

Iran's Ethnic Minorities Are Finding Their Own Voices— America Can Help

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Mar 22, 2019

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Brief Analysis

A little-publicized fact about Iran is its **ethnic diversity** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-shaffer-iran-commentary/commentary-the-missing-catalyst-for-iranian-democracy-idUSKCN1N021H>): though Turks and Persians are the largest ethnic groups within Iran, Iran's eight major non-Persian ethnicities represent approximately half of the country's total population. Each of these minority groups—Ahwazis, Kurds, Turks, Balochis, Turkmen, Qashqais, Caspeans, and the Lor tribes—collectively account for around **50 percent of the population** (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/03/irans-forgotten-ethnic-minorities/>). Largely focused in their own regions, this ethnic diversity makes it more accurate to describe Iran as a tapestry of ethnic identity than a homogenous state or melting pot.

Yet since the Pahlavi monarchy's creation of the modern Iranian nation-state in 1936, the rulers in Tehran have imposed a brutal chauvinistic system based on the supremacy of the Persian ethnicity and of the Shiite faith. This policy continued after the 1979 revolution, when hardline theocrats seized power to create the current 'Islamic Republic.'

Minority Rights: Ignored by Regime and Opposition Alike

While it is true that all dissidents in Iran are persecuted by the regime, non-Persian minorities are subjected to far **greater persecution** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/shaffer-iran-idUSL2N0JV19M20131216>) on top of the regime's standard totalitarian oppression. Non-Persian peoples are treated as second-class citizens, denied the right to **public education** (<https://unpo.org/article/21115>) in their own languages and other rights automatically granted to ethnically Persian Iranians, all in spite of supposed constitutional guarantees of the use of other languages in both media and education. Minorities are also denied employment and other opportunities available to their Persian counterparts, and are subjected to repeated attempts at enforced assimilation. **Forced Farsi-language education** (<http://www.ahwazmonitor.info/articles/iranian-regimes-cultural-genocide-ahwaz/>) is one major tool used by the Iranian regime to forcibly assimilate its non-Persian minorities, with a large portion of Iran's minority first-graders failing required proficiency tests in Farsi required to advance grades. Minorities are also banned from

wearing traditional clothing in public places such as schools and the workplace, while the regime has destroyed historical monuments in Iran meaningful to its ethnic minorities.

For many years, the Iranian regime has succeeded in imposing a media blackout on most coverage of the grotesque injustices imposed on the country's minorities. The regime presents Iran to the world as a homogenous entity; in reality, nothing could be further from the truth.

Take, for example, the Ahwaz region of Iran. Historically known as Arabistan, this area has suffered a catalogue of **oppression (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/12027744/This-is-what-happens-to-Arab-activists-in-Iran.html>)** and injustices since 1925, when it was first **annexed by brutal force (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-arabs-insight/insight-irans-arab-minority-drawn-into-middle-east-unrest-idUSBRE97E00620130815>)** during the reign of the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty Reza Shah, having previously been a semi-independent emirate. Iran's leaders subsequently changed the name of the north part of Arabistan to Farsi Khuzestan and separated the southern areas of Arabistan, these areas are the current provinces of Bushehr, Bander Abbas, and Hormozegan. While these efforts were systematic—renaming towns, cities, and even geographical features with Farsi appellations in an effort to eradicate the region's Arab identity and forcibly assimilate its people—Ahwazis have resisted these efforts, clinging strongly to their heritage and culture.

The Ahwaz region holds over 95 percent of the oil and gas reserves claimed by Iran, the factor that motivated its annexation, and is rich in natural resources. Yet most of its Arab people live in conditions of medieval poverty, with the wealth from their resources directly funneled to the regime. As with other ethnic minorities, Ahwazis are subject to systematic discrimination and prejudice, with the regime rejecting any proposals for decentralization of power. Whilst Ahwaz' oil and gas resources are the regime's economic lifeblood, the only share of this for its people is brutality, along with air and water pollution levels that are among the worst globally.

