Alternative Groups

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Alternative groups embody a basic element of modern political discourse, as such it behoves us to seek to answer three questions pertaining to the rise, and function of such groups in the Arab world, as a means of further understanding socio-political behaviour. The three questions thus addressed are: What are alternative groups? Why do they exist? What is their nature?

Alternative groups comprise associations of like minded people which are formed either to focus on a single issue, or on a multiplicity of issues. Some of the groups have created social movements with an on-going historical meaning, others have been movements that mirrored a social unrest. These groups, which one can describe by the Arabic word, harakat, arise out of a need to carry out change, or movement, in society which existing institutions do not seem capable or able to do. The groups may be legally recognized by the state as formal groups, or they may be ignored by the state either because they have not sought legal recognition or because they prefer anonymity and clandestinity because they may seek to undermine the state. Thus while some associations wish to work within the system, others wish to work without the system and in opposition to it; which begs the question, why alternative groups?

It is one of the ironies of highly industrialized, modern

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societies that as a political system attempts to respond to group and individual needs by, political strategies the positive feelings of individuals for the collectivity decline, because the public becomes anxiety ridden and uncertain. A paradox exists : high utility-high anxiety. The more utilities a government offers its population the greater the alienation, anger and political apathy of that population,(Apter,1977,p.352) which is faced with a heavier psychological load in terms of stress. The individual, wrapped up in his increasing personal problems and higher level of anxiety, begins to lose his sense of public responsibility and concentrates on his personal"gains and losses",in terms of heightened individuality and hedonism, as Bell has pointed out. (Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism,1976)

A second paradox arises as a consequence of the theory of countervailing powers. The basis of that theory is that in order to win political power a large coalition encompassing many different interests must come into existence ; but such a large coalition may represent various competing interest groups generating smaller groups which bleed off the gains of the larger ones as a means of distributing public or collectively won benefits.(Ibid.,p.357) It is true that the most successful alliance is the one comprising the least members, which mitigates the free rider effect. The smaller the number of allies the greater the likelihood of their agreeing on a division of spoils.

Nevertheless at times the smaller group , or groups, succeeds in bleeding off the majority of the gains thereby creating an elite which benefits the most from the new situation.

The third paradox is that as religion declines in society an anomie, or loss of moral meaning, is likely to manifest itself unless an ideology replaces religion. If an ideology does not take root then solidarity within society declines, and religion must rise again as a means of eradicating anomie. Such paradoxes exist in all modernizing and modernized societies, that is, almost everywhere today, for it is a phenomenon that modernizing societies, even when they have not reached the high level of industrialization that has given birth to these paradoxes, manifest the same paradoxes during earlier stages of development. Among advanced industrial societies the political process tries to address itself to such paradoxes and remedy their negative aspects. Pluralism seeks to address the first paradox,through encouraging participation in the political process by means of organized bodies where feedback from the public, in terms of accountability and consent is obtained. On the other hand Theodor Lowi has shown that too many interest groups result in a society that is polarized and parochialized. (End of Liberalism,1969) Representation and bargaining among different groups attempts to remedy the ill effects of the second paradox while the creation of a social ideology so that a situation of homeostasis operates in society addresses the third paradox.

On the other hand some societies which are not highly industrialized manifest similar signs of malaise: alienation, civic indifference , an elitist society, and return to religious values. The individual having lost a previous sense of security, whether because of urbanization, change in the method of production, a government indifferent to individual interests, or any one of a number of other reasons deriving from socio-economic change, is at odds with society. It is the very changes operating within society that render it unfamiliar and alien, difficult to cope with, stressful etc.,especially when the commonplace methods of self-help no longer apply because they are replaced by new and unfamiliar ones, that create the condition of high anxiety. Some societies attempt to address the paradoxical results of industrialization, but what happens to societies which are unable to address the paradoxes and which consequently demonstrate a high degree of alienation, elitism and anomie?

