

Eva Patricia Rakel. *Power, Islam, and Political Elite in Iran: A Study on the Iranian Political Elite from Khomeini to Ahmadinejad.* Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2009. xxviii + 302 pages. ISBN: 9789004171763. EUR 89/ US\$ 142.

In *Power, Islam, and Political Elite in Iran*, Eva Patricia Rakel writes the book “to contribute to a better understanding of Iran since the Islamic revolution (xxviii).” More specifically, she attempts to explain the effect of the balance of power among elite factions on policy outcomes in the economic, socio-cultural and foreign policy spheres. This is a worthy goal because Western publics, media and elites who have been baffled by Iran’s see-sawing policies in these areas have tended to imagine the country’s leadership as irrational or have reduced the Iranian state’s behavior to ideological parochialism. What Rakel offers us is a way to understand Iran’s networks of common interests and how different contextual conditions advantage some over others in their attempt to shape society and policies. While Rakel does a careful and impressive job in describing the trajectory of elite factions and the evolution of state policies, the book still falls short in three areas: theoretical development, lack of original research and added value, and the quality of the analysis and writing.

This book begins with a chapter that lays out the theoretical framework for the study. It begins with an unnecessary five-page discussion about whether the government of Iran is “authoritarian” or “totalitarian”. It then uses up another eight pages to argue that the literature on elites that peaked in the 1970s could be useful to understand Iranian politics if it assumes that elites are fragmented, linked to social forces, and variegated in non-industrial countries. It also argues for a “critical” theory of international relations that implies that worldviews affect how different elites interpret geopolitical interests and formulate policies and that policies resulting from these worldviews shape our world.

Rakel sometimes confuses her “theoretical framework” with a “coherent model” or “coherent theory” (*inter alia*, pp. xxii, 1). What she develops in chapter one is the former, not the latter. She basically makes the case that what an analyst of Iranian politics needs to understand to explain policy outcomes is inter and intra-factional elite dynamics, Iranian institutions, Shi’a ideology, and contextual factors such as international pressure. This does not a model or theory make because it does not produce testable hypotheses. Another weakness of this framework is that Rakel does not discuss whether its components are jointly sufficient to understand Iranian politics.

The second chapter describes the formal (religious supervisory bodies, religious foundations and republican institutions) and informal (the political factions) institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). It develops a typology of Iranian elites based on their distance from the inner-circle ruling elites (the other two layers are the administrative and “discourse” elites) and their factional belonging (Conservatives, Pragmatists and Reformists). She also traces the evolution of the three factions (networks of individuals with enough shared interests and policy positions) since 1979. This typology, even if borrowed from others as the author clearly indicates, is useful and necessary for the empirical chapters that follow. One issue with this approach of creating ideological categories and fitting elites into them, however, is that it avoids discussing the motivations and calculations of the members of these elites (precisely what Rakel wants to focus on by arguing for a “critical” IR). Could it be for example that politicians shift factions because of electoral politics, financial incen-

tives, cooptive offers, or other factors instead of ideology? Perhaps another way to create these categories would be to focus on the networks that bind the different factions instead of ideological positions, something which Rakel does sparingly.

Chapters three to five provide narratives of the IRI's policies in the areas of economic policy, socio-cultural development, and foreign policy. In each chapter, Rakel traces the evolution of this correlation, tracing causal processes as secondary sources allow, during four distinct post-revolutionary eras: the period of Khomeini's leadership (1979-89), Rafsanjani's presidency (1989-1997), Khatami's presidency (1997-2005), and Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005 until 2008 when she was done writing the manuscript). This is also the more important part of the book for non-experts trying to understand the complexity and inconsistency of policy outcomes in Iran. Experts, however, will find little that is new or revealing.

The narrative in chapters three to five could have been considerably enriched by original research (interviews with members of Iranian elites or analysis of primary material beyond websites). Chapters four and five in particular need original research because the relationship between the dynamics among prominent members of Iranian elites and the policy outcomes are not particularly clear. Rakel does not analyze the debates and strategies of elite members and factions enough to make the case for the usefulness of her framework or the importance of her typology.

The empirical chapters suffer from some redundancy because Rakel has to deal with the same eras and factions' effect on the different policy domains. While I see the merits of organizing the chapters by policy area, perhaps a more economical and streamlined way to do so would have been to organize them by the four eras instead. Chapters six and seven focus on the IRI's relations with the member states of the European Union. Chapter six uses the same format as the previous ones by charting these relations through the four different leadership-defined eras. Chapter seven looks at the flip side of EU-IRI relations by looking at EU initiatives and policies towards Iran.

Although it is not clear what this book's added academic value is, a reader may see that it does conveniently compile interesting information for other scholars, who are doing their own research on Iranian politics. It also brings other studies of Iranian elites and factions up to date, until almost the end of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tenure as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The information that Rakel uses, however, is almost exclusively from secondary sources or the websites of Iranian elites and institutions. And, as I argue above, the theoretical contribution is thin and too loosely connected with the empirical chapters. Perhaps the author intends this book for policymakers, analysts and other non-academics (particularly in the EU) with interest in Iran, but the attempt at theory and the price of the volume suggest otherwise.

The book deserved more copy-editing and careful revisions. The style (including the use of "we" by a single author when she is not using the passive voice), the use of banal sentences (e.g. "Governments are different from each other, as are societies, both in their political and in their daily life" (p. 1)), spelling errors (e.g. the use of *basji* instead of *basij* throughout the manuscript), and poor syntax are distracting. The text is repetitive and over-structured with awkward transitions. Some tables (e.g. appendix) are of dubious usefulness and the data they contain could have been presented better in graphs or, partially,

in the text. "Conclusions" are simply summaries of each chapter and often rehash the chapter's introduction. Streamlining and effectively revising this manuscript could have cut a good thirty pages and made for less tedious reading.

This book should be valuable for those who want to understand how the competition among different Iranian elite factions, each with its own views on policy and vision for society, as it provides information on individuals who have shaped Iranian economic, social and foreign policy since the Islamic revolution of 1979. This is essential knowledge for diplomats, analysts and scholars of Iran. However, it is not a book for anyone looking for theoretical innovation, original research on Iran, or elegant writing.

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