
Urban Autonomy in Medieval Islam: Damascus, Aleppo, Cordoba, Toledo, Valencia and Tunis

Fukuzo Amabe

Leiden: Brill, 2017, 225 pp.

ISBN 9789004310261

In his book *Urban Autonomy in Medieval Islam*, Fukuzo Amabe, a Japanese scholar of the medieval Middle East, offers a new perspective on the semi-autonomous administration of medieval Islamic cities. He analyzes civic movements and riots in Baghdad, Damascus, Aleppo, Cordoba, Toledo, Valencia and Tunis using Max Weber's concept of autonomous governments in Europe.

With the introduction of Marxist thought, a new inclination to define the features of European countries and towns in terms of their economic dynamics emerged. According to this perspective, the social arrangements of city dwellers are to be viewed as determined by the mode of production, while the city and urban space itself are to be viewed as shaped by purely financial determinants. Max Weber's idealization of the European city shifts the discussion one step further and relates economic and social conditions of cities with their administrations. He introduces the Islamic city as a mal-established organism without proper administrative units. Contrary to Islamic cities, in Weber's view, European cities were divided into two main categories of legitimate administration: those under patrician domination and those under plebeian domination. The presence of a central power played an important role in the administration of cities, which normally were ruled by a local ruler assigned by a government beyond the city itself. When the power of the central government declined, cities tended to recover their independence. As a result, forms of autonomous domination came into existence. Patrician domination was established when "part of the middle and lower echelons of citizens became armed supporters of an oligarchy of notables" (p. 4). Plebeian domination, on the other hand, was the rule of lower echelons "under the leadership of one of their own peers" (p. 5).

During the tenth and eleventh centuries, several centralized authorities of the Middle East, including the Abbasid-Buyid state, the Andalusí Umayyad state, the Fatimids, the Zirid state of North Africa and the Byzantine Empire, broke apart. With this development many cities were forced to recover their autonomy under their own leaders. This moment of Islamic history offers the author cases with which to analyze the appearance of local autonomy under

patrician and plebeian dominations. Although his study is based primarily on Weberian framework, he does not believe that the two forms of legitimate domination belong to Europe alone. Instead, he argues that they are universal for the medieval world and applicable to medieval Islamic cities. Thus, he states that “despite [their] rather short-term survival as compared with medieval European cities, autonomous cities did exist in medieval Islam in a more significant degree than has been hitherto considered” (p. 16). In other words, for Amabe, there were times when the inhabitants of Islamic cities were eager and able to establish autonomous administrations. To prove this argument, he investigates seven cities in seven chapters and studies the civic movements and power shifts in each.

In Chapter 1, Amabe describes ninth-century Baghdad as the earliest example where civic movements and attempts to establish a patrician domination took place. Whenever the caliphal authority lost its influence, the leaders of the privileged Khurasani warriors recruited people and created a rival government. The second city is Damascus. According to the author, it was the first notable-led city during the eleventh century. With the help of local militia, residents won autonomy in the course of a rebellion against the Fatimids. When the Fatimid army entered the city, “the authority of notables was [at] its lowest ebb” (p. 42). They invited Alptegin, the commander of a Turkic army, for help. He restored order for a while, but soon thereafter was captured by the Fatimids. Neither a pure patrician nor a plebeian domination was established in the city. In Chapter 3, Amabe investigates how a local ruler realized patrician domination in eleventh-century Aleppo. It was the time of Nur al-Din Zangi (d.1174) when an invited governor established his authority over the notables in the first half of the twelfth century. The fourth chapter turns to medieval Andalusia. During the eleventh century, Cordoba faced various integral struggles between the Saqaliba (slaves, including eunuchs, who were imported through France and Italy), the Berbers, and the populace. The notables, on the other hand, tried to establish their own oligarchy under nominal Umayyad caliphs. Although they were successful, to an extent, with the abolishment of the caliphate in 1031, the political unity of the region broke into a number of petty kingdoms. In the following chapter Amabe analyzes the eleventh-century Toledo. The civil war in Cordoba affected directly the community. In the twelfth century, it was probably the patricians who were able to choose their own political leaders in the city. Chapter 6 focuses on how the arability of Valencia exposed it to many Muslim and Christian attacks. According to the author, this resulted in the termination of a quasi-patrician domination. Finally, following the decline of the Zirid Dynasty after

the Battle of Haydaran in 1052, almost every coastal city around Tripoli was led by local rulers. The citizens of Tunis retained their autonomy under a leader of their own choice while paying allegiance to external forces.

The study of *Urban Autonomy* is productive in several ways. First of all, it contributes to the growing literature of urban studies. It might be one of the few focuses within the discipline that attempts to investigate various cities with an analysis of administration as a translocal phenomenon. The author uses a wide geographical scope to study analogous administrative changes in different cities, and the book highlights spatiality as a means of seeing the evolution of patricians and plebeians in different spaces. Secondly, in the introduction, Amabe meticulously discusses the development of post-Weberian Western methodology on Islamic cities and reviews studies on the subject, published mostly in the twentieth century. This comprehensive survey will be of use to any researcher who seeks to develop an understanding of the scholarship of Islamic cities.

However, the book has two major problems. The first of these is perhaps an inevitable result of the Weberian perspective the author adopts. In addition to being Eurocentric, the concept that Amabe uses has received a great deal of criticism even in the literature on European cities. It neglects a great part of the local particularities in cities and diminishes the value of the divergences within different groups. Likewise, Amabe gives brief explanations of communities and categorizes them under two broad concepts: patrician and plebeian. In the book, the people, including *ahdath*, *ayyarun*, *shurta*, and the Berber mercenaries, are treated within the same categories. This attitude is problematic not only because it neglects their diversity but also because it presents medieval Islamic city dwellers as people who were above all religiously and socially motivated, as if the only *raison d'être* of the habitants was to govern their cities. Because of the vastness of the geographical scope and the plurality of different classes within the Muslim groups he discusses, his approach restricts the conduction of the narrative and damage the validity of his argument.

The second flaw is the more serious of the two, and it is a result of Amabe's decision to focus almost exclusively on civic movements. He constantly offers examples of riots and internal struggles within the cities to defend his initial argument about the nature of their form of local autonomy. At the end of each example, he briefly tells which kind of domination is found as a result of that particular quarrel. However, this method does not allow the reader to see the outcomes and functioning of the cities' autonomy. Expanding the focus to include administrative and maintenance systems would have enabled

Amabe to show how a patrician-dominated or plebeian-dominated city sustained its governing mechanisms once a type of legitimate domination had been achieved. Such an approach would have also been a productive way to counter Weber's primary theoretical position on Islamic cities and to argue for the universality of these medieval administrative systems. However, focusing only on civic movements makes the book more a compendium of riot stories than a well-defended study.

All in all, *Urban Autonomy* is a successful effort to argue for the existence of autonomous cities in the medieval Islamic world. Although it has some shortcomings, Amabe published a book with instructive techniques. It will be useful especially for students pursuing a career in urban history. The book is also a valuable source for people who are interested in reading an analysis of medieval Islamic cities based on primary sources produced by their citizens.

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DOI 10.26570/isad.461149