

**Institute for Women's Studies and Research**

A Report on:

**“Status of Iranian Ethnic Groups: A Human Rights Review”**

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## **Summary**

This report reviews the status of Iranian ethnic groups from the aspect of human rights. The institute for Women's studies and research (IWSR) has concluded from its findings as well as collaboration with other NGOs and governmental agencies that despite considerable efforts to solve economic, social and cultural problems of Iranian ethnic groups such as Balochis, Azeri's and etc, there are still some unresolved issues Inside the Islamic Republic of Iran. This report examines the social, political and cultural participation of Iranian ethnic groups, their position as local and national authorities, the media, local languages and the role of NGOs in the balanced cultural, social and economic development of ethnic groups and their increased interactions with the government. In its conclusion, the report offers recommendations for solving the existing problems.

## **About the organization**

The Institute for Women's studies and research (IWSR) is a nonprofit, nonpolitical and non-governmental organization (NGO) with a 27-years experience. The institute has been granted Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 1999. Since then, the organization has been actively participating in the production and distribution of literature on human rights at the national, regional and international levels. Among the activities of IWSR includes: Participating in the three meetings of the former Commission on Human Rights, active participation in the four most recent sessions of Human Rights Council while presenting an oral statement, holding side panels and interacting with other NGOs active in human rights.

The aims of this organization include: Identifying and explaining the social issues, problems, needs and priorities of women with an emphasis on family and its influence on social and cultural processes on the national, regional and international levels and also improving the general knowledge and skills of the society on a variety of topics related to women. These goals have been followed by means of implementing research projects, holding national and international specialized scientific meetings and workshops for NGOs, experts and scholars, publishing books and journals to give awareness to the general public and finally interacting with other related governmental and non-

governmental institutions. In addition to the establishment of a center for technology development as well as holding research scientific festivals, the institute has a leading role on familiarizing Iranian, Afghan and Tajik NGOs with international human rights bodies. It also acts as the secretariat of Persian-speaking countries (Iran-Tajikistan-Afghanistan) NGOs.

### **Basic recommendations**

This report has been prepared based on the following recommendations offered during the first Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Iran in 2010:

- Continued capacity building in the field of human rights
- Continuing efforts to promote human rights in the economic, social and cultural issues.
- Increased efforts to promote the economic and social rights as well as the rights of vulnerable groups
- Supporting the civil and political rights of all people especially the members of ethnic minority groups
- Continuing policies regarding the promotion and protection of all rights of recognized religious minorities as an important step toward providing cultural diversity in the community and creating opportunities for them, thereby to ensure their political participation and to increase their collaboration in designing and implementing the different projects aimed at providing the necessary funding for educational and cultural needs of religious minorities.
- Collaborating with regional countries and other interested countries on beneficial activities for protecting the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities.

### **Current status of ethnicities in Iran**

Historical and anthropological researches in Iran indicate that different ethnic groups have long lived together in the country.

Ethnic intermixture between Kurds, Balochis, Arabs, Turkomans and Persians in Iran for thousands of years and their participation in creating prosperity and expansion of Iranian

culture and civilization has caused the reduction of ethnic, linguistic and racial gaps in the country throughout history. Generally, unlike other countries where ethnic term denotes the distance and distinction, the term in Iran implies proximity and kinship. Nevertheless, over recent decades, some factors such as uneven development within the country and underdevelopment of the country's border provinces, administrative inefficiencies and mismanagements as well as other factors such as eight-year Iraqi imposed war against Iran has caused some economic, social and environmental problems and challenges, especially in the provinces where Sunni ethnic groups such as Kurds and Balochis live. But despite spending so much to strengthen infrastructures, education, higher education and health care, there are still some provinces such as Sistan and Baluchestan and Kurdistan suffering from an unfavorable situation. In recent years, some environmental problems such as the drying up of two thirds of Lake Urmia and complete drying up of Hamoon Lake and a subsequent increase in emissions in these region especially in Khuzestan province has added to the problems of the residents of these areas. Considering a number of factors such as the human and natural capacities in these areas and other cultural, social factors linking them with capital, it is desirable from our view that the underdevelopment of these areas will be rectified over the next four years. In addition to respond to these regions' social, cultural and environmental demands, it is necessary to provide the required conditions to fully implement the constitution such as Article 15 and other articles related to people's rights and as a consequence, to create favorable conditions for increasing their participation in social and political areas on national and local management. This requires strengthening the socio-cultural approach to obtaining and implementing the policies and decisions in the field.

### **Data collection method**

To understand the real and rational image of Iranian ethnic issues, Institute for Women's Studies and Research has employed an efficient method based on field study, data and documents' collection as well as collaboration with other related governmental and non-governmental institutions. The institute has obtained valid findings and results through collaborating with experts and scholars and other research centers operating among the

Ethnic Balochis, Kurds, Azeris, Turkmens and Arabs in Iran as well as organizing scientific meetings and workshops and interviewing with officials.

