor are democratic ideals necessarily maximized by decentralization" (op.cit:606).

In a more pragmatic sense, decentralization can be a means for changing the status-quo by ensuring more government accountability, transparency, and power sharing, which are usually associated with good governance. The decentralization process can foster a

culture of democracy which may permeate the system from the grassroots up (ESCWA 2001:3).

Types of Decentralization

As the term "decentralization" lacks precise definition and embodies a semantic ambiguity, so do forms and types of decentralization. However, the general framework within which most forms of decentralization occur lies between territorial (political) decentralization and administrative (functional) decentralization. Territorial, or political, decentralization pertains to transferring power and public responsibilities to communities or local governments within well-defined political boundaries. It is often associated with pluralistic politics and representative government and is perceived as a support to democratisation (World Bank 2003a:2). Examples of territorial decentralization are the provinces in Canada and the states in the USA. Administrative decentralization, on the other hand, occurs when politically independent units entrust some of their powers to subordinate units. An example of administrative decentralization is the transfer of some planning and management functions and some responsibility for financial resources from a nation's capital to sub-national agencies (ESCWA 2001:2). Though there is a chance for an overlap between the above two types, major differences exist. Porter and Olsen state that :

> "[i]n systems that are politically decentralized, the subunits have considerable power of their own. They tend to coordinate and reshape resources coming into their jurisdiction to meet local priorities. In systems that are administratively decentralized, the field officers are generally more responsible to the functional and professional specialties of the central office bureaus and agencies" (Porter and Olsen, 1975: 75)

Administrative decentralization can be further broken down into four categories: (i) deconcentration, (ii) delegation, (iii) devolution, and (iv) transfer of functions from public to non-governmental institutions (Cheema & Rondinelli, 1983:18). Deconcentration pertains to redistribution of selected responsibilities and functions by the central government to field offices. In other words, deconcentration is shifting the workload from central government offices to regional offices without giving the latter the authority to carry out independent decisions. This is the simplest form of decentralization.

Delegation of responsibilities to semi-autonomous agencies occurs when the central government delegates management and decision authority of certain functions to organizations which are not under the direct control of the central government. This

form of decentralization allows the recipient organization, which is assumed to be technically and managerially capable, to articulate and implement decisions in certain areas without the direct supervision of higher units of government ibid:21). Indeed, delegation to parastatal agencies represents a step toward true decentralization when compared to deconcentration.

Devolution, is an advanced form of decentralization whereby a wide array of responsibilities and decision-making, coupled with full financial responsibility, and often packed by financial transfers from the central government, are entrusted to independent local government units (ESCWA 2001:2).

Cheema and Rondinelli (1983:22) further clarify devolution by specifying its five conditions: First, the local units of government are autonomous with little or no control from the central government. Second, local governments have identified boundaries within which they exercise their power. Third, local governments have the power (as in corporate status form) to mobilize resources and independently perform governmental functions. Fourth, local governments ought to be seen by local citizens as means to satisfying their needs and should work on citizens' behalf. Fifth, the relationship between local governments and the central government is reciprocal and mutually beneficial.   Therefore, devolution represents a significant move towards full decentralization, and can be seen as equivalent to territorial decentralization, which has been discussed earlier.

Transfer of functions pertains to transferring functions or task management from public institutions to non-governmental (e.g. voluntary or private agencies). This form of decentralization is sometimes associated with privatisation as governments shift the responsibility of producing major goods and services from public organizations to private ones. Indeed privatisation and deregulation could be considered as complete forms of decentralization because they facilitate shifting the responsibility for a given service fully from the government to the private sector (World Bank, 2003a:5).

It is worth noting that there are other kinds of decentralization that have been identified in the literature. Furniss suggests three major kinds of decentralization. First, economic decentralization, including the decentralizaion of industrial and regional economic planning.   Second, administrative decentralization, including internal, spatial and

functional decentralization. Third, political decentralization, including legislative and corporate decentralization (Furniss, 1974: 961). The World Bank, on the other hand, proposes four types of decentralization : (i) political; (ii) administrative (with deconcentration, delegation and devolution as sub-categories); (iii) fiscal, and (iv) economic or market decentralization, which entails privitization and deregulations.

