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Iran has many minorities, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azeris, Bahá'is, Baluchis, Christians and Kurds. Activists and members of those groups continued to face discrimination and marginalization by the Iranian authorities. Representatives of Iranian minority groups expressed their frustration and disappointment at the regime because it deprives them of their rights, including those mentioned in the Constitution. In 2012, the Iranian government did not allow the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, into the country to investigate the human rights situation. Shaheed urged the Iranian government to end discrimination against women as well as ethnic and religious minorities. While there are mechanisms in Iran for respecting human rights, violations are reported in the testimonies of 221 individuals collected between November 2011 and July 2012, according to Shaheed. Minority languages are prohibited in both government institutions and as subjects to be taught in schools. Schools in minority regions are very poor and the rates of drop-out and illiteracy are higher in those areas than the national average, according to the Baluchistan People's Party.

Dozens of Ahwazi Arabs have been detained, tortured and executed since demonstrations broke out in Khuzestan province in April 2011. The year began with security round-ups in the region, leading to the arrest of at least 65 people. Twenty-seven Ahwazi Arab residents of Shush in Khuzestan were arrested because of their alleged involvement in a campaign to boycott the March parliamentary elections and expressing support for the 'Arab Spring'. In June four Ahwazi Arabs, including three brothers, were executed on charges of 'enmity against God', after having been accused of killing a law enforcement official. Family members disputed the charges. They had been arrested during demonstrations in the province of Khuzestan. In July 2012, five Ahwazi Arabs were sentenced to death and a sixth received a 20-year prison sentence. International human rights groups contested the charges and argued that they were arrested because of their connection to demonstrations in February and March 2011 ahead of the sixth anniversary of protests by Ahwazi Arabs in 2005 calling for a better life for their people. According to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), a total of nine Ahwazi Arabs were awaiting execution by October, after further capital convictions later in the year.

Ahwaz city was rated as the most polluted city in the world by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2011 and the rate of asthma among children there has long been higher than the regional average. Life expectancy is the lowest in Iran. A critical issue is the prevalence of particles smaller than 10 micrometres (PM10), since these penetrate deep into the lungs and the

bloodstream. The WHO recommends a limit of 20 micrograms of PM10 per cubic metre of air; Ahwaz city records 372 micrograms.

Heightened health risks from such intense air pollution include cancer, hypertension, diabetes and birth defects. Causes include desertification resulting from river diversion and the draining of marshes, as well as petrochemical and other industries located in the area. In *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012*, MRG analysed the connections between natural resource extraction, land rights and discrimination against minorities, including a case study on Iran.

Ahwazi Arabs complain of being forced out of the oil-rich province of Khuzestan in order to replace them with majority Persians. In addition, the authorities consider their call for equality as a threat to national security. According to the Ahwaz Human Rights Organization, they are not allowed to teach their native language, and this violates the Iranian Constitution as well as the international human rights norms. The government also prohibits Arabic-speaking Iranians to name their children with non-Shi'a Arab names. The use of minority languages in schools and government offices is generally prohibited, according to Amnesty International.

While Khuzestan is a rich province on account of the large-scale oil production, the area suffers from poverty and a lack of adequate social services. In addition, the towns of Bostan, Dashte-Azadegan and Hovazeh have inadequate access to health care centres and are subject to frequent deaths because of untreated accidents. The Dashte-Azdegan region has the highest rates of child malnutrition, according to the Ahwaz Human Rights Organization.

Kurds also face persecution in Iran. Journalist and founder of the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan Mohammad Sadiq Kabudvand went on hunger strike in May and July, according to Amnesty International; he had been denied access to his seriously ill son and was himself refused medical treatment. In June, Mohammad Mehdi Zalieh Naghshbandian, a Kurd, died in Rajaei Shahr prison because of inadequate medical attention by prison officials. Three Kurds were executed in September in Oroumieh, after having been found guilty of illegal political activities.

The situation is also difficult for the Baluch minority. Public demonstrations or acts of violence by extremists provoke a harsh government response. In October, three men were hanged in Zahidan prison, a few days after a suicide bombing in Chabhar. The three men were not connected to the bombing incident – rather their executions appeared to be intended as a signal from the government that acts of defiance would not be tolerated. One was reportedly a teenager. The Baluch People's Party noted that 11 political prisoners were awaiting execution in October. MRG has previously reported how the Baluch minority are caught in the struggle between armed insurgents and the Iranian authorities, with violent acts by the former serving as a pretext for further militarization and repression by the latter.

Women face discrimination in a number of areas, especially with regard to family law. A number of women's rights activists remained imprisoned in 2012. One of them was released in November after spending 1,622 days in a detention centre, according to the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran and Campaign for Equality. Zainab Bayazidi, a member of the Campaign for Equality (previously called the Campaign for One Million Signatures to Change Discriminatory Laws in Iran), was arrested and sentenced to imprisonment because of her work challenging inequality. Bayazidi has also been active in the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan. In addition, 36 universities across the country banned female enrolment across certain subjects, and set quotas limiting the number of women on other courses as well as enforcing gender segregation in their institutions.

The persecution of Bahá'is by the government intensified during the year. Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted a crackdown on the community in Semnan, leading to the closure of at least 17 businesses. Amnesty International reported that at least 177 Bahá'is were detained for their

religious beliefs during 2012. Seven Bahá'í leaders continued to serve 20-year prison terms after their arrest in 2009, despite vocal international protests.

Iran officially recognizes three non-Islamic religious groups – Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews. During the autumn, Christian pastor Youssef Nadarkhani was released after having been jailed for nearly three years for his beliefs in 2012. He was acquitted of apostasy, but was convicted of evangelizing to Muslims. He was subsequently re-arrested in December and then released once more in January 2013. Religious minorities are not allowed to proselytize and there are restrictions on published religious materials. In January 2013, Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American pastor, was sentenced to eight years in jail for establishing Christian house churches; he had been arrested in September. In September 2012, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran reported that at least 300 Christians have been arbitrarily arrested and detained since June 2010.

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