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Abstract

The concept of federalism has received attention among elite groups in society who seek power sharing and address historical grievances, but the prevailing political and legal discourse in Iran often sees the move towards federalism as a potential threat to national unity which can cause secession. This article examines a potential solution that preserves national unity while moving towards greater distribution of power and decentralization. The main solution is considered to be the Persian language itself which, by creating a single identity across the territory of Iran, can play an important role to save the territorial unity in the event of a greater distribution of power.

Keywords

The Persian language, Farsi, Federalism, Iran, National unity, secession.

A) Introduction

With its rich historical and cultural heritage, the Persian language (also known as Farsi) has significantly shaped Iran's cultural and political landscape. There is a harmony between its unity in language and form of state, but the idea of power sharing is arising in its different forms among scholars.

Federalism is considered a form of political decentralization and devolution of powers to sub-national units. The dominant political and legal literature in Iran views the move towards federalism as an act leading to secession and one that threatens national unity. The question, however, is what is the solution that can preserve national unity while moving towards the distribution of power and helping us to achieve decentralization and, ultimately, federalism? There are many factors for achieving federalism, but this article focuses on language and addresses the question: How can the Persian language contribute to achieving federalism in Iran? This paper delves into the relationship between language, federalism, and national identity, aiming to shed light on how the Persian language can contribute to supporting the idea of federalism in Iran in a legal context.

To answer the main question, the article is divided into four main sections. First is the introductory section, which addresses the main question. In the second, relevant definitions are discussed, along with the history of the Persian language. The third part explores the relationship between the Persian language and federalism to respond to the main idea of the study. The final part challenges the main thesis of the article by comparing it to other countries' experiences and concludes the study.

B) Definitions

The study has two main concepts: namely, language and federalism as a legal term. Both of these will be defined further.

1. Language

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines Language as "a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings express themselves". The Iranian linguist Bateni enumerated the main features of language as follows: being contractual; non-dependence on the environment; dual construction; and creativity (Bateni, 1992). Being "contractual" means that there is no inherent relationship between form and word, but the relationship between words and their meanings is a "contractual" one. One of the results of this is the strengthening and efficiency of the language. Another component of language is non-dependence on the environment. If language did not have this capacity, its speakers could only react to what is available in time and place and affects their senses, the same ability that does not exist in the communication system of animals. What is meant by dual construction is the existence of a type of two-stage construction whereby higher-level units are made from lower-level elements, and each of these two levels has its own rules and organization. Here, a distinction has been consciously made between unit and element so that it is easier to introduce the concept that elements are the smallest components in the chain of communication. The meaning of creativity

in a communication system is that it has the unlimited ability to produce and understand new chains, and thus to exchange new messages. Each of the human languages, regardless of the culture they belong to, has this unlimited creativity, in the sense that they can create an unlimited number of sentences from a limited number of words that make up their vocabulary (ibid).

Language primarily serves as a means to facilitate communication, enabling the transmission of information between individuals (Spencer, 2008). However, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic studies have drawn attention to the use of language to express a national or local identity (Crystal & Robins, accessed 3 May 2024). Beyond mere communication, it serves as a marker of national identity, as a shared set of characteristics and values that bind an independent nation together (Hafez Nia, 2001).

The essence of a nation, its national culture, and its unique traits are vividly portrayed through its language (Ahmadi, 2006). It serves as a mirror reflecting the collective identity and values of a society (Coulmas and others, 1987). When a country liberates itself from oppressive regimes, it often sheds the language imposed by those external powers and rekindles its indigenous language (Witherspoon, 1980). The entire idea of a legal system is revealed in the context of language and introduces itself to society, shaping both the structure of governance and the distribution of power (Vafaei & Gholami, 2018).

2. Federalism

Within any political society, power can be wielded through two distinct mechanisms: Through centralizing authority in the hands of a single governing body or dispersing it among smaller units. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, federations became a widely used constitutional form (Riker, 2017). Federalism is the theory or advocacy of federal principles for dividing powers between member units and common institutions (Stanford, accessed 24 May 2024). Federalism can be defined as “the arrangement of power according to which two or more self-governing societies share a political space with each other.” Several points can be extracted from this definition: First of all, we should consider federalism as a political concept. Secondly, federalism refers to the relations between human groups living in the units that form a whole. Thirdly, each of the smaller parts has the capability for self-governance, which leads to their legal and political ability to establish political institutions.

