

Profile of Religious Minorities and, Ethnic and Lingual Groups in Iran

In the Name of God, the Almighty

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A) Religious Minorities:

Iran is home to various religious, ethnic and lingual minorities which are living peacefully together without any discrimination and freely take part in all socio-political activities. The members of these minorities enjoy equal opportunities for employment, education, etc. in state organs and institutions irrespective of their ethnicity, language or religion.

Only in certain cases, people may be asked questions about their religion including for certain government jobs which usually comes at the time of the selection of the applicants on the basis of their job and moral competency and also in state courts in which suspects are interrogated on charges of which they are accused. But, in penal cases, the plaintiff, witnesses, the accused and others are not asked about their religion. Religious and lingual minorities which have equal free access to courts and other judicial authorities for defending their rights are not subject to any discrimination.

In Iran, various ethnic groups are so mixed and scattered in different cities and towns that the state authorities as well as the public pay no attention to the difference of ethnic backgrounds of people.

Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians are recognized as religious minorities which have been peacefully living with their Muslim fellow citizens for long periods of time and are free to practice their own religions. Besides, they have their own schools in addition to other public schools which they can use for their education.

The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran has recognized the right to religion.

Article 12 of the Constitution has referred to the state religion and other Islamic sects recognized in Iran. The state religion in Iran is Islam and 12- Imam Shiism which will never change and other Islamic sects such as Hanafi, Shafei, Maleki, Hanbali and Zeidi are also recognized and respected and their followers are also free to practice their own religious rites and jurisprudence as well as personal affairs (marriage, divorce, inheritance and testament) which will also be applicable in state courts. In any region where the followers of any of the afore-mentioned sects have a majority, the regional rules and regulations which are within the jurisdiction of the local councils will be determined according to the commands of that religious sect which will also respect the rights of the followers of other sects.

In this respect, Judges from these Islamic sects have been employed in state courts and law students are also trained with respect to the laws of these religious sects.

In most cases, judges from the sects which have a majority in a region are sent to the region. Other religious minorities are subject to the civil and penal laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran. But with regard to personal and family affairs, judges ought to seek the views of the religious authorities of the minorities.

According to Article 13 of the Constitution "Iranian Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are the only religious minorities recognized and are free to practice their own religions within the limits of law."

According to the policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, people of Bahai'i belief, too, enjoy the rights of citizenship.

Article 14 of the Constitution refers to the fair treatment of non-Muslims and states: "the Government of Islamic Republic of Iran and Muslims must treat non-Muslims with Islamic Justice and fairness and respect their rights. This does not apply to those who engage in conspiratorial behavior against Islam and the state of Islamic Republic of Iran".

Article 19 of the Constitution proscribes discrimination on any grounds and states: "Iranian citizens of any ethnic and tribal group enjoy equal rights irrespective of race, colour, language, etc."

Article 20 of the Constitution refers to the rights of citizenship and states: "All citizens, men and women, are equal before the law and enjoy all human, political, economic, social and cultural rights by observing Islamic rules and regulations."

Article 23 of the Constitution refers to the freedom of expression and states: "Inquisition is prohibited and no body can be questioned or reproached for his opinions."

Thus, like other citizens, the followers of the religious minorities in Iran have a right of access to courts and other judicial authorities for defending their rights and religious beliefs can not justify any discrimination against them. Even, the issue of blood money for the followers of other religions which was different from that for Muslims has been settled by amending the relevant rules. Beside, Chapter 3 of the Constitution refers to the rights of citizens and states that all citizens, men and women, are equal before the law and enjoy the protection of law and all the rights provided for in the Constitution irrespective of their ethnic or tribal origins.

To ensure the implementation of the provisions of the Constitution on the rights of citizens, Article 570 of Islamic Penal Code reiterates: "Any state official or authority who illegally denies or deprives people of the rights enshrined in the constitution shall be subject to confinement terms ranging from 6 months up to 3 years in addition to discharge from government service from 3 to 5 years.

Establishment of a Committee for Settlement of Problems of Minorities in Iran.