When societies are totalitarian or repressive, the use of force can keep the lid on public discontent for a period of time, the length of which is determined by the degree of repression, the interests of the groups in power and the relative strength of the opposition . In societies which are authoritarian but not totalitarian , as in some third world countries and some Arab world countries, political parties, when they are allowed to exist, attempt to solve some of these problems. But generally

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they are incapable of so doing ,because weak, particularistic and disintegrative rather than aggregative (Almond in Macridis and Brown,1977).   Political parties and corporate groups have traditionally been weak in the Arab world for reasons having to do with socio-economic structure, organization, the overwhelming shadow of a centralized state bureaucracy and, as in the case of Egypt, Syria, Iraq etc. a colonial presence,etc., reasons which I shall not go into in this paper, but the differences between Arab countries and within them may be a good area in which to explore for explanations.   In such societies we note the rise of alternative groups which attempt to fill in the representation vacuum by providing linkages with like minded people. Such people may strive to exert influence by sheer force of numbers,where they would be helpless as individual actors; or by virtue of a special position within society, they may detain some element of authority be it physical as in a para-military group such as the Phalange in Lebanon, or moral such as the ulama everywhere in the Muslim world .   It has been said that poor people can exert influence only by collective action, that the working class person must speak through an agent.(Lane,1959,p.222) The same might be said of all classes of society when society does not provide the mechanism that responds to their needs.   In such societies demands are transmitted to the political structure by informal communication , through personal contact,or through access to cliques, patron client relationships, or through the

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creation of alternative groups rather than through political parties , public interest groups, or corporate bodies . This is not to imply that alternative groups do not exist in all societies, but to underline the fact that in societies which do not have formal, recognized, effective institutions, some groups take over these functions, and arrogate the roles filled by formal institutions to themselves.

While such associations are not corporations in the strict sense,some may, with time, develop into becoming corporate bodies. To recapitulate then, alternative associations arise because of a felt social need in all societies, but they exist in a wider context when other associations which are capable of responding to social needs do not exist, or fail to respond to such needs, even when they do exist. In brief when the normal associations within a society do not fulfil the desiderata of the majority of the members of that society, alternative groups will arise, to form associations that seek to address the needs of society. Within Arab •societies such groups have always existed, for society past or present has consistently failed to meet the needs of the population, and has thus almost institutionalized the presence of alternative groups. That is to say that while institutions do exist, they are weak and so are bolstered by alternative groups which bring in elements of direct loyalties such as family, city, even tribe in some countries. A state of

anomie in Arab society either leads to no action, which leaves the elite free to act as they will; or when people try to eradicate anomie, to setting up groups which seek to end alienation, and wrest concessions from the state , change it or overthrow it. These groups may therefore be confrontational rather than supportive of the state, or mediational.

What is then the nature of alternative groups? It is not my intention to present a taxonomy of alternative groups, but one can attempt to classify them in broad terms along three main lines.

I. The first groups, are those which are set up by the state itself, or with the approval of the state, to act in a mediating capacity between the state and some social groups. In that category one can perhaps place any number of so-called syndicates or professional organizations, those of doctors, lawyers, judges, engineers, trade unions etc. These are often groups defined by class or by special interests and are representative of such interests. While these groups generally work within the system some offshoots from among them may work against the system and in favor of their own vested interests. For example the butchers in Egypt in the late seventies organized themselves to keep the prices of meat high and successfully manipulated the market to their best advantage, in spite of government efforts to prevent them. In Egypt and in Iraq the syndicate of lawyers attempted to mitigate the worst excesses of the regime under

Nasser, Sadat and even Saddam. Trade unions sometimes go on strike, even in authoritarian countries.

II. The second groups arise as a result of the failure or the retreat of the state. These groups are frequently confrontational, although they may be mediational; they may be clandestine , and either seek to overthrow the existing regime, or radically modify it. Generally such groups are not defined solely by class, but represent a coalition of interests. Most representational of such groupings are the dissident members of the military.

