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Contested Notions of National Identity, Ethnic Movements and Democratisation in Iran

Ozum Yesiltas*

Abstract

Since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, successive regimes in Iran promoted competing conceptions of Iranian national identity. However, the policy of promoting nationalism as a state-sponsored ideology that excludes Iran's ethnic and religious diversity remained unchanged. Competing discourses around nation building and identity strikingly intersect with the struggle for democratization in Iran. Since the Islamic Revolution, the pro-democracy movement in the country takes place on two fronts: the confrontation between the conservatives and the reformists, and the challenge posed by the ethnic movements towards the official denial of the ethnic and religious diversity of Iran. This article argues that be they reformist or conservative, successive governments in Iran have refused to recognise the multi-ethnic structure of Iranian society and the legitimate rights of the ethnic groups. Therefore, a regime change would be unlikely to alter the social and political status of ethnic and religious minorities unless the ethnic movements and the pro-democracy opposition collaborate. Formation of a common discourse on the question of 'Iranianness' is the primary condition for this to be accomplished.

Keywords: national identity, ethnicity, democratisation, minority rights.

Introduction

The fact that Iran is characterised by diverse ethnic groups, languages, regions and religions has generated contested conceptions of nationhood at various stages of Iran's modern history. Although the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural structure of Iranian society goes back to pre-Islamic times, it became a significant component of Iranian political life following the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Throughout the twentieth century, state building in Iran evolved as a dynamic process, informed by diverse conceptions of nationalism, including linguistic, territorial, ethnic and religious ones. Varying emphasis on these complementary but often competing articulations of nationalism has transformed Iranian politics in radical ways (Kashani-Sabet, 2002, p. 162).

Although the proclamation of the Islamic Republic in 1979 resulted in the triumph of Islam as the primary identity marker, it soon found itself in a precarious state as a result of the power struggle between the conservative and reformist factions within the regime. Nevertheless, the conservative-reformist confrontation offers only a limited understanding of the contestation of the processes, policies and discourses of national identity building in post-revolutionary Iran. It has been shown time and again that, be they reformist or conservative, successive governments have refused to recognise the multi-ethnic structure of Iranian society and the legitimate rights of the ethnic groups. The construction of national identity, thus, became an increasingly problematic task due to the ever-increasing level of ethnic consciousness among representatives of Iran's numerous identities, who challenge the homogenised understanding of Iranian national identity shared by both the reformists and conservatives.

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Many of the minorities in Iran – the Arabs, Balochs, Kurds and Turkmen – have never embraced the uniform Iranian national identity perpetuated by the ruling elites or integrated fully within Iranian society (Boroujerdi, 1998, p. 54). The ethnic movements have been constantly suppressed by the Islamic regime, which perceived the demands of the minorities as an instrument of separatism. Nevertheless, through their growing opposition to the regime's minority policies since 1979, identity groups across Iran have become a crucial force to be reckoned with, turning ethnic mobilisation and minority politics into an important space of resistance and movement for political change in the country.

The present work provides an overview of the modern history of Iran within the framework of Rogers Brubaker's notion of 'nationalising states' in order to account for minority-majority relations in the Iranian context. The paper argues that competing discourses around nation building and identity strikingly intersect with the struggle for democratisation in Iran. Since the Islamic Revolution, the pro-democracy movement in the country takes place on two fronts: the confrontation between the conservatives and the reformists, who advocate for competing concepts of sovereignty and nationalism, and the struggle of ethnic movements to change the authoritarian essence of the political system by challenging the state-led denial of the ethnic and religious diversity of Iran.

The ethnic movements in Iran are strong, but they realise their fate is intertwined with the reformist opposition, as the minorities cannot achieve political change alone. Establishment of alliances between the Iranian opposition and ethnic political groups depends on the ability of the reformists to develop a more inclusive leadership and a genuine democratic agenda that addresses the demands of the ethnic minorities. Formation of a common discourse on the question of 'Iranianness' is the primary condition for this to be accomplished.

Nationalising Iran: Discourses and Counter-Discourses

Rogers Brubaker (1996) explains the dynamic nature of the nation-building process by referring to the term 'nationalising state', which highlights the unfinished and ongoing nature of nationalist projects pursued by 'unrealised' nation-states (p. 114). The nationalising state is understood to be an organisational shell that had to be filled with national content, bringing population, territory, culture, and polity into the close congruence that defines a fully realised nation-state (Brubaker, 2011, p. 1786). Thus, according to Brubaker's concept of nation, Iran is not a fully realised nation-state, but rather a 'nationalising state' that is constituted by a dynamically changing field of competitive position or stances adopted by different organisations, parties, movements, or individual figures within and around the state (Brubaker, 1995, p. 116).

The notion of nationalising states provides a useful conceptual lens through which to understand the state-sponsored processes of constructing an overarching societal culture of common values and institutions required to promote internal unity. Yet, the concept's explanatory power is limited in that it emerged primarily from the study of post-communist forms of nationalism in Soviet successor states. The analytical prism offered by the concept of a nationalizing state is embedded in a deeply institutionalised ethno-cultural understanding of nationhood that prioritises an 'ethnicised' concept of nationalism. The state is understood as the state of and for the ethno-culturally defined 'core' nation, whose language, culture, economic welfare and political hegemony need to be strengthened, and the justification of such action is compensation for previous oppression (Brubaker, 2011, p. 1786).

