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Exploring Factors Associated with Citizens' Perception of Their Political Environment: Evidence from Palestine

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This study explores factors associated with citizens' perception of their political environment in Palestine (N = 1270). Understanding these factors in this context has potential to enhance knowledge in relation to features that may be associated with dissatisfaction and civil unrest. This knowledge may help inform development of policies with greater potential to improve welfare. Overall, results of this study suggested that gender, government anti-corruption initiatives, and the country's economic condition are important in explaining appraisal of the political environment as stable or unstable. Implications for welfare and scholarship are discussed.

Key words: Political environment, corruption, anti-corruption policies, economic conditions, Palestine

Political instability continues to characterize the landscape of many countries of the global South, compromising human development and well-being. Such instability creates an endless list of problems, including long-term food insecurity, displacement, health, poverty, reduced economic investment, and low growth (Szirmai, 2005; UNDP, 2005). There is also some evidence suggesting a feedback loop relationship—that poverty and civil unrest may contribute to dissatisfaction, in turn reducing the capacity of government to satisfy the needs of citizens (Szirmai, 2005; UNDP, 2005). Despite the perceived

correlation between political instability and welfare, little attention has been given to investigating factors that may influence citizens' perceptions of their countries' political climate as stable or unstable, even in environments that are characterized by civil unrest. This study attempts to rectify this gap in knowledge by examining factors that may influence perception of a country's political climate as stable or unstable. We focus specifically on Palestinian territories. Examining this question within the context of Palestine has potential to inform perception of features that may be related to satisfaction/dissatisfaction and civil unrest, providing insight to help improve people's welfare through responding effectively to citizens' needs. It also has potential to influence understanding of factors that may lead to increased trust in a government.

Background of Palestine

Palestine has experienced a long history of occupation. In fact, it was only in 1994 that Palestine was granted limited self-rule in some parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Palestinian National Authority, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009). Since then, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) has become the major administration responsible for the welfare of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, providing social services including education, health, and social welfare (Oxfam International, 2007).

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2011) the estimated number of Palestinians in the Palestinian territory was 4.2 million at the end of 2011 (2.6 million in West Bank, 1.6 million in Gaza Strip). These data indicate that about 44% of the population in Palestinian Territory are refugees (29.7% in the West Bank, 67.4% in Gaza Strip). The population is relatively young, with a median age of 18 (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). In terms of the territory's economic situation, unemployment, at a rate of 25.4% (19.5% in the West Bank, 37% in Gaza Strip), is relatively high.¹ Further, generally, the rate of women's participation in the labor force is very low; for example, it was 15% in 2009, compared to a rate of 66.9% for men. Moreover, the territory has high levels of poverty. For example, data indicates that one in three households live

under the poverty line; the rate of poverty was 34.5% (23.6% in the West Bank, 55.7%) (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2009a).

With regards to corruption, data from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (2014) indicates that the majority of Palestinians believe that the Palestinian Authority (PA) institution is corrupt (80% in the West Bank, 64% in Gaza Strip). In fact, there is some data to suggest that the Corruption Crimes Court, which was established in September 2012, had tried about forty-one cases of corruption including “embezzlement, money laundering, fraud, and exploitation of position for personal gain” within a single year (Coalition for Integrity and Accountability-AMAN, 2013, p. 15). Most of these cases involved high-level employees. Factors associated with corruption include an environment that enables high-ranking officials to exploit their public position for personal gain. This is exemplified in the absence of strong policy to monitor conflict of interests, weak regulations against the transfer of interests from public to private, the absence of official punitive and preventive procedures, and the absence of a Legislative Council (Coalition for Integrity and Accountability-AMAN, 2013).