The army is probably the most powerful association in a modern state, and is created by the state, so that normally it would rank among the first group of associations. However once the state begins to retreat in its responsibilities towards the body politic, or fails to answer the needs of society thereby creating a power vacuum, army groups will organize themselves to fill that vacuum through a coup or a revolution. The Free Officers in Egypt, and similar associations in Syria, Iraq, Yemen etc., are examples of such alternative groups. Typically they will gather together people with different ideological and political affiliations eg. members of the Muslim brotherhoods, communists, liberals, but who all share in common a single issue: a perceived need for a change of government and of regime. In that sense they form a deviant sub-culture of atomised groups coming together for a single issue. Once that goal is attained

through a successful takeover of government, the coalitions of disparate groupings will inevitably disintegrate over time as different ideological factors move to the front and displace the temporary goal that had cemented them together for a limited duration. That grouping that finally ousts its rivals then makes sure that similar coalitions do not arise in the future to challenge their hegemony, and consequently outlaws other alternative groups which helped them come to power. A repressive state apparatus is set up to achieve total control.

The best example that comes to mind of such a group is the revolution of 1952 in Egypt, which represented a coalition of Free Officers, Muslim Brothers , Misr al-Fatah and communists. Once Nasser seized power he jailed the Muslim Brothers and the communists, and the mukhabarat, the repressive apparatus given wide range. Similar steps were carried out in Iraq, when Arif first used pro-Nasser factions to attain power, used communist factions to get rid of his former allies, then in turn eliminated the communists.

III. The third groups are inspired by socio-economic as well as political imperatives. The members of these groups can be further sub-divided into different categories. Those which develop a revolutionary approach and those who do not seek revolution. We will first examine the groupings with a revolutionary approach.

A) Among the first group as well as the second we would find sufi associations. These orders, turug have existed from the

early days of Islam and continue to the present. They form an
entity , one that is 'other' than the orthodox religious
establishment , which may or may not be in opposition to
orthodoxy, but posits an alternative way for people to obtain
salvation in the afterlife, and the elevation of the soul in
this life. Such orders may seek recognition from the government
by registering themselves, or may choose to remain aloof from any
form of government recognition.(Gilsenan, 1973).

Founded ostensibly for spiritual purposes turuq could also
arise out of a socio-political need and have specific religio-
political goals. Frequently the two are merged and create
revolutionary social movements with an enduring historical
meaning as with the al-Murabitun; others manifest a temporary
unrest, that may be defused by changing circumstances, or by a
repressive regime, and still others arise in the form of
millenary movements an example of which is the Mahdiyya in the
Sudan in the 19th century, or the group which attempted a take-
over of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979. When the group seeks
a revolutionary means to attain its ends it shares some elements
in common with the groups which arise as a consequence of the
retreat or failure of the state. But there is a fine line
dividing those groups from one another. For while the
revolutionary religious groups represent a coalition of classes
they are united in their ideology, and frequently in their aim,
which is a total change of society and the principles of

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government, and not merely a change of personnel and of regime.
They not only put into question the very legitimacy of
government but also the shared value system of their society.
The modern example for such revolutionary groupings are the new
religious coalitions referred to as jamaat.

The recent appearance of jamaat in the Arab world is a clear
indication of an attempt to end the state of anomie on the part
of groups of individuals. As a movement this is comparable to
other socio-cultural protest movements which arose in the past
against modern industrial/secular societies eg. the Chartists,
the Fascists etc. It is equally clear that these groups have
arisen because the ideology spread by the state has not taken
root, or has been rejected, with a consequent perception of a
decline in social morality and social solidarity. The turn to a
religious ideology, or an ideology that uses religious idiom, is
thus seen as providing an alternative to alienation not only in
spiritual but also in social and political terms. This is not to
deny that there is not always a need among some individuals for
religious succour in the best of times, but the phenomenon of the
rise in the Arab world of new sufi groups, or of alternative
groups with a religious dialogue is symptomatic of a constant
malaise in the body politic, and of a search for a way to defuse
it. Spiritual values, a return to one's roots, the notion of
turath, are all aspects of the same search for a valid ideology in
face of a changing society .

