Can We Apply the Standard Model of the Public Sphere to Afghan Civil Society?

In contemporary political theory, the standard model of the public sphere sees it as the most important way in which civil society relates to the economy and the government (Cohen and Arato 1992, 411). A well-grounded civil society, stabilized through the appropriate structural mechanism, is essential to all forms of political theory – from secular natural law theories to discourse ethics.

Much of the recent literature on the public spheres and civil society in the Middle East and Central Asia has tended to focus either on the emergence of local public spheres that are structurally different from the model employed by Habermas, and Cohen and Arato – for example, Qat Chews in Yemen (Wedewn 2007), or as alternative non-Westphalian institutions – for example, a transnational Islamic Public Sphere, (Salvatore 2007).

While both show how public identities can be formed outside Western secular models of deliberation, I argue that these modes of bargaining cannot properly be called public spheres. I show that in these works, the authors gloss over an important component of public deliberation – lack of deference to rank and authority.

Much recent aid work in Afghanistan has focused on the need to create both a strong civil society and a revitalized public sphere. Drawing on my research in Afghanistan, I argue that public debate is a necessary, but not sufficient condition, for an emergent public sphere and hence a strong civil society. The other models of Middle Eastern and Central Asian public spheres, while attempting to broaden the Habermasian concept, overlook the crucial levelling of rank necessary for the formation of democratic persons.