Review of the literature

Social-demographic and Political Stability

Scholars have attempted to establish factors that may be related to perception of political stability/instability. Higher per-capita income and higher levels of education have been positively connected to perceptions of political stability (Lee, 2011; McMahon, 2004). It could be that people with higher levels of education are more likely to have better income-earning opportunities compared to those who have lower levels of education and do not want to risk their current status and earnings (Lee, 2011; Urdal, 2007). In contrast, scholars also have argued that wealth and education may allow citizens to devote time and money which enable them to have better access to political information, and accordingly, increase their political participation. At the same time, poor and less educated people are hampered by illiteracy, poor political information and connections, and lack of time (Lee, 2011). Indeed, some

evidence showed that social status and education are generally associated with increased political participation and decreased civil unrest (Lee, 2011).

Gender and age have also been indicated as correlates of political stability/instability. For example, young males are said to be more likely to perceive political injustices, leading to instability and civil unrest (Urdal, 2006, 2007). An explanation for the age/gender observation is that people in this group are likely to connect instability to poverty and lack of opportunity to engage in income-earning activities. In fact, the link between poverty and deteriorating income with respect to instability has been made by others (see e.g., McMahon, 2004; Miguel, 2007; UNDP, 2005). In addition, unemployment has been linked to political instability. This could be because it is closely related to poverty and income. Furthermore, scholars (e.g., Azeng & Yogo, 2013; Urdal, 2006, 2007) suggested that political instability is likely to occur in a country where the unemployment rate is high, particularly among youth. Scholars argued that marital status is correlated with political stability. Results of research on this subject, however, are mixed. A number of scholars observed that being married decreased the possibility of participation in political violence due to family responsibilities (Berrebi, 2007; Krueger & Maleckova, 2013); in contrast, Lee (2011) found that married people (after controlling for age) were more likely to be involved in political violence.

Economic Situation and Political Stability

A country's economic performance is said to play a role in shaping perceptions of political stability/instability. Scholars contend that deterioration in a country's economic performance may negatively impact opportunities for citizens to generate income (Urdal, 2007). Further, it is argued that poor economic conditions within a country have potential to create fiscal crises for government, reducing its ability to satisfy the needs of its citizenry (Szirmai, 2005). In short, poor economic performance, characterized by low income, poor standard of living and unmet needs are connected to dissatisfaction; consequently, this leads to political protest/civil unrest (Szirmai, 1985; Urdal, 2007). On the other hand, political instability can severely hinder economic performance and limit the ability

of policy makers to develop progressive macroeconomic policies. For example, violence and/or civil unrest/strife are likely to disturb the operation of economic institutions, negatively influencing a country's productive capacity (Aisen & Veiga, 2011). Also, frequent changes in government have the potential to create uncertainty about future macroeconomic policies, discouraging potential investors (Aisen & Veiga, 2011). Indeed, the evidence reviewed suggests that political instability may be associated with poor economic standing and vice versa (Aisen & Veiga, 2011; Feng, 1997; Qureshi, Ali, & Khan, 2010).

Corruption/Anti-corruption Strategies and Political Stability

Research has examined the relationship between corruption and citizens' appraisal of a country's socio-political environment. Specifically, citizens' perception of the country as corrupt has been linked to political stability/instability (Peters, 2007; UNDP, 2010). The argument put forward is that corruption has the potential to influence stability by inducing mistrust in government (UNDP, 2010). Other investigators suggest that corruption leads to instability because it excludes substantial segments of citizens from material benefits and participation in governance. On the other hand, anti-corruption actions by the government are related to enhancing citizens' confidence in government, consequently leading to political stability (Dix, Hussmann, & Walton, 2012; UNDP, 2010). Indeed, anti-corruption actions, such as accountability and transparency, may help governments establish mechanisms with the potential to promote performance, leading to provision of quality public services (Peters, 2007).

Within the Palestinian context, social commentators point to the association between conflict and human development. For example, evidence exists to suggest that political instability has distracted the labor market, creating sharp increases in unemployment, and consequently creating high levels of poverty (UNDP, 2005; World Bank, 2010). Such deterioration necessitates more attention to factors that may have major effects on the political climate (stable vs. unstable) and its impact on the welfare of citizens. Overall, the literature reviewed provides a background from which to explore the hypothesized relationship—perception of a country's political environment is

influenced by its economic condition, corruption, government anti-corruption actions, and socio-demographic characteristics.