The more extremist jamaat may be considered as groups who reject the value system of their society and seek to impose a new value system , that based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, showing a link with the past. But since it is the value system of a society that legitimizes the monopoly of the use of force by the state such coalitions reject the legitimacy of the state.(Johnson, Revolutionary Change, 1966). In western political terms there is 'power deflation' which may be a pre-revolutionary condition . Consequently when the state is weak and loses its coercive clout, the government falls. Should the coercive power of the state remain intact, as in Egypt, Syria or Saudi Arabia, or should few share the value system of the new coalitions then their bid for power is defeated. However in Islamic terms there is an extra dimension to be added, that is the notion of legitimacy. It is one of the major sins, min al-Kabair, for a muslim to live under an illegitimate government, so while people may continue to share the value system of their society they might rise against a ruler, or a government that is regarded as illegitimate.Once the head of state is viewed as illegitimate, he becomes a miscreant,and it is the duty of Muslims to reject him, if they can. On the other hand discretion being the better part of valor, or necessity making lawful what is prohibited , as al-Ghazali said, might allow people to accept a government viewed as illegitimate. The degree of acceptance or

rejection of such a government depends on the degree of alienation of the large majority of the population and its readiness to act in terms of violence. Thus the group which assassinated Sadat declared his rule to be illegitimate, which made it legal, according to their interpretation of events, to kill him, or rather to execute him. The point of controversy here would be over whether the majority accepted such an interpretation (as happened in Iran) or rejected it as happened in Egypt. In the former case the actions of the 'revolutionaries' became 'legal' while in the latter case they became 'illegal'.

The use of religion to legitimize political opposition is not limited to Muslim countries ; Latin America with its 'red priests' and the church in Poland and East Germany are European cases that bear strong structural resemblance to the actions of the jamaat in the Muslim world. In the absence of other legally sanctioned groups or institutions, or when the legally sanctioned groups do not respond to the desiderata of some elements in society, religious bodies become the vehicle for expressing political demands. Such events reveal that the power of coercion of the state is dependent on the acceptance or the rejection of the majority, and not only on the acceptance of the ruler and his government. Whether one accepts the 'coercion theory of society' or the 'value theory' the bottom line is that once the value system of a polity is challenged by a coalition a

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pre-revolutionary stage may be in the making, and the government of that society had best be prepared to right the disequilibrium in society that generated such a rejection of social paradigms. Should the disequilibrium continue uncontrolled for long periods deviants will combine to form a confrontational sub-culture or movement (Johnson, 1966). Such was the case with the Muslim Brothers in both Egypt and Syria, the creation of al-Dawa al-Islamiyya among the shii in Iraq, and the attempt made by a group of Muslims, among whom were members of al-takfir wa-l hijra , one of the jamaat in Egypt, to seize the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

B)   The second, non-revolutionary groups would comprise:

 1- those who seek to reform some aspect of society of a moral/ethical nature;

2- those who pursue an interest of an economic or. political nature;

3- those organized in response to a perceived crisis;

4- those organized round a concept of primordial pluralism;

5- or a combination of any of the four.

1- Among the first group we may include jamaat for a purely religious purpose, or sufi turuq, who are involved in teaching muslims the moral imperatives of Islam; they offer religious guidance and a haven for those torn by conflicting social stresses, and those in mental anguish arising from personal problems or from a society that has lost its cohesiveness with

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rapid change. Such organizations offer a more intimate approach than the more formal orthodox establishment does, and supply a necessary cocoon for those who need it, or seek it.

2- The second group involving those with economic/political interests may include associations formed for an ad hoc immediate purpose, but which are so endemic as to form a basic element in the economic lifestyle of people. These associations arise because there is a constant social need, one that springs from the very foundation of that society. Such groupings are of an informal nature, but they are constantly there with a changing membership, and reflect a constant social response to a perennial need. Among such groups are those set up among women forming a group or jam yya. Women seldom get small loans from banks, especially when they possess no collateral. Consequently when a woman wishes to obtain a sum of money she sets up a jamiyya - a local savings and loan association for a one-shot deal. She gets together with a group of her friends, and each person contributes the same amount of money into a kitty, which every month rotates to a different member of the group. It is a simple method of raising money when it is needed, and paying it off every month, or saving a small sum every month and receiving a lump sum at the end of an agreed upon period. A jamiyya is a purely economic transaction but one which benefits its members, who may or may not be friends, which cuts across class lines, and gender lines, for men will often join such groupings when they cannot borrow

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money by some other means.

