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SYMBOLIC POLITICS:
THE MAIN PROBLEMS IN ARMENIA

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Abstract

Armenia has entered the information age, and whether we embrace it or not, Armenian society has evolved into an information-based society. This shift has brought significant changes to Armenia's political landscape. Currently, there is a robust movement of political symbols and meanings in Armenia's digital information sphere. This movement significantly amplifies the role and significance of symbolic politics in the country's political arena. It's important to note that symbolic politics plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of social reality. Moreover, in the information era, the relationship between authorities and society in Armenia is increasingly defined by symbols and images. The growing importance of symbolic politics in Armenia's information age presents novel challenges for political scientists. Although classical political science traditionally focuses on political processes and institutions, there is now a pressing need to study the symbolic dimension of politics. As a result, there is a demand for comprehensive research into the characteristics of symbolic politics in Armenia.

Presently, Armenia has stepped into the era of information, marking a significant transition towards an information-centric society, regardless of whether we embrace this change or not. Consequently, information technologies have permeated every aspect of Armenia's social and political environment, sparking considerable transformations. It is noteworthy that these changes exhibit a distinct (postmodern) nature.

Currently, Armenia is experiencing a notable increase in the dissemination of political symbols and meanings through its digital information sphere, thereby magnifying the importance of symbolic politics in the political arena. It's crucial to recognize that symbolic politics plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of social reality. By leveraging information and communication technologies, authorities disseminate symbols favorable to the political elite to the public, thereby transforming politics into a symbolic ritual or ceremony.

The burgeoning prominence of symbolic politics within Armenia's information age landscape presents new challenges for political scientists. While classical political science traditionally focuses on analyzing political processes and institutions, there's now a pressing need to delve into the realm of symbolic politics, or the symbolic dimension of politics. Consequently, there arises a demand for extensive research into the characteristics of symbolic politics in Armenia.

Symbolic politics is an ancient aspect of political life, yet it only became a focal point for scholarly research in the mid-20th century. In the second half of the 20th century, American sociologist George Mead (1863-1931) developed the theory of symbolic interactionism. This theory emphasizes the role of symbols and symbolic meanings in social life. According to this theory, people attribute meanings and interactions to various objects through their interactions with one another. Symbols and symbolic meanings themselves result from the interactions among individuals, and their emergence and changes occur through interpretation and control (Gromov et al., 1997, p. 275). Symbolic interactionism considers an object, action, or word to which people relate as if it represents something else, a symbol. A flag is a symbol of the nation, and people relate to this piece of cloth as if it were the nation itself (Shibutani, 1969, p. 105). Symbolic interactionism posits that humans simultaneously live in both natural and symbolic environments. Microbes are part of the natural environment of human habitat and influence vital processes, whether their hosts know it or not. The symbolic environment is not a simple reproduction of the external world. Through the ability to use symbols, people are capable of altering their surroundings (Shibutani, 1969, p. 117).

The political symbolic environment can be considered a variation of the symbolic environment. Indeed, to reinforce the cultural foundations of its existence, authority consciously uses various political symbols. In this context, Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), an American anthropologist and sociologist and a founder of symbolic interpretive anthropology, asserts that at the political center of any complexly organized society are the political elite and a combination of symbolic forms expressing and justifying their rule. Regardless of whether the members of the political elite are elected democratically or not, they justify their existence through such symbolic means as ceremonies, external signs of domination and power, traditions, formalities, and compilations of stories inherited from previous governments or invented (Geertz, 1983, p. 124).

In the latter half of the previous century, Murray Edelman (1929-2001), a renowned American political scientist, emerged as a pivotal figure in the study of the symbolic political landscape, laying the theoretical groundwork for symbolic politics. Through his exploration of the symbolic environment, Edelman sought to elucidate several puzzling phenomena of political life that defy explanation within the confines of rational choice theory. For instance, he delved into questions such as why certain political ideas gain more popularity than others, why politicians invest significant effort in crafting and disseminating vacuous statements devoid of substantive meaning, and why the positions of opposing parties are framed in particular ways rather than others.