### **Advancements**

Initially, it should be noted that upstream laws and regulations on ethnicities have no specific weaknesses and according to Article 12 of the constitution, all Iranian nationals, regardless of gender, ethnicity, social class, race or other similar categories, enjoy equal rights. Therefore, in light of cultural, social and economic nature of this issue, the focus should be on trends and advancements in the executive and legislative domains and on developments seen over past four years in the field.

#### **a) Executive domain**

- Increased production and broadcast of radio and television programs in the languages of ethnic groups such as Azeri, Kurdish, Balochi, Arabic, and Turkmen by provincial networks of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting.

These programs are produced and broadcasted by local producers in the local languages and folklore (e.g. programs in the Azeri language broadcasted by provincial networks of Eastern and Western Azerbaijan, Ardabil and Zanjan; in the Kurdish language broadcasted by provincial networks of Mahabad, Kurdistan, Kermanshah and Ilam; in the Arabic language broadcasted by provincial network of Khuzestan; in the Balochi language broadcasted by provincial network of Sistan and Baluchestan and in the Turkmen language broadcasted by provincial network of Golestan). At least half of these networks' programs are broadcasted in the local language. It seems that the amount of broadcasting in local languages is more than that of written media.

- High attention to environmental issues has led to dissatisfaction and challenges among Azeri regions, the North West and the provinces of Khuzestan and Sistan-Baluchistan. Since 2011, due to perennial drought and drying up of Lakes Urmia and Hamoon and dust emissions phenomenon in the south, Iranian parliament and government have taken some steps such as increased funding and forming special committees. These measures improved in a rapid pace in the new government, but they are still insufficient.

- As the 11<sup>th</sup> Iranian government (President Hassan Rouhani) came to power in summer 2013, for the first time, a new position titled “Special Assistant to the President for ethnics Affairs” was created to organize and accelerate the settlement of issues related to Iranian ethnics and religious minorities. This matter welcomed by NGOs and elites can provide more development and better care about the problems of Iranian ethnics and minorities.
- The augmentation of social and political participation of Iranian ethnics as well as employing them in national and local governmental positions, are extremely considerable. Our researches show that at present, approximately, 75% of local managers are native in the Kurdish-speaking and Azari-speaking Provinces as well as in Khuzestan, Sistan and Baluchestan, and Golestan Provinces, who have been selected among the Azari-speaking, Kurdish-speaking, Arabic-speaking persons as well the Baloch and Turkaman. Among the Azari-speaking, Arabic-speaking, and the Shia Kurdish-speaking, some people have been appointed to the governmental positions as a vice-president or the Director of Supreme National Security Council. Although, the Balochi people hardly have any national governmental posts but the appointment of a Sunni Technocrat as a deputy minister, is still regarded as a hopeful action. Since the President has promised in his election programs and his assistant has emphasized on it, this process will be accelerated in the near future.
- Holding the 4<sup>th</sup> election of “Urban and Rural Islamic Councils” in all over the country, including the ethnic provinces, on June 14, 2013, local development had been implemented in order to institutionalize the social participation of the people and representatives of these regions. In Kurdistan Province, the Kurds are active in the councils of 29 cities and 1339 villages and the number of these councils members are 183 in cities and 4000 in villages. The appointment of the first Kurdish woman as a mayor in the city of Baneh in Kurdistan Province and the appointment of the first Balochi woman as a mayor in the city of Sarbaz in Sistan and Baluchestan Province are extremely significant actions.

- In the 11<sup>th</sup> government, important progress has been made in changing the attitude and insights which adds to the government's approach towards ethnicities in Iran. In the past, ethnic problems were viewed as a security matter, especially in Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluchestan Provinces. On the contrary, because of his moderate approach, the Rouhani Administration has tried not to regard these matters as security and political issues. The new government's approaches and insights have been welcomed and embraced by the Iranian ethnicities; consequently, 71% in Kurdistan Province and 80% in Sistan and Baluchestan Province voted in favor of Dr. Rouhani.

#### **b) Law-making Domain**

- The Expediency Discernment Council has attempted to compile the general policies of Islamic Republic of Iran. According to the Council legislation, these policies, after being affirmed by the Supreme Leader, are imparted to the Parliament and government for implantation. These policies have been compiled on the basis of the Constitution and the Future Outlook of Islamic Republic of Iran as well as the equity of nations and balanced development of different parts of the country. The ethnic elites have played a major role in compiling these policies.
- After taking office in the summer of 2013, the Council of Ministers (Cabinet) has been obliged to compile "Civil Rights Bill" by utilizing elites opinions and suggestions of NGOs. This matter has been welcomed by the elites and NGOs in the ethnic provinces. After the collection of expert opinions and beginning of legal processes, "Civil Rights Bill" will be imparted to the Parliament in order to be surveyed and passed.

