

As Anti-Regime Protests Swell Across Iran, Ethnic Minorities Demand Freedom and Equality

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Brief Analysis

In order to create more lasting changes, the current wave of protests in Iran must be inclusive of the demands and expectations of ethnic minorities.

As anti-regime protests grow across Iran, crackdowns against protesters have likewise spread. However, the regime is focusing its brutal retaliation in [areas \(https://astudies.org/2022/10/revolutionary-voices-ethnic-minorities-in-iran-demand-freedom-and-equality/\)](https://astudies.org/2022/10/revolutionary-voices-ethnic-minorities-in-iran-demand-freedom-and-equality/) where the country's non-Persian ethnic minorities are concentrated. Of the estimated 224 protesters that have been killed by regime forces so far, roughly 90 percent are from the country's ethnic minority populations. Thousands more have been arrested and imprisoned.

In Iranian Kurdistan in northwest Iran, the regime launched swift and savage retaliation against Kurdish protesters, the first to rise up following the death of a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, [Mahsa \(Zhina\) Amini \(https://astudies.org/2022/09/mahsa-amini-and-irans-multi-layered-revolution/\)](https://astudies.org/2022/09/mahsa-amini-and-irans-multi-layered-revolution/), from severe injuries sustained when she was beaten by the 'morality police' who had arrested her for 'improper veiling'. The regime's attacks on Kurds have also extended to Iraqi Kurdistan, where Iran's infamous Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) have intensified bombings of Kurdish villages in the border region in recent days using drones and missiles.

However, other ethnic minority regions have been similarly targeted. In the southeastern region of Balochistan, for example, at least [91 people \(https://www.iranintl.com/en/202210067855\)](https://www.iranintl.com/en/202210067855), including a woman and six children between the ages of two and five have been killed by regime forces since September 16.

As with the regime's shelling of protesters and attacks on other ethnic minority regions, the indiscriminate shelling of Iraqi Kurdish villages is being [justified \(https://astudies.org/2022/10/as-protests-escalate-irans-ethnic-minorities-fight-multifaceted-oppression-racism-and-propaganda/\)](https://astudies.org/2022/10/as-protests-escalate-irans-ethnic-minorities-fight-multifaceted-oppression-racism-and-propaganda/) in the name of "opposing separatism" and

“fighting terror.” These are the standard excuses used by the regime and, more shamefully, by many of its Persian-Iranian opponents (<https://ir.voanews.com/a/shirin-hunter-a-university-professor-voa-farsi-guest-interview/6773802.html>) to justify brutally crushing any protests that break out in Kurdish, Ahwazi Arab (<https://astudies.org/2022/08/how-iran-used-securitisation-to-impede-the-ahwazis-pursuit-of-freedom/>), Balochi, Turkish-Azerbaijani, or other regions.

Regime crackdowns have focused on minority regions even before the spread of any protests there. In the predominantly Arab Ahwaz region in south and southwest Iran, the regime instituted a major crackdown almost as soon as the latest protests began in Kurdistan, deploying large numbers of troops in the region, fearing mass protests would be ignited not only by Mahsa Amini’s death but by the increasing rage at the regime’s worsening abuses and the intensifying crises.

To quell protests, the regime has deployed a large number of troops, security forces, and armored vehicles, and regime personnel are carrying out mass arrests of activists, intellectuals, poets, writers, and others who they fear might “incite insurrection.” Among those arrested is 23-year-old Zahra Sawarian (<https://astudies.org/2022/10/ahwazi-activist-dies-following-suspected-torture-in-iran-regime-detention-facility/>), a poet and civil rights activist who has been transferred to the women’s wing of the Sepidar Prison in Ahwaz, infamous for its torture. Sawarian is one of several female Ahwazi activists arrested, including Afaf Abadi, a student activist who was dragged from her home. When her husband, Hamid Khalilawi, returned home and learned what had happened, he went to the security and intelligence headquarters to find out where his wife had been taken but was then arrested himself.

On October 7, Ahwazi activists confirmed (<https://astudies.org/2022/10/ahwazi-activist-dies-following-suspected-torture-in-iran-regime-detention-facility/>) the death of 31-year-old Emad Haideri, a prominent and popular Ahwazi civil rights activist, ten days after he was arrested in the regional capital of Ahwaz City by Iranian regime forces. Emad is widely believed to have died as a result of brutal torture in one of the prisons run by the Iranian regime’s intelligence services. After his latest arrest, he was accused of communicating with fellow civil rights activists abroad, connecting to the internet—which the regime had cut in an effort to stifle protest coverage—and distributing VPN details to young Ahwazis, enabling them to circumvent the regime’s internet blackout to access social media and report the truth about the protests and events in the region.

