



Review of the publication: Yoav Peled, *The Challenge of Ethnic Democracy. The State and Minority Groups in Israel, Poland and Northern Ireland*, London: Routledge 2013, ISBN 9780415664219

Reviewer: Dr. Ondřej Klípa

Editor: Dr. Jack J. B. Hutchens

Date of publication: 22.02.2017

DOI: 10.11584/opus4-997

Yoav Peled's book brings again into international academia an almost forgotten concept of ethnic democracy. After a theoretical introduction reviewing the concept, Peled examines if ethnic democracy could be found in three cases: Northern Ireland (co-authored by Natalie Kosoi), interwar Poland, and Israel. He uses the case studies also "to offer a critical reexamination of the conditions for the consolidation and stability of ethnic democracy" (p. 1).

It is no surprise that the concept of ethnic democracy was resurrected by an Israeli scholar since the theory was elaborated by his countryman Sammy Smooha (first in 1989, although the term was coined originally by Juan J. Linz in 1975) and Israel became the "archetype" of ethnic democracy. Smooha was very active in his attempts to reach a wider academic audience with ethnic democracy, especially at the turn of the century when he edited a volume collecting case studies from Eastern Europe [1]. Smooha himself focused on cases other than Israel's, such as Northern Ireland, Malaysia, and Slovakia.

Not surprisingly, Yoav Peled started with the aim not only to apply the concept to the three selected cases but to revise the theory as well. Perhaps the reason ethnic democracy was not so successful in attracting wider academic attention is its theoretic instability. In principle, ethnic democracy is a combination of liberal democracy with fundamental civic rights for all on the one hand, and exclusivist nationalism keeping minorities in a slightly excluded and inferior position on the other. However, it remains unclear which rights have to be safeguarded and which can be taken away from the minority so that it can still be called democracy. Where is the exact border between ethnic democracy and non-democracy? To use Smooha's own terminology, how much "incomplete" could be the individual rights of members of non-core groups in ethnic democracy? How should "some control" imposed by the state on non-core groups look in particular cases? [2]

It is thus a quite welcome development that Peled aims to contribute to the clarification of the definition, in particular to revise the conditions which make ethnic democracy a stable regime. Compared to previous applications of ethnic democracy in case studies, Peled applies it in a most comprehensive and detailed way. It is evident that Peled is not an amateur in this field. He first published on ethnic democracy as early as 1992 and his interest in interethnic relations in Israel dates back even further. Peled's home country takes the biggest share of the book too. The chapter about Israel is nearly twice as long as the one dealing with Poland.

Whether it was due to the collective authorship or not, the case of Northern Ireland seems to be most coherent chapter, both as a "textbook" analysis of the conflict and as a clear examination of the ethnic democracy model. The only inconsistency I find is in the subtitle of the chapter. This is the only one from four subtitles in the book that does not address ethnic democracy directly but refers to some particular feature in the chapter (although the chapter could be easily subtitled "the longest ethnic democracy", for instance).

When it comes to the Polish case, the second one studied, the application of ethnic democracy is not that clear. While reading the chapter one may get the impression from various statements that the whole interwar republic fits in the ethnic democracy model and the only question is when exactly it deteriorated (as late as with the German invasion or earlier?). However, in Peled's overall assessment of that case he repeatedly states that it was not ethnic democracy at all.

In the case of Israel, Peled draws a bold line between the period labeled as ethnic democracy and periods that both precede and follow it, i.e., the period in between the lifting of the military control of the Palestinian Israelis (1966) and the overall deterioration of civil rights for them after 2000. However, when trying to understand the arguments underpinning the existence of ethnic democracy in Israel one comes across problems. First, the core period in which Peled identifies ethnic democracy is devoted the least attention,

especially when compared with a thorough description of the newest development in the twenty-first century. Second, all timeframes often blur as many of the examples and data provided by Peled come from different periods than the one in focus. Sometimes it makes the reader perceive the whole existence of the State of Israel as one single case.

Third, and most importantly, some of the arguments deserve further discussion. For instance, one of the salient features of "suspension of the rights" of Palestinian Israeli citizens is their exclusion from the army (p. 98). As Peled notes (p. 146) when writing about civil service as a relatively new option for the Israeli Arabs to contribute to Israeli society, this voluntary and peaceful substitute for army recruitment was fiercely rebuffed by Palestinian leaders from all realms of Palestinian life (politics, religion etc.) since they regard it as a betrayal of their interests. It is thus a question if they would perceive obligatory army service in the Israeli Defense Forces as meeting their "rights" had they been subject to this duty. When discussing ethnic democracy, in my opinion, the will of minorities not to integrate into the state should not be omitted and should be more distinguished from the state's policy of diminishing the rights of the minority. In Smootha's original concept of ethnic democracy, minorities are expected to struggle for higher recognition and equal rights (as Catholics in Ulster or Jews in interwar Poland did, for instance). But how does this accord with the model if the minority strives for much more?

