

Weak State, Weak Civil Society: The Politics of State-Society Relations in the Arab World

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Most Arab states are categorized as authoritarian state-corporatist characterized by limited legitimacy, coercive security apparatus, and inefficient administration. Despite apparent similarities with the supreme state and primordial society, Arab states also possess distinct variants. In conservative state-corporatist states including Saudi Arabia and other kinship-based monarchies, the state is weak due to the low autonomy from and high immersion into particular social groups. On the other hand, in populist state-corporatist states, such as Egypt and other single-party ruled republics, the state is weak because of the high insulation from and low responsiveness toward the broad social structure. In a similar vein, while the civil society of the former is weak owing to the highly submissive attitudes toward the state, that of the latter is weak due to the radical and militant attitudes toward the state.

Keywords: *the state, civil society, state-society relations, corporatism, liberalism, state-corporatism, authoritarianism, state strength, state capacity, the Arab world, the Middle East*

1. INTRODUCTION

This study intends to delve into the origins and characteristics of the contemporary Arab state and civil society. This paper mainly argues that the corporatist paradigm is more appropriate in analyzing the state and civil society in Arab countries than the pluralism paradigm. According to the corporatist paradigm, the colonial legacy, the lack of a hegemonic class, and the primacy of the state, rather than peculiar political cultures, have been crucial in shaping exclusionary corporatism in the Arab world. It proposes that most Arab states are classified as authoritarian state-corporatist due to limited legitimacy, coercive security apparatus, and inefficient administration. Moreover, the Arab state-corporatist states, with low level of state strength and capacity, can be specified into two different types: the conservative state-corporatist states and the populist state-corporatist states. In conservative state-corporatist countries, the state is weak due to the excessively high level of immersion into the particular social groups through patronage networks while the civil society is also weak owing to the high level of submissive attitudes toward the state. On the other hand, in populist state-corporatist countries, the state is weak because of the remarkably high level of insulation from the broad and general social structure whereas the civil society is also weak owing to the high level of militancy toward the state.

This article begins by positing competing paradigms for analyzing the state and civil society in general. Then it investigates into the question of which paradigm, between pluralism and corporatism, is more applicable to the Arab state and civil society analysis in particular. In the third section, these research questions are dealt in the context of colonial legacy, state building, and society formation process in the Arab world. It introduces crucial factors in establishing the contemporary nature of the Arab state and civil society. The fourth section considers the appropriate criteria to measure the strength and capacity of the Arab

state and civil society, and to classify them. This is followed by a short comparison with other non-Arab countries including Turkey, Iran, and Israel in the region. Finally, I conclude with the argument that the Arab state and civil society in both conservative and populist state-corporatist countries are weak but in somewhat different way.

2. THE STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY: PLURALISM VERSUS CORPORATISM

The two main contrasting paradigms for conceptualizing the state are pluralism and corporatism. The state, in pluralism, is viewed as a collection of individuals occupying particular official roles and as an arena within which societal actors struggle to insure the success of their own particular preferences through electoral pressure and lobbies. Although the state involves consultation with interest groups, its role is quite passive as a literal referee without political authority (Dahl 1971, Downs 1957, North 1990, Olson 1965).

In contrast with the atomistic view of pluralist paradigm where the concept of the state as a political system is sometimes too vague and narrow, the state in the corporatism paradigm is the decisional and authoritative structure linked with the associationally- organized interests of civil society. Since corporatism is a political concept which is premised neither on the supremacy of the individual nor on the supremacy of class in institutional arrangement, it affords a greater role of the state. Thus, the state directs the economy and manipulates social groups (Ayubi 1995; Cantori 1999; Grant 1985; Schmitter 1979). Although the state as an autonomous unity in statist theory or non-pluralist paradigm is often too idealistic, the corporatist state generally has powerful incentives to engage in bargaining and negotiation with interest associations and sometimes even create and license them (Evans et al. 1985; Hall 1997; Krasner 1984; Mitchell 1991).

In a similar manner to the state debate, there are two different conceptions of civil society, a network of institution mediating between the individuals and the state. The pluralist version of civil society highlights 'civility' and views civil society as an informal network embodied in the horizontal civic bonds (Putnam 1993). The realm of civil society in pluralism is quite narrow because it distinguishes political and economic society from civil society and sometimes excludes religious organizations from it.

