The Coexistence of Integrity and Diversity: A Theory for the Consistency of Cultural Difference and National Solidarity in Iran

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Abstract

As a consequence of increasing literature on multiculturalism, cultural identity and cultural self-rule during the last four decades or so, the concept of nation-state and the realm of national government have been subject to dramatic changes. While due to the development of globalization, revising the classical functions of the state machinery looks more urgent than ever. Different accounts of national and cultural identity, widespread demands of recognizing cultural difference through arguing for the rights of cultural communities living in a country, and the changing nature of concepts like national security and interests, have forced political theorists to look for a more adequate conception of national integrity which consists with such changes as variety of alternatives to the classical interpretation. Through exploring recent theoretical developments of the subject, I shall offer a model of overlapping consensus among cultural communities (whether majority or minority) in Iran, on the basis of the historically situated and shared Iranian-religious identity by granting them cultural autonomy and limiting the power of the national government.

Keywords: Cultural Diversity, National Solidarity, Overlapping Consensus, Iranian Identity, Cultural Autonomy.

1. Introduction

If once it was necessary to show the very existence of cultural diversity within nation-states, nowadays, at least in more developed countries, it is rather the questions concerning its nature, practical implications for politics, and reshaping political institutions of the national government model which is the focus of a significant number of studies. The consequences of the failure of the idea of 'one nation-one culture' in capturing the real nature of contemporary societies, have gone much further than explaining the reality of different cultural identities, to numerous arguments on cultural minority rights and the protection of their different identities against the essentially assimilatory policies of the national governments. Furthermore, pervasive processes of globalization, emerging as a result of the creation of new international organizations (such as the World Trade Organization),the enlargement of the scope of the influence of already established international organizations (such as the Security Council of the UN, International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), the marvelous expansion of the internet and media, and the formation of regional corporative organizations (such as EC and Shanghai Cooperation Organization), have seriously undermined both the degree of the power and the nature of the authority of national governments.

Consequently, an important issue for politicians, policymakers and political theorists is how to adjust sub-national diversity into the idea of national integrity on the one hand, and rethinking national security and interests on the face of developing influence of transnational organizations on the other. Obviously, only those countries which avoid leaving the issue into politicians' hands and their everyday interests and limited knowledge, and employ all their available intellectual resources to understand the multi-dimensional nature of the issues at stake, would be able to adopt an active role in the new situation. It is for this very reason, therefore, that in the first section of the present study, some of the main aspects of the problem of cultural diversity will be discussed briefly. The second section explores some criticisms which have been made on the traditionally adopted views on national integrity. Finally, I shall offer a model which seems to be more adequate for accommodating cultural diversity into national integrity.

2. The notion of cultural diversity

It is obvious that the first steps towards finding a solution to a problem consist a clear understanding of the problem itself. Discussing cultural diversity, it seems crucial, for instance, to note that what raised to the emerging significance of the argument during recent decades is rather due to the increasing demands for the 'recognition' of such diversity than the mere affirmation of its 'existence' which by no means is specific to contemporary societies but as old as human social life. However, In order to achieve a more comprehensive picture of the issue at hands, it is important to understand the basic concepts involved:

