

A Study of Contributors to the Development of Ethno-Cultural Variation in Iran

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ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to explore the contributors to ethnic variation by relying on two cultural elements: Language and Religion. The author believes that the causes for ethnic variation are to be sought in the nature of man. Man has two dimensions: Physical and Cultural. In Iran, culture is responsible for ethnic variation and that physical or ethnic differences do not play a significant role in this variation. Furthermore, it should be noted that, based on the teachings of Islam, the color of skin and race do not serve the measure for differentiation and identification among Moslems. Of cultural elements, language and religion have always played a most substantive role in the development and variation of ethnicity in Iran. In Iran, unlike multi-ethnic countries like India, America, Russia, China, etc, there is no ethnic group which constitutes the majority. Hence, there is no single ethnic group in power, dominating other ethnic groups in Iran.

KEYWORDS: Ethnic Group, Culture, Language, Religion

INTRODUCTION

The country, now referred to as Iran, has always served the purpose of a habitation for peoples with varied cultures. Before the arrival of Iranians, i.e. when it had not become a consolidated country yet, it was the home to Elamis, Kassiss, Loloites and Goutis (Grishman, 1970: 49-53)

Following the arrival of Iranians in the first millennium B.C. and establishment of the great Achaemenides Empire by Cyrus the Great in 550 B.C., Iran emerged as the largest and most powerful empire in the ancient world. Extending from China to Yugoslavia, it united peoples and nations of different cultures under one flag. The peoples and nations comprising the empire was reported by Darius the Great (486-521 B.C.) in Bisutun Inscription (Shareb, 1967:25-68) as well as in Histories by Herodotus (1989:222-225). In addition, the role played by the nations and peoples affiliated to the Achaemenides Empire can be seen in the stone-masonry at Persepolis.

The situation continued into the Parthians, Sassanides and Islamic dynasties and like the past, cultural variation has continued into the present. Now the question that is in order is why there has such a situation in Iran and what factors have been involved in the shaping of ethnic variation? Thus, the aim of the present work is to explore the etiology of ethno-cultural variation in Iran.

Ethnicity & Culture

To explore the ethno-cultural variation etiology, the concepts "ethnicity" and "culture" need to be defined. An ethnic group consists of people with shared cultural, historical, or at times, physical characteristics, who have a sense of belonging and solidarity to one another and find themselves distinct from other groups.

The difference between the term "ethnos" and "race" is that the latter is commonly applied to people with physical characteristics distinguishing them from one another. In the past, human societies were divided into races depending on their skin color, hair, eyes and other physical characteristics. The term "race" was commonly used in place of "ethnos". Doubtless, physical characteristics contribute to ethnicity. For instance, a major factor that distinguished American blacks from American whites is their skin color. Culturally, i.e. in terms of religion, language, education as well as use of material means, economic activities, sports, literature, music, etc, American blacks rather belong to the American culture than to blacks of the African Continent. Yet, their skin color is a major factor in separating them from the whites. However, what distinguishes ethnicity from ethnic groups is culture, for a study of ethnicity and ethnic groups indicate that there are varied ethnic groups with similar physical characteristics.

In defining "culture", it seems that the most comprehensive and simplest definition is: Culture is a non-biological or non-physical phenomenon comprising all human achievements, material or non-material, transferred by instruction. Put simply, whatever man creates or learns is referred to as "culture".

Etiology of Ethnic Variation in Iran

Basically, the etiology of ethno-cultural variation in Iran and other parts of the world is to be explored in the human nature. Unlike other creatures, man is the only creature with physical and cultural dimension, who, above all, meets his physical and mental needs by means of culture. Therefore, the physical (racial) and non-physical (cultural) differences cause ethno-cultural variation. However, in Iran, race or physical differences do not play a significant part in ethno-cultural variation. For this reason, culture can be said to be a critical factor in ethnic variation. Accordingly, of the ethnic groups in Iran, only Turkamans and some other small groups share marked racial characteristics. Further, in view of the fact that based on Islamic teachings, skin color and race do not the standard for inequality and identifications among Moslems, it can be said that physical differences are ignored in Iran. Thanks to its geography, Iran has been the target of invasions by Iranian ethnic groups, Arabs, Turks and Moguls for at least three millennia, leading to mixed races.