In general, we can argue that all types of decentralization fall within the two major forms identified earlier: territorial (political) and administrative (functional) decentralization.

Rationale for Decentralization

There are historical and intellectual reasons for decentralization. In the West, the concept of decentralization has always been very appealing. In the U.S.A political parties have a very suspicious attitude towards a strong central government, dating as far back as the American Revolution (Porter & Olsen, 1976:75). In addition, centralization was associated with dissatisfaction on the part of the masses. In Medieval Europe, feudalism represented the extreme of centralization. Up to the middle of the twentieth century, colonized societies were dominated by distant colonizers and had no control over their own resources. Therefore, based on historical events, the desire for decentralization by people in both developed and developing countries is not surprising.

Intellectually, decentralization has been associated with freedom and democracy. Though decentralization may not always lead to democracy, as mentioned earlier, by and large it will provide for better and wider representation of citizens and local constituencies. Town meetings and neighbourhood planning committees may depict a form of decentralized planning process where residents participate in shaping their future. Since several decades ago, De Toqueville showed great passion for town meetings as a vehicle for wide participation, and a major prerequisite for a better liberal life:

> "... [t]own meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it. A nation may establish a free government, but without municipal institutions it cannot have the spirit of liberty (De Tocqueville, 1945: 61).

In recent years, decentralization has been considered as one of the major elements of "good governance", because it represents an effective means for ensuring greater government accountability, transparency and responsiveness (ESCAW 2001:3).

Therefore, it has been considered by the World Bank, UNDP and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as a prerequisite for sustainable development (Fawaz, 2002: 2). With increasing globalization of markets, and the need by governments all over the globe – particularly in developing countries – to attract foreign investments, many governments have made concerted efforts to decentralize their political and administrative structures, as evidence of their "good governance".

In addition to the notions of democracy and "good governance", there are other factors which play a positive role in increasing the appeal of decentralization. Among them are efficiency, effectiveness, flexibility and the limitations of the rational decision making approach . Decentralization has been perceived as an efficient technique for allocating resources. Because cities and states are supposedly more concerned about their resources than their central governments, it is assumed that they will use their resources more efficiently. It is probably true that service delivery will be performed more efficiently by decentralized organizations than by large bureaucracies, which in any case are exorbitant to maintain.

Effectiveness has always been linked to decentralization. Local citizens will be better served by local elected officials because the latter are more aware of their needs than those seated in the capital. Porter and Olsen believe that this argument is a strong one in favour of decentralization. They stated that political decentralization

> "...will increase the ability of elected state and city officials to deal with the needs of their constituents...there is a stronger likelihood that state or local officials will be able to integrate and coordinate the resources coming to them from the federal government in such a way that they will meet the highest local priorities" (Porter & Olsen, 1976: 76).

In other words, decentralization is effective because it increases citizen access to information, participation and responsiveness, hence results in service improvement.[5]

Flexibility, as a positive associate of decentralization, refers to the notion that decentralization is a risk accommodating strategy. That is, when uncertainty of goals or technologies exists, it is less risky to implement policies on a smaller decentralized scale than on a larger centralized one. In centralized systems, the cost of implementing the

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[5] Indeed, some empirical studies support the above argument. Yin, (1979) in a study of the influence of decentralization on urban governments (considering 215 cases) showed that in over 60% of the cases, access to information had been increased and in about 70% of the cases, services had been improved and that was a good indicator of responsiveness .

wrong policy is horrendous due to the large scale on which such policies are applied. Conversely, decentralized systems allow smaller units to implement policies under uncertain conditions with little chance of hurting the overall state structure, because if such policies have negative consequences, they will be limited to where they were implemented. Moreover, decentralization allows for innovation, because each of the decentralized units has greater discretion over its local political, social, and economic life and can adopt policies and programmes tailored to its special needs. Furthermore, flexibility allows for adapting different strategies for each particular context and preference. Hence, it does not lead to a one grand scheme that suits all environments and local conditions.