Murray Edelman's perspective on politics as a symbolic form focuses on its symbolic influence on both the political elite and the masses (Edelman, 1964, p. 2). He identifies two distinct manifestations of politics: politics as spectacle and politics as an organized activity pursued by groups aiming to secure specific, significant benefits. On one hand, politics unfolds as a grand display, characterized by a "parade of abstract symbols"; on the other hand, it functions as strategic action aimed at advancing particular interests (Edelman, 1964, p. 5).

Accordingly, politics assumes divergent meanings: for the active participants–a minority–it serves as a tool to achieve desired outcomes, while for the masses, it resembles a ceremonial spectacle. Edelman's framework essentially delineates a contrasting structure of politics, stemming from the profound contrast inherent in mass perception. To the audience of this political "drama", every event represents either a menacing threat that instills fear or a reassuring calm that inspires hope.

From this perspective, symbolic politics can unsettle or pacify individuals not through addressing or disregarding their demands directly, but by altering those very demands and expectations.

Murray Edelman posits that symbols employed in politics serve not only as a means of representing objective reality but also as integral components in shaping political reality itself. Drawing upon the principles of symbolic interactionism, he contends that humans uniquely reconstruct the past, perceive the present, and forecast the future through symbols. In this view, symbols play a fundamental role in mediating individuals' understanding of the world and their place within it, particularly within the realm of politics.

Human beings possess the innate ability to interpret sensory data symbolically. Symbols serve as tools for abstracting from reality, facilitating complex judgments, and planning actions. They can reflect, combine, distort, and even sever social ties, shaping individuals' understanding of the world based on sensory input. However, this symbolic capacity also predisposes humans to illusions, misunderstandings, and the mythologizing of phenomena, sometimes leading to erroneous actions.

Consequently, to fully elucidate political behavior, it is essential to consider how common meanings are formed and altered through the symbolic interpretation of diverse interests, circumstances, threats, and opportunities by individuals (Edelman, 1971, p. 2). Symbols carry contradictory emotional charges: they can inspire, reinforce, seduce, deceive, and mislead. The emphasis lies not solely on individual symbols like anthems, coats of arms, or flags, but rather on symbolic actions.

The impact of political symbols should be assessed not merely by their role in manipulating public consciousness by the political elite, but rather by their contribution to the masses' acceptance of the prevailing political order.

Murray Edelman further interprets symbols as mechanisms for "organizing the playbook of the knower of meanings". Political symbols serve as pre-existing semantic structures that aid individuals in processing information by simplifying it to the level of what is already familiar. They form the foundation of a structure that shapes the perception of social reality and, consequently, influences people's political behavior (Edelman, 1971, pp. 33-35). According to Edelman, the symbolic functions

of socially constructed meanings can be elucidated through concepts such as discourse, idea, image, myth, and symbol (in the narrower sense of signs or images that conventionally represent certain phenomena or ideas). These concepts serve as tools for describing and analyzing the intricacies of symbolic politics.

From this perspective, the notion of symbolic politics, encompassing both Symbolic Politics and Symbolic Policy, can be regarded as a tool for empirically understanding and dissecting political reality.

Central to Murray Edelman's theory of symbolic politics is the concept of the "symbolic act". A symbolic act refers to an action whose sole targets are symbols and the associated abstract concepts, disregarding the tangible objects related to those symbols. Political actions infused with symbols serve to bolster trust in authorities and facilitate adaptation to prevailing social conditions. Through these symbolic acts, the elite can further their material interests and influence the distribution of goods within the framework of the existing political system.

It's important to note that Murray Edelman links the concept of the "symbolic act" to a pragmatic interpretation of language. In this sense, the symbolic act, as a linguistic act, is itself a political act rather than merely a means of describing politics. Language, political events, self-perception, and other elements are all facets of the same action, mutually conditioning each other's meanings (Edelman, 1977, p. 4).

