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Iranian Kurds Fall Foul Of Authorities After Norouz Celebrations

As millions of Iranians celebrated Norouz, 15-year-old Arina Salimi and her elderly grandmother Batul Azami spent the Persian New Year in jail.

They were among at least 20 people who were reportedly detained on March 21 after taking part in a Norouz celebration at a public park in the city of Sanandaj, the capital of the northwestern province of Kurdistan.

The following day, over two dozen Kurdish activists and others were reported to have been summoned and interrogated at the provincial office of the Ministry of Intelligence. Two of them were reportedly detained.

Despite its pre-Islamic roots, Norouz is widely celebrated across Iran, including among the country's sizeable Kurdish minority, who often mark the occasion with music, dance, and fire.

The detentions came after authorities in Kurdistan announced that any public Norouz celebrations must receive official permission and display the Iranian national flag during ceremonies, according to the France-based [Kurdistan Human Rights Network](#) (KHRN).

The KHRN also said authorities ordered organizers to sign pledges that they would not use Kurdish symbols, such as red roses or white scarves, in their celebrations. Rights group said the detentions were another example of Iranian authorities restricting the cultural rights of ethnic minorities.

Iranian leaders have long feared secessionism among the country's ethnic minorities, including the Kurds, although many communities have pushed for greater rights short of independence.

Kaveh Kermanshahi, a KHRN board member, says the restrictions enforced on Norouz celebrations in Kurdistan were aimed at controlling the festivities. With the easing of COVID-19 restriction, the authorities expected a much larger turnout than the previous year.

"The celebrations had intensified the establishment's sensitivities, and naturally [authorities reacted] with extensive detentions," said Kermanshahi, who is based in Berlin. "But there had been detentions and interrogations even in previous years."

The crackdown on festivities in Sanandaj, where a large celebration was also held at a sports stadium, were not isolated.

In the town of Oshnavieh, located in West Azerbaijan, another province with a sizeable Kurdish population, Iranian security forces were reported to have used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse a crowd marking Norouz. It was unclear if there were any detentions.

The authorities also attempted to prevent unsanctioned Norouz celebrations in the cities of Orumyieh and Piranshahr, both located in West Azerbaijan Province.

Kermanshahi said Kurds often celebrate Norouz "collectively with fire and with dancing among men and women with Kurdish symbols," which is not accepted by Iran's clerical establishment. "Attending these events cannot be considered a crime under the law because it's Norouz [a public holiday] and these celebrations have been always held traditionally and they will continue [to be celebrated]," he said. "Therefore, authorities have so far not managed to announce any official charges against the detainees."

Kurdish journalist Masud Kordpur told RFE/RL's Radio Farda that Tehran appears to have become more sensitive about Norouz celebrations among Kurds. "The conservatives are in power, and they stand against any cultural activities that they don't [approve of] and try to prevent them," Kordpur, who is based in the city of Mahabad in West Azerbaijan, said in a telephone interview.

Meanwhile, a group of Iranian political and civil activists called for the release of those detained at Sanandaj Children's Park "as soon as possible."

In a statement released on March 25, the Iran-based activists said the arrests had created "pain and sorrow" for the families of the detainees and spread fear in Sanandaj and other cities. The statement called on the authorities "to change their approach to cultural rights and remove formal and informal restrictions."

The Islamic republic has long been accused of suppressing and discriminating against the country's ethnic minorities, including Kurds, which make up about 10 percent of the population.

In a January [report](#), the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Javaid Rehman, said he was "alarmed at the targeting of minorities, including through executions, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary sentencing of individuals."

"Minorities are disproportionately affected by the imposition of the death penalty and arbitrary deprivation of life, and are also disadvantaged with regard to recognition of rights in law and as a matter of policy," the report said.

Last year, 36 human rights and civil society groups said in a [statement](#) that "Iranian authorities routinely target individuals from Iran's Kurdish minority for arbitrary arrest and detention simply based on their real or perceived support for or association with Kurdish opposition parties" that have links to armed Kurdish groups outside the country.

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ecoi.net summary:



Sanandaj: At least 20 Iranian Kurds detained after taking part in a Norouz celebration; according to rights group detentions are another example of authorities restricting the cultural rights of ethnic minorities

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