2.1. Culture: Rather than the narrowly defined anthropological notion, in the realm of studying cultural diversity, culture is generally understood both as the spiritual and material characteristics of a society or social group which in addition to literature and arts, includes lifestyle, value system, and customs and believes.(UNESCO, 2001)Philosophically speaking, it may be suggested, culture represents a framework within which, conceptions of the good life held by individual persons or a community are formed. Cultural pluralism: There are two views on pluralism in general and cultural pluralism in particular. According to the first account, it is as an irreducible and permanent feature of almost all contemporary societies. The kind of plurality at stake may include either different understandings of a certain conception of the good life held within a specific community, or the diversity of conceptions of the good held in different societies. Accordingly, the recognition of such a plurality in the processes of decision-making is necessary in democratic societies. To put it differently, while in the democratic theory, justice in the public sphere was traditionally viewed as a matter of equality (as opposed to inequality), from a postmodern perspective, it is seen through the discourse of difference (as opposed to assimilation). In fact, in plural societies, it is the very concept of equality which is pluralized. (Requejo, 2005: 10)On the other hand, the second view holds cultural diversity not only as a fact, but also a value which should be protected against any attempt involving assimilation. The value of the plurality of conceptions of the good life lies in providing a wide range of options to be chosen by citizens as an essential precondition of exercising their individual freedom. Identity: There are different accounts of the concept of 'identity'. I do not intend to argue the complicated and controversial sociological aspects and philosophical claims here, but to note only two of the major trends on notion of identity: the first may be described as foundational as it views identity as representing one's inherent characteristics that determine his or her moral orientation as a rational animal. This account is universalistic by nature and takes the person's identity as more or less unchangeable. The second is contextual and understand identity in relational terms, underlying the importance of the individual and society. Accordingly, the person's self-awareness towards his or her belonging to a social group and, at the same time, his or her independence as an individual, plays a significant role in the formation of his multiple and hybrid identity. Cultural diversity and policy-making: Depending on the way they comprehend cultural identity, political theories which view cultural diversity at least as an undeniable reality and permanent feature of human social life, adopt different approaches in accommodating the issue into state policies; namely the minimalist and the maximalist ones. Minimalist views hold that in democratic governments, policies should be formed in accordance with the principle of tolerance with respect to cultural differences. Maximalist views, on the other hand, go further to demand decision-making processes to include considerations concerning cultural diversity. In the latter, therefore, the cultural toleration of minorities by the majority is seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition. Accordingly, all decisions should be made with respect to the plurality of ways of life, beliefs and values. Cultural community: Theories of the politics of cultural diversity are either individualistic (as in the Kantian liberal view), collectivistic (as in the socialist pluralist view), or based on the intertwined significance of the individual and society (as in the communitarian view). For those theories which attribute cultural identity to cultural membership of a certain cultural group or community, the role of cultural communities in political policy making is quite important. Accordingly, governments which facilitate the participation of cultural communities in state politics are considered as more democratic in comparison with those which ignore cultural differences.

2.2. Practical reasoning: With respect to practical reasoning in democracies, two types of rationality are distinguishable. First, instrumental rationality which focuses on the most efficient or cost-effective means to achieve a specific end, but not in itself reflecting its value. The main characteristic of instrumental rationality in politics is its reliance on bargaining and compromise among different views; its values or guidelines are efficiency and stability.

According to this account, general agreements which are achieved through moral conventions but are unstable, are viewed as unacceptable. By contrast, one may call for a morally defended rationality which respects the diversity of values and beliefs and besides seeking the empowerment of national unity, provide the free and peaceful co-existence of different cultural communities within the framework of national solidarity.

2.3. Neutrality of the state: until recently, one way of avoiding controversial value-based arguments involving policy-making, was to adopt a neutral position towards different conceptions of 'the good'. This could be understood as procedural neutrality, consequentiality neutrality, or generally speaking, any account of state decision making processes which is blind to the diversity of the conception of good life. Today, arguments for political neutrality, however, are seen as either impossible or undesirable. The question of finding a model of a political agreement compatible with the recognition of cultural diversity, therefore, remains at the heart of the contemporary political philosophy.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that adopting policies which ignore cultural diversity seems undesirable for at least four interrelated reasons:

a. The kind of national unity and integrity which is based on imposing assimilatory policies are formal rather than essential; and different historical instances prove its fragility and instability as soon as political conditions and power balance change. Demanding members of cultural communities to ignore the cultural differences which is derived from their shared history and common identities for the sake of national unity and solidarity, seems unrealistic and even though the state machinery can impose such policies through a variety of means (legislation, nationwide media, and distribution of resources), it would not end in creating a homogenized cultural identity. At best, it would give rise to hypocrisy, alienation, anger, depression and decrease in social capital.