The Role of Culture in Ethnic Variation in Iran

Earlier, reference was made to the role of culture in shaping ethnicity and it was reminded that an ethnic group comprises people with a shared culture and feel attached to one another. Culture is not only a determining factor in ethnic formation but also plays a major role in ethnic sustenance, change or destruction. Now the question that arises is what aspects of culture influence the development, sustenance, ethnic change, or ethno-cultural variation. A study of ethnic groups in Iran indicates that two cultural elements, namely language and religion play a larger role in ethnic identification. This is not to say that ethnic characteristics are totally ignored; rather, as reminded earlier, ethnic characteristics in certain instances such as Turkamans, Hazareha and some aboriginal African groups are conspicuously distinct. As language and religion are determining factors in ethnic identification, it is necessary to briefly address the issue.

Language

Language is an essential element of culture and in fact, overriding the language. Every element of culture ranging from religion to architecture and sciences as well as from family and political system to army and weaponry depend on language. Basically, spoken language is an arbitrary symbolic system which attaches meaning to the sounds and the combinations of sounds (Falk, 1994). Therefore, language is an arbitrary entity shared by members of an ethnic group or community; hence, it separates ethnic groups and communities. For instance, each ethnic group has a name, and the units constituting them, ranging from the individuals to the largest groups has their names. The names identify each ethnic group and the units comprising them. However, the basic question is how language influences ethnic variation in Iran? Language influences ethnic variation in two ways: Firstly, language is a phenomenon that changes with time and may gradually be subdivided into other languages and numerous dialects. Subdivision of language and emergence of new dialects paves the ground for ethnic development into a new identity. For instance, the ancient Persian language underwent change starting with the Achaemenides, and consequently Middle Persian branched out from it. In the early centuries of the Islamic rule too, Persian, Lori and a number of dialects emerged from Middle Persian. Another instance is that based on the studies of Historical Linguistics, all the languages and dialects common in Iran with the exception of Arabic, Turkish, Indian and Pakistani languages and dialects have a common root (Beats & Pollack, 1996:450-451). This, i.e. branching Ural-Altai languages (Hait, 1986:22)

and other languages, is true. Secondly, emigration of one ethnic group or a branch of an ethnic group to the land of another ethnic group can result in ethnic variation. Iran can be mentioned as an interesting example. A study of Iran's history indicates that up until Medes and Parsees established themselves in the first millennium B.C., i.e. about three thousand years ago, other peoples including Elamites, Kassiss, Loloites and Goutis had lived, peoples whose languages, dialects and religions were extinguished and replaced by other languages and religions. All the existing languages, dialects and religions in Iran were imported from other places by different

peoples. All the existing languages and dialects trace to three language families: Aryan, Semitic and Ural-Altai (Turkish-Mogul).

Table I. Family Languages in Iran

Item #	Language Family	Date Imported	Current Languages & Dialects
01	Aryan	3000 years ago	Persian, Lori, Lari, Balouchi, Gilaki, Mazanderani, Armenian, Behdini (Dari), Taleshi, Kurdish, Laki, Barahouei, Tati, Shahmirzadi, and tens of other dialects.
02	Semitic	2500 years afterwards: over 1400 years ago	Hebrew, Mandaei, Assyrian, Arabic
03	Ural-Altai (Turkish-Mogul)	900 years ago	Azari, Turkish, Khalaji, Turkamani