International attention on the protests has highlighted the courage of Iranian girls and women of all ages who have continued to risk flogging and imprisonment by publicly removing their hijabs in protest of Amini’s killing and the ISIS-style proscriptions of the ruling regime. Indeed, the regime’s murderous, brutal response has largely backfired in much of the country during this round of protests, with hundreds of thousands of young Iranians of both sexes continuing to take to the streets to say ‘No more.’

Yet the significant factor of ethnicity in the case of the victims of the regime’s severe response has received much less attention in international coverage. Although Amini, herself, and the other victims killed or arrested in the regime’s escalating crackdown have come overwhelmingly from minority backgrounds, the focus of the international media has been on the female-led nature of the uprising, to the exclusion of other intersecting factors.

Of course, there are some exceptions. Speaking with the Iran International opposition TV channel earlier this week, Mrs. Raha Bahreini—Amnesty International’s Iran researcher and a human rights lawyer based in London—said, “It seems that just because these provinces are already oppressed and marginalized and are considered sensitive regions, dozens of lives can easily be taken in this brutal way. It seems that there is no cost to the Islamic Republic of Iran’s regime to kill these historically oppressed and discriminated groups in this heinous manner.” She also noted that deaths of Iranian minorities in detention have historically been high, and that minorities have likewise made up a disproportionate number of those executed by the regime.

It's undeniable that protesters across Iran, regardless of background, are heroically risking arrest, torture, and imprisonment to protest for the same fundamental freedoms and human rights. However, the stifling oppression and the severity of the penalties they face for dissent are not the same. For Iran's ethnic minorities in the annexed or colonized border areas of Iran—predominantly Kurds, Ahwazi Arabs, Balochis, Turkmen, and Azeris—the regime's standard repressive fundamentalism and misogyny are compounded by an additional layer of persecution against their non-Persian ethnicities, redoubling the ferocity of the regime's attacks.

While the regime unleashes its brutal plainclothes Basij' thugs in Tehran to beat, club, and terrorize protesters, the regime has instead deployed heavy machine guns, armored vehicles, tanks and heavy artillery, and even helicopter gunships in Kurdistan, Balochistan, and Ahwaz. Of course, the regime's Basiji, like its 'morality police', are notoriously brutal. Nevertheless, their boots, clubs, and electric cattle prods are far less lethal than the heavy military firepower that the regime directs against Balochis, Kurds, Azerbaijani Turks, Ahwazi Arabs, and other ethnic minorities.

Younger protesters are also realizing that the roots of prioritizing Persian Iranian identity lie far beyond the current regime. This supremacist racism dates back to the colonial era of Shah Reza Pahlavi, who heavily promoted and romanticized Persia's history of imperial conquest and the supposedly-related innate superiority of Persians to 'lesser', non-Persian peoples. These minorities were expected to accept annexation of their own areas and the eradication of their own cultures, history, and languages in return for assimilation. Those demanding freedom, decentralized rule, and the right to retain their languages and culture were, then and now, depicted as backwards, extremist troublemakers, and separatists.

There is, naturally, a terrible irony in the nominally-leftist Khomeinists' enthusiastic adoption of a profoundly supremacist and imperialist worldview that they supposedly rose up to overthrow in 1979. In reality, the so-called Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is imperialist to its core, with its constitution enshrining the 'duty' to export its 'Islamic revolution' regionally and ultimately globally. As the region has now discovered, this means expansionist theocracy in practice.

While younger Persian-Iranians—tired of the Khomeinists' repressive mindset—are increasingly questioning the regime's racism and its brutal quashing of ethnic minorities' rights and culture, older generations, particularly those who call for a return to the Shah's autocratic monarchy rather than a pluralist democratic system of governance, appear to not yet abandon this worldview.

The country's ethnic minority groups overwhelmingly view such a proposal as a regressive step—a mere change in the flavor of the absolutist rule rather than real progress towards freedom and the establishment of a modern, pluralistic, decentralized, democratic system.

Indeed, Iranian youth from all backgrounds are demanding long-denied progress, freedom, human rights, and a fair system for all, wishing to look forward to the 21st century rather than once again going backwards to previous ones.

