The ethnicist discourse on the minority issue today builds on a heritage that consists of, on the one hand, the leftist discourses on oppression and resistance among particular socialist organizations and, on the other hand, the 1960s and 1970s literary and social critique of Pahlavi authoritarianism.

While the constitutionalist movement (see Chapter 4) had introduced the idea of citizenry and democracy to a significant part of the population in central and northern Iran, the leftist movement introduced the idea of social justice to a much broader audience—including minorities in the periphery. Whereas regionalist movements such as the Jangalis of Gilan (1914–1921) and that of Colonel Pesiy in Khorasan (1921) did not represent particular minorities, the demands raised in the first revolt of Shaykh Khiabani in Azerbaijan in 1919 contained significant ethnic framing. This created a rift in the broader movement for social reform: between those who believed regionalism was antithetical to modernism and those who believed that the modernist elite of Tehran was out of touch with realities in the periphery. From that point onward, the latter segment of the movement gravitated toward a socialist language attentive of minority demands and concerns.

In the communiqué issued by the 1927 congress of the Communist Party (ferge-ye komunist, abolished in 1937), for example, it was stated that “discrimination against and oppression of the minority nations (melal-e aqaliyat)” was one of Reza Shah’s great misdeeds. Although one could discuss what was exactly meant by melal, the use of the plural “nations” was nonetheless significant: during the same period that nationalist intellectuals were striving to monopolize and singularize the meaning of “nation” in accordance with the nation-state-congruence principle, it opened the possibility of thinking of Iran as the home of more than one nation. However, this interpretation was at odds with the one that came to dominate the leading Iranian communist organization, the Tudeh.

Whereas the Tudeh Party, established in 1941, was mostly led by young Persian speakers and Persianized Azeris in Tehran who adhered to orthodox Marxism and had little understanding of or sympathy with minority grievances (among them also extremist Persian-centric such as Taqi Arani, see Chapter 4), the Azerbaijan Democrat Party was led by Azeri Leninists who were primarily influenced by fellow Turkic speakers and their experiences with tsarist ethnic policies in the Caucasus.
The Democrat Party was originally a wing of the Tudeh but gradually broke ranks with the party after a 1944 congress had descended into disagreement over the issue of local autonomy. This happened after a period of mounting inter-ethnic tensions in areas of socialist mobilization, including between Arabs and Persian speakers in the oil industry of Khuzestan and between Azeris and Persians in the coalfields of northern Iran. These tensions also created deep divisions among the leading cadres of the socialist movement.

Thus, the Democrat Party, which declared Azerbaijan autonomous at its establishment in 1945, represented an alternative to the orthodox Marxist interpretation of Iranian society as only divided by class. According to this alternative interpretation, ethnic minorities were “peoples” (khalq-hā) oppressed not only by the forces of capitalism but also by ethnic discrimination. What had started with Azeri critique of the Persian- and Tehran-centric approach of the Tudeh Party and its ambiguous stand on the minority issue had thus spawned a new wave of regionalism and ethnicism, demands for local autonomy and linguistic rights. Instead of “the nation,” to which the Tudeh addressed its official party program, the Azeri socialists addressed “the nations” (melal) of Iran.

When the Democrat Party took over control of Azerbaijan, they presented a declaration of autonomy that identified “the people of Azerbaijan” with “distinct national, linguistic, cultural, and traditional characteristics.” While the Party clearly stated that they had “no desire to separate” from Iran, they referred to the 1941 Atlantic Charter that promised all nations freedom and autonomy. Apart from autonomy, the Party demanded that Azeri Turkic, as the “national and mother tongue” of the Azeris, should be instituted in the education system and in local government. The declaration was thus a written testament to the perception among some people in Iran’s periphery of constituting a nation with a national culture distinct from that of the Persian-speaking core.

The reaction to this development was strong and harsh: the Tudeh called for national unity and sought to ignore the ethnic dimension of the autonomist movement, and nationalist intellectuals condemned the Democrat Party for unleashing a potentially unstoppable cycle of regionalism and separatism that would lead to Iran’s disintegration. After less than a year, the Iranian military moved in to crush the movement in Tabriz. However, the Azeri autonomists—and to some extent the Kurdish equivalent in the Mahabad Republic of 1945—had opened the possibility of ethnically framing regional discontent, and thus laid the seed of modern-day ethnicism. While the Democrat Party and the Tudeh eventually merged in a united front, ethnicist discourse had gained a life of its own.

The demand for administrative autonomy, linguistic rights and cultural independence in the name of oppressed peoples in the periphery was again launched during the 1978–9 revolution, resulting in inter-ethnic clashes and a regionalist uprising in Kurdistan. Various socialist-inspired armed movements at odds with Khomeini fled to areas such as Kurdistan and Turkmansahra, where they instigated an insurgency in the name of oppressed peoples. Regionalism and ethnicism came to equate, in the eyes of the ruling elite in Tehran, with socialism and separatism.

However, by that time, the ethnicist movement had also found a number of other ideological reference points. Inspired by developments all over the post-colonial