#### **c) NGOs Domain**

- Regarding the limitations of NGOs active in the domain of Iranian ethnicities, they're usually active in environmental and literal fields and also help as social workers and minesweepers. Their concentration on the abovementioned matters can promote the

people and society's perception concerning the situation and problems of Iranian ethnicities as compared to the past. For example, the impact of these organizations on collaborating the people with the victims of earthquake in the summer of 2012 and sending their donations to the earthquake-stricken regions is conspicuous.

### **Challenges and Problems**

Despite the mentioned developments and the improvement in the situation of Iranian ethnicities in the mentioned matters, there are still some challenges and problems which are presented in the following:

#### **a) Legal Obstacles**

The situation of current laws concerning the problems of Iranian ethnicities has resulted in excessive centralization and decrease of duties of civil and selected societies such as Urban and Rural Islamic Councils. Such a problem is not only found in the ethnic regions but due to the special problems of these regions, numerous challenges have been appeared. Slowing the decision-making processes and budget allocation, lengthening the implementation of development plans and troubling the relationship between the people and governmental organizations, are some challenges related to legal obstacles. But some obstacles still remain such as the process of getting a license and the way of supervision on the press and NGOs. An intentional approach getting a license and the way of supervising them can deteriorate these obstacles. These instances can be considered a lack of general outlook as a basis for law-making as well as unity-making.

#### **b) Administrative Challenges**

The number of decision-making centers, inconsistency in the matters dealt with Iranian ethnics, and the lack of unity-making among those, loosing opportunities and in fact, turning them into challenges, can lead to uneven development in these regions. The establishment of Iranian ethnics in the frontier zones and in the vicinity of the unstable



countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq as well as spreading insecurity and problems such as goods and people smuggling and drug trafficking into Iran, on one hand, can increase government security and political costs in these regions in order to control the border and to prevent goods from smuggling as well as illegal comings and goings (traffic), and on the other hand, can influence the life quality and problems of Iranian ethnicities residing in the frontier zones. Some environmental problems in Sistan and Baluchestan, Khuzestan, Ilam, Kermanshah Provinces are due to the lack, few or ineffective cooperation among the neighboring countries in order to prevent the dust-moving phenomenon and to divide their share of water from rivers bordering with Afghanistan.

The challenges caused by the foreign intervention and the attempt of some countries in order to abuse the ethnic varieties in Iran or ethnic ties in both sides of the border, can increase the security viewpoint concerning the mentioned matters as well.

Moreover, the financial straits and the reduction of government incomes, especially the effects caused by economic sanctions, have halted or slowed the implementation of developmental, infrastructural and environmental plans in all provinces, including the ethnic regions; hence, the number of unemployment in these regions has reflected a more disquieting situation as compared to the other regions.

### **c) Social Challenges**

Such challenges can be ranged from paying attention to the literature and local languages, the implementation of 15<sup>th</sup> Principle of Constitution, and the variety and diversity of each language as well as the conflict concerning the language and script. This kind of variety and diversity is apparent; for example, the Kurdish accent of the Northwest of Iran is not understandable for the Kurds, living in Kurdistan and Kermanshah Provinces. In addition, such variety and diversity have caused some problems such as using and teaching them in the media and the press is truly difficult. If one accent is preferred to the others, then the other accents will face discrimination, leading to the conflict or competition among the

Iranian ethnics. Moreover, the diversity of Iranian ethnics and turning some cities in East Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Khuzestan, and Sistan and Baluchestan Provinces into a place in which some Iranian ethnics with different languages and subcultures have resided can deteriorate the implantation of the 15<sup>th</sup> Principle of Constitution.

### **Recommendations and Solutions**

Regarding the social and cultural essence and nature, the Institute for Women's studies and research has proposed some recommendations and solutions concerning the matter of Iranian ethnics' ties with one another which are presented as follows:

- The increase of Islamic Councils duties as the noblest form of civil participation in order to manage the affairs and to form provincial councils for meeting the demand of Iranian ethnicities and improving the interactive mechanism between the government and civil societies.
- Decentralization and increasing duties of governmental organizations in provinces.
- Enhancing the quality of the media feeds and TV channels especially in the ethnic regions as well as utilizing the folklore, local languages and literature of Iranian ethnicities along with the support of published media.
- Paving the way for NGOs' activities especially in social and cultural domains.
- Accelerating the compilation of "Civil Rights Act" and imparting it to the Parliament in order to be passed and implemented.
- The increase of employing competent and qualified managers from all Iranian ethnicities in the national level.
- Paying additional attention to the environmental and economic challenges connected to the ethnic regions especially Sistan and Baluchestan and Khuzestan Provinces as well as Azari-speaking and Kurdish-speaking regions.