In contrast, the corporatist conception of civil society shows a broader scope by encompassing legislative assemblies, political parties, and interest associations which include trade unions, business groups, and professional syndicates (Schmitter and Karl 1991). Interest associations in corporatism generally consist of a limited number of singular, compulsory, noncompetitive, hierarchically-ordered, and functionally- differentiated units. Through this associational and collective channel and with collaboration with political parties, the interests are expressed toward the state (Ayubi 1995; Schmitter 1979).¹

In pursuit of a useful paradigm for understanding the state and civil society in the Arab world, it has been contended that corporatism is more valid than pluralism in the following two ways (Al-Sayyid 1995; Ayubi 1995; Cantori 1997; Cantori 1999; Ehteshami and

¹ Pluralists and corporatists offer opposing political remedies and divergent images of the institutional form that such a modern system of interest representation will take. The former suggest spontaneous formation, numerical proliferation, horizontal extension, and competitive interaction; the latter advocate controlled emergence, quantitative limitation, vertical stratification, and complementary interdependence (Schmitter 1979: 16).

Murphy 1996; Kamrava 2002; Turner 1984; Zubaida 1992). First, corporatism implies the state's autonomous and interventionist role which is easily found in most Arab states. However, pluralism neglects the influence of the state. It is closely tied to the specific mechanisms of political representation and participation, which is less efficacious in dealing with the Arab politics, given the lack of institutional mechanisms and devices, such as voting, elections, and parties.

As a matter of fact, a powerful state defines the critical context in which capitalism emerges in late developing countries. Regarding the primacy of the state, there have been growing theoretical arguments and conceptual developments. The state both reacts to social forces and shapes the direction of those forces, in turn. Although the state, because of its penchant for intervening in the economy, is viewed as the impediment to capitalist development, it remains the only available instrument for carrying out all the market and political reform prescriptions. This is what is known as the "orthodox paradox (Snider 1996)". The solution does not involve removing the state from the development processes, but rather changing the way the state plays its role. In the Arab world, while a more democratic order cannot be built through the current state power, it cannot be built without the state power. In other words, government remains crucial to the project of political and economic reform in the region.²

Second, with regard to the cultural specificity of the Arab world where the historic-intellectual prerequisites for individualism and secularism are weak (Inglehart 1997; Inglehart and Welzel 2005), pluralist paradigm does not seem to capture the realities. Instead, corporatism whose original view covers familial, communitarian, moral, and organic nature is culturally more compatible with the Arab countries. The contemporary Arab states appear to correspond to the Gramscian category of corporative state where the state is everything, but the civil society is primordial and gelatinous in terms of its economic interests and functions. As evidence of contention, the corporatist characteristics of political culture in the Arab world, where the interest of the community, not the individual, comes first and consensus, not pluralist competition, is prized (Ayubi 1995; Cantori 1997; Cantori 1999; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Okruhlik 2005).

With regard to the civil society, it seems more persuasive to include political parties into the realm of civil society given that in nearly all Arab countries, most opposition political parties have no chance of forming the government. Also, the idea of a *pays reel* which conveys a broader understanding of civil society may include illegal opposition parties and associations among its set of relational networks (Al-Sayyid 1995; Henry 1999; Norton 1995; Ottaway and Carothers 2004). In fact, the contemporary political Islamists in the Arab countries are the principal stimulus to civil society.

² Efforts since the 1990s to promote theoretical integration among the state-centered approaches have produced the "new institutionalisms" (Hall 1997). These are rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism, and they are interest-based, structure-oriented, and idea-oriented approaches, respectively (Lichbach and Zuckerman 1997: 3-16). These approaches have evinced a common interest in the role of states in development and democracy. The historical institutionalist approach most explicitly focuses on the diversity of institutional arrangements rooted in their own historical landscapes in order to explain the primary role of state which constrains actors' perceptions and choices (Evans et al. 1985; Hall 1997; Mahoney 2003; Zysman 1983).

3. COLONIAL LEGACY, STATE BUILDING, AND SOCIAL FORMATION IN THE ARAB WORLD

This paper has established that it is more plausible to apply corporatism than pluralism to the state and civil society analysis in the Arab world given their power structure, political system, socioeconomic structure, and even political culture. Then, what is the most crucial factor in establishing the corporatist nature in the Arab state, civil society, and the relationship between the two?