A final argument for decentralization is the limitation of the rational decision making approach. Centralization could be justified if the concerned actors are perfectly informed and perfectly able to evaluate all possible options, and all possible consequences for each option. Since such an argument is unrealistic in theory, let alone in practice, this becomes a strong argument for decentralization. Indeed, there is no such actor as a rational centralist because the human mind is not perfect. The imperfection of the human mind is the point at which decentralization and *shura* converge. What decentralization and *shura* have in common is an emphasis on reducing individualistic control over the decision making process. Because of its recognition of the imperfection of the human mind, *shura* involves a wide consultation, which reduces substantially the possibility of reaching a faulty decision. Similarly, decentralists do not see the possible existence of a perfect rational decision making process. Indeed, central planning has been accused of failing to deal effectively with socially and economically complex problems. If this is the case, then theory along with practice are not the best supporters for centralization.

If the above justifications for decentralization are general around the globe, there are some arguments for decentralization peculiar to the developing world, to which most Muslim countries belongs. Cheema and Rondinelli (1983:14-16) suggest fourteen arguments in support of decentralization in the developing world, among which are the following:

- Decentralization can cut through the enormous amounts of red tape which are a function of the over-concentration of power and authority at the center.

- Decentralization may allow for greater representation of various political, religious, tribal or ethnic groups.

- Decentralization may enhance the administrative capabilities of local governments.

- Decentralization may increase the efficiency of the central government as its top officials could be relieved from routine tasks, which could be performed by local governments.

- Decentralization may allow for institutionalising the participation of citizens in development planning and management.

- Decentralization may increase political stability and national unity.

Although the arguments supporting decentralization are numerous there are certain arguments against it. The first one pertains to the ineffectiveness of fragmented jurisdictions and local governments. Many of these localities lack sufficient resources (e.g. human and financial) to effectively run their business. Second, local governments are always accused of being unprofessional and inclined to political graft. Third, national and regional interests may be overlooked by smaller jurisdictions; for example, the negative side effects of a local government's policy may hurt neighbouring localities or even the whole nation (e.g. pollution problems). Fourth, diseconomies of scale may resurface via decentralization; for instance, large organizations such as school districts may lose some economies in administrative, capital and maintenance costs. Fifth, decentralization may not be able to control benefits of spill over effects. A certain jurisdiction may spend more money to improve its public parks - paid for by resident taxes - but such facilities may be utilized by outsiders for free. In other words, decentralization cannot guard efficiently against free riders (Kaufman 1969: 76-82).

Additional arguments against decentralization could be advanced based on fiscal and economic grounds. Central governments in fragile economies are in a better position to adopt economic stabilization policies (e.g. taxation, currency devaluation, anti-inflationary measures, etc.), and to mobilize resources for debt repayment. Centralization is also essential to redistribute resources among various regional entities in order to reduce the political instability that often results from regional disparities. (ESCWA 2001:4).

It is safe to say, however, that the benefits of adopting decentralization far outweigh its negative aspects. It is essential, nevertheless, to adopt some measures at the national

level to guard against the negative ramifications of decentralization. A limited number of central agencies may be required to adopt strategic decisions and to perform coordinating functions. Needless to say, these central agencies should arrive at their decisions through a consultative process (e.g. *shura)* that takes into account the views and concerns of local communities.

Outcomes of Decentralization:

Although the advantages of decentralization are numerous and ambitious, its application particularly in the developing world has not been very encouraging. There are wide gaps between its goals and its outcomes. Most developing countries believe that decentralization will solve their problems, but unfortunately that has not been the case, primarily due to the way such countries have perceived decentralization. Based on empirical evidence, Cheema and Rondinelli (1983:296) noted:

> "Only in those countries where decentralization was defined more narrowly and the scope of policies was limited to reallocation functions among units of the central government did developing countries achieve their intended goals".

It is clear that perceptions of the term decentralization affect its desired goals. Therefore, it is necessary to define decentralization precisely before its application, for desired ends need clear, well defined goals.