Another contested argument of inequality in Israel presented by Peled might be the case of separate education of Arabs, especially no equally reciprocal curricula between the two communities. This means that Jewish students do not learn Arab language and history to the same degree that Arab students learn Jewish language and history. It would surely be better if the communities knew more about each other. However, a stronger emphasis put on Jewish language does not have to be necessarily the instrument of discrimination. Knowledge of Hebrew is inevitable in the labor market. Therefore, practical reasons in favor of the minority should be taken into account too. Moreover, glimpse into many European states that enable state-funded minority schooling would give the impression that either all of them are ethnic democracy or the situation in Israel is not that bad.

This brings me to my major feeling from the book. In my opinion, Peled is using a somewhat "lighter" definition of ethnic democracy when compared to Smootha's model. It takes Peled's model a bit away from "harder" cases (with weaker democracy) while placing it very close to the number of – especially Central and Eastern European – "normal" democracies distinguishing ethnic minorities from the core nation-group.

This shift becomes evident when looking at Smootha's previous analyses of exactly the same cases, although the Polish one remains in a nascent form [3]. Peled uses these texts rather rarely (p. 8), however. In consequence, the explanation why both of the scholars draw – except for Northern Ireland – different conclusions is not underlined enough. Unlike Peled, Smootha does find ethnic democracy in interwar Poland and identifies it in Israel, too, but in its first two decades only. This striking contradiction could be hardly explained any other way than that Peled's revision of "conditions for consolidation and stability" moved him away from the whole original definition of the ethnic democracy concept.

This does not mean, however, that it made his effort less valuable. On the contrary, both from analytical and practical-political points of view his conclusions are comprehensive and useful.

His major theoretical finding is that stability and consolidation in ethnic democracy has to be materially grounded (populism in Northern Ireland and state corporatism in Israel) on a "non-ethnic basis of solidarity" (p. 13). That is, as I understand it, an adoption of inclusive, civic understanding of nation (such as republicanism in Israel's early period or non-ethnic understanding of nation in late nineteenth-century Poland). It certainly should bring Peled's book into worldwide discourse about social cohesion, multiculturalism and ethnic conflict prevention. However, I argue that precisely the condition of non-ethnic solidarity drifts Peled's perspective beyond the standard definition of ethnic democracy since Smootha always insisted on pure "ethnic nationalism" as a feature of ethnic democracy.

What I find more important than sticking to theoretical orthodoxy is how the concept can help us understand and possibly resolve conflicts in ethnically diverse societies. As it was presented in Peled's book (as well as in works of some other authors [4]) and stated directly in the very last two sentences of it, ethnic democracy "may be a relatively benign form of ethnic conflict regulation in deeply divided societies" (p. 157).

Peled proves that his deep insights and long experience in the field may contribute – no matter whether situated into the concept of ethnic democracy or not [5] – to peace and cohesion in many places in the world. Both social scientists and policy-makers might find the book a very inspiring reading.

[1] Sammy Smootha, Priit Järve (eds.), *The Fate of Ethnic Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (Budapest: Open Society Institute, 2005).

[2] Sammy Smootha, *The Model of Ethnic Democracy* (Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues, 2001), 32-36.

[3] For Northern Ireland and Israel see Sammy Smootha, *The Viability of Ethnic Democracy as a Mode of Conflict Management: Comparing Israel and Northern Ireland*, in: Todd Edelman, Ann Arbor (eds.), *Comparing Jewish Societies* (MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 267-312

For Poland see Sammy Smootha, *The Model of Ethnic Democracy* (Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues, 2001), 81.

[4] Velo Pettai, Emerging Ethnic Democracy in Estonia and Latvia, in: Magda Opalski (ed.), *Managing Diversity in Plural Societies: Minorities, Migration and Nation-Building in Post-Communist Europe* (Nepean: Forum Eastern Europe, 1998), pp. 15-32.

[5] Yoav Peled, Culture is not enough: A democratic critique of liberal multiculturalism, in: Shlomo Ben-Ami, Yoav Peled and Alberto Spektorovski (eds.), *Ethnic Challenges to the Modern Nation-State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 65-924.

This review was originally published on www.pol-int.org.