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Fall 11-30-2018

### We Need Less Power Distance in Egyptian Bureaucracies

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#### Recommended Citation

##### APA Citation

Baradei, L. (2018). We Need Less Power Distance in Egyptian Bureaucracies. *PATIMES*, [https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty\\_journal\\_articles/4413](https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_journal_articles/4413)

##### MLA Citation

Baradei, Laila El "We Need Less Power Distance in Egyptian Bureaucracies." *PATIMES*, 2018, [https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty\\_journal\\_articles/4413](https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_journal_articles/4413)

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This is an author's draft of an article published in the PA Times.

The final version, the version of record, is available online at:

<https://patimes.org/forms-of-duality-of-institutions-and-the-reasons-why-egypts-case/>



## We Need Less Power Distance in Egyptian Bureaucracies

Being an Egyptian who has worked and interacted intensively with government bodies, I can clearly attest to the fact that Egypt is one of the countries which is high in “power distance.” Perhaps it is now time to work on reducing that distance in order to avoid many of its negative attributes and cut back on many of its associated manifestations in our public organizations.

When Geert Hofstede developed his model of Cultural Differences amongst nations in the early 1970s, the first dimension he included in his model was “power distance,” which, as defined by Hofstede himself, refers to “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.” Countries low in power distance include the US, UK, Australia, Germany, Sweden and Norway. In those countries there are less formalities followed between employees working at various levels of an organizational hierarchy and more opportunities for disagreeing with leaders and demanding a more consultative leadership approach. The opposite is true in countries high on power distance, including several Asian, African and Arab countries, such as: Japan, Singapore, China, Malaysia, Cameroon, Uganda and Egypt.

According to Hofstede, one of the main purposes of his Cultural Differences model was to try to understand how to be an effective leader in a globalized setup. The categorization of different nations along the various model dimensions is not value ridden. Being high or low on power distance is neither good, nor bad, but in Egypt, in my opinion, it sometimes becomes rather funny, and, at other times, the situation borders on hypocrisy. Within work and formal professional setups, especially amongst the traditional bureaucrats, the power distance dimension is taken to an extreme:

- Whenever there is a meeting with a minister or high level official, it is not only that he/she must chair the meeting, but the chair must be different and bigger than the rest of those for the other meeting participants.
- Watching formal governmental meetings on TV, you notice how many times the ministers sit with a poker face, looking down to the floor, sometimes at the edge of their chairs, since they are in the presence of a higher level official.
- Excessive formalities are used in correspondence to higher level officials in government, generously using word equivalents like “your excellency,” “your highness,” “supreme Pacha” and the like.
- In one of the ministries, the employees went to an extreme in expressing their acceptance of power distance by making sure whenever the minister was ready to leave the building, they would burn fragrant incense in the corridors through which the minister will pass on his way out of the ministry.
- In public universities, when professors pass through a corridor, all the custodian staff must spring up from their chairs and stand up in salutation.
- Many of the official documents, plans and strategy papers start with the phrase “Upon the guidance given by the political leadership,” and “political leadership” is often the term used to refer to the President of the republic, in a very clear concession and acceptance of where power lies.
- An additional manifestation of how “power distance” is taken to an extreme is in the size of the offices for the top level officials, and the extravagance in the furnishings used, compared to the rest of the organization they are heading, although of course Egypt is a developing country with limited resources.

Of course, Hofstede’s model was described as a “watershed” because of the great number of subsequent studies that either tested, extrapolated and/or refuted his model. Many of those studies concluded that the rise in the ‘power distance’ dimension may be correlated with a few negative attributes. Jain and Jain in 2018, tried to prove that with higher power distance there is less demand

for transparency. Lian et al in 2012 suggested that high power distance orientation leads to more acceptance of abusive supervision, while Rinne et al in 2012 suggested that high power distance may be negatively correlated with Global Innovation scores, and Matusitz et al in 2013 found a negative correlation between power distance and human development. Terzin in 2011 concluded that there is a negative and significant relationship between high power distance and democratic tendencies. Khatri in 2009 concluded that although at the organizational level decisions may be speedier when there is high power distance, yet the quality of those decisions may be undermined because the lower level employees do not get to be consulted.

We may accept that Hofstede's cultural dimensions are not set in stone, and there were several studies that criticized his model and methodology. However, given all these mostly negative attributes of a high-power distance culture in the above cited studies, and given the superfluous and exaggerated manifestations of high-power distance in our Egyptian institutions, I think it is time to think of ways of shrinking this distance.