What we commonly perceive as political events, such as elections, are often symbolic constructs or performances because direct observation, let alone control, of real political processes is often beyond the reach of the masses.

The efficacy of symbolic acts in politics hinges on the tendency of individuals to predominantly think in stereotypes, thereby personalizing and simplifying political reality through symbols. This cognitive process aids people in navigating complex political situations by providing familiar reference points. The ambiguity inherent in political signals can evoke existential threats and instill fear. However, the mutual agreement on politically significant symbols can foster a sense of order and coherence in interpreting political reality.

As symbolic acts evolve into symbolic practices, the institutionalization of these acts occurs. This institutionalization solidifies the role of symbols in shaping political discourse and behavior, further reinforcing their impact on society.

Murray Edelman delineates two symbolic forms inherent in political institutions: myth and ceremony (Edelman, 1964, p. 16). Myth serves to elucidate established political ceremonies, infusing them with a spectacular dimension and fostering the illusion of mass participation in politics. However, it's crucial to recognize that the arbitrary utilization of myth and ceremony can backfire. "Accumulating symbols" with their corresponding potential are not arbitrarily constructed but develop gradually in tandem with the evolution of social life. Therefore, the strategic deployment of symbols must be informed by an understanding of their organic growth within the fabric of society (Edelman, 1964, p. 20).

The overarching characteristics of symbolic politics, encompassing various definitions, allow us to formulate theoretical propositions that should underpin the study of symbolic politics in Armenia. Symbolic politics is an inseparable companion of real politics, constituting a mandatory component thereof. Virtually all

real political actions entail a symbolic dimension, which exerts either direct or covert influence on the consciousness of the masses and their choices of behavioral options. Simultaneously, both authorities and opposition figures, as well as individual politicians, consciously undertake actions aimed at imbuing specific meanings and organizing the political landscape. These actions possess distinct political and symbolic significance. Whether serving as a component of real politics or existing purely as symbolic acts, symbolic politics interprets and thereby structures the socio-political landscape.

Symbolic politics finds its cultural and political roots in various foundational elements, including political myths, ceremonies, celebrations, and days of remembrance. A political myth is defined as a myth utilized for political purposes, such as the acquisition or legitimization of power, or the establishment of political dominance (Tsuladze, 2003, p. 56). It's widely understood that every political myth serves to conceal the interests of specific individuals and social groups. This definition underscores the pragmatic, applied nature of political myths.

Another definition characterizes a political myth as a complex of values encompassing presuppositions and irrational ideas that constitute an individual's entire worldview (Mikhaylov, 2010). This complex is shaped through the dissemination of ideologies, which act as propaganda and pseudo-rational interpretations of the foundational myth, ultimately serving as acts of faith. This broader definition highlights both the objective, cultural dimensions, and the subjective, ideological-technological aspects of political myths.

To have a clear and comprehensive understanding of the political myth, it is necessary to clarify what myth is in general. Myth and mythological thinking are inherent to human nature and are an inseparable companion of life. In connection with this, the following is mentioned in philosophical literature: Mythological behavior often comes to life before our eyes. We are not talking about remnants of the primitive psyche. Some aspects and functions of mythological thinking are important components of human nature (Eliade, 2000, p. 171).

Among the crucial cultural-political pillars of symbolic politics are political ceremonies, which wield significant influence in political life. These ceremonies essentially constitute symbolic forms of communicative action within the realm of symbolic politics. Inauguration ceremonies for presidents and parliament deputies, military parades, receptions for foreign representatives, and similar events all qualify as political ceremonies.