The colonial era resulted in the incorporation of the Arab countries into the capitalist world system and in the consolidation of internally-bureaucratic state and an externally-territorial state. However, the colonial legacy contributed to the partial and unstable nature of state-building and social formation in the post-colonial Arab countries. The most problematic legacy from colonial era is the lopsided nature of the post-colonial countries, that is, the underdeveloped class structure and the overdeveloped state in the newly capitalist countries. The state apparatus in colonial period was not created by a national bourgeoisie but by a foreign colonial one which overinflated the size of the bureaucratic machine, especially its military and security wing to serve its own purpose and to confront any possible resistance (Anderson 1987; Ayubi 1995; Henry and Springborg 2001; Migdal 1988; Owen 2004).

Thus, the rulers of the post-colonial state were also able to produce much the same type of effect via the creation of authoritarian system. In such situations, the social classes have been excessively dependent on the state, and the primacy of state within social formation has compensated for the absence of a domestic hegemonic bourgeois class, which resulted from the embryonic class structure in the immediate post-independent countries (Jang 2008: 237-8).

Regarding the notion of corporatism which is premised on non-supreme individual or class in structural setting, an important concept is articulation which is more likely in situations where no one mode of production or no one class has emerged to dominate. It was also at transitional stages where a certain mode of production or a certain class loses its supremacy without another having yet taken its place (Ayubi 1995: 27). Owing to the non-hegemonic class and the primacy of the state in the Arab world, there is technical arrangement by the state of articulations among the modes of production in economic aspect, coercion in political aspect, persuasion in ideological aspect and within each of the three modes. Capitalism injected into the Arab countries by the colonial powers has been articulated in different forms with pre-capitalist modes of production, such as pastoral-nomadism in some countries and semi-feudal or semi-commercial agriculture in others, and with a state-capitalist mode of production regardless of their declared ideologies (Ayubi 1995; Richards and Waterbury 1990). Moreover, there are combining articulations between certain economic and technical elements of the capitalist mode of production and certain social and cultural elements of pre-capitalist modes of coercion and persuasion, such as political tribalism, or patrimonialism in the Arab countries (Henry 1996; Migdal 1988; Owen 2004).

In sum, the corporatism in the Arab countries is artificially established by the above, and the overemphasized role of the state with the absence a hegemonic class has been more exaggerated in order to promote delayed capitalist development in the name of national interest. This also implies that the state has been more autonomous from the civil society in their relationship.

4. TYPOLOGY OF THE STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE ARAB WORLD: WEAK STATE AND WEAK CIVIL SOCIETY

Concerning the typology of the corporatist states in the Arab world, there are two main subtypes of corporatism according to different structures of power and influence: state-corporatism and societal-corporatism. The former tends to be associated with political systems in which territorial subunits are tightly subordinated to central bureaucratic power; elections are nonexistent or plebiscitary; party systems are dominated by a weak single party; executive authorities are ideologically exclusive; and are such that political subcultures based on class, ethnicity, language, or regionalism are repressed. On the contrary, the second is found in political systems with relatively autonomous, multilayered territorial units; open electoral processes and party systems; ideologically varied, coalitionally based executive authorities (Ayubi 1995: 184; Schmitter 1979: 21-2). The state in state corporatism is dominant, commanding and is, not surprisingly, contestational with, alienated from its civil society. Hence, it is persuasive to classify the Arab states into the state corporatist category.

Then, why did the Arab states develop the exclusionary state-corporatism rather than societal-corporatism pervasive in democratic welfare states despite their similar and common culture as communitarian and non-individualistic characteristics? Given the different outcomes between state and societal corporatist states based on the commonly shared cultural background, political culture is not the most crucial determinant of political context. Accordingly, it implies that the authoritarian and overdeveloped state power in the Arab countries is not due to the peculiar political culture (Harik 2006) but due to the colonial legacy as a structural and institutional cause.

