

MERIA

THE MINORITY RIGHTS OF AZERBAIJANI TURKS IN IRAN

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This article discusses the minority rights of Iran's Azerbaijani Turks and human rights violations in its majority Azerbaijani-populated provinces of Iran by the Iranian central government. With the conclusion of the second Russo-Persian War (1826-1828) and the signing of the Turkmenchay Treaty, Azerbaijan was divided into north and south, with the massive region of Southern Azerbaijan becoming part of northwestern Iran. Since then, relations between Southern Azerbaijanis and the Iranian government have been unstable. This article focuses on Tehran's discriminatory policies towards Iran's Azerbaijani Turks in the fields of education, media, culture, and environment from 1990-2010.

INTRODUCTION

Since its establishment, the Islamic Republic of Iran has faced criticism for its repeated human rights violations. Despite its poor human rights record, however, Iran's position in the Middle East has made it a major player in international politics. Iran is a multiethnic country, with different ethnic groups and minorities throughout the country.

The rivalry over the control of the Azerbaijani territories and over hegemony both in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea led to two major wars between Russia and Iran, which were concluded with the Treaties of Gulistan (October 12, 1813) and Turkmenchay (February 10, 1828). The massive region of "Southern Azerbaijan" in northwest Iran, which encompasses six provinces--East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardebil, Zanjan, Qazvin, and Hamadan--became known as such after Azerbaijan was officially split into two parts (north and south) by the Russian Empire and Iran following the second Russo-Persian war. Southern Azerbaijan has since become a significant province of Iran. "Despite their separation under fundamentally different political and cultural systems... for over 150 years," Southern and Northern Azerbaijanis continue to share a common ethnic identity.¹

Precise estimates of the Azerbaijani population in Iran are unknown. Some researchers estimate that more than half of Iran's population is Persian while the others claim Persians make up less than 50 percent. Nonetheless, Azerbaijani activists and political groups believe Azerbaijanis are the largest ethnic group in Iran and that their numbers in the country are underestimated. According to Azerbaijani student groups in Tehran, 27 million Azerbaijanis live in the Islamic Republic,² with the majority of Azerbaijani Turks concentrated in the northwestern part of Iran. They are also the predominant population in several provinces, including in East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, and Ardabil Province.

Pressure from the Iranian authorities also forced large communities of Iranian (or Southern) Azerbaijanis to emigrate. Many left to the Republic of Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, European Union countries, and the United States. Some eight million Iranian Azerbaijanis live outside Southern Azerbaijan, over a million of whom are considered political immigrants residing in Europe or America. Some have also left the Azerbaijani provinces for other Iranian provinces, such as Tehran. Some estimates claim the population of Tehran to be made up of between 25 percent to a third of Azerbaijani immigrants and their first or second generation offspring.³

Based on these estimates, some 25 million Azerbaijani Turks live in Iranian or Southern Azerbaijan, making them the largest ethnic group in the country. Despite their size, however, the rights of Azerbaijani Turks, including minority, cultural, and linguistic rights, as well as their national identity, have been violated by the Iranian authorities. In order to limit their expansion and control their population growth in the country, the Iranian central government has implemented an assimilation policy. This article will focus on the outcome of demonstrations by the Azeri minority throughout the 1990s and the 2000s against the central government in Iran.

AZERBAIJANI INDEPENDENCE FROM THE SOVIET UNION AND AZERIS IN IRAN

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Northern Azerbaijan's restored independence, Azerbaijani national identity grew stronger. This historical event also influenced Iran's Azerbaijani Turks and encouraged them to push for independence in the South. From the mid-1990s, the Azerbaijani Turkish population held several peaceful demonstrations demanding ethnic and cultural rights and protesting the Iranian government's discriminatory policies. Such demonstrations were held in Tabriz, Urmia, and many other Azerbaijani cities. Their main demands were official permission to use their mother tongue and recognition of their national identity as "Azerbaijani Turks." Another principal demand was cultural and administrative autonomy in the Azerbaijani provinces.⁴ The Iranian security forces suppressed the protesters, with no promises from the governmental authorities to meet their demands.

While the right to education in one's mother tongue is enshrined in the Iranian constitution, the Azerbaijani-Turkic language remains suppressed in Iran. Use of the Azerbaijani language in schools and at universities is prohibited by the Iranian government. The University of Tabriz, for example, offers no Azeri-language education,

while seven other languages are taught in the cultural centers of Iran's Azerbaijani provinces.