Brubaker's emphasis on ethno-culturally defined core nations derives from his focus on the specific political and institutional legacy of multinational predecessor polities, which helps explain the prevalence of a distinctive kind of nationalizing discourse in the Soviet successor states. In Iran, on the other hand, the role played by ethnicity in the state cultivation of a uniform national identity was historically limited. Iranian citizenry is a differentiated community with important crisscrossing

splits in terms of socioeconomic class backgrounds, genders, cultural practices, religions, provincial and ethnic ties, and political aspirations (Farhi, 2005, p. 8-9). The 'essence' of Iranian political, cultural and social life is too multifaceted to be captured solely by the notion of nations built around 'ethnic cores.' What are crucial to the debate on nationalism in Iran are the 'counter nationalizing discourses' developed by Iran's diverse minorities, who highlight ethnicity as their primary identity marker. Their demands for linguistic, cultural and political rights have brought the 'ethnic question' to the forefront of Iran's political agenda and become a constant reminder of the regime's failure to establish an inclusive democratic polity.

Rather than the notion of 'nationalising state,' it makes more sense to speak of competing nationalizing discourses and practices in the context of Iranian politics. That would broaden the boundaries of nationalising policies beyond the realm of elites in charge of the state and open room for considering the ethnic movements in Iran as 'agents' as well as 'subjects' of nationalising processes. Bhabha emphasises the value that lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life is constructed (Bhabha, 1990, p. 3). He draws attention to the tendency to read the nation rather restrictively, as the ideological apparatus of state power, and underlines the often obscured, but highly significant, recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of peoples and oppositional capacities may emerge (ibid.). Within their encounters with the state, the ethnicities in Iran assigned new meanings and different directions to the processes of national identity construction in the country.

Brubaker makes a distinction between the core nation, whose economic and political interests are promoted by the state, and national minorities, who are exposed to policies of assimilation/integration. Nonetheless, he considers nationalizing policies and practices to be performed exclusively by the state elites, while considering national minorities within a narrowly defined framework of 'reactive nationalism,' which assigns them a passive role in their encounters with the state. While reacting to the state's nationalizing policies and practices, however, the national minorities affect and reshape the legal and institutional structures and political alignments in diverse ways in Iran. This creates a fluid and reciprocal relationship between the minority groups and the Iranian regime and shifts attention to the proactive characteristics and transformative potentials of ethnic movements in Iran.

Linz and Stepan (1996, p 35-3) account for the implications of Brubaker's notion of nationalising states for democratic consolidation and argue that the state elites' attempts to homogenise multicultural societies will harm democratic consolidation. It is true that the homogenizing impact of nationalising policies reinforces state authoritarianism, which creates the automatic assumption that the question of nationalizing states is a 'negative' phenomenon. However, under certain circumstances, nationalizing policies may in fact play a 'positive' role in preparing a given society for transition to democracy. This holds true particularly in multi-ethnic polities like Iran, where national minorities challenge the state-instigated homogenised understanding of national identity through counter-nationalizing discourses.

The Status of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Iran: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic

Iran is the second largest country in the Middle East with a population of approximately seventy-eight million (UN Demographic Yearbook 2013). Although the statistics regarding the ethnic groups in Iran vary according to different sources, estimates suggest that 51% of Iran's population is ethnic Persian, the rest being Azeris (24%), Gilaki and Mazandarani (8%), Kurd (7%), Arab (3%), Lur (2%), Baloch (2%), Turkmen (2%), and other (1%) (Hassan 2007; CIA 2012). The majority of the non-Persian ethnic groups live in the border regions of Kurdistan, Turkman Sahra, Sistan and Baluchestan and Khuzestan provinces.

The Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which can be said to represent the beginning of Iran's modern history, was oriented towards establishing a nation state where language was defined as the essential component of national identity. In their struggle to form a new political establishment, the Constitutionalists adopted the strategy of purifying the Persian language of Arabic terms and dissociating Iran from Islam (Tavakoli-Targhi, 1990, p. 93). The ethnic and cultural diversity of the Iranian society was subsumed under the general notion of the 'Iranian people', whose identity was defined by pre-Islamic history and the Persian language. The local and regional languages were neither recognised nor denied.

Yack (1999) contends that nationalisation of the political community has traditionally been accompanied by modernisation and nation building (p.105). In the context of the Middle East, the nationalising states were largely products of the colonial era, which left its mark on the emerging state structures of the region. The external colonial competition that the region was exposed to since the 19th century resulted in widespread processes of modernisation and development and the rise of the nation state model. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 was a culmination of Iran's efforts to protect its autonomy vis-à-vis foreign powers in the face of growing colonial pressures. Nevertheless, while the resistance against Western domination considerably expanded the 'anti-imperialist' scope of the Iranian nationalist discourse, the policy of promoting internal unity against external threats, ironically, was implemented through the historic vehicle of the rise of Western world power, the nation state.