These ceremonies are intricately intertwined with political myths and frequently serve as vehicles for perpetuating and disseminating such myths within the public consciousness. The primary function of a political ceremony is to convey information to the masses about the government and its underlying values. Through these ceremonial events, governments seek to project their ideals and assert their legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

It's important to recognize that ceremonies, including political ceremonies, are rooted in general cultural practices. According to a common definition, a ceremony entails a stereotyped sequence of actions involving meaningful movements, words, and objects (Turner, 1983, p. 32). These actions are typically performed in

designated spaces to influence supernatural forces or beings. This definition underscores the sacred nature of the performers' attitude towards certain phenomena.

Popular ceremonies encompass various practices, such as standing during a moment of silence or the National Anthem. Additionally, ceremonies associated with death, burial, and remembrance are prevalent across cultures. Ultimately, ceremonies, including political ones, serve as symbolic forms of group behavior. They reproduce symbolic values, regulate and preserve group memory, and assert collective identity.

One of the cultural-political foundations of symbolic politics lies in holidays, celebrations, and memorial days, which serve as crucial tools of what is termed "memory policy". The politics of memory constitutes an integral component of symbolic politics, shaping the interpretation of the past. This interpretation encompasses a multitude of symbolic and cultural practices through which a society remembers or forgets events from its historical past.

It's important to note that the historical past serves as a significant resource for legitimizing governmental authority. Authorities often invoke the past, frequently resorting to historical myths, to justify their actions, decisions, and ideological stances. In doing so, they construct narratives about the past that align with their desired agendas and beliefs.

Currently, the symbolic political landscape of Armenia is characterized by a rich diversity of symbols, ideas, and concepts, often marked by contradictions and doctrinal interpretations that do not align with modern political realities. The implementation of symbolic politics in Armenia primarily serves as a response to the established political landscape, focusing on preserving existing political realities rather than envisioning and shaping a future political order.

During the execution of symbolic politics in Armenia, there is a tendency to utilize forgotten yet still active political symbols, leading to ambiguities within the symbolic space. These symbols often deviate from their original meanings, resulting in dissonance and alienation among the populace. This state of symbolic politics in Armenia underscores the authorities' challenge in legitimizing the current political order.

Therefore, there is a pressing need to conduct an in-depth study of the characteristics of symbolic politics in Armenia, exploring its place and role in political life. Specifically, research should delve into the symbolic political space of Armenia and the political symbols circulating within it to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

The challenges surrounding the symbolic policy implemented in Armenia can be broadly categorized into two main groups: theoretical and practical-applied.

Theoretical issues encompass the construction of the characteristics of symbolic politics in Armenia and its relationship with political reality, as well as identifying its role and significance in either legitimizing or delegitimizing the government. Additionally, theoretical exploration should include studies on the cultural-political foundations of symbolic politics in Armenia, focusing on understanding the mythological layers of mass consciousness, the circulation of political myths, and the significance of political ceremonies, holidays, and memorial days. Furthermore,

delving into the politics of memory, which involves how historical events are remembered or forgotten and its impact on contemporary politics, is of great theoretical importance.

Important practical-applied problems of the symbolic policy implemented in Armenia include studying the main models of interaction between the government and the masses in the information and communication space of Armenia, as well as analyzing the goals, strategies, and technologies of the actors involved in symbolic policy. Additionally, examining the online technologies utilized in the implementation of symbolic policy, along with modern technologies for the representation and observation of the government, are essential aspects to consider.

Conclusion

Today, in the information age in which Armenia has emerged, the role and significance of symbolic politics in political life have unprecedentedly increased. This elevation of symbolic politics poses new challenges for both politicians and political scientists, necessitating the study of symbolic politics implemented in Armenia.

Symbolic politics is an obligatory component of real politics, but in political life, some actions are purely symbolic in nature. These actions are aimed at impressing upon the masses certain meanings and constructing a political reality advantageous to political forces. The main functions of symbolic politics are the construction of socio-political reality and the legitimization or delegitimization of power. Symbolic politics has its cultural and political foundations, which include urban myth, ceremony, holidays, and days of remembrance.

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