Every year, on September 23, which marks the beginning the school year in Iran, youth in the predominantly Azerbaijani-populated regions of the country boycott the schools and hold demonstrations demanding the right to education in their native Azeri Turkish and calling for an end to the Iranian government's discrimination policies. The demonstrations have resulted in arrests, including of youth, by the Iranian authorities. In 2006, for example, at least 15 were detained in the provincial capital of Azerbaijan, Tabriz, among them 14-year-old Mohammad Reza Evezpoor and his brother Morteza, aged 16.⁵

In addition to the denial of mother-tongue education, non-Persian-language media and publications are systematically limited by the government, despite the fact that the Iranian constitution grants "the use of regional or tribal languages in the press and mass media."⁶ Azerbaijani-Turkic language publications and broadcasting do not promote Azerbaijani Turks' rights nor do they discuss their main challenges. Azerbaijani activist groups have criticized local radio and television channels for the limited number of programs available in Azerbaijani-Turkic. In response to this, in April 2010, the head of Zanjan Province Radio and TV stated, "We are not legally authorized to broadcast (programs for children, adolescents, and youth) in the local language. Tehran must grant authorization for Turkic broadcasting of such programs to enable us to do so... According to its guidelines, 50 percent of the programs must be in Persian."⁷ Only pressure from the international community and increased sanctions against the Iranian government will force Iran to abandon this policy of discrimination, and only then will Iran's Azerbaijani Turkish population be granted the minority rights to which it is entitled.

THE 2006 DEMONSTRATIONS

Following years of mistreatment and discrimination at the hands of the Iranian

government, on May 12, 2006, an Iranian newspaper printed an insulting cartoon mocking Azeris, which depicted a cockroach speaking Azeri. The cartoon was accompanied by an article criticizing the country's Azeri population. The article read: "... in dealing with cockroaches... one should not adopt violence, because it takes the fun out of it. In a civilized way, we should sit at a table and have a dialogue with them. Unfortunately, the cockroaches do not understand human language, and the grammar of their own language is so difficult that 80% of them prefer to speak the language of others. When cockroaches do not understand their own language, how do you expect them to understand us? It is at this point that dialogue comes to an end, and you have to resort to more violent ways."⁸ The event sparked a wave of demonstrations among Azeris across the country--mainly in the Azerbaijani-populated cities of northwestern Iran--against the Persian regime. The demonstrations were initially concentrated in Tabriz, the cultural center of Iran's Azerbaijani provinces but soon spread throughout the country and "paralyzed these cities for several days, in some cases even weeks."⁹

The protesters demanded a formal apology from the government and called for respect of Azeri ethnic and cultural rights and for Azerbaijani Turkish to become an official state language in Iran. Tehran, however, did not meet their demands, did not condemn the caricature, and provided no official response. The anti-state demonstrations soon came to a halt due to pressure from the Iranian security forces. Some reports indicate that Azerbaijani nationalists in particular were targeted by the security forces. As a result, dozens of protesters were killed and hundreds were arrested. However, the exact number of fatalities is unknown due to the Iranian government's distorted and unreliable information as well as its exclusion from Iranian media reports.¹⁰

In response to the demonstrations, the Iranian government eventually made some amendments to appease the protesters. The newspaper's editor-in-chief and the authors

were fired. In addition, the publication of the newspaper was temporarily suspended.¹¹ Still, there was no official government apology. The demonstrations constituted a major uprising against Tehran's policies toward the country's Azerbaijani population and were among the largest ethnic protests since the 1979 Iranian Revolution.¹²

THE 2009 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND MINORITY RIGHTS

Following the 2006 events, national identity among Iran's Azerbaijani Turks was strengthened. This was evident during Iran's 2009 presidential elections. Among the candidates was opposition leader Mir Hussein Mousavi, an ethnic Azerbaijani. Mousavi vowed to secure equal rights for the country's minorities, and he was supported by the majority of the citizens in the northwestern provinces. During the campaigning, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani also promised to expand minority, cultural and linguistic rights. With the conclusion of the elections, however, Rouhani neglected to address the issue.