The marginalisation of ethnic differences in the Constitutional era revealed the latent authoritarianism of the discourse of modernisation, which required unity and the promotion of a homogeneous culture. Gellner argues that with the advent of the modern industrial society in the nineteenth and twentieth century, cultural homogeneity emerged as a requirement for the modern state, an inescapable imperative that manifests and erupts in the form of nationalism (Gellner, 1983). This 'national' condition of modernity is exclusive and intolerant, dictating that people who do not have the cultural characteristics of the 'core nation' are to choose between assimilation and migration (Gellner, 1997, p. 240). The Constitutional Law of 1906-07 was silent on the subject of minorities, yet the emerging Iranian nationalism soon broke this silence through the official public discourse, particularly after the rise of the Pahlavi State in 1925, with an argument for national revival and progress that was premised on the need for political and economic modernization (Vali, 2011, p. 5).

Reza Shah, who founded the Pahlavi Dynasty in 1925, shaped Iranian nationalism by infusing it with a distinctly secular ideology. He established a constitutional monarchy and saw the fostering of the idea of 'one nation' and 'one language' as fundamental to the creation of a modern, unified and centralised Iran. The common historical experience of the peoples of Iran and attachment to the Persian language were promoted as the two main components of a collective Iranian identity. The state ideology advertised 'Iranians' as a 'pure Aryan race' in order to de-emphasise Arab and Islamic influences on Iranian history. Hence, during the Pahlavi era, rather than purely ethnic, a civilisational and linguistic understanding of the 'core nation' was promoted by the state. Pre-Islamic culture and Persian language and literature were officially propagated through the state-controlled media and the education system. To the detriment of the cultural rights of the minorities, writing in non-Persian languages and speaking these languages in public places were declared illegal and were punished (Hassanpour, 1994, p. 86).

The policies of territorial centralism and denial of Iran's ethno-national diversity were forcefully pursued by the first Pahlavi state from 1926 to 1941, and then, after a short lull, again by the second Pahlavi state, continuing until 1979 (Farhi, 2005, p. 12). The Iranian Revolution and the downfall of the monarchy effectively did nothing to change this dynamic. Despite the dramatic and significant shift from the secular nationalism of the Pahlavi State to the religious focus of the Islamic Republic, relatively little change was seen in minority-state relationships (Higgins, 1984, p. 39).

While defining national identity, the Islamic Revolution took a different track but with a similar bend by emphasizing religious identity as supranational and supra-ethnic. The new government declared ethnic identification to be an offense against the overarching Muslim identity, thus, proved to be largely negligent of the ethnic issue in Iran, like its predecessor. Islam was taken as the focal symbol of identity between the state and the people and the common culture promoted by the state (Cottam, 1979; Helfgott, 1980). The revolution offered Shia Islam as the main pillar of Iranian collective identity, which introduced the Sunni-Shia divide as the key determinant of majority-minority relationships.¹ Hence, following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the state definition of the 'core nation' took an entirely religious character, which promoted 'religious nationalising' as the primary dynamic of state-society relations. The primacy of Shi'ism considerably accentuated Sunni grievances, including mostly the Turkmen, a minority of Arabs, Balochs and Kurds. Since each of these collectivities is also identified as an ethnic group, they constitute a sort of 'double' minority: ethnic and religious (Elling, 2013, p. 19).

As a state entity, Iran is constitutionally at ease with its ethnic minorities. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic established the principle of equality in Article 19, which states that 'all people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; and color, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege.' The Islamic Republican state has neither been moved by sweeping laws to restrict minority language publications or cultural activities, nor does the Islamic Republic proclaim itself for ethnic Persians in an exclusive way. The constitution recognises the national minorities' right to use their languages in the mass media and education. Article 15 states that:

The official language and script of Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian. Official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as text-books, must be in this language and script. However, the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian.

Persian, despite being the official language, is the mother tongue of barely half of the population in Iran. Other languages include Turkic, Kurdish, Balochi, Luri, Arabic, Gilaki, Assyrian, and Armenian (Tohidi, 2009, pp. 299-300). The constitution does not obligate – but only allows – the teaching of local and ethnic languages in schools. Although the instruction of these languages is allowed in addition to Persian, no permanent measures have been introduced in Iran's education system to facilitate teaching in minority languages, nor to teach such languages as a second language (Amnesty International, 2008, p. 11). Even if Article 15 is fully implemented, it falls short of guaranteeing the full scope of human rights associated with the use of a mother tongue. The article permits the use of local languages in media and education so long as they are used in conjunction with Persian. The phrase 'regional and tribal languages' includes no recognition of the linguistic identities of national and ethnic minorities or of a mother language as a fundamental principle.

When analysing the minority politics of the Islamic Republic, it is important to note that the central problem lies more with the implementation than the law itself. The aforementioned provisions were never fully implemented and had little potency in reality. The essence of the legal problem facing Iran's national minorities is not that there is a body of discriminatory anti-minority or Persian-first legislation. Rather, ethnic movements in Iran face the same obstacles confronted by other pluralistic, secular political movements in the country – that much law in the Islamic Republic permits arbitrary

1 The Sunnis and the Shia are the two main branches of Islam. The split originates from a dispute over who should lead the Muslim community following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The great majority of Muslims are Sunnis (approximately 85-90%). In general the differences between the members of the two sects lie in the field of doctrine, ritual, law, theology and religious organisation.

clerical rule and fails to protect basic freedoms (Hicks & Hicks, 2007, p. 212). Constitutional provisions establishing the right to freedom of expression, political participation and other basic freedoms are rendered impotent by clauses asserting the primacy of undefined Islamic interests (p. 212).

