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Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity After Khomeini*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 276 pp., \$100.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780230115842.

Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity After Khomeini by Rasmus Christian Elling addresses an extremely important, albeit under researched topic. As indicated in the title, the volume sets out to investigate the transformations and valences of nationalist and ethno-nationalist discourses in the decades following Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death (d. 1989). Not only does Elling adeptly provide a meticulous inventory of both popular and scholarly perspectives on Iranian "nationhood" and "cultural diversity" (2-3), but also a much needed critical appraisal of these manifold literatures, produced within both Iran and the diaspora.

Elling's theoretical framing of the question of "ethnicity" in Iran is inspired by the seminal work of Rogers Brubaker and Sinisa Malesevic. In this way he seeks to eschew the pervasive *groupism* underlying so much writing vis-à-vis minorities, whereby collectivities are treated as a single actor, endowed with a unitary will of their own. By contrast, Elling analyses ethnicity as "politicized social action" which must be understood in a situational, relational and processual sense. The chief question is how and through what social, cultural, and political processes certain categories get invested with "groupness" (16).

In terms of sources, Elling has drawn upon a vast array of material in both English and Persian, enveloping many of the disparate views advocated by Iran's metropolitan political and intellectual elites, including scholars working in the discipline of Iranian Studies itself. Elling's study is the first to take an in depth and critical view of the Islamic Republic's political and intellectual classes' varied and antagonistic interpretations of national diversity and the question of minorities in the post-Khomeini era, and in this respect it can be read as a discourse analysis of official, intellectual, scholarly and media representations of the "ethnic question" in the post-revolutionary Iranian public sphere.

Chapter 1 highlights some of the methodological perils and difficulties in thinking about ethnicity and race in the Iranian context. As Elling notes there has never been a national census along ethnic lines, not to mention unsettled questions over whether numerous prevailing ascriptions ought to be considered "ethnic" or "tribal" or a sub-set of broader ethnic categories. Similarly the question of the "ethnic majority" (22) has permeated much established scholarship whereby Persian is nativized and deemed indigenous whereas other languages are held as threatening and innately "foreign." This is linked to another problem which has afflicted both popular and scholarly accounts of Iran's ethnic composition, i.e.,

the conflation of “Persian” with “Iranian.” For instance, as Elling astutely points out, while today Persian speakers can be considered a linguistic majority in Iran, this linguistic fact is not equivalent to an ethnic majority (24). The remainder of the chapter provides a succinct adumbration of the various minorities and their respective histories within the historical territories of modern day Iran—e.g., Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Turkoman and Baluch.

Chapter 2 addresses the dilemmas minorities have confronted since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Elling highlights the diverse reactions within minority communities and the new forms of marginalization and discrimination that emerged following the institutionalization of the twentieth century’s first Shi’ite hierocracy. The author draws attention to the tensions at the heart of the newly established constitutional order, which while promising to eliminate oppression and discrimination, enshrined Twelver Shi’ism as the state religion, and excluded non-Twelvers from eligibility for the presidency. Elling makes clear that to cast the logic of marginalization in strictly sectarian terms would be mistaken, because not only do all prospective presidential candidates have to be Shi’ites, they also must pledge fealty to the principle of *velayat-e faqih* or Rule of the Jurist, the theological principle underwriting clerical rule in the Islamic Republic (50). Elling perceptively argues later in the book when analyzing Khomeini’s views on national identity that they were “ethnically inclusive but ideologically exclusive” (95). Nevertheless, the discrimination against Sunni Muslims in the public domain is very real (51). Another important issue Elling appraises in this chapter is the securitization of the Kurdistan and Khuzestan regions and the underdevelopment experienced by these areas and their residents, which numerous academics and activists have long contended are yet to fully recover from the depredations suffered in the course of the revolution and the eight year war with Iraq. The issue of uneven development in Sistan-Baluchistan is also considered while Elling is cautious in drawing a strong correlation between alleged negligence in minority dominated areas and ethnic mobilization (56).

Elling goes on to argue, as a number of scholars have before him, that “nationalism as a state ideology was only nominally abandoned in the post-revolutionary political order” (83). He demonstrates that despite its pretensions to the contrary, the Islamic Republic inherited many of the nationalist ideological preconceptions of the Pahlavi *ancien régime*. Thus, while in several respects radically transforming existing socio-political structures, the new state to a significant extent refashioned, adapted, and augmented many of the state institutions it claimed to uncompromisingly negate. To vindicate this thesis Elling draws on official and intellectual literature and popular media so as to understand how nationalist ideology has come to be institutionalized in the post-Khomeini era and subsequently deployed to the end of political mobilization. The public reception and plaudits reserved for the Qods Force’s Major General Qassem Soleimani, and his myriad forays into both Iraq and Syria over the last year, regarded as underwriting Iranian regional influence and stability is one of the more recent incarnations of the Islamic Republic’s dexterous cultivation of a specific brand of nationalist fervor.