However, despite the poor performance of decentralization attempts in developing countries, some positive outcomes have been documented. Those outcomes can be summarized as follows (Ibid: 298):

- People's access to power has increased, particularly for those who live in previously neglected areas.
- Local governments have managed, via decentralization, to exert more pressure on their central governments to obtain more resources.
- Some improvements have been noticed in the technical and administrative capabilities of localities, primarily due to decentralization.
- New organizations have appeared on the surface at the local and regional levels to manage development.
- Local and regional planning has increasingly become an important component of national planning, thus bringing new interest to the national political arena.

Shura **and Decentralization in Arab Countries**

Decentralization has become a global trend in recent years as more governments have jumped on the globalisation and "good governance" bandwagons for the reasons cited above. In a survey of 75 developing and transitional countries that have a population of over five million people conducted by UNDP in 1998, 63 of them (i.e. 84%) have embarked on some form of decentralization. Virtually all countries in the ESCWA Region – i.e., West Asia, including most Arab countries – have adopted various strands of decentralization (ESCWA 2001:4). Yet most of these attempts can be characterized as mere deconcentration within highly centralized states (ibid). As Fawaz (2002:14) notes in her study of governance in West Asia:

> ".. old traditions of political centralization and the absence of political pluralism in the area remain the norm everywhere, even among the most liberal countries of the region"

Apparently, the vast majority of Arab towns adopt a centralized system of governance and are far from adopting a *shura*-type consultative system that takes the opinions of citizens into account. The empirical study conducted by Alskait (1997:31), for example, concluded that 27% of the surveyed Arab towns follow a centralized system, 64% adopt a rudimentary form of local administration similar to deconcentration, while only 9% adopts genuine decentralization. Similarly, Al-Hammad (1995-:60) has found that the central government is the main source of revenue for 91% of Arab towns he surveyed, which is a very strong indicator of their centralization of planning and decision making.

This strong tendency towards centralization is reflective of a strong belief in the rational planning model, which is pivoted on the assumption that professionals and technocrats in central planning agencies can devise comprehensive plans (physical, economic, social, etc.) by collecting detailed data and applying "scientific" and rational methods to it. This model, as has been explained earlier, has serious limitations and shortcomings, and may lead to poor results.

The case of urban planning in Alexandria Governorate is a case in point. Because the General Organization for Physical Planning based in Cairo prepares structure plans for all towns and metropolitan areas in Egypt, the structure plan it has prepared for Alexandria 2017 designated some existing and vibrant residential areas as industrial zones. Obviously the socio-economic costs of this decision are daunting to say the least, and would not have happened had the plan been prepared locally with sufficient consultation between different stakeholders and local planners. (Gamal Hamid, discussion with the Urban Planning Department, Alexandria, 2-4 May 2003)

Space limitation precludes elaboration on planning and policy disasters in Arab towns that result from centralization and lack of consultation with stakeholders and/or their representatives. Alskait (1997: 133-30) presents examples of some urban problems - namely, solid waste disposal and flood control - that happen at the local level as a result of centralized planning and decision-making.

Conclusion: Decentralization -- A Planning Vehicle Within Islamism

A decentralized planning system is of considerable importance to improving citizens' access to information and power. This will lead to a better participatory planning process, which constitutes a key ingredient for the realization of successful future plans.

Given the numerous advantages of decentralization, it can work as an effective planning tool in many Muslim societies because it parallels *shura*, an essential Islamic tenet which encourages the involvement of more participants in the decision-making process. Decentralization is an outcome of, and at the same time a prerequisite for planning based on wide consultation and *shura.* Both concepts are means to achieving better ends, and both are suspicious toward the possibility of perfect rationality that underpins centralized planning systems.   Although *shura* is a general framework that aims at reducing domination of a single vision over the decision-making process, as a safeguard against the infallibility of the human mind, it is flexible enough to endorse decentralization as a planning tool in Muslim societies.

Decentralization is logically backed by *shura* and by substantive planning thoughts (thoughts that are guided by human intellect and experience, e.g. radical planning). Such backing could make the concept more appealing to the masses in Muslim societies, yet difficult to be rejected by central actors. An astute utilization of decentralization, bolstered by a wide application of s*hura*, and learning from its successes in the developed world, is fundamental to its success as a planning tool in the Muslim world.

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