



UPR of IRAN

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Fact Sheet on ethnic minorities in Iran

KEY DEVELOPMENTS SINCE LAST REVIEW:

Large segments of the Iranian population belong to ethnic minorities, including Kurds, Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, and Turkmen. These populations are geographically concentrated in peripheral regions where they form the majority of the population.

During its previous UPR in 2014, Iran received 16 recommendations on the situation of ethnic minorities. Only one - related to the promotion of inter-cultural dialogue - was accepted by Iran, while 7 others were “partially accepted” (on protection from discrimination and violence, education and participation in public life) and the remaining 8 were noted.

When voicing grievances and advocating for civil, political and cultural rights, members of Iran’s ethnic groups frequently face prosecution under national security crimes, bearing heavy punitive measure, including death penalty. Additionally, deteriorating socio-economic conditions, environmental challenges and the emergence of natural disasters mismanaged by Iran have influenced the already strenuous lives of ethnic minorities in provinces.

General Recommendations

- *Reform laws that discriminate against persons on the basis of their language, ethnicity, religion or belief and gender, in line with international human rights Conventions to which Iran is a party*
- *Adopt, with the full participation of concerned communities and minority rights defenders, a comprehensive plan to address economic, social and cultural challenges faced by persons belonging to ethnic minorities in Iran and remedy historical marginalization*
- *Disaggregate national statistics by ethnicity, with the assistance of the OHCHR, in line with the “leave no one behind” principle of the SDGs*
- *Submit its overdue periodic report to the CERD*

1. RIGHT TO LIFE

Ethnic minorities, especially Kurds and Baluchis, are over-represented in death penalty statistics. Many of the offenses carrying the death penalty, in particular drug-related offenses and national security offenses, are among the charges most commonly used to target and convict minorities. Impoverished

and marginalized minorities have been over-represented among those executed for drug offenses. Additionally, Kurdish political prisoners charged with national security offences represent almost half of the total number of political prisoners. Overall, half of those executed for affiliation with a political party or a banned group between 2010 and 2018, were Kurds, while a quarter were Baluchis and over one-tenth Arabs. There have also been serious concerns over the secret executions of Ahwazi Arab prisoners in recent months. Ahwazi Arab activists have reported that 22 men were executed in secret in 2018.

Baluch and Kurd border couriers transporting goods across the Iranian borders - often without a license - are frequently shot at by Iranian security forces. In 2018 alone, 75 border couriers were killed and 177 were injured.

Recommendations

- *Ensure greater transparency of death penalty statistics, including by making public the proportion of prisoners on death row belonging to minorities*
- *Prevent, punish & remedy extra-judicial killings of border couriers*

2. POLITICAL PRISONERS

According to the February 2019 report of the UN Secretary General on the situation of human rights in Iran, members of religious and ethnic minorities are reported to constitute “the majority of political prisoners”. Rights groups continue to document routine and systematic targeting of ethnic rights activists, human rights defenders, and journalists that belong to ethnic minorities. According to Amnesty International’s 2017/2018 report, ethnic rights activists who were vocal about the discrimination against minorities face arbitrary arrest, torture and other ill-treatment, grossly unfair trials, imprisonment and the death penalty. Detained ethnic rights activists are also often accused of supporting separatist agendas, facing heavy charges.

In 2018, the Iranian security forces attacked at least two ethnic-cultural gatherings, held by Azerbaijani Turk activists. The confrontation resulted in the detention of a large number of Azerbaijani Turk activists and participants who had peacefully come together in celebration of their culture and identity.

Additionally, up to 600 Ahwazi Arabs were reportedly arrested following the September 2018 deadly armed attack. Furthermore, in the first ten months of 2018, 828 Kurdish citizens were reportedly detained in relation to their civic activism and membership of Kurdish political parties, for which many were sentenced to long prison sentences or to the death penalty.