Research Questions

This study explores factors that may be related to appraisal of a country's political climate as stable vs. unstable. More specifically, two research questions are explored:

Do individual level characteristics predict appraisal of political climate (stable vs. unstable)?

Do the following predict perception of political climate (stable vs. unstable): (a) a country's economic situation; (b) household financial situation; (c) a country's level of corruption; and (d) effectiveness of government anti-corruption policies?

Method

Description of Data

This study uses data from the first wave of the Arab-Barometer survey. The data were collected from 2006 to 2007, and included seven Arab countries: Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen. The data were collected through face-to-face interviews with large and representative national samples of adults over the age of 18. All aspects of the interview were conducted in Arabic. The survey was administered by the Institute for Social Research of the University of Michigan, and examined citizen orientation, along with attitudes related to a county's economic conditions, family financial conditions, corruption, government performance, politics, democracy, and reform (Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research [ICPSR], 2007). Palestine (N = 1270) was selected for the current investigation. Palestine has been deeply influenced by political and economic upheaval for a long time. These factors, for the most part, are related to the conflict between Jewish and Palestinian populations, and only in 1994 did Palestine obtain limited self-rule government. Within this context, this study attempts to understand factors beyond the external conflict that may impact citizens' perceptions of their political environment.

Measures

Dependent variable: The main dependent variable utilized in this study is perception of political environment, which is measured by a single question: *How would you describe the political situation in your country?* The item is captured as a dichotomous variable, with 0 indicating negative appraisal of country's political climate.

Independent variables: A number of independent variables are utilized. A brief overview of these is presented below. Perception of a country's economic situation is measured by a single item asking respondents to rate the current economic condition of their country on a binary measure, with 0 indicating negative perception of the country's current economic condition.

Household financial situation is captured by asking respondents to rate the financial situation of their household on a scale ranging from 1 to 4. Lower values indicated negative appraisal of a household's financial situation. Level of corruption captures a respondent's perception of the extent of corruption in her country. The variable was rated on a scale from 1 to 4; lower values indicated lower level of corruption.

Government anti-corruption action is employed to examine the extent to which the government is working to fight corruption. The question was rated on a scale from 1 to 4; lower values indicated negative appraisal of government anti-corruption action.

Individual-level characteristics, including age, gender (1= male, 2 = female), marital status, employment status and level of education were used as control variables.

Data Analyses

A number of statistical procedures were used to investigate the relationships between key study variables. More specifically, univariate analyses were used to describe variables such as age, gender, level of education, employment, and marital status. Bivariate correlations and binary logistic regression were performed to explore factors that may be related to appraisal of a country's political climate. A number of demographic variables were included in the models as controls.

Study Limitations

This study has two main limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on participants' self-reports, limiting the accuracy of the data to the extent to which respondents were able to report their situation correctly. The second limitation is related to the measure of corruption used. This study only captured one aspect of corruption. Other features, such as embezzlement, abuse of function, and extortion were not included. Despite these limitations, this study has merit and provides insight that may help explain how respondents perceive factors related to the political environment in their respective countries.

Results

Characteristics of Study Participants

The sample demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. Overall, about half of the respondents were females (51.9%). Age ranged from 18 to 87 years, with a mean age of 37.37 years ($SD = 13.7$). In terms of education, 6.4% of the respondents had no formal schooling, 14.7% had elementary level education, 24.3% had attained primary education, 32.3% had secondary level education, and 22% had college level education and above. The majority of respondents were married (75.7%), and over half were unemployed (67.6%).