Federal systems are, as a matter of definition, decentralized; but so are, as a matter of fact, all modern democratic unitary states. Consequently, what distinguishes federal from unitary states is not decentralization. Federal systems allow for shared sovereignty and cooperation while preserving regional diversity. In contemporary times, federalism is widely accepted as a mechanism for addressing the demands of minority groups such as linguistic minorities, and promoting and protecting their rights through granting a certain degree of legislative, judicial, and administrative autonomy. This enables these minority groups to take effective control over their own affairs without interference from the center. It allows them to preserve their cultural identity, customs, and traditions, as well as their institutions, in the manner they wish, provided it does not violate the rights and freedoms of others and other accepted limitations. What, then, distinguishes one governmental system from another? The one factor that fulfills this role is the ownership of constitutional powers set out by Breton (2000), who offers language as one reason for federalism to be enabled to become the constitutional arrangement.

Two driving forces must be present in order to consider federalism as a political system, namely identity and efficiency. Identity in federalism refers to two or more culturally, linguistically, religiously, or otherwise diverse communities that share common values and live together as a single political community, while retaining meaningful autonomy within that community. This is the kind of federalism in which language can play a significant role (Arraiza, 2015). Arraiza's idea of identity in federalism is closely tied to how linguistic diversity is managed through territorial and non-territorial autonomy. Territorial autonomy allows linguistic groups to have a homeland where their language and culture are dominant, while non-territorial autonomy supports the idea of self-identified communities governing themselves regardless of their location. Examples of such political communities are Canada and Switzerland. Efficiency in federalism, on the other hand, ensures administrative efficiency in homogenous but geographically large states, so as to improve democratic representation and accountability by devolving political power, thus allowing better control over resources and policies to local people while upholding national unity and the ability to act consistently with national policy (Defere and others, 2019). Arraiza highlights a relationship where language, society, and political institutions continuously influence each other. Linguistic diversity shapes the design of autonomy arrangements, and these arrangements, in turn, affect the development of linguistic identities. The history of the Persian language will be discussed further to examine this influence.

C) History of Persian, an official language

Persian is an Iranian language that belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family; it is not limited to a specific group. When faced with foreign influences, the strength of Iranian cultural identity resisted cultural assimilation. As a result, unlike in many other regions affected by the Muslim conquest, Iran did not undergo a gradual replacement of its language and culture. Despite the fall of the Sassanid government, the Arabic language failed to supplant the native Persian tongue (Khobroye Pak, 2013). Nor did the Mongol invasion of Iran result in the replacement of the Persian language or culture.

From its inception, the Persian language served as a gateway to political unity among the Iranian Aryan tribes and facilitated communication and understanding between them. The modern Persian language comes from the older Middle Persian (or Pahlavi) language, which itself originated from Ancient Persian (Afshar and others, 1986). "Middle Persian" was common in Iran from the 3rd century BC to the 7th century AD, and "New Persian" or "Modern Persian" is considered the final form of the Persian language; a variant that replaced Middle Persian in the 8th and 9th centuries during Abbasid rule. With the decline of the Abbasids, the national life of Iranians was re-established (Zabihulla, 1986).

There are other languages in Iran; the biggest linguistic minorities are Kurdish, Balouchi, and Azari. The first two have experienced struggles with the central power, which is surprising, especially since both are branches of the Persian language. Even Azari, if we go back to the time of Alexander's conquest of Iran, was a part of Persian (Kasravi, 1973 quoted from Djalali, 2011). These linguistic groups have built a very powerful cultural heritage that contributes to their sense of unity as distinct populations (Djalali, 2011).

In accordance with Article 15 of the current constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Farsi is designated as the official language. The Persian Constitution of 1906 and its amendment did not address the issue of language. This is indeed astonishing, especially given the historical context,

in which all preceding governments officially recognized Persian as the formal language of the state including the Qajar Dynasty (1789–1925), Safavid Dynasty (1501–1736), Timurid Dynasty (1370–1507), and even the Mongol Ilkhanate (1256–1335), which, despite being foreign to Iran, adopted Persian as the administrative language of their empire. They contributed significantly to the promotion and use of Persian in their bureaucracy and culture (Morgan, 2007). This lack of attention to the official language of the 1906 Constitution was due to the ongoing conflict about changing the Persian script. Keeping it quiet was a way to avoid conflict and ensure the certainty of the issue (Sharifyazdi and others, 2024). This lack of legislation about language led King Pahlavi I to establish the Academy of Iran to promote the Persian language as an official one for unity. The charter of the academy was approved by the government board in 1935. Article 2 of the charter of the academy emphasizes Persian language in a nationalist atmosphere by moderation. The letter on the moderation of the use of the Persian language was one of this effort.

In modern times, some argue that Persian has become the hegemonic language over time. When the Pahlavi came to power on the Iranian plateau, efforts to suppress social and ethnic groups contributed to its dominance across the country (Miri, 2017). It should be noted that Persian is the official language of Iran, and according to a report by the Statistical Center of Iran, around 70 million Iranians speak it. There are also Turkish, Kurdish, Baluchi, and Arabic as the biggest minority languages. These minorities are shaped by the identities of linguistic groups, creating a dynamic interplay between language, society, and political institutions.

