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FOCUS IRAN: AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Iranian Arabs seek equal rights

By Ahmed Janabi



Ahwazi Arabs follow both Shia and Sunni Islam

Amnesty International has urged Iran to improve its human rights record as the country celebrates the 30th anniversary of the Islamic revolution.

Amnesty said that "some sectors of society – including ethnic minorities – continue to face widespread discrimination, while the situation for other groups – notably some religious minorities – has significantly worsened".

"Those seen as dissenting from stated or unstated official policies face severe restrictions on their rights to freedom of belief, expression, association and assembly," the advocacy group said.

Iranians of Arab descent, known as Ahwazis, who live in the south of the country, say they are one such ethnic minority who have been persecuted and marginalised by the government in Tehran.

Seyed Tahir al-Seyed Nima, the chairman of the Ahwaz National Liberation Movement (ANLM), said Ahwazis consider themselves to be under Iranian occupation in much the same way Palestinians suffer under Israeli occupation.

He said: "We were an independent state until 1925 when oil was discovered in our land and our ruler Sheikh Khazal was killed. Our land was then annexed by the Shah of Iran."

Oil-rich Ahwaz

The Ahwazis live in the province of Khuzestan, which lies 850km southwest of Tehran and is considered an area of strategic importance because of its vast oil reserves and shared border with Iraq.

Ahwazi Arabs have not been included in Iran's economic development and prosperity derived from oil exports, according to a 2007 Human Rights report published by civil rights organisations in Europe in coordination with the



Iranian Arabs complain of poverty despite their rich natural resources

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Belgium-based Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation.

The 52-page dossier says nearly 25 per cent of Khuzestan's population of 4.35 million live in shanty towns.

A third of its urban population lives in poverty.

"We are discriminated against, when it comes to jobs; we need [a] proper health care system, and our freedom," Abu Doulab, a member of the Al-Bu Nasir, a tribe in the town of al-Falahiya in Khuzestan, said.

"We are suffering, poverty is everywhere, our children suffer malnutrition, we do not have proper education and [as a] result young men cannot have [a] future."

Reaching out to Arabs

Mohammad Sadiq al-Husseini, an Iranian political analyst who specialises in national security issues, believes that the focus on urban development has left some Iranian Arabs feeling disenfranchised.

"I do not think there is an official will to marginalise Iranian Arabs or deny them their basic rights, however, there is an ongoing problem in Iran and most of the third world countries," he said.

"These countries lack the proper vision on how to give rural areas their rights. The general system in third world countries focuses on urban areas."

Al-Husseini believes that administrative inefficiencies are often wrongly blamed on religious or ethnic discrimination.

"In Iran for example, this problem is not only with Arabs but with Kurds ... and other ethnicities as well, and all these groups live in far rural areas, and their complaints are usually taken from [a] political point of view."

Al-Musawi acknowledges that Khuzestan does not enjoy its share of the oil revenues but expects that the Iranian government is working on a project to rehabilitate and develop the province.

He said: "President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad has received the plan to increase spending and share of revenues for Khuzestan and he is working on it."

Violent protests

Nevertheless, those in the Ahwazi minority say discrimination has increased in recent years.

Nicole Choueiry, the Middle East and North Africa press officer for Amnesty International, says they have documented several reports of abuses against Ahwazis in recent years.

In April 2005, violent protests broke out in Khuzestan when it was rumoured that Tehran wanted to disperse the Arab communities throughout Iran.

Fourteen people were killed in bomb explosions in Ahwaz City two months later and attacks on oil installations in the province led to the arrests of hundreds of Ahwazi Arabs.

"Ahwazi mercenary"

Geoffrey Cameron, a researcher at the London-based Foreign Policy Centre (FPC), told Al Jazeera: "A state's sovereignty implies a responsibility to all of its citizens, and Iran continues to trample on the rights of marginal groups."

"If Iran wants to claim a leadership role in the international community it needs to begin by addressing the claims of women and ethnic and religious minorities to basic civil rights."