Hamed Kenani, a London-based writer (<https://twitter.com/kananihamed>) at Dialogue Institute for Research and Studies, underlined the need for coordination between the Persian-Iranian opposition in Iran and ethnic minorities in order to achieve a genuine cohesive opposition. "Unity can't be a vague romantic idea," he emphasized. "It needs real serious work, and Persian opposition groups should do their job in this regard and stop trying to evade the question of the Ahwazi people's national struggle or that of Kurds, Balochis, Turks, Turkmen, Gilaks, etc. [They] don't only want the bare minimum of collective freedom and civil rights, but also decentralized rule... to end the current brutal repression and domestic colonization and as a way to protect their existence and cultural identity."

This point—the need for genuine unity between all Iran's peoples in confronting the regime to have any realistic hope of ending its rule in the near term and bringing about real change—was emphasized repeatedly by interviewees

from all Iranian groups.

Like many other dissidents, Mehdi Jalali Tehrani, a young Persian-Iranian writer and activist now living in exile in the United States, expressed optimism for the future, though laced with caution. He echoed Kenani's call for greater coordination: "What we are sure of is that the revolution has started and that we've reached the point of no return—but when will this revolution succeed?," he wondered. "It's still not possible to talk about it with confidence because there is no genuine unity and collective strategy for all the peoples of Iran."

Tehrani emphasized that "Clashing with and confronting the Security forces is not a sign of unity... [and] people in different parts of Iran, especially in the outlying regions where the non-Persian ethnic groups are located, have different demands."

He also pointed to the limited role of Persian media in reflecting the diverse protest demand. "Those who are heroes of non-Persian ethnicities are marginalized. Persian media only covers the protesters in Tehran and central Persian cities, and the demands of students in these central cities [are presented] as the central, sole, and representative demands of all people in Iran, as though they'd coordinated with [minorities] on this, which is untrue and misleading."

He noted the damage such presentations can cause: "The non-Persians see that the media coverage of their struggles still faces discrimination, and therefore they have wanted to change their destiny from the very beginning [after the revolution] and become independent."

Tehrani also cautioned: "Even coordination and similarity in practice can be fragile, and some parts of Iran generally are not taking to the streets because they do not see themselves as facing the same fate as others." He pointed to "the Turks of [Iranian] Azerbaijan who we envisage as having a vast capacity for protests and for engaging in the fight, though we have not seen that potential emerging in their areas."

Ahwazi activists highlighted that the Ahwaz region has also remained relatively quiet during this round of protest, due both to fears of major repression and suspicion about the ability of the current protest movement to include non-Persian peoples' demands.

Speaking about the wariness among many Ahwazis about the current protests, Younis Kaabi, an Ahwazi activist based in Washington, D.C. said, "We Ahwazi Arab people always stand in solidarity with protesters in Kurdish, Turkish, Balochi areas since they face the same suffering as we do."

Kenani echoed Kaabi's words about the Ahwazi frustration with both Iranian opposition and international support. He also offered further explanation on why many Ahwazis are wary of large-scale participation in the current demonstrations: "It's almost certain that Iranian security services have massive numbers of security dossiers on most of the young Ahwazi men and women who are leading the protests in the streets of Ahwaz. They may have also imposed financial guarantees and written promises on the majority of Ahwazi Arab activists not to participate in any future protests. Those who do so will face a brutal crackdown, prison, and the death penalty. In the last five years, Ahwaz has seen several uprisings, each of which has been followed by a wave of arbitrary arrests." Kenani pointed to protests in Ahwaz in 2018 and 2019, where the regime responded by setting fire to a local café and shooting unarmed young men, followed in each case by arbitrary detentions.

However, Kaabi emphasized that the Ahwaz region participating in the protests more significantly would have a huge impact on the movement as a whole. Ahwaz is a region strategically vital for the regime since it contains over 90 percent of the oil and gas resources claimed by Iran. "We live on the land where the energy resources are. If we protest, the regime will massacre our people because Ahwaz is the 'land of oil and gas'. Ahwazis crippled the flow of energy from Ahwaz before and toppled the Shah. In return, Khomeini broke his promises of freedom and killed and displaced our people. We don't want this fate to be repeated again. Unity comes when we see real change in Persian

opposition discourse, recognizing our full ethnic national rights rather than issuing mere populist and romantic mottos.” ❖

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