The Persian language has become 12 percent more widespread and has grown, as can be seen from the statistics of 2003 and 2015. Of course, it should be noted that increasing attention to Persian and emphasizing Iranian identity should not negate attention to the rights of linguistic minorities. In this regard, protecting individuals' rights to use their mother tongue is a significant issue. But the important point is that non-Persian speakers in Iran also acknowledge this reality. Both of these perspectives, promotion of Persian and minority language rights, pose theoretical and practical challenges. According to Article 15, education in the mother tongue is permitted in schools, the media, and journals (Ghanbari & Rahimian, 2020).

D) The Persian language and the idea of federalism

From Belgium and Switzerland in Europe to Iran and India in Asia, and to Canada and the United States in North America, the question of the national language has been and continues to be used as a tool to advance nationalist ideas to the detriment of minority languages. During their history, all of these countries have experienced and tasted tensions with the roots of language and linguistic nationalism in front of their eyes.

In contemporary Iran, especially during the rule of Pahlavi I, as mentioned, the reconstruction of the concept of country, nation, and national language by intellectuals, the press, politicians and political activists became a serious concern and created discussions in the scientific field and, since then, new approaches towards defining and consolidating the national cause have emerged.

One of the prominent nationalist ideas in Iran is that of “Iranshahri,” most notably associated with the Iranian thinker Seyed Javad Tabatabai (Tabatabaei, 2018). His idea of Iranshahri is based on the general principle of “Iran’s exception” compared to other regional and global experiences regarding nationality and national government, emphasizing that Iranshahri is something different and far from nationalist ideas.

Taking an anthropological perspective on language, we recognize it as a social construct intricately woven into the objective and subjective fabric of society. Within this framework, language serves to unite ethnic groups, while also playing a role in securing ethnic and minority languages. However, paradoxically, it can also be a tool for limiting and even eradicating these languages. Specifically, the approach taken in defending the Persian language and safeguarding it from perceived threats clashes with non-Persian mother tongues and challenges the constitutionally recognized freedoms and rights of linguistic minorities, including their right to education. Contrary to Tabatabai's viewpoint, the adoption of policies based on the idea of Iranshahri may exacerbate centrifugal forces. Simultaneously, the violation of minority rights, including language-based rights, fosters dissatisfaction and fuels tendencies toward the break-up of the national entity (Jalali & Aghaei, 2023). Hence, a way must be found to reconcile territorial integrity and power distribution, and language can be a unifying point as a common cultural element to achieve federalism without destroying territorial integrity.

E) Federalism through language

Some critics contend that federalism in Iran is often misconstrued as merely dividing a large state into smaller entities. Historically, no unified country such as Iran has transitioned to a federal system structure. Rather than fragmenting an existing nation, federalism should be viewed as a mechanism for decentralization, aiming to enhance operational efficiency in governance (Ahmadi and others, 2016). The mere separation of states does not inherently lead to separatism. In contrast, this paper proposes a unifying element—one that can preserve national and territorial unity—by emphasizing language (Moazzampour, 2004). This perspective diverges from that of Iranshahri, which neglects linguistic minorities as was explained above.

Claims to a collective identity rooted in language frequently play a pivotal role in autonomy movements, especially when speakers are geographically concentrated. Conversely, autonomy structures themselves can shape collective identities through linguistic and education policies (Arraiza, 2015). While language is not the sole marker of group identity, it often stands out as a distinguishing feature, even when other cultural traits may be less stable. Given the absence of a stable element for consensus on federalism in Iran, language emerges as a potential avenue for resolving this conflict.

The role of language has historically been overlooked in mainstream research on federalism. Classic studies have often centered around the United States as an empirical example (Wheare, 1964) and have primarily focused on the dynamics of power-sharing between two tiers of government: One representing the constituent units and the other the central government. These principles have proven effective in countries where a core national identity rooted in language existed before the establishment of a federal state.

However, language can assume a central role, particularly when perceived as a basis for economic discrimination. In affluent, industrialized, liberal democratic states like Canada or Switzerland, implicit linguistic divisions—long dormant—can resurface, turning language into a significant issue. In such cases, the institutional framework of federalism, rather than being an inherent feature of the political community, becomes a contested arena (Subrata, 2002).

Linguistics matters as a political criterion, depending on whether states want to create one identity or two identities. For example, Swedish and Norwegian are quite similar languages. Both are part

of the North Germanic language family, which means they share a lot of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. Speakers of these languages understand each other easily. In contrast, the cases of Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan are quite different: the same language, but different identities. Language serves as a delicate bond, facilitating communication among state institutions and acting as the foundation for power and resource negotiations among competing social groups. A shared language minimizes uncertainty, reduces information loss during transmission, and levels the playing field for these groups, significantly enhancing both the legal standing and legitimacy of the state. Beyond its functional role, language also carries a rich tapestry of historical, religious, cultural, ritualistic, and mnemonic meanings, forging a moral connection between the state and its citizens. Conversely, in post-colonial contexts like India or Pakistan, newly independent states grapple with nation-building through language. Finally, there are nuanced situations, as seen in Switzerland, where no single language enjoys uncontested status as an exclusive national symbol due to historical and political complexities (ibid).