Mousavi's failure in the presidential elections led to demonstrations by his adherents against the Iranian central government. While a number of Azerbaijani activists were killed during these protests, the situation for the Azeri minority in Iran remained unchanged after the elections. Article 2.1 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities asserts, "Persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities... have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination."¹³ Azerbaijani Turks in Iran continue to be deprived of education in their mother tongue, non-Persian media and publications are limited, and they cannot provide court testimony in their native Azeri--though these rights are enshrined in Iran's constitution. Despite criticism by the international

community, Iran continues its discrimination policy against the Azeri minority.

THE LAKE URMIA CRISIS AND TEHRAN'S ASSIMILATION POLICY

Lake Urmia located in northwestern Iran between the country's Western and Eastern Azerbaijani provinces, is a saltwater lake considered the largest lake in the Middle East. The lake, which is protected as a UNESCO biosphere reservation,¹⁴ is an important part of rural life for the residents of the northwestern provinces, especially for Iranian Azerbaijanis.¹⁵ Since the late 1990s, its water level has been declining due to agricultural development construction by the Iranian government on the lake's tributaries, which has stopped the flow of fresh water to the lake. Environmental experts have predicted that the lake could dry up completely in a few years unless urgent measures are taken by Iran. The international community has warned the Iranian government about the lake's declining water level, which has caused increased salinity and is destroying the lake's ecosystem. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), considering this a matter of urgency, has even allocated a special fund to prevent this environmental disaster. Still, the Iranian government has taken no "serious measures to prevent the lake (not only a valuable biotope, but also one of the symbols of Southern Azerbaijan) from disappearing."¹⁶

In March 2010, Iran's Azerbaijani Turks began holding demonstrations criticizing the government's policy on the Lake Urmia crisis and calling for it to take action on this urgent matter. Local football fans (Tractor Sazi FC) and nationalist groups from the region also took part in the demonstrations. For the protesters, the issue was not only environmental, but also political and nationalist, due to Lake Urmia's importance to the Azerbaijani Turkish population in the region. Tehran's failure to address the environmental crisis was seen as discrimination against the Azeri minority. The demonstrators thus demanded that the

government respect their minority and resolve the crisis.¹⁷

Tehran's failure to take action resulted in intensified protests from mid-2011. In addition, the protests spread to Turkey and Azerbaijan, both of which would also be affected by the lake's desiccation.¹⁸ Demonstrations continued for a period of several years. During this period, Iranian government intervention resulted in the arrest of hundreds of protestors and the deaths of a number of them.

As of the writing of this article, Tehran's discriminatory policies toward the country's non-Persian populated regions continue, and Lake Urmia's water level continues to decline. The Islamic Republic's failure to take action on the Lake Urmia crisis stems from two major objectives it has in drying up the lake. First, it hopes to use the lake's uranium reserves for its military-based nuclear program. Second, the lake is considered an essential aspect in the agricultural development and rural life of people living around it—mainly the country's Azerbaijani Turkish population. If the lake dries up completely in a few years, the population will be forced to migrate to the central, Persian-populated parts of the country, which could lead to their assimilation.

CONCLUSION

Minority rights in Iran are repeatedly violated by the central government in the political, religious, economic realms, and more. Due to their (non-Persian) national identity and large numbers, Iran's Azerbaijani Turks have in particular been targets of discrimination by the government since the 1990s. In general, political relations between the central government in Iran and its minority communities are unstable. Azerbaijani national identity intensified with the independence movement in Northern Azerbaijan during the late 1980s and following Azerbaijani independence in 1991 (with the establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan), including among Iranian Azerbaijanis. Since these events, Tehran and

the country's security forces have kept the Iranian Azeri community under close watch. The rights of the Azerbaijani Turkish minority are systematically violated by the government, in particular in the northwestern part of the country where Iranian or Southern Azerbaijanis are concentrated.

Two decades of demonstrations against Tehran's discrimination policies have served as an indication of the reality Iran's Azerbaijani Turks are facing. Their main demands have been equal rights--including education and media in their mother tongue--the promotion and recognition of their national identity as "Azerbaijani Turks," cultural and administrative autonomy, and environmental protection. Due to the benefits of the Azerbaijani provinces for the country's economy, Iran is not willing to give up this territory. Instead, the Islamic Republic's policy has been suppression and discrimination against the Azerbaijani population in all realms. So long as the international community does not increase sanctions in order to stop these human rights violations, the Iranian central government will continue to implement its discriminatory policies towards its Azeri Turkish population.

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NOTES

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