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PolicyWatch 2908

Provinces Lead the Center in Iran's Protests

by [Brenda Shaffer](#)

Jan 4, 2018

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Brief Analysis

As ethnic minorities and poverty-stricken provincial communities assume a greater role in nationwide unrest, the regime will likely try to pit them against each other.

The recent antiregime protests in Iran emerged in the country's peripheral provinces, which is also where the majority of reported deaths have taken place. The momentum of the demonstrations remains strongest in the border provinces rather than Tehran, especially in the northwest and southwest. The outbreak of protests in widespread locations—including rural areas and outside major cities—suggests that the regime will be much more challenged by this movement than the 2009 Green Revolution, which was centered in Tehran and had a clearly identified leadership that could be directly subdued.

Moreover, the current protests include an ethnic element that was absent from the 2009 uprising and could create extra problems for the regime. Although this factor is but one of many grievances galvanizing the demonstrators, the intensity of protests in the border provinces indicate that it might cause serious ethnic unrest. Minority grievances are amplifying economic grievances, which are worse in the provinces than in the Persian heartland. In social media footage reportedly drawn from many demonstrations, participants are using minority languages such as Kurdish and Azerbaijani to voice slogans of ethnic pride. Accordingly, foreign observers should pay more attention to the ethnic factor as they attempt to project future developments in Iran and gauge the regime's stability.

PROVINCIAL STRUCTURE AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION

Iran is composed of thirty-one provinces (*ostan*), each with a governor appointed by the central government. In many cases these officials are not natives of the regions they oversee and do not speak the local language. A third

of the provinces border at least one foreign country, and most of their residents share ethnic and often family ties with these states. In some provinces, direct trade with neighboring countries competes with or even surpasses trade with Iran's center.

The majority population of most border provinces is non-Persian, while Iran's heartland is primarily Persian (though about half the population of Tehran itself consists of minorities). In all, ethnic minorities comprise more than half of the country's total population of 82 million, according to mainstream academic assessments. The largest group is Azerbaijanis (approximately 24 million), followed by Kurds (8 million), Lurs (3 million), Arabs (3 million), Turkmens (3 million), and Baluch (3 million).

ETHNIC AND PROVINCIAL GRIEVANCES

Ethnic identity can take on a wide range of roles in Iran. Many minority citizens identify completely as Iranian, and their ethnic identity has little political significance. In fact, some of the regime's most important pillars hail from minority communities, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself, who is Azerbaijani. For many others, however, ethnic identity is primary, and their feelings of separation may be fueled by a host of regime policies that affect their communities at home and abroad, and by state media outlets that regularly mock minorities.

Regarding the current unrest, several signs indicate that ethnicity has become an important driver. For one, the protests first emerged in the city of Mashhad, which has a large Turkmen population and is located two hours' drive from the border with Turkmenistan. From there, the protests spread to many small towns in the north and southwest, mostly in Kurdish and Arab areas. Only on the third day did significant protests begin in Tehran, and many demonstrations in the heartland erupted in communities populated by minorities (e.g., the Azerbaijani-dominated town of Karaj outside the capital).

In addition, dozens of social media posts have shown protestors in certain provinces blaring ethno-nationalist demands and music while chanting slogans in minority languages such as Azerbaijani, Kurdish, and Arabic. A number of foreign organizations that advocate for the rights of ethnic minorities have issued statements in support of the protests, but it is not clear how representative they are of people on the ground. Whatever the case, ethnic demands seem to be a powerful mobilizer for wide segments of the population who may not be politically active.

The provinces also face more economic hardship than the heartland. Income levels and social services in the periphery are lower, unemployment rates are higher, and many residents suffer from extensive health and livelihood challenges emanating from ecological damage. Whether justified or not, provincial communities often blame this damage on central government policies.

Furthermore, the regime does not allow ethnic minorities to use their native languages in official settings such as courts and schools, in violation of constitutional protections. Perhaps as a result of this, many minority citizens in large cities report that Persian is their stronger functional language.

The current protests are not the first sign of opposition in the border provinces. Ethnic minority operatives have carried out a number of domestic terrorist operations in recent months, including the Kurdish attacks on the parliament building and Khomeini Mausoleum in Tehran last June, as well as frequent attacks against border guards in the northwest.

Meanwhile, the number of judicial executions carried out in Kurdish and Baluch areas is far above the average seen in Iran's center. While the regime claims that these executions are for crimes such as drug smuggling, their disproportionate frequency suggests that authorities may be using them to quash opposition activity. In addition, the head of a major diaspora organization that advocates for the rights of Arabs in Iran was assassinated last November as he was leaving his home in the Netherlands. Tehran has not claimed responsibility, and there is no hard evidence of its involvement, but no other likely suspects exist.

Iran's foreign policy toward its neighbors also has domestic implications. For example, the regime's efforts to punish the Kurdish independence movement in Iraq last fall created indignation among Iranian Kurds. In addition, larger numbers of Iranian Azerbaijanis have taken chartered tourism trips to the neighboring Republic of Azerbaijan over the past year, and some may have been influenced by the experience of enjoying their native language and culture free of the restrictions imposed in Iran.

HOW WILL THE REGIME RESPOND?

The regime's usual playbook for dealing with ethnic and provincial opposition is to blame foreigners for its emergence while attempting to pit domestic groups against each other. Khamenei has already blamed the current protests on foreign enemies. In reality, however, the unrest in Iran's provinces is clearly homegrown.

Fomenting conflict between domestic communities has worked very well for the regime in the past, so Tehran may now try to exacerbate Kurdish-Azerbaijani tensions—especially in West Azerbaijan province, where these two groups cohabit and have grievances against each other. The regime can also appeal to Iranian nationalist sentiments among the economic and political elite. This includes opposition elites—when faced with potential ethnic conflict in the past, many such figures have been unwilling to risk their control over the provinces or the dominance of the Persian language for the sake of addressing minority issues or achieving democratic reform.

As for the prospect of international action, the West has often supported peoples' right to protest peacefully in various countries—the challenge is how to make such support effective. On January 2, U.S. ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley made clear that Washington is pushing the Security Council to discuss potential responses to the Iran situation. Another way to support the people is through international broadcasting that gives them reliable information about what is happening in their country, counterbalancing the censorship and misinformation seen in regime news outlets. Thus far, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty have not been very effective on that front, especially in broadcasting aimed at Iran in languages other than Persian. Given the seemingly strong ethnic drivers in the latest unrest, both outlets should consider boosting their programming in minority languages.

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