As for state strength and capacity, the Arab state-corporatist states are usually perceived weak due to limited legitimacy or hegemony, low level of taxation capacity, coercive security apparatus, and inefficient administration. Also, these weak states similarly possess authoritarian regime despite their different or even contradictory ideology bases. Mainly, the Arab states are fierce states that have to resort to coercion and repression in order to preserve themselves, but they are not strong. They are weak and hard. To avoid any confusion over the nature of the state between 'strong,' 'hard,' 'fierce,' and 'coercive' on the one hand, and 'weak,' and 'soft,' on the other, one needs to differentiate these vague and arguable notions. The idea of state strength and capacity being strong or weak is based on the degree of legitimacy and institutional quality including taxation capacity, law enforcement, and administrative efficiency. On the other hand, the hard or soft describes the nature of the power that is exercised (Anderson 1987; Ayubi 1995; Evans 1995; Fukuyama 2004; Henry and Springborg 2001; Migdal 1997; Salame 1990; Zubaida 1992; Zysman 1983). In figure 1, the Arab states as state-corporatist fall into the category of weak-hard state. Namely, given the differentiated and sophisticated concept about the state, the Arab states are hard with regard to their coercive apparatus, but as a whole they are weak because of their lack of legitimacy and low institutional quality.

Figure 1. State Typology by Differentiated State Concept

Nature of Exercising Power	Degree of Legitimacy and Institutional Quality	
	Strong	Weak
Hard	Developmental States	State-Corporatist States
Soft	Societal-Corporatist States Liberal States	(Weimar Republic in Germany)

So far, the Arab states are classified as weak and hard state-corporatist states. However, regarding the basic but apparent variant characteristics within the same category, there are two subtypes of corporatism for the Arab states: conservative corporatism and populist corporatism. The Arab corporatism ranges between a more organic, solidaristic and communitarian strand at one end of the spectrum, and more organizational, interest-based, populist, and mobilizational strand at the other. Conservative, kinship-based monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, other GCC countries in the oil exporting Gulf area, Morocco, and Jordan are illustrative of the first strand. Radical and populist single party ruled republics including Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Syria, and Yemen are illustrative of the second (Ayubi 1995; Henry and Springborg 2001). This dichotomy is principally similar to other works' typology classified by obviously distinct political system and ruling ideology (Hammoudi 1997; Owen 2004; Richards and Waterbury 1990).

Given a more differentiated state classification which distinguishes conservative state-corporatist states and populist state-corporatist states, it seems feasible to specify their common weakness in a more detailed and distinguished way. Although one may recall that state strength and capacity and the notion of taxation ability were main components in the institutional quality criteria, a different criteria should be set up for the Arab states. Concerning the public finance resources, the taxing capability of the conservative state-corporatist states and the populist states show contrasting features. Because of the abundant oil revenues, the former tends to achieve low tax extraction by establishing patron-client network. The latter displays excessive taxation, going over the optimal level and shows some evidence of discretionary authority. Therefore, a new notion of state strength and capacity is needed to cover these contrasting features. The notion also concerns the state's insulation from the particular societal interests and its immersion in the broad social structure at the same time. In doing so, the state might facilitate a mutual interaction between the state and society, or at least allows quasi – political pluralism where societal actors can have a room to act (Evans 1995).

The conservative state-corporatist states display intensely high immersion but low insulation from the particular social groups. Yet, the populist state-corporatist states feature excessively high insulation and low immersion. Specifically, figure 2 is an effort to depict the different weaknesses of the conservative state-corporatism and populist state-corporatism. Both conservative and populist states are commonly captured by the groups who seek to

preserve of the privileges. They thus try to keep the status quo by striving to co-opt other social groups in the civil society, often relying on force (Bellin 2004; Brownlee 2007). However, they are weak in different ways as figure 2 illustrates. This implies different institutional arrangements between the state and civil society in those two states, particularly concerning the finance revenues.

The populist states usually attain the resources by way of nationalizing private enterprises. They often tend to show excessive tax extraction from the broad society going over an appropriate level by exercising a predatory power in an isolative and insulating way (Langhor 2004; Snider 1996). Therefore, the states are more inclined towards the insulation aspect. On the other hand, the conservative monarchies due to the abundance of their oil revenue, show a rather low level of tax extraction. The availability of financial resources in these rentier states not only supports the coercive apparatus of the state but also sustains massive social welfare programs. In doing so, it fuels powerful patrimonial networks under crony capitalism based on family, tribe, and proximity to the ruling elite embodied in the logic of “no taxation, no representation” (Herb 2005; Karl 1997; Luciani 1995; Ross 2001; Ross 2008). Accordingly, the conservative states are closer to the immersion axis compared to the populist states.

