Book Review

The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics: Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan.

Edited by Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner.
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As the ideas of struggle against imperialism and class were prominent among social scientists a generation ago, those of ethnicity are in the forefront today. Ethnicity—language, race, folk culture, food, etc., cut across class and sect. In Africa and Asia it has assumed violent political shape, succeeding in creating nations like Bangladesh or seriously disrupting them as in the case of (Sri Lanka).

The interrelationship of ethnicity with the state and religion are explored in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan in the book. It is the very fuzziness of these central concepts—state, religion, ethnicity—that creates so much heat around their discussion. The theoretical linkages between the concepts in these three states are clear. Not so clear is the method to resolve tensions between them. A book, then, which brings together "an outstanding group of anthropologists, historians, political scientists and Islamicists" promises value.

Fourteen distinguished academics have combined to produce the contents of the book. Some cannot resist the pitfall into which social scientists are wont to plummet, i.e., the use of impenetrably recondite jargon: "Whatever the particular criterion for group identity, inquiry into the relationship of ethnic groups to the larger sociocultural systems of which they are a part ought to rest on the 'situational' approach to ethnicity" (P. Higgins: p.169). Mercifully this kind of language is restricted.

African and Asian scholars will be quick to apply the label "Orientalist" to some of the participants. Others will note that the 4 authors of the chapters on Pakistan are non-Muslims; an observation not entirely irrelevant about a book on ethnicity and religion. This kind of emotionalism however, must not be allowed to distract from the quality of the work. The papers are scholarly, and most are based on a life-time's work. They attempt to discuss the central issues in complex and changing societies.

The editors, in a comprehensive and useful introduction, lay out their

belief in the first line: "In no region of the world have changes in religion and ethnic identity had a greater impact on political life than in the three countries that are the subject of this book".

The editors explain that in Iran, the Pahlavi state collapsed in the face of a mass-based, religiously inspired, and popular revolution, after over half a century of rule. It had sought to build its foundations and claim to legitimacy mainly upon a pre-Islamic Persian heritage, and to strengthen that heritage in relation to the country's myriad linguistic and tribal minorities. In contrast the new theocratic state founded by the Islamic religious scholars is seeking to build its foundations upon an Islamic identity. It attempts to neutralize, or weaken those who do not closely follow its religious line.

A Soviet-dominated Afghan state replaced a secular, but weak, tribal-based regime in Afghanistan. It is promoting a Marxist political ideology as a means of creating loyalty to the state. Opposition to the state comes mainly from the tribes and ethnic groups, as well as the urban middle classes. For these Afghans, an Islamic identity has served as a rallying point capable of unifying ethnic or otherwise antagonistic groups and communities.

In Pakistan, the Bengalis, the major ethnic group, successfully divided the state in two. And now, about two decades after the secession of 55 percent of the country's population and a sizable segment of its land, the ruling military elite, dominated by Punjabis, still views some segments of the country's non-Punjabi ethnic minorities as a potential threat to the integrity of the state.

Such competing claims of religion and ethnicity and their perception by elites in these three countries have had political repercussions that have extended far beyond the region. The three countries illustrate, moreover, the continued salience of both religion and ethnicity in the contemporary world, in general, and in developing politics in particular. What is less obvious is the degree to which the new Islamic "resurgence"—in its revolutionary, oppositional, or legitimizing role—has overridden or simply obscured the continued importance of various forms and manifestations of ethnic identity in these countries. The question is complex for the various groupings to which attaches the label "ethnic"—from the level of clans, to tribes, to the larger and more socially heterogeneous, linguistic communities which are currently undergoing significant changes themselves. At times, such ethnic identities compete with the claims of religion for purposes of political mobilization; at other times religious and ethnic identities serve either to support or to undermine the authority and legitimacy of the state. It is this complex interplay between state power and religious and ethnic identifications that emerges as the central problem.

Broadly speaking, there are at least three reasons for the continuing importance of ethnicity in the three countries. The first is that all three societies are poly-ethnic. In Iran, the politically dominant Persians form an estimated

55 percent of the total population of 44.5 million people (1405 AH/1985 AC estimate). The country's largest linguistic minority is the Azeri (Turkish)-speaking Azerbaijanis, who comprise about one quarter of the population. Next in numerical strength are the Kurds, who make up about one-twelfth of the population. The other major ethnic groups are the Qashqā'is, Boir Ahmadis, Turkomans, Afshars, Bakhtiaris, Baluchis, Arabs, and Lurs. Shī'ite Islam is the professed religion of close to 90 percent of the population. The Sunni minority includes the Baluch, the Turkomans, the vast majority of the Kurds and segments of the Arab population. Non-Muslims, comprising less than 2 percent of the total population, include the Baha'is, Zoroastricans, Jews and Assyrian and Armenian Christians.

In multilingual Afghanistan, the arithmetic of the ethnic balance between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns has been a continuing subject of controversy. Although the Pashtuns claim to constitute a majority of the country's 18 million people (1405 AH/1985 AC estimate), including the Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran, this is at best a marginal majority. The Pashtuns themselves are divided into numerous tribes. They have been the politically dominant group since Ahmed Shah Durrani built a confederacy in the eighteenth century. The Dari (Persian of Farsi)—speaking Tajiks are the second largest linguistic group, estimated at approximately one-fifth of the population. The Tajiks, too, are divided into a variety of ethnic communities. The Shi'ite Hazaras, an estimated one million, are the second largest Dari-speaking group. The Uzbeks, who number about a million, are the largest Turkic-speaking group in Afghanistan. Other linguistic groups include the Turkomans, the Baluch, the Aimaq, the Brahui, and the Nuristani.