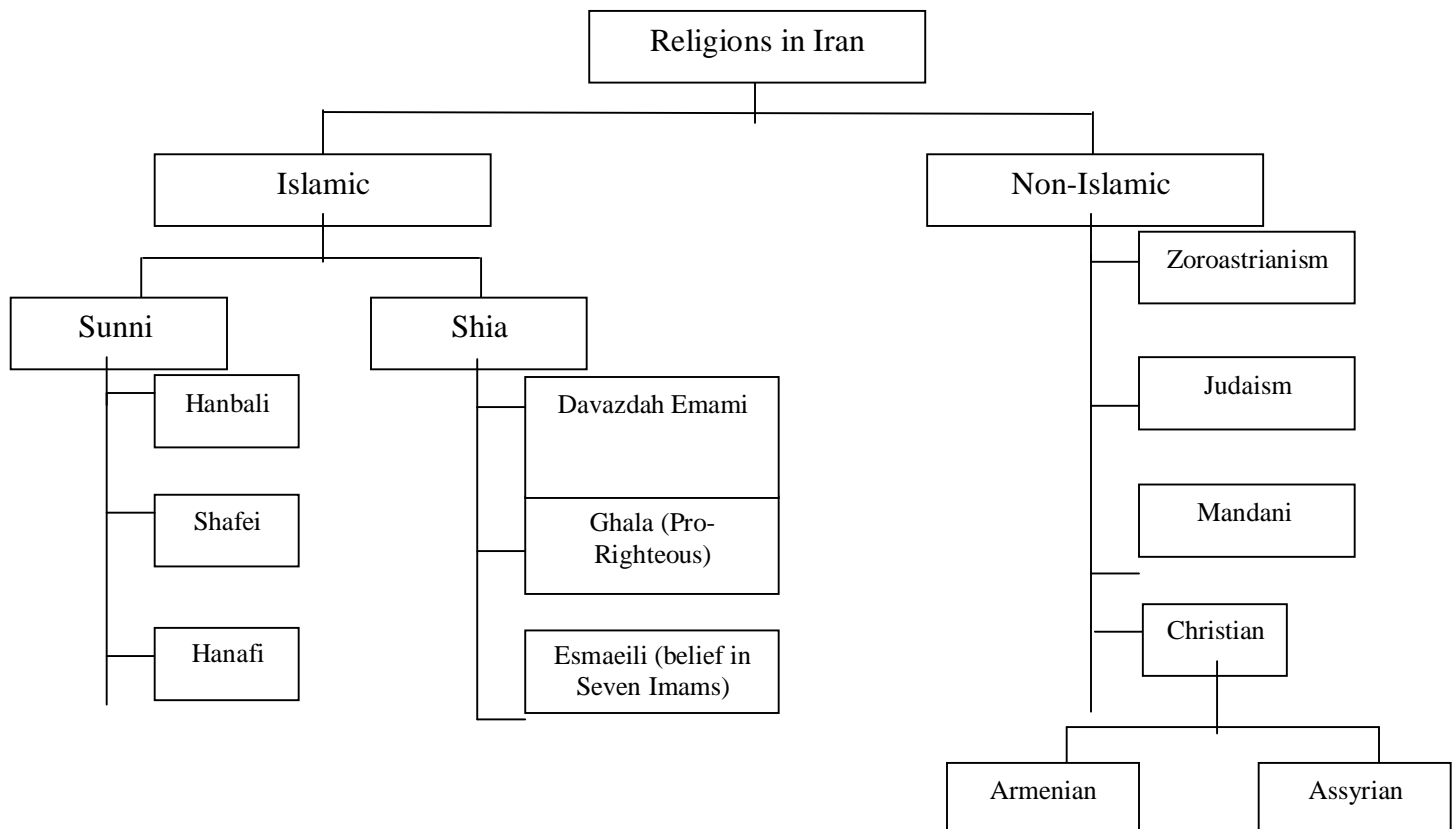
Because of its geography, Iran was always been the target of invasions by peoples speaking different languages and dialects (Grontesky et al: 1980; Albalazari, 1967; Fry, 1984; Boyle, 1987). As most peoples came to Iran from the east, i.e. Middle Asia, they brought with them Aryan and Ural-Altai languages from which most languages and dialects presently common in Iran have been derived.

Religion

Like language, religion is a global phenomenon such that until now there has been no society destitute of religion. Religion consists in belief in metaphysical creatures and forces, namely matters of superhuman nature which influence man's life. Since religion influences all aspects of life, prescribing and safeguarding the essential norms and values in the society, it plays a leading role in demarcating societies and peoples. Religious beliefs are construed as undeniable truths by the followers: As such, religious prejudices are strong, operating as a mechanism in demarcating peoples and societies with a variety of religions. Since religion and religious faiths are of general concern with the society members and yet the source of separation of societies, it can be taken to play a leading role in the development, reinforcement and sustenance of ethnic variation.

Religion causes ethnic variation in a number of ways: Firstly, by religious renovation, i.e. emergence of a new religion. Secondly, by innovation i.e. branching out in a religion, which results in emergence of a new sect; and thirdly, emigration or stampede of the followers of a religion into the realm of another religion resulting in coexistence of the followers of two religions, or in the event of victory, the invading people imposes their religion on the defeated people, destroying their religion.