In short, these weak states are undemocratic and coercive. Neither is weaker than other, but they are both weak in a somewhat different way. Although the late 1980s witnessed liberalization trends in the region, in the midst of threats and opportunities of globalization, most of the economic and political liberalization were achieved as regime projects and were certainly not intended to lead to a gradual loss of power, but rather to consolidate and reinvigorate the power and legitimacy of politically, economically and ideologically weakened regimes (Brumberg 2002; Eickelman 2002; Diamond and Brumberg 2003; Lust-Okar 2004).

Meanwhile, other non-Arab countries in the Middle East, namely Turkey, Iran, and Israel, are relatively pluralist and strong states with high immersion and high insulation. They are the only regional states with at least conditional democracy, probably due to the low intensity or absence of the colonial experience (Diamond 2002; Henry and Springborg 2001). However, this high level of state strength and capacity should be viewed in relative terms, in comparison with other Arab state-corporatist states.

Given the differentiated natures, strength, and capacity of the Arab state-corporatist states, one needs to reconsider and differentiate the typology of the Arab civil society as well. Is the civil society in the Arab countries too weak to challenge the power of the state? Or is it too

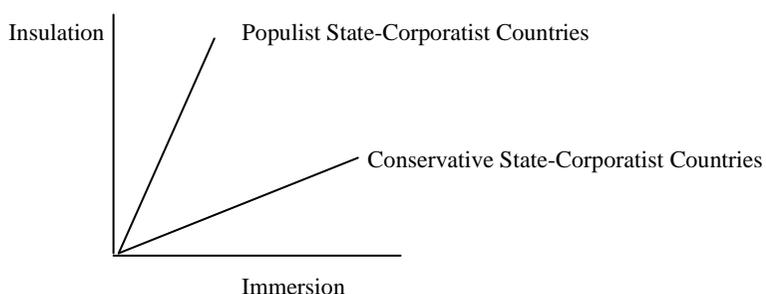


Figure 2. The State in Conservative and Populist State-Corporatist Countries

strong, resulting in a state that overly depends on force to maintain control? According to figure 3, the civil society of the conservative state-corporatist countries is weak, feeble, and submissive because most of the associations are based on the clientage network, whose members traded their loyalty for the patronage and protection as emphasized earlier (Diamond and Brumberg 2003; Herb 2004). Thus, they are in no position to play an intermediary role between the individuals and the state.

On the other hand, some of the societal actors in the populist state-corporatist countries are too radical for the state to tolerate and to be included within the system. Those societal actors are mainly the Islamist oppositions or Islamic fundamentalists, and the incumbent regimes lack tolerance particularly toward these groups. In fact, the Islamist oppositions have illustrated greater militancy and less coordination with other civil society groups, which result in greater repression by the state, rather than some type of mutual accommodation based on bargaining. The associations of radical and militant Islamist movements tend to promote their slogans regardless of the deleterious consequences for the civil society as a whole. In other words, they are collectively uncoordinated within the civil society as a whole and lack centralized bargaining power at the national-level with the state (Gerges 2005, Jang 2008).

However, in terms of organizational depth, the civil society of the populist corporatist countries shows higher levels than that of the conservative corporatist countries. Among the civil society organizations of the populist state-corporatist countries, those of Egypt for instance, display more developed organizational forms and are less marginalized than others as figure 4 shows. This is largely due to the different intensity of the colonial situation, since more repressive and brutal colonial occupation produced overdeveloped police, military, and security wing of the state apparatus, and thus prevented civil society from extending their associations.

For example, the French colonization in Algeria was much longer and intense than that in Tunisia. Unlike Morocco and Tunisia, where the colonial authorities did not implement radical changes in the socio-cultural or political structures, the situation was different in Algeria which was declared a full and integral part of France, which resulted in a dismantlement of much of the original society. Neither the French nor the authoritarian state of Algeria permitted the public expression of civil concerns, and thus, the social classes