b. The adoption of assimilatory policies would encourage diverging rather than converging tendencies among different cultural communities. A glance at historical experiences of different countries, including Iran, proves the point that diverging tendencies take most advantages from assimilatory policies of the central government to legitimize their claims in the eyes of the politically deprived members of cultural minorities.

c. In addition to practical disadvantages, adopting policies which are indifferent to cultural diversity, are morally unacceptable. By ignoring cultural minority's rights, they pave the way for the tyranny of the majority, the harmful effects of which have been argued widely under the subject of 'the wrongfulness of the tyranny of the majority rule'. To point out only one of its consequences, the burdens it imposes upon the realization of creativity among cultural communities, seems to be sufficient to see it as undesirable.

d. Today we live in a world in which protecting local identities against enormous waves of globalism becomes increasingly more difficult. Imposing assimilatory policies by national governments would facilitate wider and more effective influence of cultural globalization. The fact that worldwide media are usually welcomed by cultural minorities and centralized national broadcasting is losing its audients seems to be a sign of this developing tendency.

The recognition of cultural diversity in political decision making processes, therefore, is now an important part of national governments' business, both from a moral point of view and for pursing national interests and security. My claim is that rethinking the traditional roles and functions of national government is a necessary step in this way; a point which will be argued in the next section.

3. Theories of national solidarity

Nation-state is a modern concept emerged from the ninetieth century, partly as a result of the Westphalia peace treaties of 1648, received privilege in public political language and academic debates as a concept which joins the political entity of a state to the cultural entity of a nation. Arguing for any other political alternative concept or any criticism concerning its functions and tasks, however, is usually seen at best as an unrealistic and utopian attempt by most politicians. Nevertheless, many contemporary political theorists have explored the disadvantages of the nation-state model. I am not going to discuss any of their arguments here, since my focus will be on the functions of national government with regard to cultural diversity. As an initial step, it may be useful to consider the controversial concept of 'nation'.

We may agree with Scruton, that "a nation consists of a people, sharing a common language (or dialects of a common language), inhibiting a fixed territory, with common customs and traditions, which may have become sufficiently conscious to take on the aspect of law, and who recognize common interests and common need for a single sovereign."(Scruton, 1982:312) Accordingly, a nation-state is "a state organized for the government of a nation (or perhaps of two or more closely related nations), whose territory is determined by national boundaries, and whose law is determined, at least in part, by national customs and expectations."(Ibid) In contemporary world, therefore, government is sovereignty over an independent territory and its conceptual requirements including population, the organization of this population such that it does not remain a mere aggregation of individuals, sovereignty of the collective will, and exclusive rule by this sovereign entity over a territory. (Renner, 2005:24-25) An important point about arguments on nationality is that from the modern political and moral point of view, to ascribe any moral value to nationalism seems problematic. Nationality is not by itself morally valuable and is unlikely to be a source of normative propositions which can be used as benchmarks in shaping political decision-making processes. One reason for viewing nationality as non-moral (not immoral) is that, with the exception of cases where the person asks for changing his/her nationality, no one is free to choose the membership of a certain nation, but is born with his/her national identity. Now if we conceive a moral action as an action which is based on one's autonomy, ascribing any moral value to nationality seems to be very difficult, if not impossible.

This is not the case for membership of cultural communities. The moral dimension of membership in a certain cultural community is articulated through affirming its significance in one's identity. As Charles Taylor puts it, To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity ids defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.(Taylor, 1989:27) Accordingly, the main feature of human being is its dialogical characteristic and "we become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human language of expression."(Taylor, 1991:23) For this reason, universal commitments (such as religious faith) and particularities (such as nationality) are parts of one's identity.