In Pakistan, the Punjabis, constituting some 55 percent of the total population of 95 million (1405 AH/1985 AC estimate), are the politically dominant group within the bureaucracy and the military. Muhajirs, mainly Urdu-speaking refugees originating from India, though only a small percentage of the population, exercise considerable influence. Urdu, the language of the Muhajirs, is the country's official language. Sindhis, Baluchis, and Pashtuns are the major minority groups.

A second feature of the ethnic mosaic of these countries is that many of the ethnic groups are the trans-border peoples. The borders of all three countries divide major ethnic groups. In the case of Pakistan, each of its major ethnic groups is a trans-border people. Punjabis and Sindhis live in both India and Pakistan, but religious cleavages coincide with the national boundaries. A majority of the Baluchis live in Pakistan, but a substantial minority lives in Iran and in southern Afghanistan. The Pashtuns are a majority in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, but large numbers of Pashtun-speaking tribes live in neighboring Afghanistan.

In addition to the Pashtuns, the other linguistic groups in Afghanistan

are also divided by international borders. Its northern most peoples—the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkomans—also live on the Soviet side of the border. And the Baluch population is divided among Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. The Hazaras are the only major ethnic group in Afghanistan that is not internationally partitioned.

The Azerbaijani and Turkoman populations are divided between Iran and the Soviet Union; the Kurds among Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and the USSR; and the Baluch among Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Finally, the region's Arab population is shared among Iran, Iraq, and the littoral states to the Persian Gulf.

Each of the countries is at odds with at least one of its neighbors over its borders. Successive Afghan regimes have rejected the Durand Line separating Afghanistan from Pakistan and have insisted that the Pashtun population of Pakistan be given the right to choose between autonomy within Pakistan, an independent Pashtunistan or reversion to Afghanistan. The Baluch in Pakistan waged civil war against the Pakistani government from 1973 to 1977 in pursuit of their demands for autonomy or, failing that, independence. The Baluch movement received some support from the Baluchis living in Afghanistan and Iran, but was opposed by both the Pakistani and Iranian governments. The Kurds, as is well known, have fought for autonomy within Iraq and, in recent years, with Iran. When the Iraqis tried to lay claim to the loyalty of the Arab population of southwest Iran in the early days of their current conflict with the Islamic Republican regime in Iran, they had no apparent success. Hence, the porousness of the borders. Furthermore, the irredentist and secessionist claims made by various ethnic groups and governments contribute to the persistence of the crisis of ethnic group identity and undermine their loyalty to each of the states.

A third factor in the continued importance of ethnicity is the relative weakness and the limited capacity of each of the states. This is in some respects the most critical factor. A central concern of successive rulers in all three countries has not only been the enhancement of their own personal power but the extension of the authority of the state itself. In all three countries, religious, tribal and ethno-linguistic leaders have had an uneasy and at times hostile relationship with central authority. They have been regarded by those in authority as impediments to the building of the "state". The term "state" itself is an elusive one. In many ways its association with modern European political development makes its application inappropriate to the institutions of these countries.

The chapters address the fundamental questions of how society, polity, and the state are linked in societies that have a history of ethnic fragmentation. They also discuss how religion has alternately been used as an instrument for solidifying and undermining state authority. As John Esposito asks: "Perhaps

the most fundamental questions which have arisen from Pakistan's recent experiment in Islamization are: "Whose Islam?" and "Why a negative Islam?"" (p.361). He explains: 'Whose Islam?', is for many, tied to a related question: 'Why a negative Islam?' The Islam which Zia ul-Haq's regime has implemented is criticized as simply one of restrictions, *ḥudūd* punishments, taxation, and political control. This quandary underscores a dual problem that has confronted Pakistan (and many other Muslim countries) throughout its existence: inability to agree on the concept of Islamic belief and the need for reinterpretation and/or reform. Pakistanis have found it easier to rally under the umbrella of Islam in opposition movements, e.g., against British and Hindu rule or, more recently against the Bhutto regime, than to agree upon what Islam and an Islamic state are" (ibid).

A collection of this kind is bound to be uneven. The six years it has taken, from the time of the conference in 1402 AH/1982 AC which brought the scholars together, until the collection reached me in published form, has created an interesting time warp. Major changes are afoot in the countries under discussion. In Pakistan the fervor of Islamization seems to have abated; in Iran fundamental changes are expected after the inevitable passing of Khomeini and a new era is expected to open in Afghanistan with the imminent departure of the Russians.

A theoretical flaw remains the synchronic perspective of American social scientists. Society is analyzed in the here and now. Nikki Keddie, the American "expert" on Iran, sees Khomeini's revolution as a "unique experiment" (p. 165). This is nonsense! Religious figures have vied for political power in Iran since the creation of the Saffavid dynasty. Khomeini has many precursors in Iranian history. Similarly, society in Pakistan and Afghanistan exhibit ethnic and political tensions which reflect traditional tribal configurations.

With their tendency to dismiss "class" the analysts often miss the emergence of new classes. The emergence of the lower middle class in Pakistan explains some of the dynamics of Pakistan in the 1980s; a point noted by Nikki Keddi for Iran (pg. 161). The religious leadership in Iran that backed Khomeini tended to have come from small towns and was of non-elite origins.

Some shortcomings: One map, (Figure 1.1 pg. 5) shows 'Punjabis' on a location where Pashtuns actually live. Ghulam Ishaq was not a member of the elite Indian Civil Service (p. 313). The importance of the Islamic University in Islamabad is greatly exaggerated (p. 356). Thus, the book suffers from the inevitable problems facing any such academic jamboree – unevenness, the disparate disciplines and nationalities of the authors. Nevertheless it is essential reading for anyone interested in the social and political problems of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan.

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