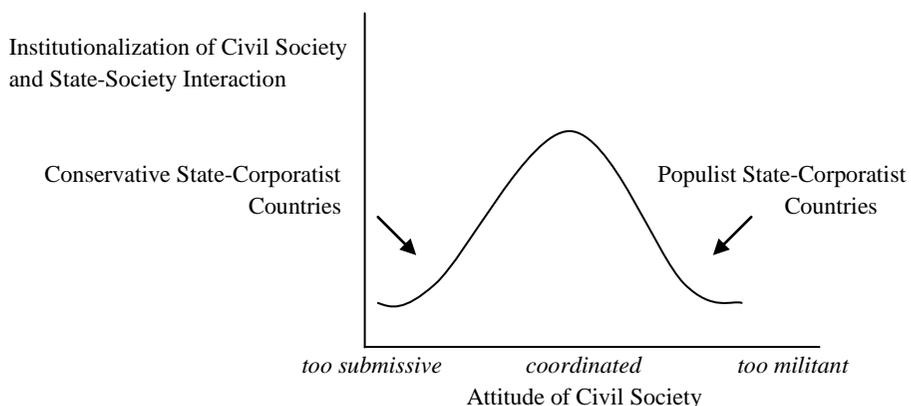


Figure 3. Civil Society in the Arab World

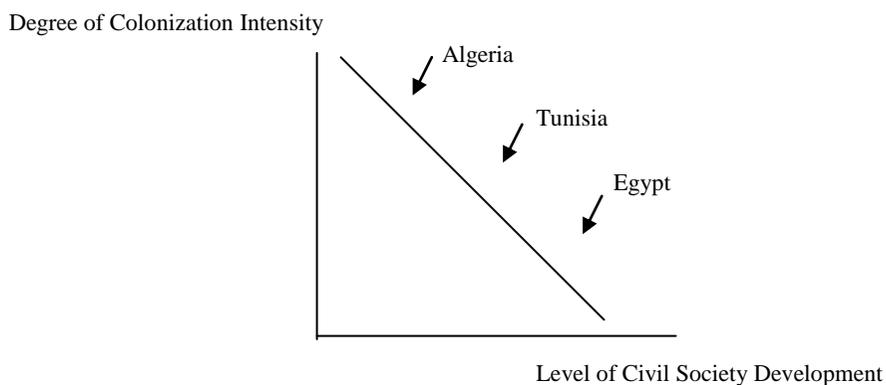


Figure 4. Civil Society Development in Populist State-Corporatist Countries

could never be organized and not to mention being invited to any bargaining table (El-Kenz 1991; Hammoudi 1997; Henry 1999; Langohr 2004; Wickham 2004). Therefore, as figure 4 indicates, the capacity of the civil society to coordinate with internal associations and bargain with the state has been greater in Tunisia than Algeria. As a matter of fact, as a “veiled” protectorate, Egypt was never as intensively colonized as either Tunisia or Algeria. Accordingly, it has displayed even greater capacity to spawn Islamist associations and parties (Henry and Springborg 2001). The more coercive the states, the more radical and militant civil society.

In sum, as figure 3 illustrates, a strong civil society should possess internal-coordination within itself and bargaining power vis-à-vis the state. Some of the societal actors are too weak and feeble to challenge the power of the state while others are too radical. Neither a too submissive civil society of the conservative state-corporatist countries nor a too radical one of the populist state-corporatist countries can be considered as strong. Again, the primacy of the state has preempted the development of and compensated for the absence of strong societal groups. The power configuration of societal actors has been excessively dependent on the absolute primacy of the state. Therefore, the undemocratic characteristics of the incumbent regimes in the Arab state-corporatist countries have been reflected in their state-society relations.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the state, civil society, and state-society relations in the contemporary Arab world in comparative corporatist perspectives. Most Arab states can be classified as authoritarian state-corporatist and characterized by limited legitimacy and excessive dependence upon external revenues without infrastructural power. Also, they often resort to raw coercion in order to preserve their invested interests. The states are not strong but fierce, coercive, and hard. Indeed, most of these weak states in the region possess similar drawbacks despite their distinguished or even contradictory ideology bases.

Despite the fundamental similarities, the Arab states show critical differences at the same time. In conservative state-corporatism, such as kinship-based monarchies, the state is weak

because it is too immersed in the particular social groups through patronage networks while the civil society is also weak since it is too submissive to the state. In populist state-corporatism, such as single-party rule republics, the state is weak because it is too insulated from the broad social structure whereas the civil society is weak since it is too militant and radical toward the state. Neither is weaker than other, but they are weak in a different way.

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