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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011 - Iran

Iran is home to many ethnic minorities including Arabs, Azeris, Balochis, Fars, Kurds, Lurs and Turkmen. Around 2 per cent of the population are members of religious minority groups, including Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians, all of whom are recognized as religious groups under the Constitution, and Bahá'ís, who have no recognized status. Though Article 14 of the Constitution also charges all Muslims to treat non-Muslims according to the 'ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights', the situation for Bahá'ís in Iran remained dire in 2010. In a September report on human rights in Iran, the UN said that members of the community faced arbitrary destruction of their homes, arrests, and confiscation and destruction of property. Their access to education and employment is also restricted.

Religious minorities

The trial of seven Bahá'í leaders (including two women), who were arbitrarily arrested in 2008 and held without charge for 20 months, began in January 2010. In August, it was reported that Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli and Vahid Tizfahm – who deny charges of espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, and 'corruption on earth', among other allegations – were given 20-year jail sentences. Independent observers were not allowed to attend the trial. In September, the Bahá'í World News Service reported that lawyers representing the seven were informed that the sentence had been reduced to ten years on appeal. At the time of writing, MRG had received reports that the 20-year sentences were re-imposed in March 2011.

In October, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a report criticizing Iran's use of torture and the death penalty, its discriminatory treatment of women and its failure to protect minority rights. In November, the UN General Assembly approved, for the seventh consecutive year, Resolution A/C.3/65/L.49, expressing deep concern at ongoing human rights violations in Iran, in particular its:

'Continued discrimination and other human rights violations, at times amounting to persecution, against persons belonging to ethnic, linguistic, recognized religious or other minorities.... Increased incidents of persecution against unrecognized religious minorities, particularly members of the Baha'i faith.'

Iran's non-Shi'a Muslim minorities also suffer ongoing persecution. In February 2010, at least 27 members of the Nematullahi Sufi order were arrested, and their place of worship in Isfahan was demolished, according to the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to the Human Rights Council. The report states that the

families of those arrested were denied any information about their fate, and that their lawyers were prevented from meeting with them.

Conversion from Islam is met with harsh state reprisal. Youcef Nadarkhani, who was born to a Muslim family but converted to Christianity, was arrested and sentenced to death under charges of apostasy in 2009. In September 2010, the Gilan province Court of Appeals upheld the sentence. In December, Nadarkhani's lawyer filed an objection with the Supreme Court, and, at the time of writing, the NGO International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran reported that it is not known whether the sentence was overturned or upheld. Elsewhere, two Christian women, Maryam Rostampour and Marzieh Amrizadeh Esmaeilabad, who were accused of proselytizing and apostasy, were cleared of all charges in May 2010. Security forces in Tehran arrested them in March 2009 after they were accused of handing out Bibles and attending religious gatherings. They were held, initially without charge, in a crowded cell with 27 other women at Evin prison for more than six months, Amnesty International reported. They suffered infections, fever and lack of medical attention.

Ethnic minorities

The Azeri community continues to face restrictions on the use of their language, including in the media, as well as political and social marginalization. In 2010, the case of an Azeri woman, Sakhineh Mohammed Ashtani, who was accused of adultery, attracted international attention when she was sentenced to death by stoning. It was argued that one of the factors that stood against her during her trial was that she did not speak Farsi well enough to be able to understand the proceedings in the case. Ashtani has reportedly been subject to torture. Her previous sentence was revoked, but she continues to face a sentence of death by hanging.

Arabs in Iran's Khuzestan province have faced decades of marginalization and under-development. According to the Ahwaz Human Rights Organization, in its submission for the February 2010 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council, the province is rich, and produces 90 per cent of Iran's oil, but one-third of its population lives in abject poverty. They have little access to sanitation, proper housing, and no regular access to clean water or electricity. Access to employment is also limited, and Arabs suffer discrimination in language rights, which impacts on their access to media and other sources of news and information, and to cultural activities. The Ahwaz Human Rights Organization reported that, 'due to discrimination, almost all Ahwazi women living in rural areas are illiterate', and states that 'while the illiteracy rate is about 10-18 per cent in Iran, it is over 50 per cent among Arab men in Khuzestan, and even higher for Ahwazi women'.

For Kurds in Iran, the situation is similar, with the added component of ongoing violent clashes between Kurdish factions and the state. In its recent Iran briefing paper *Seeking Justice and an End to Neglect: Iran's Minorities Today*, MRG reported that in August 2010 the mother of Behmen Mesudi set herself on fire in front of Orumiye Prison after her son was tortured and then beaten to death by a prison guard.

Sistan-Balochistan

Sistan-Balochistan, where many Baloch live, is one of Iran's most impoverished provinces, where according to MRG's recent briefing on minorities in Iran, 'human rights have been violated in a way unseen in other parts of the country'. Over decades this has resulted in disproportionate poverty rates, low standards of living, and linguistic and cultural repression. The armed pro-Balochi group Jondallah has engaged in the execution of non-Balochis and government officials, and taken part or expressed support for suicide bombings. This has resulted in an increased militarization of the province and a rise in extra-judicial killings of Balochis by the state.

This cycle of violence looked set to continue past year-end when a suicide attack occurred at the Imam Hussein mosque in Chabahar, in south-eastern Iran. The bombing took place during the Shi'a holy day, Ashura, when worshippers mark the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein. An estimated 39 people were killed. According to the UK's *Guardian* newspaper and other media, Jondallah claimed responsibility. At the end of 2010, 11 Baloch prisoners were reportedly executed for alleged membership of

Jondallah following the attack, however all had been imprisoned before the attack took place.

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