In Iran, religion has been the source of ethnic variation and solidarity. The presence of non-Moslem religious minorities such as Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, Zoroastrians and Mandais, and the division of Moslems into Shia and Sunni as well as the division of Shiites has been the cause of ethnic variation. However, Islam has always been a source of solidarity of Moslems. Over the past three thousand years, Iran has always been the home to various religions and a place to live for their followers: Up until the advent of Islam, Zoroastrianism was the prevailing official religion and other religions like Judaism, Christianity, Manovi, Mandai and Mazdaki existed alongside. Following the advent of Islam and occupation of Iran in the fateful Fatholfotouh Battle in 21 H.A. in Nahavand, Islam, looked upon as the prevailing religion, and succeeded Zoroastrianism, resulting in the extinction of Mazdaki and Manovi. Gradually, Islam, too, branched out into two major faiths: Sunni and Shia themselves branching out in turn into other faiths and contributing to ethnic variation.



Historical Background of Ethno-Cultural Variation in Iran

Over the past three thousand years, Iran has always been the target of invasions, attacks and settlement on this land by various peoples. The most important outcome of these invasions is that all languages, dialects, religions and faiths existing in Iran are non-native imported by non-native peoples. This will confront us with the essential question of why it has all come to this. To answer this question, we will have to briefly analyze the issue.

On balance, to understand the situation, it is necessary to first study the origin of languages and religions before their introduction to, and how they found their way into, Iran. Earlier, it was reminded that two language families, Aryan and Ural-Altai originated from Eastern Iran, i.e. Middle Asia. However, languages affiliated to Semitic language family (Jewish, Mandai, Arabic and Assyrian) originated from the Middle East, particularly from the Arabian Peninsula, Palestine and from invasions to Iran. For religions, the situation is the same. Similarly, Mazdai religion was imported and established in Iran from the Middle Asia by Aryan migratory peoples. Likewise, Islam was imported and established in Iran from the Arabian Peninsula by the Arab tribes in Iran. Judaism, Mandai and Christianity, always comprising the minorities, are exceptions.

Now, we will turn to why and how the above languages and religions were introduced to Iran. Studying the turbulent history of Iran, we will discover that it has been the target of the following invasions for three millennia:

- Migration and invasion by Medes and Parsees in the first millennium B.C. resulting into establishment of Aryan languages, Zoroastrianism and such other cultural elements as Norouz (new year's day), Iranian customs and rites.
- Invasion by the Greeks in the fourth century B.C. who failed to establish their language, religion and culture
- Invasion by Moslem Arabs at the beginning of the first century A.H. resulting in occupation of Iran and replacement of Zoroastrianism with Islam and vast changes in all aspects. In fact, establishment of Islam in Iran resulted in integration of certain customs and rights and cultural development different from the traditional Persian culture.
- Invasion by Seljuq Turks in the fifth century and subsequent invasion by Tamerlane and finally establishment of Turks in Iran, resulting in establishment and development of Turkish language in Iran
- Invasion by Moguls in the seventh century A.H. resulting in devastation of Iran; however, as Moguls were indifferent to other religions, they did little to impose their faiths on the inhabitants of the countries they occupied. With the exception of certain Moguli terms, there are no traces left of Moguli language, religion, customs and rites. Hence, Moguls played no part in ethno-cultural variation in Iran. However, there are sparse ethnic traces of their invasion. The Moguli descendants now speak a non-Moguli language and are Moslems.

The essential point about the above invasions is that, with the exception of Greek invasion, other invasions were made by migratory peoples. Hence, it can be argued that Mazdai languages, dialects and religions as well as Islam, presently the prevailing religion, were imported by migratory peoples into Iran. Undoubtedly, for reasons to be referred to, migratory peoples were the cause of linguistic, dialectal and religious variations. For instance, up until the migratory Turkish tribes were settled, the present Turkey had a western culture and the people were Christian. However, Turks gradually changed the language, religion, rites and customs of the land such that now not only the Byzantine Empire changed to Turkey but also the Turkish language replaced Greek and Latin languages and Islam replaced Christianity.

A study of historical events sheds light on the truth that following the decline of the Sassanids in the Islamic period, Turk-Mogul tribes occupied many of the present areas including Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kirghizstan and Turkey and were settled in a large number of areas in Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. For two major reasons, migratory tribes enjoyed a powerful military force.

The first reason concerns their living style which depended on livestock farming and using natural pastures to which people had to flit. This living style caused the nomads to live in tents which could easily be moved. Moreover, nomadic life style is coupled with mobility. For this life style, there is little room for idleness; rather, the people must be strong and able to put up with difficulties. Nomads are skilled jockeys and sharp shooters. They are fully skilled at warfare. Overall, nomads are sportspeople with a military morale and tolerant by nature. The second reason for the fact that nomads are powerful is their socio-political structure which relies on a tribal system where the members have common interests and who react as a consolidate force to enemy. The tribal system demands perfect loyalty of the members. Such a system is expandable such that at times the population of clans exceeds hundreds of thousands.

