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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012 - Iran

Large-scale protests by government critics and opposition members were held in Iran in 2011, but were met with a heavy crackdown by security forces. On 14 February, opposition groups staged a 'Day of Rage' protest in Tehran and other cities, during which thousands gathered in solidarity with protesters in Tunisia and Egypt, despite the large number of security forces. Police fired tear gas on protesters, killing two people.

In April, the Iranian parliament passed regulations severely limiting the independence of civil society organizations, and created a Supreme Committee Supervising NGO Activities chaired by ministry officials and made up of members from the security forces. Activists from the One Million Signatures campaign, a women's grassroots movement aimed at ending discrimination against women, were targeted in 2011 by the state. Several women are currently detained or serving prison terms for their activities, and many have been held in solitary confinement or have limited contact with their families and lawyers.

In 2011, Iran did not permit Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur assigned with investigating its human rights record, to enter the country. Widespread discrimination against Iranian minorities in both law and practice continued during 2011, according to an Amnesty International report that noted that minorities face land and property confiscations, denial of employment and restrictions on cultural, linguistic and religious rights. In February 2011, MRG published a briefing which noted that the traditional lands of many Iranian minorities (namely Ahwazi Arabs, Azeris, Kurds and Baluch) are rich with natural resources and provide large sources of wealth for the Iranian government, but local communities experience high rates of unemployment, poverty and disease because of weak infrastructure and poor government investment.

The Iranian government continued to persecute Kurdish activists in 2011, convicting them on vague charges such as 'acting against national security' and 'waging war against God'. Fifteen imprisoned Kurdish activists are believed to be on death row. Death sentences against Zainar and Loghman Moradi, and Habibollah Latifi, were upheld in 2011 following failed appeals. Another Kurdish activist, Sherko Moarefi, was also at risk of imminent execution.

In terms of land rights, there are high levels of property confiscation and governmental neglect in the Kurdish region of north-west Iran – Iranian Kurdistan, Kermanshah and Ilam provinces. The Kurdish region has abundant water resources. Dams have been built by the government to facilitate water irrigation and for hydroelectric power generation, but Kurds are generally excluded from the benefits of this investment. They experience poor housing and living conditions because of forced resettlement, and the expropriation of rural land for large-scale agricultural plantations and petrochemical plants which pollute the surrounding environment.

The Bahá'í faith, with over 300,000 followers in Iran, has long been the target of persecution. Hundreds of Bahá'ís have been executed, tortured and imprisoned, and many others have been denied livelihoods, education and the right to inherit property. In January 2011, Navid Khanjani, who began advocating for Bahá'í rights after he was denied access to higher education, was sentenced to 12 years in prison. At the beginning of 2012, the case was pending appeal. In March, six Bahá'ís were arrested in Kerman, at least four of them for providing education for young children. The high-profile case of the seven Bahá'í leaders attracted renewed attention and criticism during 2011. Their 20-year prison sentences had been reduced to 10 years in September 2010; however, they were told in March 2011 that the longer sentences had been reinstated. They maintain that the charges against them are without foundation; their lawyers have had very limited access to them. In May, security forces arrested at least 30 Bahá'ís affiliated with the outlawed Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, a correspondence university.

Several of the country's ethnic minorities – Arabs, Baluchis, Kurds and Turkmen – practise Sunni Islam. These groups are doubly affected by discriminatory policies based on both their ethnic identity and their faith. Sunni Muslim religious leaders are regularly intimidated and harassed by security services and report widespread official discrimination. In 2011, Sunni Muslims in Tehran were banned from congregating at prayers marking Eid al-Fitr, the Muslim holiday that signals the end of the month of Ramadan.

Christian converts regularly face state harassment and arrest. Many belong to evangelical protestant groups, and are regularly charged with 'insulting Islamic sanctities' and apostasy. One of the main targets is the Church of Iran, an evangelical congregation with members throughout the country. In January 2011, the governor of Tehran, Morteza Tamaddon, publicly referred to detained Christians as deviant and corrupt. Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, who converted to Christianity, has been a frequent target of the Iranian authorities. He was arrested in October 2009; the Supreme Court upheld his apostasy conviction and death sentence in September 2011.

Sufi Muslims have faced growing government repression of their communities and religious practices, including harassment and imprisonment of prominent Sufi leaders and destruction of prayer centres. In January, three lawyers who had defended Sufi members were put on trial. They were reportedly sentenced to 6-7 months' imprisonment for 'propagating lies and creating public anxiety'. Over 60 people, mostly dervishes (members of a Sufi religious order), were arrested in September. In the same crackdown, a member of the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi order was reportedly killed. By 2012, at least 11 remained in detention. Also in September, four lawyers who were representing the detainees were also arrested; they were charged in December for spreading lies and membership in a 'deviant group'.

Most of Iran's Ahwazi Arab community lives in the south-western province of Khuzestan, which borders Iraq and contains 90 per cent of Iran's oil wells. Ahwazis are marginalized and subject to discrimination in access to education, employment, adequate housing and political participation. In April 2011, HRW reported that several dozen Ahwazi protesters were killed by security forces during demonstrations over the Ahwazi minority's grievances over state discrimination and denial of economic and cultural rights. Authorities arrested hundreds, prosecuted them during flawed trials where they had limited or no access to lawyers, and executed several.

Sistan-Baluchistan

The Baluch region is rich in energy and mineral resources, but activists claim the government has deliberately pursued a policy of underdevelopment. Baluchistan has the lowest per capita income in Iran, a high infant mortality rate, and the average life expectancy is at least eight years below the national average. As Sunni Muslims, Baluchis have also come under pressure from the government to convert to Shi'a Islam if they want to find employment and access education.

Sakhi Rigi, an ethnic Baluch blogger and former member of opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi's campaign staff, was sentenced in June to a 20-year prison term on charges of 'acting against national security' and 'propagating against the regime.' He was first arrested in 2009.

Iranian security forces were reported to have arrested or killed several members of the pro-Baluch armed group People's Resistance Movement of Iran (PRMI), also known as Jundallah, which was created in 2003 and is considered by both the United States and Iran to be a terrorist organization. In May 2011, nine members of Jundallah were arrested and in July two Jundallah commanders were killed in Baluchistan by security forces. In late August 2011, four members were arrested on suspicion of planning an armed attack in Baluchistan.

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