A more serious criticism on modern theories of national government concerns not the very notion of nation, but conceiving it as "one nation, one culture". This is the criticism made by Karl Renner (2005) through comparing contemporary ethnic conflicts and the religious wars at the outset of European modern history. At the time, German absolutist states imposed a certain religious attitude on their subjects in the aftermath of the Augsburg Settlement of 1555. The organizational principle was 'in this region, that religion' which resulted in endless wars and was resolved only through the separation of religion from the territorial sovereignty and the right of peaceful co-existence of the followers of different religious faith was recognized. In modern states, according to Renner (29), the organizational principle is 'in this region, that language' or 'who governs the territory decides the language. As Ephraim Nimmi points out, "the personality principle, according to Renner, would separate the question of governance from the issue of protecting national and cultural identities, just as religious freedom separated church from state."(Nimmi, 2005:11) The aim, therefore, is not to reject authority over a certain territory by the national government, but to find an alternative for the myth of 'one-nation, one culture'; a myth which has encouraged many political theorists (among them some liberals) to allow the enforcement of assimilatory policies by appealing to the melting-pot metaphor. Today, however, national governments have to accept the undeniable realty of the existence of different cultural communities within their national borders. Instead of neglecting the reality, they need to think about the ways by which such diversity could accommodate to national solidarity. How such a paradoxical situation might be solved? The present study attempts to suggest a theoretical framework in accordance with which, appropriate procedures might be designed.

4. Cultural Autonomy

As mentioned above, neglecting cultural diversity leads to ignore the problem rather than finding a solution. To days, almost no state might claim cultural homogeneity. Various sources of cultural differences can be distinguished: some differences appear as the consequences of immigration, other are concerned with distinct territorially concentrated groups, and there are demands for the political recognition of some linguistically or religiously particular communities.

What distinguishes the second kind is their geographical concentration and their belonging to a particular territory, while the first and third kinds may be geographically scattered, however, connected by common beliefs (including religious) or other cultural features (such as language or rituals). One way of dealing with such different kinds of cultural difference is to adopt a particular policy for each cultural minority. This is usually applied by most of liberal democracies and its advantages and disadvantages have been largely discussed by scholars like Will Kymlica (1995), Bhikhu Parekh (2000), Paul Kelly (2002), Simon Caney (2002) and Susan Mendus (2002). The model I wish to use here, however, is 'cultural autonomy' in conjunction with a kind of an 'overlapping consensus'. I shall explore each briefly and then turn to discuss its application to the particular case of Iran. 'Cultural autonomy' was first suggested by Otto Bauer and Karl Renner (1899) as an efficient model for the new political conditions of the Austrian empire in the aftermath of defeat by Prussia which divided German and Hungarian populations in each part. Renner argued the model in his famous essay 'State and Nation' which recently, after the reappearance of ethnic wars of the post-soviet era, received wide attentions. The model rests on the 'personality principle' which is distinguished from the 'territory principle'. The former concerns the protection of national and cultural identities while the latter represents the very character of the modern state. Accordingly, every citizen is required to declare his/her nationality when he or she reaches the voting age. Thus, "members of each national community, whatever their territory of residence, would form a single public body or association endowed with a legal personality, collective rights, segmental sovereignty and competences to deal with all national cultural affairs in the context of a single multinational state".(Renner, 2005:11)

To deal with the overlapping consensus model, some preliminary notes need to be pointed out beforehand: First, it should be noticed that, as Rawls (1993) rightly argued, there are important differences between an 'overlapping consensus' and a 'modus vivendi', the most significant of which is that the former is based on morally agreed principles and, therefore, enjoys stability over the time, whereas the latter is always in danger of breakdown since a shift in the distribution of power would give a group an incentive to rewrite the terms of social contract so as to benefit itself. (147) Second, as I have discussed elsewhere (Hosseini Beheshti, 2007:13), we may distinguish two kinds of politics when multicultural societies are at hands: a kind of politics based on thick moral arguments about 'the good', which is relevant to the political relations *within* cultural societies; and the kind of politics which is concerned with the politics of cultural difference and is based on thin moral or even non-moral principles, appropriate for the political relations *between* cultural communities. Finally, the model offered here should be viewed as a general framework and its applications are in need of further articulation. I claim, however, that it may work well in countries like Iran; the reasons of which will be explained bellow.