Women will also organize themselves to combat a social trend or to push for some political action which they favor. For example a number of women's organizations pushed for changes in the laws of personal status to improve the condition of women in Egypt. While such ad hoc coalitions were on a voluntary and unofficial nature, nonetheless they gave the issue publicity in the newspapers, in movies such as Fatin Hamama's _Uridu_ _hallan_, and in social gatherings. While the results of such actions are long term ones, nonetheless they eventually develop into legal changes such as the legislation enacted in Egypt in 1980. Changes of a similar kind were also pushed for by organizations of women in the Sudan. I have no doubt that similar organizations are at work in most other Arab countries although their outcome may not yet be clear.

A further example is one derived from the economic life of Egypt where a new bourgeoisie pushed for an open-door policy that eventually was adopted by Sadat in the mid-seventies. The new bourgeoisie, which made its money from working in oil-rich Arab countries and remitted its income to Egypt, effectively lobbied for a change in the economic direction of the government. That change was also influenced by a number of external factors into which we need not go here, but the new bourgeoisie certainly had a hand in installing an open door policy in the country. The same might be said of the pressures within Syria which allowed

for a greater participation of the private sector in industry and commerce.

3- Groups may be created for an ad hoc purpose, in response to a crisis that is not of immediate personal or political interest, such as preventing the government from embarking on a project, or trying to force it to carry out a project.

During the Sadat regime there was a project to turn the area round the pyramids into a Disneyland. The area was sold for a pittance to a Japanese company that was to sub-divide it into lots, build lakes,golf courses, landscape it and sell it back to the Egyptians at a hefty profit to the company. Not only was that project a means of exploiting the Egyptians by a foreign company, but worse, it would have ruined the ecology of the region, undermined the structural safety of the pyramids and destroyed the archaeological remains that lie under what is an ancient and major necropolis. A woman, Nimet Fuad, cognizant of the dangers such a project represented , rallied the women of the Cairo Women's Club, who carried out a widespread campaign among their friends and relations and the public of both sexes at large against the project. The outcry and outrage that resulted was so successful that the entire project was scrapped. Once their mission had been accomplished the group disbanded, but remained as an example of what the ordinary citizen can accomplish through organization into an alternative group when a need is perceived. It is not inconceivable that similar groups will continue to

arise in the future to oppose projects such as setting up nuclear reactors which is meeting with opposition among some parts of the Egyptian population . The reaction to Numairi's Islamization decrees on the part of some groups in the Sudan may well have been one of the precipitating factors in his overthrow. The success or failure of such groups might be a first step towards integrating them within a political party, or even to the group deciding to form a party of its own. The successful achievement of a goal by one group signals to other groups in the wings that such groups can work.

4- Groups based on elements of primordial pluralism such as ethnicity or religious affiliations sometimes forge a stronger bond in the Arab world than that of nationalism, and frequently cement relationships of a political nature. As an example we have the hold of the Alawis on the Syrian regime, the Phalange , the Shia and the Druze in Lebanon, the shia in Saudi Arabia,etc. These groups may be highly organized or may simply be vague groupings which feel their ethnicity the strongest when their interests are threatened or perceived to be threatened, as with the Copts in Egypt.

Generally such groups organize themselves as pressure groups within the state, and normally mediate or negotiate with the state, but carried to an extreme , they may disregard the interests of other groups in the body politic and end by destroying the state as is the case in Lebanon, where a decade

of civil war, has pitted ethnic and religious groups against each other in a senseless massacre. While Lebanon is the only case of a state being destroyed by communal strife, other Arab states show communal divisions between shii and sunni, as in Iraq, although these divisions have been temporarily papered over by the war with Iran, and other areas of the Gulf.

People may come together informally when they form part of the same social set - a condition that has been dubbed the shilla as though that made it a uniquely Egyptian phenomenon. People naturally choose allies or partners among their friends, or those with whom they have primary, face to face contact. Political parties in Egypt eg. The Wafd or the Ahrar, were started by groups of friends, who shared common political interests and a common outlook reflecting class and education, as were other groups in the rest of the Arab world and anywhere else. Not all members of the same social set are involved in the same groups, in fact two brothers may choose to join opposing groups. Members of the same school , the same faculty, the same graduating class may also form groups, as was the case with the officers who carried out coups d'etat in the Arab world. But then the old boy network, or the old school tie as well as family linkages providing employment for family members is not limited to the Arab world. English society has long established them as an informal institution.