The Early Counter Nationalizing Discourses: The Kurdish and Azeri Movements

In his account of post-colonial nationalist regimes, Chatterjee states that no matter how skilfully employed, modern statecraft cannot effectively suppress the very real tensions that remain unresolved (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 169). He draws attention to the movements based on ethnic identities as proofs of the incomplete resolution of 'the national question.' Although Iran was never officially colonised in a way that much of the Middle East was by the British and the French, it was among the primary targets of colonial interests in the region. Hence, the dominant characteristics of colonialism, particularly the nation-state model exported by the European powers, took root in Iran as much as it did in the rest of the Middle East.

The first counter-nationalising discourses facing Tehran emerged in 1945. The Kurdish and Azeri national movements erupted as a reaction to the politics of territorial centralism and the cultural process of the construction of a uniform Iranian identity pursued by the Pahlavi state since 1925 (Vali, 2011, pp. 1-2). The rise of the Kurdish and Azeri nationalisms resulted in the establishment of two self-governing bodies in northern Iran: The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad and Azerbaijan People's Government. The goals of the Kurds and Azeris were focused on gaining autonomy for their people within the territorial limits of Iran and administering their affairs in their own language. Both movements, however, were portrayed by the state as a threat to the territorial integrity and unity of the Iranian nation. Furthermore, the fact that the Kurdish and Azeri challenges to the state emerged as Soviet-backed movements reinforced the state's use of anti-imperialist narrative, through which Iran's ethno-national diversity was constantly reproduced as a 'foreign instigated' security threat in official state discourses rather than a political question of how to address the demands of ethnic minorities for equal rights.

The Kurdish and Azeri movements of 1945-1946 not only marked the formation of ethnic movements in Iran, but also provided an institutionalised framework for the promotion of political pluralism, decentralisation of power, provincial and local administrative and cultural autonomy, and respect for religious and ethnic differences in the country (Vali, 2011, p. 90). In effect, these early ethnic challenges towards the Iranian state crucially revealed the Pahlavi regime's failure to forge a genuine sense of national cohesiveness, as well as the shortcomings of citizenship and democratic political process within the juridico-political framework of Iranian sovereignty. The establishment of Kurdish and Azerbaijani autonomous regimes highlighted the crucial problem confronting the various collectivities co-existing under the same political rubric in Iran: The focus of the national question is less of an identity issue – 'Who is an Iranian?' – and more of an institutional matter – 'How can the Iranians of all colors and ethnicities build a common political life and effective institutions of government?' (Farhi, 2005, p. 13).

The autonomous governments of the Azeris and the Kurds were short-lived. Both movements were crushed by the Iranian government forces in November and December 1946, respectively. Following that, the ethnic movements in Iran remained largely in the background until they reappeared in the antimonarchy push that precipitated the 1979 Revolution. The downfall of the monarchy was seen by the ethnic groups as a unique opportunity to revive the debate on effective governance in Iran and push for autonomy and recognition of their cultural rights. Ethnic groups had backed the Islamic Revolution and broadly participated in the revolutionary process from the outset. However, the ethnic

regions and Tehran quickly became antagonistic as it soon became apparent that the demand of various identity groups for the establishment of a democratic republic was not compatible with the new regime's objective of establishing a strong and centralised Islamic state.

Ethnic movements and the State after the Islamic Revolution

After the Islamic revolutionary regime established power, Iran's Turkmen, Balochs, Arabs, and Kurds staged revolts. The demands, despite their diversity, had much in common: The national minorities should enjoy autonomy and administer their own social, cultural, linguistic and economic affairs, while the federal government would manage foreign policy, financial and defense issues (Mojab & Hassanpour, 1996, p. 234). With the exception of the Kurdish challenge, the regime put each uprising down relatively quickly (Hiro, 1987, pp. 111-113). Although the state succeeded in tackling the ethnic uprisings, it lost the ideological and political war against the minority nationalisms. Since the proclamation of the Islamic Republic, there has been little support for the Islamic regime, its ideology and politics in the ethnic regions of Iran.

The reasons behind the ethnic uprisings against the Islamic state were easily discernible. When the Kurds, Arabs, Balochs and Turkmen put their demands before the Islamic Republic, they were told all Iranians are Muslim and ethnic identification is not to be emphasised. However, according to Article 12 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, the official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari School, which establishes Shia Islam as the primary principle of unity. In addition, Article 13 of the Constitution recognises only the Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Iranians as religious minorities. Thus, given the Islamic Republic's Shia exceptionalism as well as its prohibition of ethnic identification under the overarching Muslim identity, the Kurds, Balochs, Arabs and Turkmen are not able to invoke minority status either as non-Persians or as Sunnis. Having no constitutionally recognised identity according to either criterion, they abstained almost unanimously from voting for the new constitution after the proclamation of the Islamic Republic.

