



Title: Ethnicity and Electoral Politics

Author: Jóhanna Kristín Birnir

Publisher: Cambridge University Press, 2007

Reviewed by: Dr. Klejda Mulaj

Senior Researcher

Gulf Research Center

Of the models of political organization of states the most basic distinction is made between authoritarian and democratic regimes. The political conditions under which ethnic groups conduct their affairs in these two types of systems vary greatly. In democracies, ethnic groups participate along with other social groups in governing the country. In authoritarian politics, ethnic groups may hold the reins of power to the exclusion of other groups, they may be excluded completely from governance, or they may share in the governance of the country with other social groups. It is democracies, however, that provide the domain for the study of ethnic politics in this book.

Normatively, democracies are preferred political structures because they allow for a greater variety of interest representation than do authoritarian regimes. Given that more and more countries are embracing democracy, it is reasonable to expect that democracy is the favorable political system of the future. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the effect of ethnicity on democratic sustainability. This book is concerned with democratic politics. Democracy is understood as a political system where all members of society are allowed to participate freely and where elections are considered free and fair.

The standing of ethnic groups in countries which have embraced democracy vary. For instance, both Spain and Bulgaria have re-democratized, providing their ethnic groups with the option of participating in electoral politics. Spain, nevertheless, has experienced sustained ethnic violence perpetrated by Basque nationalists, whereas in Bulgaria the Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) has been in and out of government. Similarly, in Romania the Hungarian Democratic Forum (UDMR) has been an integral part of the coalition government. The question that concerns Birnir is: What distinguishes peaceful plural democracies from violent ones?

Even within a given democracy ethnic groups fare differently. For instance, not all ethnic groups in Spain are violent. The Basques have engaged in violence, the Catalans instead have sought involvement in government coalitions. Another question dealt with in this book is: What distinguishes violent ethnic groups from peaceful ones within the same democracy?

Contrary to a rather commonly held hypothesis that ethnic politics is not conducive to young democracies, this book suggests that ethnic politics has the potential to help stabilize new democracies by jump-starting party system stabilization. Moreover, whether ethnic groups become a stabilizing or a destabilizing influence in maturing democracies is, in part, a function of ethnic group access to government. Access to government implies either that the ethnic party is included as one of the parties that constitute a coalition government, or the ethnic party exerts influence on a minority government, or the ethnic group is represented in government in a nonethnic party. Having access to government, of course, implies influence over policymaking and government resources.

The author aims to cast some light on the effect of ethnic politics once democracy is established procedurally. Contrary to conventional wisdom, J K Birnir suggests that ethnic groups and their political demands are not inherently intransigent and that violence is not a necessary corollary of ethnic politics. Instead, she shows that ethnic groups and other factions become intransigent in response to political situations where access to government is limited. It is possible therefore that the political intransigence and violence expressed by some ethnic groups (such as those in Spain and Sri Lanka) stem from circumstances exogenous to ethnic affiliations.

As countries have democratized, it has been easier to translate ethnic group loyalties into stable party loyalties. The central proposition of this book is that ethnic identity serves as a stable but flexible information shortcut for political choices, influencing party formation and development in new and maturing democracies. Where ethnic groups are numerous, mobilized, and are allowed full participation in democratic electoral politics, they can be expected to field or support parties that represent ethnic interests from the very first elections. Furthermore, ethnic group members are likely to vote consistently for the party that represents their policy interests. Hence, under conditions of limited information in new democracies, the author expects unrestricted ethnic party formation and voting to stabilize party system development, at least, in the short term.

If ethnic groups are allowed continued participation in electoral politics and are, over time, able to access all levels of government to represent the interests of their ethnic constituency in negotiations over policy, the overall effect on democratic regime development in the long term also is expected to be stabilizing.

The argument of stable but flexible ethnic information shortcuts is referred to by Birnir as the argument of Ethnic Attractors. In her interpretation, the Ethnic Attractor produces a long-term pattern through the association of ethnic voters who rely on their ethnic group fellows for electoral purposes. Such shortcuts do not imply any particular political predisposition of any group member or the group as a whole. It is this which leads the author to suggest that ethnic groups are cohesive or stable but inherently flexible electorates. Whereas, in the short term, cohesion dominates ethnic group behavior, in the long term, flexibility becomes the norm, as the group responds cohesively to exogenous influences.

The argument of Ethnic Attractors does not predict ethnic electoral instability and violence. Rather, relying on the assumption that democracies provide widespread representation to groups, the argument of Ethnic Attractors leads to the belief that electoral instability and violence in ethnic politics are anomalies. Contrary to previous scholarship, which scrutinizes the characteristics of the group to discern potentials of ethnic violence, the argument of Ethnic Attractors advocates an examination of the conditions that prevent ethnic groups from fulfilling their peaceful political potential.

J K Birnir argues that absolute restrictions on ethnic access to the executive produce conditions under which ethnic group incentive to participate in peaceful electoral politics is eliminated. She observes that if an ethnic group permanently occupies a position of opposition, members of the group have less incentive to moderate their stance. By extension, if the ruling group is never forced to cooperate with the ethnic group, the ruling group has little reason to moderate its opposition to the demands of the ethnic group. This is a situation which may lead to a perpetual political adversity between the ethnic group and the ruling group, which in turn is likely to spiral into intransigence and even violence.

Due to the traditional emphasis on ethnic intransigence and its destabilizing influence on democracy, scholars have tended to focus on remedies that depoliticize ethnicity. Donald Horowitz, for instance, has suggested electoral reform that compels politicians to appeal to all ethnic groups in a district in order to be elected. Arend Lijphart, for his part, has advocated removing the source of ethnic conflict through elite bargaining about the power sharing mechanism of consociationalism. Birnir does not believe that deemphasizing ethnicity holds the key to peaceful coexistence between different ethnic groups. Moreover, she is not convinced that resolving political conflict through elite bargaining is a necessary condition for the peaceful inclusion of ethnic groups in national politics.

The author suggests that ethnic groups in and of themselves are not inherently intransigent and access to government promotes political moderation as this would decrease incentives for governments to attempt to depoliticize ethnic national identity. Hence, the value of finding an institutional structure where ethnic minorities are incorporated into the central government.

This book considers ethnic groups as flexible political actors and their effect on democratic party system development as constrained by institutions. Parties are considered important because they provide legislative representation, policy expertise, and accessible political information to their constituencies in democracies. Birnir asserts that as long as party system development facilitates such representation of the electorate, without barring emerging interests from entry into the system or barring their access to government over time, increasing stabilization of parties supports peaceful democratic development. As opposed to this, a fixed party system that prevents political access of ethnic groups through routine democratic means contributes to party system instability, deterioration of democracy, and even ethnic violence.

In conclusion, the principal propositions offered in this book are that due to political socialization, membership in an ethnic group functions as a stable but flexible information cue for political choices in democracies and that ethnic group access to government promotes moderation of all pertinent political actors, thereby supporting peaceful ethnic politics. The virtue of this book in challenging the assumption of ethnic intransigence is that it emphasizes the importance of institutions in enhancing interethnic peace. If not entirely new, this is a useful argument that certainly deserves attention.