Family linkages are strong in the Middle East, and

frequently members of an extended family will resort to a
member of the family who is in a position of power to help out
the rest of the family. Thus Hafez al-Assad placed his brother
Rifaat at the head of the national guard, and made him a vice-
president; Kamal Adham, King Faisal's brother-in-law was made
head of Saudi intelligence, while the Sudairi brothers control
the Saudi cabinet; Barzan Takriti, Saddam Husain's half-brother
controlled the security forces in Iraq etc. It is not that these
individuals do not have personal qualifications for occupying
these positions, but the important ingredient is that family
linkages have helped them obtain these positions, which they
might otherwise not have attained, and these family connections
are seen as a means of reinforcing common interests. Sometimes
linkages comprise people coming from the same village. A more
extreme case is that of Iraq where a large portion of the top
administrators all come from the village or town of Takrit. Such
loyalties are regarded as being sufficiently strong to warrant
action taken by the opposition not only against the individual
members comprising the opposition but also against the entire
town. When Hafez al-Assad wished to quell the movement of the
Muslim Brothers he felt that he had to blow up the entire town of
Hama to do that. Thus coalitions arise from among similar
ethnicities, religions, people coming from the same village,
members of the same family and their allies by marriage. A
recent work has tried to make much of allies by marriage as
though that were a clandestine means of creating coalitions, when

it is as old as the hills, and exists in all countries not merely the Arab world.

Coalitions created for an ad hoc purpose may have the possibility or rather the capability of turning into permanent , or formal associations. For example recently in Egypt a group of women intellectuals created an association to disseminate information about women and subjects of interest to women. The women involved came from a number of professions, some were doctors, lawyers, writers, artists, etc. the common bond between them being their sex and their views on what women needed and should be able to acquire. Such an association could easily have been turned into a lobby, and unfortunately that is how the government viewed it when it refused to grant it permission to set up as a recognized association. The state seemed to fear the coming together of like-minded women in a more public place than in the salons of their own homes. At an earlier age a similar organization, the Muslim Women's Association had indeed become an auxiliary to the Muslim Brethren, and may have served as a warning to the government to beware of women's associations. Other coalitions could have turned into more permanent pressure groups, social, economic or political. Some of them could even turn into corporate bodies, and here I would disagree with the belief that Egypt is an unincorporated society, because organized bodies have always been weak and unimportant, or, because Egypt is neither European nor catholic, when the real motive behind

corporations is education, economy etc., on the contrary I
believe that such organizations as existed in the past were
sometimes strong and important.   If we go back to the 18th
century we see how important the role of the ulama was, and how
the role of the sufi orders was even more powerful. The
inescapable conclusion to derive from that example is that
corporations in the Arab world come into existence when the
central power is weakened as in the 18th century, and in Lebanon,
where the central power has always been weak. Egypt at the moment
may be an unincorporated society, but the organizations that have
recently arisen are neither weak nor unimportant, the trade
unions are certainly showing signs of becoming incorporated
~~illegible~~   ), while other associations have
assassinated a president and caused his successor to follow
certain policies within the state which reveal how important he
thought these bodies were and how they should be defused and
similar deviant associations discouraged.   One may look upon the
recent creation of political parties in Egypt as a means of
defusing the creation of future deviant groups, one may also see
Assad's invitation to Syrian Muslim Brethren in exile to return
to the homeland also as an attempt to defuse, or to cure,
+national division.

     Coalitions or alternative groups will arise from within
any lot of like minded people for whatever reason they deem
important enough to bring them together.   Some become more
permanent political coalitions, embryonic political parties in

fact, some became trade organizations, for that is how trade unions came into existence, some remain informal but continue as a means of recruiting and attracting supporters and candidates for office. Whatever the reason may be, in societies which have no political parties, or weak ones, and which have little or no effective institutions, such coalitions play a far more important role than they do in societies with representatives forms of government.

It may well be that society will always need alternative coalitions but representation, participation in the political process, any means which supply feedback from the ruled to the rulers in an orderly and institutionalized manner will certainly minimize the central role that alternative coalitions otherwise play.

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