Bivariate Correlations of Study Variables

Preliminary results obtained from correlation that examined the relationship between study variables are presented in Table 2. These showed a positive association between appraisal of a country's political climate and gender ($r = 0.11$; $p < 0.01$); compared to men, women were more likely to have a positive appraisal of their country's political climate. Also, being unemployed was associated with a positive appraisal of a country's political climate ($r = 0.06$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, family financial situation, government anti-corruption policies, and country's economic conditions were each associated with positive appraisal of a country's political climate. More specifically, respondents who had a positive evaluation of their household's financial situation, positive expectations of government anti-corruption policies, and positive evaluations of

Table 1. Description of the Demographic Variables Used in the Analysis

Variables	Percent/Mean (SD)
<i>Average Age (years)</i>	37.36 (SD = 13.7)
<i>Gender (Female)</i>	51.9%
<i>Level of Education</i>	
Illiteracy	6.4%
Elementary	14.7%
Primary	24.3%
Secondary	32.3%
College +	22%
<i>Marital Status</i>	
Single	19.4%
Married	75.7%
<i>Employment Status</i>	
Employed	30.9%
Unemployed	67.6%
<i>Family Financial Situation</i>	
Very bad	17%
Bad	34.4%
Good	43.5%
Very good	4.8%
<i>Perception of Corruption</i>	
Hardly anyone is involved	9.1%
Not a lot of officials are corrupt	51.1%
Most officials are corrupt	29.4%
Almost everyone is corrupt	5.2%
<i>Government Anti-corruption Actions</i>	
Not at all	13.5%
To a small extent	15.4%
To a medium extent	34.4%
To a large extent	31.4%
<i>Perception of Current Economic Condition</i>	
Bad	86.3%
Good	13.6%
<i>Political Situation</i>	
Bad	81.1%
Good	17.3%

their country's economic conditions were more likely to report a positive evaluation of their country's political climate (see Table 2).

Regression Results

Results of a binary logistic regression performed to examine factors that may influence the appraisal of a country's political climate are presented in Table 3. Results of the first step, which included age, gender, marital and employment status, showed that the overall model of demographic variables was significant in distinguishing between positive and negative appraisal of a country's political climate [χ^2 ($df = 5$) 15.89 =, $p < .007$; (-2 log likelihood = 1008.549)]. The model correctly classified 82.8 percent of the cases. Wald statistics showed that only gender significantly predicted a country's political climate as either negative or positive. Specifically, women were 1.7 times likely to have a positive evaluation of their country's political climate compared to men.

Results of the second step, which added economic situation, household financial situation, corruption and anti-corruption policies, also indicated that the model was significant [χ^2 ($df = 9$) 97.242, $p < .000$; (-2 log likelihood = 927.115)] and correctly classified 83.1 percent of the cases. Wald statistics showed that gender, government anti-corruption policies and country's economic conditions were significantly related to appraisal of a country's political climate as either negative or positive. More specifically, women respondents who had positive expectations of the ability of governmental policies to combat corruption, and respondents who had positive assessments of a country's economic conditions were more likely to perceive their country's political climate as stable. The odds ratio revealed that women were more likely to have positive appraisals of a country's political climate. Also, a unit change in the perception of government anti-corruption policies as effective increased the likelihood of appraising the country's political climate as stable by about 1.6 times. Furthermore, a unit change in perception of the country's economic conditions as positive increased the likelihood of appraising the country's political climate as stable by about 3.3 times.

Table 2. Spearman Correlations for the Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Age	---								
Gender (Female)	-.01								
Education	-.23**	-.11**							
Employment status	.02	.48**	-.27**						
Marital status	.56**	.21**	-.19**	.04					
Family financial situation	-.16*	.00	.18**	-.13**	-.14**				
Perception of corruption	.00	.02	.00	.05	.00	.08*			
Government anti-corruption actions	-.03	.01	.03	.04	-.06	.04	-.09**		
Perception of current economic situation	-.09**	.08*	-.08	.04	-.06*	.28**	-.02	.11*	
Political situation	-.02	.11*	-.003	.06*	-.01	.12*	-.04	.17**	.26**

