

Ethnic Nationalities of Iran

A Struggle for Universal Rights

Background

Ethnic and religious nationalities in Iran are often subjected to marginalization, under-representation, and even violence by the government. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the state has gone through periods of extreme conservatism, with brief instances of more liberal policies. The current President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad marked his disputed landslide victory in 2009 with increased crackdowns, as ethnic minorities were targeted with arrests and house raids conducted by the military. Conservative governments have attempted to maintain absolute authority over the state by homogenizing the population. It is believed that with the promotion of ethnic identity, and differences in culture and religion, ideas of separatism will flourish. The state has suppressed manifestations of 'otherness' through arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, and intimidation. The wider communities have been further suppressed by limiting their access to education, employment, government, and natural resources through discriminatory laws. This discrimination has caused the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities to be the least developed in the country scoring very low on economic and social indicators. Despite suppression and intimidation political activists are still struggling for their community's universal human rights.

Ahwazi

Ahwazi Arabs have faced violence and extreme marginalization by the Iranian government. Their crime has been to be located in one of the most economically valuable provinces in Iran. The Al-Ahwaz Province, where the Ahwazi people originated, is rich in oil reserves, providing roughly 90% of Iran's oil. Its location on the Persian Gulf and the flow of the Karoun River also make the province a prime shipping hub. Due to the economic importance of this region the Iranian government has forcibly displaced large numbers of Ahwazi Arabs at times employing violent means.

In 2005 a government attempt to 'Persianize' Al-Ahwaz was made public through the leaking of internal documents. After the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran was suspicious of the ethnically Arab population, believing they would be inclined to separatist activities. Fearing the loss of such an economically important region the government planned to reduce by a third the Ahwazi Arab population, at that time approximately 70%-80% of the local inhabitants. This was carried out by forcefully displacing families, selling appropriated Ahwazi lands to Persians with preferential loans. Also no attempts were made to restore Ahwazi homes and farms destroyed in the war, in an effort to discourage refugees from returning.

After the government's plans were made public, the Ahwaz population held mass protests during which numerous arrests were made, with many detainees being denied legal representation or rights covered under Iranian law. Fearful of any renewed Ahwazi protests, the police carry out raids and arrests every year on the anniversary. Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi wrote to the UN Human Rights Commissioner this year denouncing the brutal crackdown and that ensued this past April reporting that "During these clashes, more than 12 people were killed, around 20 injured and tens of protesters [were] arrested." She

went on to say that, "In the 32 years' history of the Islamic Revolution, Arabic-speaking Iranians have suffered from inequality and an extensive discrimination."

Despite the natural wealth of the region, oil and shipping revenues have flowed directly to Tehran, with little being left or returning to the area to fund regional development. The government has also made it difficult for Ahwazi Arabs to maintain employment in oil, gas, and petrochemical companies. The dismissal of 400 ethnic Arab employees being interpreted as a reflection of this discrimination, despite Tehran's explanation that the lay offs were caused by the financial downturn. Discrimination against Ahwazi Arabs by the Iranian government has left much of the population in extreme poverty. As a result, illiteracy amongst the Ahwazi population is over 50%, unemployment is between 15%-20%, and roughly 1 million, out of 4 million, live in urban slums. In Dashte-Azadegan, a mostly Ahwazi populated region, 80% of children are suffering from malnutrition.

Poor social conditions have been exacerbated by environmental mismanagement of essential water resources. The diversion of the Karoun River for hydroelectric power and the damming of Lake Urmia, have increased water salinity and dried out the Lake. The human impact of this has been the diversion of local access, causing once fertile agricultural lands to dry out, and increased rural poverty and dislocation. Those who have protested the degradation of this vital resource have been brutally suppressed and arrested by security forces. It has been confirmed by the European Parliament that police killed and arrested several dozen ethnic Arab environmental protestors in Al-Ahwaz during April 2010. Many believe that the diversion of the Karoun River was part of the government plan to Persianize the area making it difficult for Ahwazi farmers to maintain agricultural lands.

Political activists face arrest, torture, rape, and in many cases execution on charges of drug trafficking or Mohareb "Being enemies of God." Still the consequences of speaking out can be even worse as the wives and children of political activists are sometimes arrested as well, in violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2011, 31 Ahwazi Arab students and rights activist have been executed. Many Ahwazis abroad have managed to gain UNHCR refugee status, however, many in Syria and Lebanon have been forced to return to Iran to face imprisonment and sometimes execution.

Iranian Kurds

Iranian Kurds, many of whom originally opposed the Pahlavi Government, have faced violence and discrimination since the inception of Ayatollah Khomeini's regime. While Kurds believed the 1979 Revolution could be an opportunity to create a new Iran where they could enjoy regional autonomy and religious freedom, once Khomeini took power he sought to homogenize the country. The Kurds' desire for autonomy and predominately Sunni population posed a threat to Khomeini's designs for a centralized, Shi'a-led government leading him to declare the idea of an ethnic minority to be against Islam, thereby instigating a Jihad against the Kurdish population.

During the Jihad of 1979 several thousand Iranian Kurds were killed as military forces attacked towns and villages, attempting to force the region to submit to centralized Iranian control. Numerous assassinations of Kurdish officials attempting to negotiate peace have taken place both nationally and internationally, including the General Secretary of the PDKI in Austria in 1989, and his successor in Berlin in 1992.