The only exception to the antagonistic majority-minority relationships in post-revolutionary Iran is the Azeri community, which is the largest ethnic minority group in Iran. The Azeris were among the groups that posed an ethnic challenge to the regime during the Pahlavi era because of the state's emphasis on linguistic unity. However, as far as their religious identity is concerned, the Azeris are a predominantly Shia community. Therefore, following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, they were better integrated into the religio-national identity promoted by the new state than other non-Persian Sunni groups. After the 1979 revolution, the Azeris, as a Shia community, ceased to constitute a threat in the eyes of the new regime. They started to enjoy representation at all levels of the political, military, intellectual and religious hierarchy.

The center-periphery and inter-ethnic dynamics strikingly overlap in Iran. Tehran's uneven, top-down and highly centralised development strategy, or as many see it, 'Persian/Shia-centered' nation-state building, has resulted in a wide socioeconomic gap between the center and the peripheries, which are predominantly inhabited by the ethnic minority groups. Attributable to its Shia make-up, the provinces that comprise Iranian Azerbaijan constitute a major exception to this dynamic. Iranian Azerbaijan today has the largest concentration of industry and trade outside of Tehran, as opposed to the considerable socioeconomic and political disparity existing between other ethnic regions and the Persian center (Wimbush, 1979, pp. 61-81). This uneven distribution of power, socioeconomic resources and sociocultural status created long-standing grievances and played a significant role in fueling community self-awareness on the periphery (Bradley, 2006, p. 181).

The Emergence of Ethnic Movements as a 'Third Force' in Iran

Opposition to the Islamic government in Iran began to form shortly after the revolution that ended the Shah's reign. The wave of reform that emerged in Iran in the 1990s remarkably crystallised the power struggle among the contending forces within the Iranian regime: the reformist call for democratisation of the state and the conservative opposition to it. The source of the power struggle between the reformist and conservative factions was rooted in the Islamic government's attempt to blend elements of theocracy with those of a republic. The constitution of the Islamic Republic embraces two conflicting and competing conceptions of sovereignty. One is the 'popular sovereignty,' which is inscribed in Article 1 of the constitution and represents the indivisible will of the Iranian nation, and the other is the 'divine sovereignty,' which represents the paramount status of God's law.

Confrontation between the popular and divine conceptions of sovereignty created a contested arena regarding the question of national identity in Iran. The religio-national identity promoted by the conservatives was challenged by the reformists' opposition against the strict clerical control over law and behavior. The reformists tried to marginalise the divine concept of sovereignty in order to give the popular-democratic conception its due place in the constitution. To that end, they emphasised liberal nationalist ideas and the promotion of basic freedoms and human rights. Many reformist intellectuals moved beyond the old paradigms of both a secular Aryan-centered and a religious Shia-centered, homogenised Iranian identity (Tohidi, 2009, p. 319). Nonetheless, despite the rights-based language they adopted, the status of religious and ethnic minorities remained a neglected aspect of the reformists' human rights discourse. The reform movement's goal of democratising the Iranian political culture did not include any significant questioning of the state-sponsored notion of national identity that was based on the Shia Islamist exclusionary discourse of the conservatives.

In this context, the emergence of the ethnic movements as a 'third force' within the movement of change in Iran originated directly from the challenge that minority rights activists posed upon the exclusionist and homogeneous understanding of the nation shared by both the conservatives and the reformists. Minority rights activists underscore that their ethnic-related demands are inseparable from the national demands for greater democracy and socioeconomic development that concern all people of Iran (Tohidi, 2009, p. 310). They criticise the reformist intellectuals for their failure to recognise Iran's multiethnic reality and for their reluctance to embrace the ethnic movements' emphasis on pluralism and multiculturalism.

There has been tension and mistrust between many Iranian pro-democracy and human rights activists and ethno-nationalists mainly due to the separatist stigma attached to the majority of politically active minority groups in Iran. For ethno-nationalists, the pro-democracy Iranian opposition does not aim at genuine political change, but only strives to take control of the state by marginalising the conservative faction. On many occasions, human rights activists, intellectuals, and political organisations in the opposition were criticised by the minority groups because of their hesitance to support the demands of ethnic and religious minorities (Shemirani, 2005). The Marxist-inclined Tudeh party, for example, which traditionally had a closer association with the ethnic cause, avoided the term 'nationalities' in referring to Iran's minorities in its program (Ghassemlou, 1993, pp. 116-117). Other opposition groups such as the Iranian National Republicans or human rights groups such as the Center for Defenders of Human Rights in Iran were criticised as well for their failure to openly condemn government repression of the ethnic minorities.

The atmosphere of distrust is particularly strong between the Kurdish political parties and Iranian opposition groups. The Kurds are usually viewed more threatening than other ethnic groups in Iran, not only because they are more geographically concentrated and a border minority, but also because they demand not just a slight readjustment of the state framework, but a major reorganisation (Higgins, 1984, p. 58). The most influential Kurdish opposition groups in Iran, such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and Komala, underscore that the accommodation of the demands

of the Kurds and other national minorities within a decentralised structure is the primary condition for the achievement of a democratised political process in Iran. In this respect, the Kurdish call for democratisation addresses not only the problem of rights and freedoms, but also the question of what kind of rule or institutions the Iranian society needs for a more inclusive democracy. Such an articulation of ethnic demands generates a new discursive terrain, whereby the 'ethnic question' becomes one of the important arenas in which democratic and civil liberties in Iran and the struggle to build effective institutions converge on one another.