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion

The study set out to explore factors that may be associated with perception of a country's political climate (as stable vs. unstable). The findings indicated that only gender, among socio-demographic variables, was related to a country's political climate; females were more likely to have positive appraisals of their country's political climate. Similar to other studies, this result could be explained by the opportunities of men to engage in income-earning activities (see Urdal, 2006, 2007). Indeed, the percentage of unemployment among men is higher compared to women, and increases as soon as political unrest rises. For example, the unemployment rate among men increased from 22% in 2007 to 26.5% in 2008, while it increased from 19% in 2007 to 23.8% in 2008 among women (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2009b). Whereas the observed rate appears to be similar for both males and females (4% across gender), it is problematic in that men, in Palestine, are generally responsible for households financial welfare. Another possible explanation for the observed relationship between gender and political climate (stable vs. unstable)

could be that women have limited information about the political situation and hence report limited level of participation in political activities.

Table 3. Logistic Regression in Prediction a Country's Political Climate

Variables	Step one			Step Two		
	b	Wald	Odd Ratio	b	Wald	Odd Ratio
Age	-.00	.096	.998	.00	.007	1.00
Gender (Female)	.54	7.75**	1.71	.48	5.67**	1.63
Education	.07	1.12	1.07	.077	1.29	1.08
Marital status	-.132	.395	.876	-.00	.002	.991
Employment status	.179	.706	1.197	.19	.679	1.204
Family financial situation				.154	1.87	1.166
Perception of corruption				-.085	.577	.919
Government anti-corruption actions				.491	26.29***	1.63
Perception of current eco. situation				1.197	33.377***	3.311
-2 Log likelihood	1008.549			927.115		
χ^2	(<i>df</i> = 5) 15.89				(<i>df</i> = 9)	97.242
<i>P</i>	.007			.000		
Overall rate of correct classification	82.8%			83.1%		

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Contrary to the argument made by Peters (2007) and UNDP (2010), evidence from this study revealed no relationship between corruption and political stability in the context of Palestine. It might be that Palestinians consider factors such as economic well-being and unemployment to be closely related to stability. This, in fact, has been indicated by others (see e.g., Dix, Hussmann, & Walton, 2012). Results of this study showed that government anti-corruption policies were significantly related to appraisal of a country's political climate. This observation is in line with comments made by Peter (2007) and UNDP (2010) that government policies to combat corruption have potential to strengthen confidence in government, leading to political instability.

This study reported that respondents who reported positive evaluations of their country's economic conditions were more likely to have positive appraisals of their country's political stability. This finding reflects arguments advanced by Szimai (1985) and Urdal (2007) that good economic conditions create satisfaction, and accordingly, political stability.

Implications

Findings of this study draw attention to a number of implications for policy, practice, and scholarship. One area of attention may be addressing the causes of dissatisfaction among men. Addressing such dissatisfaction may include developing a clear understanding of causes of dissatisfaction, creating more opportunities for employment, and enhancing citizens' participation in political activities. Another area of focus could be collection of rigorous data on the subject. This is important in that such data has potential to help government develop effective responses to the plight of males, reducing the potential for civil unrest. This observation may also be important for civil society organizations.

Results also highlight the importance of implementing effective anti-corruption strategies. Anti-corruption policies, such as those focusing on increased government transparency and improving accountability may be key in this regard. More specifically, effort could be devoted to ensure that the general public is aware of the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies. Government could also ensure that implementation of such policies is transparent. Additionally, attention could be given to economic performance, as this factor influenced perception of a country's political stability. Indeed, scholars have indicated a relationship between economic stability and improved welfare. In fact, this is also linked to decreased political unrest (Safadi & Lombe, 2013; Szimai, 1985; Urdal, 2007).

Finally, more research may be needed to examine the feedback loop type of relationship between political instability and the capacity of government to adequately provide quality social services. Collection of sound data may be useful in this regard. Additionally, comparative studies examining the noted relationships in stable and unstable political environments could provide important insight on similarities and

differences, as well on the features that may be associated with appraisal of political climate (stable vs. unstable).

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Endnote:

¹Please note that we are looking at two different data points, so the unemployment rates may be different. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that the rate of employment is influenced by a number of factors, including political stability. Hence, the data from 2011, a relatively stable period, may reflect this reality (World Bank, 2014).