To ensure the regime's dominance, Khomeini blocked Kurdish representatives from attending meetings on the new Iranian constitution in 1979, meaning that no provisions for Kurdish autonomy or inclusion in decision-making could be made. Despite a brief period of progress in 1997 when President Mohammad Khatami appointed some Kurdish politicians to his cabinet, Kurds continue to be denied completely equal representation in the Government, and are completely blocked from holding office due to Article 115 of the constitution prohibiting non-Shi'as from the presidency. The lack of a truly democratic system led to mass boycotts of elections in various Kurdish cities in 2009. Today Kurds make up the majority of Iran's political prisoners of conscience. Conditions and the use of torture against Kurds in prisons are widely reported, and grew so bad in 2008 that prisoners went on a hunger strike for over a month to publicize conditions.

Iranian Kurds continue to be executed without legal judicial proceedings or notification to lawyers and families. Acknowledged by the European Parliament, the drastic increase in executions that took place in 2009 made Iran the country with the highest per capita execution rate in the world. According to statistics published by international human rights organisations, Iran executed at least 94 people in 2005, 117 in 2006, 317 in 2007 and up to 370 in 2008. Iran also remains the only country, despite its ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to execute minors, most of whom are Kurds.

As Sunni Muslims, Kurds have faced extreme religious discrimination and have been blocked from access to certain employment, educational, military and governmental opportunities. In 1988, the government passed the Gozinesh Law which uses the Shia concept of Vilayat-e Faghih, or Governance of Religious Jurist, to screen out Sunni Muslims. In some cases university students have been subjected to Gozinesh screening meaning there is limited access to higher education for religious minorities. The effects of the Gozinesh Law can be understood when taking into consideration the extremely high rate of illiteracy and the unemployment rate that reaches roughly 50% in Iranian Kurdistan. Many Sunnis are prohibited from observing religious holidays such as the celebration of Eid, and as a clear mark of the religious intolerance in Iran today, there is not a single Sunni Mosque in Tehran, despite being home to over 1 million Sunnis.

Baloch

The people of West Balochistan, as the Ahwazi Arabs and Iranian Kurds, have suffered from inequality, injustice, and marginalization within their own homeland. The Iranian government has been particularly focused on assimilating the Baloch people as the bordering Pakistani province of Balochistan shares stronger cultural, ethnic, and linguistic links with Western Balochis. Fearful of ceding authority, Tehran has worked to suppress ethnic Baloch identity.

Baloch language has been prohibited in formal and public places. Despite the existence of a few Balochi publications, after 1979 they were systematically shut down, and now are banned. Students are not able to receive education in Baloch or any other language as schools only teach in Persian despite Article 15 of Iran's constitution allowing for local and tribal languages to be used. The effects this has had on access to higher education are clear as non-Farsi speaking students make up 42% percent of college students, but only 12% and 10% respectively of postgraduate and PhD students. As a predominately Sunni population Baloch people have even further limited access to higher education and certain occupations.

The government, as in Al-Ahwaz, has been attempting to make the Baloch people a minority in the region by selling land to non-Baloch people at discounted prices in order to facilitate population transfers. There have even been reports of people being evicted from their homes by police to make room for new buildings. Victims rarely receive adequate, if any, compensation and many have been injured following protests.

In Balochistan there have been widespread reports of torture, enforced disappearances, and killings. Since July 2009 the Revolutionary Guards have been given effective control of West Balochistan's security and governance. The military has been given freedom to keep a firm grip on the region, meaning that those who commit human rights violations often go unpunished. Over September-October 2011 more than 40 people have been executed without previous announcement. In the past two years, executions have simply been committed in prison yards, and bodies of those executed are not returned to their families. A quote by a local military leader describes the impunity they have been given in the region, "We have not been given orders to arrest and hand over those who carry weapons. On the basis of a directive we have received, we will execute any bandits, wherever we capture them."

Many Balochis who are arrested are refused access to defence lawyers until after they have been formally charged, with trials taking place in closed-door court rooms. Lawyers who dare to contest the legality of these trials face imprisonment themselves. The use of the death penalty is very common, and lawyers and families are not always informed 48 hours before an execution as Iranian law obligates in case of objection. One newspaper stated that as many as 700 people were awaiting execution in 2007. In September 2010 the youngest Baloch prisoner, Mohammad Saber malik Raisi, was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison without a legal representation. According to the Baloch Human Rights Group it is likely that the teenager has been arrested to pressure his family members to give up his older brother to security forces. In another case a Baloch blogger, Sakkhi Regi Baloch, was abducted by police in 2009, after writing about the upcoming elections. After several months of illegal detainment he was charged with "propagating against the system" and sentenced to twenty years in prison. Tehran has since put further pressure on both prisoners by transferring them to prisons across the country, making visits from family members impossible.

West Balochistan is rich in natural resources including gas, oil, and gold. However, despite producing 40% of Iran's energy, it remains the poorest region in Iran. Again it is clear that the state has been extracting the natural resources of the region mostly for central use, while the Baloch people have not reaped any benefits, as only 5-6% of Balochis even have a gas connection in their homes. As a result of this social and economic oppression, West Balochistan has had the lowest scores on UN indicators in Iran including on life expectancy, adult literacy, primary school enrolment, access to clean water, sanitation, and infant and child mortality rates.

Currently the Iranian government is building a wall along the border of West Balochistan and the province of Balochistan in Pakistan. The Baloch people across the border share ethnic and cultural links with the Iranian Baloch people, and many families have relations living across the border. Though the government claims it is trying to block the flow of illegal migration and drugs into Iran, many believe the true goal is to guard against ideas of a united Baloch state by dividing the people. Reminiscent of a modern day Berlin Wall, this wall will also divide many families living on both sides, and further suppress Baloch culture.