The ethnic movements' resistance against integration into the Iranian society on the basis of the nationalising policies of the state has led to increasing recognition by the regime that should they be joined by Shia Persian groups desirous of a secular state and agreeable to a confederacy, the balance of support for the Islamic Republic could be severely undermined (Higgins, 1984, pp. 58-59). In the eyes of the reformists, on the other hand, as the minorities make up a significant portion of the population, they are key actors for improving the chances of success at achieving political change in Iran. Thus, as the reform movement was unfolding rapidly during the mid-1990s, the ethnic movements' potential to wield power was a factor that was difficult to dismiss by either the conservative regime or the reformist opposition.

1997 Presidential Election and the First Wave of Reform

The presidential election victory of Muhammad Khatami, a key leader of the reformist front, on May 23, 1997 was unexpected for the conservatives, who had monopolised politics since the Islamic Revolution. Khatami's election not only heightened hopes that he would take Iran in new policy directions, but also showed the genuine public demand for democratisation in Iran (Fairbanks, 1997, p. 51). During the process that culminated in Khatami's election victory, the ethnic factor played a significant role in shaping the reformist agenda. Challenging both the conservatives' portrayal of Iran's ethnic problem as 'artificial' and 'foreign instigated', and the reformists' concerns about ethnic separatism, minority groups played a significant role in influencing Khatami's election campaign and the presidential election of 1997.

The focus of Khatami's presidential campaign was on the rule of law, democracy and inclusion of all Iranians in the political decision-making process. Khatami made a concerted effort to reach out to non-Persian and non-Shia constituencies. His supporters distributed election materials in Kurdish and Azeri, and Khatami campaigned on a pledge to expand the language rights of Iran's non-Persian minorities (Shaffer, 2002, p. 219). This theme of inclusiveness and respect for differences featured prominently in his campaign slogan of 'Iran for all Iranians', which implicated a major re-articulation of Iranian nationalism. Indeed, the support of minority groups was crucial to his two electoral victories. Alongside the youth and women, who were the primary supporters of Khatami, the ethnic minority participation in the 1997 election critically showed the potential of these groups to make a difference on the democratic process in Iran.

At the presidential election of 1997, more than 70% of the population of ethnic regions voted for Khatami (Princeton University, 2013). This vast participation was a record in these areas, given that a majority of the ethnic minorities refused to vote for the Constitution of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and predominantly boycotted the previous presidential elections (Khorshidi et al., 2011, p. 148).

Massive participation in the 1997 elections in the minority provinces was the reaction of ethnic groups to Khatami's mottos and inclusive statements throughout his election campaign. Although Khatami's support of ethnic rights could be seen as a strategy to attract voters, his emphasis on democracy, rule of law and political participation was largely a result of the pressure coming from minority political groups and the efforts of the political and civil rights activists in ethnic regions.

During his two terms in office, Khatami failed to realise many of the democratic plans he used as slogans. However, the reform process that unfolded during his presidency played a significant role in infusing democratic thoughts into society and strengthening liberal demands. Iranian civil society, in particular, experienced an important period of rejuvenation during Khatami's presidency from 1997 to 2005. Although preserving the advances of this period of reform became increasingly difficult after the rise of hard-line Islamic Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in 2005, the voices of civil society that have been gathering steam over the past decade proved to be sufficiently resilient to nudge the reform movement along under conservative rule.

Ethnic Movements in the Post-Khatami Era

After the end of Khatami's presidency, civil unrest and opposition to the regime's policies in the ethnic regions became an increasingly important component of the growing civil society in Iran. Ethnic movements continued to be influential in terms of shaping the political agenda in the country, which was evident from the presidential candidates' continued efforts to address the rights of ethnic and religious minorities during their campaigns in the 2005, 2009 and 2013 elections.

The implication of the 2005 presidential election was that the window of opportunity for democratic reforms in Iran was closed. Nonetheless, events that have taken place since the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the sixth President of Iran showed that the forces for democratic change continued to display considerable dynamism. Developments on the minority rights front were particularly stirring.

In April 2005, the oil-rich Khuzestan province, which is predominantly inhabited by minority Arabs, became the scene of severe ethnic clashes. The uprising was against a government plan to alter the Arab composition of Khuzestan by transferring a great number of Arabs to other parts of Iran and replacing them with non-Arab ethnic groups, and also changing the Arab names of various places and streets of this province to Persian names (Tohidi, 2009, p. 313). The fact that the unrest in Khuzestan occurred only two months before the 2005 presidential election played an important role in pushing the ethnic factor once again to the fore of campaigning in ethnic minority-dominated provinces.