Governments that have accommodated minority native language groups within their territories must consider the long-standing presence of these communities when political demands arise. Otherwise, they risk facing centrifugal pressures, as minority groups will take steps towards identity building and independence (Brass, 1991, pp. 13–16).

The emphasis on the national language here is not to negate or suppress minority languages, but rather to emphasize the potential of the national language in promoting national identity and unity. This should be done in a way that strengthens national identity without attempting to eliminate minority languages. Rather, minority languages play a complementary and driving role in the national language.

One of the rights that is often opposed in these political regimes under the guise of security is the right to a mother tongue, which in this confrontation restricts the freedom to use the mother tongue for linguistic minorities. Non-democratic, non-human rights governments, with a security perspective, always consider linguistic minorities as centrifugal and separatist forces and face obstacles to the freedom to use the mother tongue under various headings, including threats to security and national unity, territorial unity, and territorial integrity. Now the fundamental question is whether the existence of linguistic minorities and in general the existence of a natural human phenomenon such as linguistic diversity and the existence of linguistic minorities is in itself a factor of threat and instability, or is this threat a temporary characteristic and is the context of time and place, security policy, and the type of government approach to this phenomenon that turns it into a threat? And is the phenomenon of linguistic diversity a threat, or has it been perceived as a threat by undemocratic governments that do not have a traditional security approach to human rights?

Does the existence of linguistic diversity and minorities contribute to threats and insecurity, or, conversely, does confronting the linguistic freedoms of minorities increase their dissatisfaction and desire to move away from the center? The author's answer is the second proposition. Especially since governments that traditionally seek security only beyond their borders naturally neglect internal threats or attribute them to foreign sources. In doing so, dissatisfaction with the deprivation of basic freedoms, such as linguistic rights, becomes just one of the grievances. Economic and social problems will also arise and intensify, and as a result, centrifugal forces grow stronger due to injustice, economic deprivations, and restrictions on fundamental freedoms. Therefore, in a general statement, the more undemocratic a government is, the more outward-looking its policies and security approach will be and the more it will restrict domestic rights and

freedoms, resulting in increased centrifugal forces and threats to national security and territorial integrity.

F) Federal countries that foster language diversity

The Persian language can significantly contribute to the achievement of federalism. The central focus of this paper revolves around this hypothesis, yet it prompts us to consider potential objections. Notably, numerous federal countries have exhibited linguistic diversity without compromising their successful functioning.

Switzerland, for instance, boasts not one but four national languages. The institutionalization of language roles ensures that linguistic diversity is not perceived as a threat to any specific group's identity or livelihood. Additionally, dialects among Swiss German speakers serve as both markers of identity and channels for social communication. However, it is essential to recognize that the role of language in state formation varies across nations. While some countries may define themselves through other elements, Iran stands out due to the unifying role of its language. The essence of Iranian culture is intricately woven into the Persian language, akin to Belgium's cultural fabric. In contrast, the United States, Canada, and Switzerland do not share this linguistic centrality.

Historically, the Persian language has consistently served as a unifying element in Iran. It connects the nation to its past, acting as a bridge between pre-and post-Islamic spirituality and culture. For instance, during the Arab conquest of Syria, the local population lost their previous language and culture, emphasizing the significance of language in shaping identity. Consequently, language plays a pivotal role in realizing federalism in Iran, aligning with the broader theme of identity formation (Meskoub, 2000).

G) Conclusion

Beyond its functional role in communication, language also acts as a symbol of national identity—a unifying force that binds an independent nation together. Persian language, steeped in historical and cultural significance, has profoundly influenced Iran's cultural and political fabric. While national unity and power distribution remain contentious issues, language serves as a cultural bridge. By embracing linguistic unity and recognizing the value of federalism, Iran can move towards federalist goals without compromising its identity. However, we should note that this cultural element does not play a similar function in every country because what makes language important is the unifying role it can play in a nation, as it does in Iran.

Ultimately, leveraging the capacity of the Persian language can help to facilitate federalism alongside other elements. While this paper focuses on the Persian language's role in federalism, decentralization can serve as an initial step towards this goal for Iran.

However, additional questions arise: Does language solely matter within a federalist system, or can it also contribute to decentralization? Can genuine decentralization enhance power distribution, or is federalism indispensable? These inquiries warrant further exploration in a separate scholarly work.

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