The model of an overlapping consensus of cultural communities might be outlined as follows:

4.1. The concept of national integrity at stake is not understood so comprehensive to ignore differences. Rather, it represents a common ground which may be recognized by different cultural communities as a possible overlapping consensus. In Iran, I think, the shared Iranian-religious identity which has developed over the last twenty-five centuries, can be considered as capturing such a common ground. It is worth mentioning that the two components (the 'Iranian' and the 'religious') of this common identity go hands to hands and none may be reduce to the other. Muslims are the largest religious community in the country. However, it should be noticed that many of the religious rituals are more or less culturally localized without undermining the universalistic nature of Islamic beliefs. But a few peoples in the region enjoy such a historically constructed unifying identity and for most of them membership of either transnational communities (such as being Arabs) or local communities is more recognizable than their national identity. The Iranian national identity can encompass most of the various sub-cultural identities like the Azaries, Kurds, Lors, Baluches and Arabs who live in different parts of the country but recognize themselves as Iranian and Muslims. Members of religious minorities such as Jews and Christians, the two Abrahamic religious traditions close to Islam, and Zoroastrians and many other religious minorities recognized themselves as religious Iranian too. The Iranian-religious identity, therefore, may be well recognized as a basis for the consensus.

4.2. Governance in this model of autonomy is cultural identity-oriented rather than territory-based; a tradition experienced both in the ancient history of Iran and the prophet Mohammad in Medina in the 7th century. Moreover, the non-territorial-based cultural autonomy model reveals a more practically acceptable approach in the present conditions of cultural diversity in Iran.

Today, as a result of changes emerged according to the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the increasing rate of immigration from rural to urban areas, ethnic and religious communities are more shattered than before. The model would also reduce anxieties over the possible disintegration of the nation and the potential danger of segmentation of the country.

4.3. The decentralization of the political power of the national government in favor of the empowerment of cultural communities is practicable in issues which are justified for political reasons compatible with the republican character of the political system, and for moral and humanistic reasons compatible with its Islamic character. It should be noticed, however, that the processes of such decentralization is gradual and, therefore, necessary legal structure and cultural grounds could be developed in the meantime. It would take place in verity of forms such as the transition of economic tenure to the public sphere, the distribution of national budget with regard to cultural demands, and increasing the public awareness on cultural diversity through the media, education system and arts.

4.4. Since founded on national common interests and the respect for different cultural identities, the national solidarity achieved in this way would be more stable against possible foreign treats. Moreover, it helps to increase the social capital and hence, results in balanced and sustainable development which in turn, would strengthened the national government authority in regional and international aspects.

Through the model just outlined, I think it would be possible to introduce a new way of peaceful co-existence between cultural diversity and national solidarity. As mentioned earlier, however, it needs further studies in related areas such as a clearer articulation of cultural minorities' demands in order to show the contents and extents of such demands in more details; the review of policies, laws, and regulations as well as the actual functions of governmental offices with respect to national minorities; and the assessment of successes or failures of policies concerning cultural diversity experienced in other countries.

5. Conclusion

The arguments of the present study attempted to offer an understanding of politics of cultural diversity through references to the basic concepts and different theories suggested so far. It has been mentioned that the most important point is to go further than mere toleration against cultural minorities to the recognition of equal rights for such them in order to facilitate their inclusion in political decision-making processes. The most important question for national governments, therefore, is how to manage the coexistence of cultural diversity and national solidarity. In order to provide an answer to this question, I employed the notion of 'overlapping consensus' and the model of 'cultural autonomy' and suggested some elementary principles of a model which may be called an 'overlapping consensus of autonomous cultural communities' which I hope might facilitate solving the problem in an appropriate way.

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