Following the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005, the appointment of a Shia from Sistan, Habibollah Dehmordeh, who is known for his hard-line anti-Sunni Islamism, as the governor of Baluchestan resulted in an outrage among the Balochs, and two Baloch deputies in the parliament resigned in protest (Tohidi, 2009, p. 312). The same year, the Kurds took to the streets when the security forces killed and dragged the body of a Kurdish activist Shawaneh Ghaderi throughout the city of Mahabad. Mass demonstrations took place in Kurdish towns and villages in July and August 2005 and resulted in an untold number of arrests without charge and the death of at least 17 people at the hands of security forces (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2012, pp. 11-12). In May 2006, a wide-spread campaign was organised by the Azeris following the publication of an insulting article by a state-sponsored daily. The Azeris also marched in massive numbers in February 2007 in observance of the International Mother Language Day, protesting the state-sponsored suppression of their heritage and language.

The vitality of developing a more inclusive approach to democracy, which would accommodate minority demands, resurfaced once again following the re-emergence of the wave of reform after the 2009 presidential election, showing signs that it would make a stronger push to achieve political change in the country. Although it was the disputed results of the presidential election that triggered the pro-democracy protests in June 2009, it can be argued that the developments on the minority rights front during Ahmadinejad's first term in 2005-2009 played a significant role in providing a pre-existing social and political context for the subsequent growth of pro-democracy opposition movements in Iran.

2009 Presidential Election and the Second Wave of Reform

The post-presidential election protests in Iran in 2009, known as the Green Movement, had grown as a major popular opposition movement that posed a great challenge to the country's power structure. That was a unique phenomenon since the Iranian Revolution, which took place nearly thirty years ago. Approximately three million peaceful demonstrators turned out on the streets of Tehran with the slogan 'Where is my vote?' to protest official claims that Ahmadinejad had won the presidential election in a landslide (Milani, 2010). Although the movement was born out of the disputed election results, it soon embodied the Iranian people's decades-long yearning for democracy, human rights and peaceful change.

Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, the two reformist candidates that competed against Ahmadinejad, were the recognised leaders of the Green Movement. However, unlike the reform process during the Khatami administration, Iranian people who took to the streets in June 2009 were ahead of the movement's political leaders and reflected the increasing strength of Iran's emerging civil society. The democratic discourse surrounding the Green Movement was shaped by a rejection of the existing political system and a strong demand for structural changes. The contradictions associated with demanding democratic change within the framework of many anti-democratic institutions fundamental to the Islamic Republic were explicitly underscored. Therefore, although they were recognised as the leaders of the Green Movement, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi did not have a significant role in creating and organising the movement and were only responding to sentiment on the street rather than directing it (Wright, 2009, p. 43).

The rapid transition of the Green Movement from a group of angry voters to a mass movement demanding democratic rights revived the age-old state strategy of using the anti-imperialist narrative as an instrument for inciting 'national unity.' However, the Islamic Republic's intense efforts to portray the movement as a revolution financed and directed by the West proved fruitless. The Iranian people's construction of their own unique narrative based on denouncing the economic and political shortcomings of the regime revealed a historical break with the state and its strategy of promoting nationalism through associating domestic problems with external threats. This shift in public attitude was evident in the slogans shouted by the protesters: 'Neither for Gaza nor for Lebanon; my soul is sacrificed for Iran' (Tafesh, 2012).²

Although the Green Movement created a new and expanded political space for democratic opposition in Iran, its declining influence in the months following the election highlighted a number of drawbacks that the movement suffered from. Although the inhuman crackdown by the government security forces played a major role in suppressing the protests, one significant deficiency of the movement was the lack of widespread support from Iran's ethnic minorities, including the Kurds, Balochs, Arabs, Turkmen and others. The protests remained largely limited to the northern areas of Tehran and a few more Persian cities. As the ethnic minorities make up almost half of Iran's population, their reluctance to figure significantly in the protests restricted the Green Movement's struggle for power and potential to become a nationwide movement and painted it mostly as a factional conflict among the Shia political elite.

The Green Movement's unsuccessful campaign outside of Tehran was due in large part to the movement's leaders' lack of plans on behalf of the Arabs, Azeris, Kurds and the Balochs as well as their tendency to steer clear of direct contact with minority political groups in order to avoid charges of separatism. Therefore, expectations remained low among the ethnic groups that the leaders of the Green Movement would have the political capital to change the authoritarian bend of the regime.

² Since the proclamation of the Islamic Republic, Iran's claim to regional leadership in the Middle East has been largely based on projecting power abroad through the policy of providing financial and military assistance to groups fighting for the Palestinian cause in Gaza and Lebanon. The slogan represents the protesters' disapproval of the policies pursued abroad and demands for reorienting Iranian politics towards domestic problems.

Wary about their unknown status in the future of the movement, ethnic groups kept their distance from the protests despite the fact that they share most of the goals of the Green Movement, such as increasing popular representation in government and opening Iranian society for greater internal political dialogue.