In view of the above, one can conclude that the nomadic life style is a major contributor to the formation of a politico-military system. Thanks to their peculiar politico-military system combined with bravery and valor, nomads enjoyed a great military power. This quality paved the ground for their expansionism and invasion of distant lands; hence, it played a leading role in transferring their culture or, rather cultural elements such as language, religion, etc, contributing largely to ethnic variation.

Identity and Ethnic Demarcation

Identity is form of symbolization, or rather, a cultural phenomenon which people, groups, peoples or localities adopt to attain identity and become distinct from others. A most common style of identification is labeling such that there is no unlabeled individual, group, people or country (Peoples & Baily, 1991; 1374; Horwitz, n.d: 111-141; Barth, 1969:9-38). A study of the peoples in Iran indicates that each people have levels of identity, i.e. units comprising the people have their labels which distinguish them from one another. For instance, the Lor people branched out into Bakhtiari, Kohkilouyeh, Boyerahmad, Mamasani, Lorestani, etc, each comprising in turn various groups and clans. Each clan, too, comprises numerous units with distinct identity levels.

For the same reason that there is demarcation between the units of a people, there is demarcation between peoples too. Cultural contributors or elements include labels, languages, religions, customs, rites, music, dance, costume, belongingness, solidarity and on balance, a common culture and history. Apart from the above, occasionally such natural forces as rivers, seas and mountains, too, influence demarcation of peoples.

Obviously, cultural demarcation is an effective force in shaping the geographical boundaries of peoples. Up until the recent changes, for reasons of insecurity and shortage of modern transport and a weak central government, trips were made only with difficulty to various parts of Iran. Hence, there were distinct geographical boundaries and cultural demarcation between peoples. A study of the geographical boundaries of peoples in Iran indicates that each group or people own a part of this land. Unfortunately, up until today, there has been no study conducted on the cultural and geographical demarcation of the Iranian people, such that there are neither reliable statistics available of the groups and peoples in Iran nor detailed maps providing an accurate distribution of the peoples. This shortage is due to the false supposition that the peoples in Iran are minorities comprising a small proportion of the population. A number of peoples might be politically problematic; however, the truth is that there is no group or people in Iran possess as much land as all the peoples put together.

If one is sufficiently informed about the ethno-cultural combinations in Iran, they will no doubt realize that Persian speakers referred to as "Farsha" occupy the greatest amount of land. This condition indicates an interesting situation, i.e. the majority governing the other ethnic groups referred to as the "weak minority" is not the leading issue*. The difference must be sought in the history and culture of Iran. Historically, for the reasons outlined, Iran has always been the target of invasions and that the peoples who established themselves in this land are not weak minorities

* A number of sociologists in Western countries who have done studies about the Iranian people and ethnic groups, have referred to the terms "minority" and "majority", namely they have generalized the structural model of the American society in Iran, which is far from reality (Higgins, 1984: 37-71; Helfgott, 1980: (195-204)

who have done so without struggle. Iranians, Arabs and Turks found their way into Iran only after waging wars and winning victories. Further, over 99% of Iranians are Moslems.

Here, the element "religion" has drastically reduced cultural differences among people, causing assimilation and solidarity among people and the Iranian ethnic groups. Therefore, although language and other cultural elements are the source of demarcation among Iranian, religion has created many common features among Iranians.

Ethnicity and Ethnic Changes in Modern Iran

Following the fifth stage in cultural development, i.e. Industrial Revolution in the West, a change occurred in the man's life which still continues. About 4.5 million years after the genesis of man and his having traveled a long way, finally in the eighteenth century, thanks to the advancement of science and technology, man was able to come upon a new force, i.e. machine whose power is far greater than that of animal. Tapping this power empowered man in every area ranging from the factory and agriculture to military, to such an extent that the Western societies having scarcely arrived into this stage of cultural development, excelled other societies. Thanks to their advancement in science and technology, the modern Western civilization achieved a much higher efficiency; hence, deeply influencing other societies. Having waged long wars with Russia and experienced the involvement of the British, Iran which had lost a huge part of their territory, had to adapt to many of the Western achievements. The influence of the Western culture which began with the Qajars and increased during the Pahlavi regime drastically changed the traditional Iranian society, such that the culture of modern Iran is a blend of three cultures: Iranian, Islamic & Western.