Iran has sought to carve a larger role for itself in the region [Reuters]

However, the government, has categorically denied accusations they have been repressing the rights of minorities in Ahwaz or other parts of the country.

Amir al-Musawi, an Iranian political analyst and former consultant to the ministry

of defence, says foreign governments have been fuelling dissent in Ahwaz.

"The Ahwazi people are supporters of the Iranian revolution, but there are some mercenaries who have been funded by foreign powers to create a situation where it appears there is a falling out between Iranian Arabs and the government," he said.

"We know the British in Basra are fuelling some Ahwazi mercenary acts but we are sure they will get nowhere."

Religious discrimination

Though they comprise a mixed Shia and Sunni community, al-Seyed Nima says Ahwazis have also suffered religious persecution.

He said Ahwazi Arabs have traditionally attempted to mark Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar in which Muslims fast from dawn to dusk, in conjunction with Sunni Arab countries.

"One of the ways we are able to feel the common bond and ancestry with our Arab brothers is to celebrate the religious holidays at the end of Ramadan and the Hajj pilgrimage when they do," al-Seyed Nima said.

"However, during the last Ramadan season, Iranian security forces arrested people and banned us from marking the holiday unless we followed the government's Shia calendar" al-Seyed Nima said.

The FPC believes that a group of "hard-line" clerics have enforced their version of Islam and that this has become the official doctrine of the government.

"Iran's history is characterised by rich debate over the meaning of Shia doctrine and the implications of theology, and much of this diversity has been suffocated in the Islamic Republic," Cameron told Al Jazeera.

"As a consequence, women and minorities are subjected to constraints on their freedoms: Bahais are treated as 'infidels' without rights, the private lives of women are regulated by the state, and Sunni Kurds are denied basic religious freedoms."

Iranian officials were unavailable for comment. Al Jazeera's phone calls and emails were not returned.

Iranian influence

Some analysts have cautioned, however, that the Ahwazi claims of religious persecution should not be viewed through the prism of Shia-Sunni tensions which were exacerbated by the 1980-88 war with neighbouring Iraq.

Abd al-Amir al-Rikabi, an Iraqi politician and author, says some within the Iranian government believe that the Islamic Republic has a larger leadership role to play in the Middle East.

He said: "Iranians believe that Arabs led the Muslim nation for 1,000 years, and the Turks had that opportunity for several centuries until World War One. Tehran thinks the time has come for it to lead the Muslim world."

In recent years, Iran has reached out to its Arab neighbours in the Gulf seeking to promote improved trade and cultural ties and play a greater regional role.

Clamouring for leadership of the Muslim world, and indeed the Gulf region, has led to several conflicts in the past 50 years. In 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, which had just overthrown its Shah in favour of the Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's late leader, and his religious followers.

Iraq had made territorial claims on Khuzestan saying it was a predominantly Arab region.

However, Saddam Hussein, the then Iraqi president, failed to inspire an Arab rebellion in southern Iran.

"In 1980 when the Iraqi army attacked Ahwazi cities, Ahwazi Arabs defended their cities despite the fact they had the chance to get annexed to an Arab country, Iraq. It is true the idea appealed to some Ahwazis but they were [a] minority," al-Musawi told Al Jazeera.

Al-Seyed Nima denied that Ahwazis willingly fought with the Iranian army and said they had been hired as mercenaries or forced to enlist.

Amnesty says it is concerned about the status of several Ahwazi Arabs who have fled to Iraq and are reportedly to be forcibly repatriated to Iran.

The human rights group has called on Baghdad "not to return anyone to a country where they would be at risk of torture or other ill-treatment".

Amnesty says it is preparing a 2009 report on the treatment of Ahwazi Arabs in Iran.

Source: AlJazeera

Feedback

Number of comments : 1

Ahmad Gokce United States	10/02/2009
Iranian turks	
Okay, since it is missing in the article: Iranian is an artificial, fake identity. Farsi, who make slightly more than half of the population, is the ethnicity who rules Iran. Farsi is also the only education language in the country. One third or one fourth of iran are Turks who are repressed culturally like Arabs.	