Iranian regions with non-Persian ethnic minorities—and in particular the Ahwaz region—have witnessed regular, almost continuous, protests against the Iranian regime's racism and insults to Arab ethnicity on state TV (all media is controlled by the regime). The Iranian government has also marginalized Ahwazis through forcible land confiscation; diversion of rivers from Ahwazi areas to Persian ones, thereby reducing the available water for Ahwazi people; and discriminatory employment practices that deny Ahwazis jobs. In the latter case, positions are often reserved for ethnically Persian citizens, who are also offered financial incentives and homes in specially built settlements where Ahwazis are prohibited from living. And after every demonstration against these injustices, both Iranian regime police and Iran's paramilitary Basiji thugs carry out raids on Ahwazi people's homes, arresting hundreds of Ahwazi and sentencing them to long prison sentences on fabricated charges.

Any effort to campaign or lobby for one's human rights from any minority is automatically treated as a criminal endeavor. The state imprisons and often executes activists on charges such as '**corruption on earth (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/01/24/iran-stop-execution-ahwazi-arab-political-prisoners>)**' and '**enmity to God (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2012/jun/13/five-ahwazi-arab-risk-execution-iran-amnesty>)**.' These trumped up charges are often based off of confessions to crimes never committed by the accused, and extracted under torture.

Unfortunately, the Iranian opposition also often remains silent on the regime's human rights violations against minorities in Iran. Regime opponents in exile such as monarchist groups, leftist and socialist parties, and pan-Iranian parties often routinely dismiss non-Persian minority movements. They disregard non-Iranian minorities' long struggle for freedom and human rights as hostile to Iranian interests, often echoing the regime's rhetoric by labelling Ahwazis as “puppets” and “stooges” of the Saudis or of Israel. Their activism focuses solely on the regime's crimes in a wider context while failing to mention **the racism and bigotry (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/03/irans-forgotten-ethnic-minorities/>)** that inform the regime's

authoritarian worldview just as much as its regressive theocratic doctrine.

In opposition reports on human rights violations, they often fail to mention the identity of those arrested, what sort of activism they were engaged in and the nature of their demands, in contrast to those cited by the regime. These reports instead tend to inaccurately label all groups as part of a homogenous anti-regime mass whose sole issue is the current regime. Moreover, minority activists often receive scant attention relative to Persian opposition activists when arrested inside or Iran.

A Growing Tide of Minority Activism

Disregard for minority rights by major opposition parties has led to widespread resentment among Iran's minorities, who feel that their own struggles for justice and human rights are seen as expendable and are airbrushed out of the wider collective struggle for freedom and democracy. Indeed, these disparate struggles are intertwined and must be addressed together in order to bring about any real hope of a just and equitable freedom for the long-suffering peoples.

This sense of being disregarded and marginalized, not only by successive regimes but also by Iranian opposition parties has led many, if not most amongst Iran's ethnic minorities to turn away from Iranian identity.

In the minority regions, increasing numbers of young Kurds, Ahwazis, Turkmen, and others are instead embracing their own ethnic identities, cultures and heritages. They feel that Iranian identity, whether that of the current theocratic regime or its predecessor or of the Persian-led opposition parties, is a distant, alien and hostile entity with no interest in their wishes or wellbeing and that they would be better served by separatism or federalism. Thus, Ahwazi people are likely to view their loyalties as lying first with their own Ahwazi culture and region rather than with that of those seen as their oppressors in Tehran; the same is true of Kurds in Kurdish areas, Balochis in the Balochi region, and so forth.

And despite the regime's efforts to intimidate these minorities into silence, resistance continues to grow. The recent massive anti-regime protests that have roiled Iran have occurred in tandem with equally important protests and uprisings in the ethnic minority regions. These protestors seek recognition of minorities' right to self-rule, whether through federalism or autonomy, under which minorities would have the right to use their own natural resources to develop their willfully neglected and impoverished regions. Minority activists in exile also continue to speak out about the regime's abuses, allowing international awareness of the reality in Iran to slowly grow.