The changes that have occurred over the past eighty years in Iran led to a reduction in differences and increased cultural assimilation among Iranian ethnic groups. Earlier, it was noted that in the traditional Iranian society, religion, customs, rites, costumes, etc. were the cause of ethno-cultural variation in Iran. Further, since most Iranians are Moslems, Shiites in particular and that Persian is the national and pervasive language, they both played a significant role in the solidarity, assimilation and homogeneity of the people. However, adaptation to the Western

cultural elements over the past eighty years has helped to develop common features among the people of various geographical parts of Iran and led to cultural homogeneity of the ethnic groups. The Western culture or civilization has played a much greater role than imagined in cultural similitude. This means that the varied Iranian cultural elements have gradually passed into oblivion. Presently, there is an abundance of similitude between the living style of the people living in the provinces or various parts of the country. For instance, the architectural styles, transports, costumes, household equipment, medications and medical care, cosmetics, living styles, education and countless others have been assimilated. Nowadays, even a clan shepherd living in the distant mountains of Fars Province wears jeans and probably a watch.

Briefly, the Western cultural elements and renovation programs have made changes to the traditional culture, replacing the traditional cultural elements with the Western cultural elements and creating a considerable portion of similitude among the Iranian people. Put otherwise, the development has increased the assimilation and homogeneity of the Iranian population. The influence of the Western culture and civilization not only resulted in the assimilation and homogeneity of the Iranian ethnic groups, but in some respects fostered ethno-centrism. Development of literacy in Iran, growth in consciousness and knowledge of civil rights among the Iranian people have caused many a citizen to grow cognizant of their rights violated by autonomous rulers. Hence, the elites of the ethnic groups propound claims analyzable with the

context of national solidarity. Doubtless, the survival of the entire nation owes themselves to the unity and solidarity of the Iranian people, and that the best way to achieve national unity and solidarity is decentralization and popular participation of the Iranian people in the Government.

Conclusion

Since the Elamites, that is, before the arrival of the Aryans, Iran has always been home to various ethnic groups. The situation was the same during the time of Achaemenides, Selukis, Parthians, Sassanides and during the Islamic period. Even today, the situation is still the same. Ethnicity is a cultural phenomenon even though ethnicity can occasionally be an influential force. Hence, culture is the source for cultural variation in Iran. Of the cultural elements, language and religion have made the largest contribution to ethnic development and variation. Linguistic variation and subdivision in Iran was caused by the invasion and settlement of peoples of different languages. Religious variation, too, was caused by settlement of the followers of other religions in Iran, religious innovation and adoption of religions originated from other countries. The geography of Iran and invasions to Iran of nomadic peoples with different languages and religions over the past three thousand years led to the settlement of three linguistic families of Aryans, Semitic (Arabic, Hebrew and Assyrian) and Ural-Altai (Turkish-Mogul) and other religions such as Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Iran. These forces originated from ethno-cultural variation. Although arrival of ethnic groups with different languages and religions in Iran over the past three thousand years resulted in ethnic variation, over the past century a new wave of the Western cultural elements gradually replaced the traditional Iranian cultural elements, causing a reduction in the differences and increased assimilation of ethnic groups. It played an essential role in the development of modern culture composed of the Iranian, Islamic and Western cultural elements. The Western cultural elements, especially thanks to the advancement of science, technology, politics and other, enjoy a higher efficiency than that of the traditional cultures and civilizations.

Although owing to linguistic, religious and cultural variation, the Iranian people are subdivided into various groups and peoples, unlike multi-ethnic countries like India, the U.S., Russia, China, etc., the ethnic combinations are based on the majority-minority concept. Hence, there is no ruling majority dominating other ethnic groups.

In view of the situation and the fact that over 90% of the Iranian population are Moslems; hence, a common national history, literature and customs, these forces contribute to the unity and solidarity with the Iranian people. The ethnic groups in Iran have a peaceful relation and that irrespective of their ethnic identity; the survival of the Iranian people depends on the national solidarity. No doubt, regional inequality in Iran which can be eradicated by programming sympathy is the best way to continue the solidarity among the Iranian people, decentralization and their participation in the entire affairs made possible by delegation of power to the provinces.

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