The author’s critical analysis of what one might call elite “reformist” and “religious-nationalist” (*melli-mazhabī*) perspectives on the minority issue is a welcome addition and deepens our understanding of the ways in which ethnic conflict is ideologically framed by disparate factions and political groupings within the post-revolutionary state order. A common theme which runs through the gamut of political elitist perspectives is suspicion of all ethnically framed demands and protests of complicity with foreign powers, and malignly plotting to undermine the Iranian nation’s otherwise intrinsic and beautified harmony. The Rouhani government’s recent announcement that the University of Kurdistan will begin

teaching Kurdish language and literature for the first time does,¹ however, offer some hope that such suspicion by default, even insofar as the political and security elite are concerned, is proving increasingly untenable due to the widely accepted consensus around electoral politics, notwithstanding the electoral system's still profound and highly contested structural flaws, and thus the importance of attracting and mobilizing minority voters within the Islamic Republic's constitutional parameters. The assessment remains sober and measured throughout, giving the impression that the author is better informed than most of the long road ahead, until something like genuine cultural and linguistic pluralism might be attainable. Moreover, Elling is cognizant of the predicament which, for example, advocates for greater cultural and linguistic rights find themselves in when confronted by reports of U.S. efforts to fuel ethnic unrest through covert funding and operations. At the same time the author appreciates the nuances of President Mohammad Khatami's reformist administration with its novel emphasis on dialogue, minority rights and the rule of law, and political development.

The final two chapters focus on scholarly and intellectual visions of the nation and how they too are underwritten by nationalist ideology. In Chapter 5 Elling shows how a host of preeminent Iranian scholars and intellectuals such as Mahmud Afshar, Ehsan Yarshater, and Shahrokh Meskoub, as well as more recently scholarship following the revolution, such as that of Tehran University academic Hamid Ahmadi, have perpetuated Persian-centric and essentialist biases in their interpretations of Iranian history and politics. The exaltation of the Persian language above all others perhaps being one of the most pervasive prejudices, thereby eliding the multi-lingual nature of Iran as a country (150, 158). One of the most fascinating insights of these later chapters is these scholars' instrumentalization of contemporary theories of nationalism in order to legitimize and delegitimize alternative forms of national consciousness and being-in-the-world. In this way one Iranian scholar of national identity adopts what Elling dubs "selective ethno-symbolism" (156) by contending that the couching of political demands by minority movements in ethnic terms is merely a contrived and "invented tradition," to use Hobsbawm's phrase, while Iranian identity represents an ancient *ethnie* as classically theorized in the work of Anthony D. Smith. In this way, and somewhat ironically given a historian like Hobsbawm's methodological emphasis on "history from below," modernist theories of the nation are deployed in order to "push what is essentially a nationalist agenda" (156), thereby muffling, if not completely delegitimizing subaltern and marginal voices.

The one part of the puzzle arguably missing from Elling's discussion is the lot of Iran's sizeable Afghan population. There are close to 1 million registered Afghan citizens residing in Iran according to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Some official estimates, which include undocumented refugees, however, are as high as 3 million.² The overwhelming majority of them continue to face severe and legally sanctified forms of discrimination. For instance, Afghans have been prohibited from residing in nine Iranian provinces and in some instances prohibited from even entering these provinces, placing incontrovertible constraints on their freedom of movement.³ Some remedial measures have

¹ "Faculties of Kurdish language, literature established in Kurdistan," *IRNA*, 30 July 2015, <<http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81701149/>>, (accessed on September 8, 2015).

² Michelle May and Shahriar Khonsari, "A report card: Iran and its Afghan children," *The Guardian*, 1 June 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/gallery/2015/jun/01/a-report-card-iran-and-its-afghan-children>>, (accessed on September 8, 2015).

³ "Vezerat-e keshvar-e Iran: eghamat-e atba'-e Afghan dar 9 ostan mamnu' ast," *Radio Farda*, 8 September 2015 <http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f14_afghan_residence_prohibited_in_9_region_of_iran/26756978.html>, (accessed on September 8, 2015).

been taken. For example, Ayatollah Khamenei issued a statement in May of this year, which was taken up by the Interior Ministry, stating that all Afghan children living inside Iran were entitled to basic education; a right guaranteed by Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Nevertheless, a great many problems await resolution. Many undocumented Afghans act as manual and menial laborers, including children, adding an important class dimension to the ideational construction and economic functions performed by this minority *in* Iranian society, which has not merely been deprived of many basic human and civil rights, but also regularly vilified and ostracized in the realm of public opinion. Given the size of Iran's Afghan population and the crucial role it plays today in Iran's informal economy, it would have been most interesting if Elling could have considered its place in the broader class dynamics of Iranian society, and how it has been constituted and racialized in official and popular discourse, despite its linguistic affinity with the "majority." This would have been most appropriate in light of the author's own sophisticated deconstruction of all claims to "indigenous" or "native" authenticity, at the Other's expense. With the wide-ranging scope of the Elling's undertaking, it is however understandable why he refrained from wading into such thorny territory, which perhaps merits a standalone monograph of its own.

Elling's *Minorities in Iran* should be considered an important addition to the literature on national identity in modern Iran, whose critical engagement with the extant literature in English, but foremost Persian, should be incorporated into future research agendas so that the pitfalls and shortcomings of past scholarship might be eschewed once and for all.

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