One flash-point is non-Persian ethnic minorities' annual celebration of the international World Day of the Mother Tongue on February 21. Although this marks a global celebration to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism, Iran's ban on education in non-Persian languages makes this a particularly tense issue. A large number of the Ahwazi, Turkish, and Kurdish civil and cultural activists have launched a campaign calling for the right to have school education taught in their native language as well as in Farsi. These activists have flooded social media with pictures and videos promoting the hashtag: #We_want_mother_tongue_in_classrooms.

The winds of change are now finally coming to Iran after decades of brutality, oppression and stagnation under theocratic rule, bringing a new spirit of unity amongst Ahwazis and other long-oppressed minorities. Iran's ethnic minorities have developed strong bonds of solidarity as a result of their shared history of oppression and injustice. After so many years of regressive authoritarianism imposed from Tehran, minorities want a fairer, or progressive system of decentralized rule and equal justice for all the peoples, in which each region finally has truly democratic representation, with the right to self-determination along with equal rights and protections for all, with the United States' providing a template for how this can be achieved.

How the West Can Help

Currently, there is widespread frustration among Iran’s ethnic minorities that Western media focuses on the regime in Tehran even as persecution of minorities in Iran’s other regions goes unnoticed. The widespread arrest of non-Persian human rights activists, the persecution and extremely high execution rates of minority dissidents—far higher than that of ethnically Persian dissidents—the relentless human rights abuses of ethnic minority detainees; these are all issues that are barely touched upon in the large corpus of U.S. media coverage and analysis of Iran. Even the best human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch only make fleeting reference to the suffering of ethnic minorities in their reports, which generally focus almost completely on the abuse of ethnically Persian dissidents. In one case, a VOA translator even omitted (<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2018/07/24/VOA-Persian-translator-omits-Ahwaz-Arabs-phrase-from-Pompeo-s-speech.html>) a reference in Secretary Mike Pompeo’s speech to repression of the Arab Ahwaz, mistakenly translating the statement instead as ‘Azhari.’

This censorship may not be deliberate, and is in fact probably due to ignorance. It is nevertheless incredibly frustrating for an already brutally persecuted and oppressed people that the West—widely respected for its free media—appears to be censoring itself on this issue. Even more sinister is that ignoring the plight of ethnic minorities effectively gives the regime carte blanche to continue its focused prosecution in these areas.

American human rights groups and media can help these oppressed peoples by amplifying their voices, thus giving them the chance to shed light what is going on in their own regions and advocate for their freedoms. In particular, U.S. government-sponsored media should provide equal coverage for all of Iran’s peoples and ensure that channels like VOA aren’t dedicated solely to reporting issues concerning the interests of only half of Iran—its Persian ethnic group.

The U.S. government itself can help by publicly recognizing the ethnic diversity of Iran rather than the homogenous misrepresentation used by Iranian opposition. If U.S. decision-makers truly wish to see a stable, peaceful, and flourishing democratic Iran replace the current bellicose extremist state, they must avert resentment and injustice that could spark further hostility by supporting the rights of all its peoples to the dignity and equality that are their and all peoples’ birthright.

We non-Persian peoples do not want special treatment, just equal treatment. This requires a greater awareness of the suffering of ethnic minorities and a special focus on the Ahwazi, Kurdish, Turk Azeri, and Balochi prisoners who are detained and punished far more severely than ethnically Persian activists. In order to help unite the people, the U.S. government and Western media alike need to advocate that all who live in Iran have equal rights and all deserve the same right to help shape their country’s future. ❖

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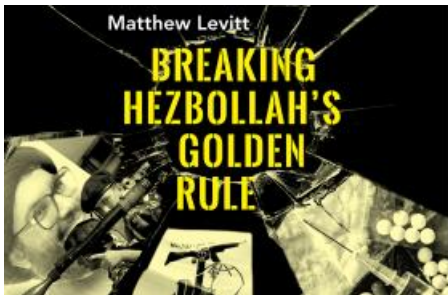
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