After the start of the protests in June 2009, many minority political groups have expressed reluctance to put any faith in the Green Movement. The Kurdish Globe, an Erbil-based website affiliated with the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, declared that the dispute between opposition leaders and the government was simply the latest of many internal power struggles among the political elites of Tehran, which have existed since the early years of the Islamic Republic (Ghajar, 2010). It was argued that a new leader would not have fundamentally changed the government's position on minority rights or its human rights stand. The Kurdish political groups as well as the other ethnic minorities in Iran generally showed a reluctance to become involved with the Green Movement in any tangible way, opting instead for silence, or, at most, a statement of solidarity. In January 2010, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan issued a statement regarding the Kurdish movement's stance on the future of the Green Movement:

Democracy in its real form can only be obtainable when the national rights of the various nationalities are acknowledged explicitly. The Green Movement will succeed if it joins its cause with ethnic minorities. But that's something we believe the Green Movement is, so far, afraid to do. (Medya News, 2010)

On June 7, 2010, Abdullah Mohtadi, secretary general of the Kurdish Komala Party, issued a statement aimed at forging solidarity between the Kurds and the Green Movement:

The people of Kurdistan do not demand special rights or benefits for themselves. They do not demand separation from Iran. Their demands are not outside the common framework of contemporary democratic regimes and recognised standards of human rights. The people of Kurdistan rightly demand that the effective leaders and political and cultural figures of the Green Movement and the practical activists of the movement, approve and support the demands of the people of Kurdistan, and in so doing allay their rather legitimate fears. (Mohtadi, 2010)

The realisation of the Green Movement's goals, by definition, includes the demands of many Iranian minority groups for increased self-expression and cultural autonomy. The reformist arguments for democratisation and constitutional change, however, have largely left out appreciation and respect for ethnic and religious differences in the country. That said, throughout the Green Movement, the minority political parties were not very assertive in putting their case forward. The political space created by the Green Movement provided the ethnic groups with an important opportunity to consolidate their position as the 'third force' of democratisation in Iran and integrate their demands into the emergent grassroots democratic front in the country. Although they criticised the Green leadership's lack of an inclusive discourse to satisfy Iran's minorities, the ethnic groups did not make any significant attempt to become a part of the protest movement by critically challenging the dominant positions of both the regime and the reformists and by making their case.

Conclusion

Since the Islamic Revolution, the confrontation between the conservatives and the reformists and the challenge posed by the ethnic movements towards the official denial of the ethnic and religious diversity of Iran constituted the two fronts where the struggle for democratisation in Iran takes place.

The politicians and activists of both fronts built their case for political change around competing discourses of nation-building and identity.

Brubaker's (2011) emphasis on the contentious relationship between the 'unrealised' nation states and their national minorities has substantial explanatory power for the case of Iran. The chief concern of the Iranian state has been to 'nationalise' its heterogeneous populations by decisively bringing them into the national fold, defined in terms of the specific interests of the 'core nation'. From this perspective, the national minorities constantly appeared to be dangerous threats to the nation-building process in Iran's nationalising agenda.

Although the core nation is defined in different terms at different stages of the modern history of Iran, the exclusionary character of Iranian national identity was consistently strengthened. In this context, what makes the counter-nationalising discourses of the ethnic movements crucial is that they created a significant arena of political mobilization for democratic change and functioned as a constant reminder of the Iranian regime's failure to accommodate the demands of its national minorities. The fact that the regime still views most of the ethnic movements as a threat to the territorial integrity of Iran proves that the ruling elites did not succeed in having the minorities interiorise the nationalist discourse promoted by the state. The unfavorable consequence of this situation is the persistent democratic deficit and authoritarianism in Iran due to continued use of coercion to suppress the demands and actions that challenge the programs and policies of nationalisation that have been firmly in place since the early 20th century.

Although the Islamic regime managed to suppress the protests of June 2009, the pro-democracy movement in Iran should be regarded as an ongoing process rather than a failed attempt to challenge the government. Since the crackdown on the protests, the Iranian opposition and minority groups held several meetings in order to unite the opposition and strengthen the Green Movement. The opposition groups, however, showed a general reluctance to address and respond to the minority demands for a democratic federalist state as an alternative to the Islamic Republic. Yet, the meetings underscored the growing awareness that ethnic groups are a strong and active part of the Iranian opposition and that it is imperative for the state to address their demands. Whereas the international community has condemned Iran for its human rights record and treatment of minorities both before and after the 1979 revolution, this condemnation is now being echoed and reinforced from within Iran on an unprecedented scale (Ghanea & Hass, 2011).

Regardless of whether the reformists or conservatives dominate the government, the refusal to recognise Iran's multi-ethnic reality is an inherent problem of the established political order in Iran. The position of the newly elected President Hassan Rouhani, who is viewed as a politically moderate figure, on Iran's ethnic question only confirmed this situation. Despite his election motto of 'moderation and change' and his promises to ensure cultural and language rights of minority groups, immediately following his election victory, Rouhani stated in a television interview that "Iran is not a multi-ethnic state" and "There is only one nation in Iran and that is structured by Islamic system" (Rudaw, 2013). Unless the deep-rooted flaws embedded in the core institutions of representative democracy in Iran are eliminated, a regime change would be unlikely to change the social and political status of ethnic and religious minorities. That is why it is imperative for the ethnic movements and other pro-democracy forces in the country to collaborate under the common theme of changing the entire political system. Formation of a common discourse over the definition of Iranian national identity is the primary condition for the accomplishment of this goal.

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