Recommendations

- *Implement the opinions of the WGAD, and refrain from detaining individuals for exercising their freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly*
- *Ensure that persons belonging to ethnic and linguistic minorities have their right to a fair trial respected, including access to an interpreter, in line with the ICCPR*

3. MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

Even though people speak many languages in Iran such as Farsi (Persian), Azerbaijani/Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, Baluchi among other languages, the Islamic Republic of Iran only recognizes Farsi as its official language. In August 2016, participants in the national entrance examinations for universities in Iran were allowed to choose Kurdish and Turkish languages as their majors at the bachelor level. Nevertheless, there is still no access to mother tongue education in primary and secondary schools, a challenge highlighted as an issue of concern by the CRC during the 2016 review of Iran.

Recommendations

- *Provide children belonging to ethnic minorities with opportunities to learn, communicate and practice their language, art, culture and religion without any undue interference, as recommended by the CRC*
- *Take measures to provide access to education based on the national curriculum in the native languages of ethnic minorities, in particular in Azeri, Kurdish, Arabic and other languages, as recommended by the CRC.*
- *Ensure that any pre-school examination of children's mastery of Farsi language is undertaken in conformity with UNESCO standards and does not lead to discrimination of minority children*

4. POVERTY

Ethnic majority areas of Iran struggle with marginalization and poverty. The government does not adequately support local economy, infrastructural development and job creation in these areas. Even though in 2014 President Hassan Rouhani declared poverty “the greatest evil in Iranian society”, poverty remains a major challenge in much of ethnic majority areas. According to an MP from Sistan Baluchistan, 75% of the people of this province face food insecurity. Meanwhile, unemployment also remains a key challenge and a contributing factor to poverty. In areas such as Kurdistan and Balochistan many take on the difficult job of serving as border couriers (see above under “right to life”).

Recommendation

- *Prioritize poverty alleviation and development plans given the deteriorating living conditions of most marginalized*

groups, including persons belonging to ethnic minorities living in poverty, in line with the SDG principle of “leave no one behind”

5. STATELESSNESS

As highlighted by the former Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran in March 2018, there are currently reportedly over 20,000 individuals with Baloch ethnic background that live without proof of citizenship in Sistan-and-Balochistan. Lack of access to proof of citizenship has resulted in massive exclusion from access to state services, including healthcare, social welfare and education.

Recommendation

- *Take firm action to prevent and reduce statelessness in Iran, including by ensuring that persons belonging to the Baloch ethnic minority can obtain as soon as possible, appropriate proof of citizenship and a national identification card*

6. ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

Environmental challenges have emerged as a key alarming issue in Iran, having led to economic hardship, health problems, social disruption, and one of the main triggering points in recent nationwide protests. Growing environmental challenges, including water scarcity and air pollution, lead to ongoing unrests and grievances across the country. While climate change is considered a factor in the deterioration of the environment in Iran, the government’s mismanagement of natural resources is also a key contributing factor. For example, Lake Urmia’s water dramatically decreased, partially due to mismanagement of water resources.

Environmental challenges, and resulting grievances, are particularly vivid in the ethnic majority areas of the country. 22 incidents of reported gatherings and protests took place in the first ten months of 2018 regarding the right to usable water across the country, at least 12 of which emerged in Khuzestan Province, home to Ahwazi Arabs, where a number of protesters were reportedly detained.

Iran has repressed efforts of the civil society in addressing deteriorating environmental challenges nationwide. 8 environmental rights experts and defenders working to preserve Iran’s wildlife were arrested in 2018, held in prison under security crime charges.

Recommendations

- *Take urgent measures to ensure that all Iranians, including those belonging to ethnic minorities, have adequate access to safe drinking water and to combat air pollution, in line with SDG3 and 6*
- *Ensure the effective and transparent management of environmental challenges and natural resources, including access to safe drinking water and food for all*
- *Protect the work of environmental rights defenders and create an enabling environment for civil society to work on these issues free from harassment and intimidation*