In 2000, at the order of the president, a committee consisting of the representatives of the relevant departments including education, health, Justice, science and technology, Foreign Affairs and Supreme National Security Council and law enforcement forces was set up to consider the problems of the religious minorities through coordination among the relevant authorities on the drafting of the policies and laws related to them.

The establishment of such a council was included in Article 120 of the law of the 4th 5-year Development plan of the country.

Based on the same Article, the Government put on its agenda the establishment of the Council for Making Policies on Religious Minorities and submitted a bill for that purpose to the Parliament. The measures adopted by the Islamic Republic of Iran to ensure the rights of the followers of the religious minorities are as follows:

1. Equal blood money for followers of the religious minorities with that of Muslims,
2. Approval of the bill for payment of equal blood money for religious minorities by the Parliament in 2002,
3. Issue of religious verdicts by religious authorities such as Ayatollah Yousof Sanei, Ayatollah Nouri Hamedani and Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi on equal blood money for the followers of religious minorities.

Formation of Religious Minorities Institutions

Under the rules and regulations on the formation of political parties, professional associations and religious minorities institutions so far over 51 institutions of religious minorities have obtained permission for the establishment of political and professional entities.

Given the percentage of the population of the religious minorities of the total population of the country, this number of permissions issued for them points to an increase in their activities.

B) Ethnic and Lingual Groups:

In Iran, a population of 65.5 million people comprising 7 national ethnic groups consisting of Farses, Azaris, Kurds, Lors, Baluchis and Turkmen with different traditions, languages and dialects are peacefully living together. In our country, due to the mixture of various ethnic groups and absence of ethnic segregation, ethnic characteristics have not been included in national censuses.

The inhabitants of West Azarbaijan, East Azarbaijan, Ardabil and Zanjan are mainly Azaris, the inhabitants of Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Ilam and some parts of West Azarbaijan are Kurds, the inhabitants of Lorestan, Kohgiluyeh and Buyerahmad and Chaharmahal Bakhtiari are Lors, the inhabitants of Sistan and Baluchestan are bluchies, part of the population residing in Kuzestan province are Arabs and part of the residents of Golestan province are Turkmen. And most of the Iranian nomads are Turks, Lors and Kurds.

To improve economic, social and cultural indicators in less developed areas where ethnic groups are residing, the Government has provided for legal mechanisms and tools in the third 5-year development plan for accelerating the development process in these areas. In addition, special

financial resources have been allocated in the annual budget of the country to less developed provinces such as Sistan and Baluchestan where ethnic groups are residing.

To promote socio-economic and cultural development of less developed provinces and regions of the country such as Sistan and Baluchestan and Kurdistan provinces, certain measures have been taken of which mention can be made of providing facilities for the exploration and exploitation of mines, use of soil and water sources, construction of big industrial and mineral plants and encouraging the participation of the private sector in the development projects in those regions based on Note 6 to the Budget law of 2002.

It's to be noted that the Presidential Office for Development of Poor Areas oversees the conduct of affairs in the deprived areas of the country.

In the budgeting system of the country, there is a chapter within development credits called "multi-purpose operations for development of poor regions." One of the programs provided in the chapter is allocated to the comprehensive development of nomadic communities.

The credits and measures provided for in this program relate only to human development, infrastructural services and improvement of socio-economic conditions of nomadic communities. In Iran, freedom of expression for ethnic groups is ensured through exchange of information in national and provincial T.V. channels, facilitation of publication of books and periodicals and holding of book fairs, etc.

50% of the radio and T.V. products and programs in provinces where ethnic groups are residing such as West Azarbaijan, East Azarbaijan, Kurdistan, etc. are prepared in local languages.

Recently, new measures have been taken to promote exchange of information related to scientific activities mainly by means of publication of books and periodicals in local languages. In addition, book fairs have been organized in Kurd, Baluch, Azari and Lor-populated areas as part of the cultural activities of the government which have been detailed in the 16th country report. Based on the latest figures, so far, 875 books have been published in Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian. In addition, permissions have been issued for 85 periodicals in various legal, social, cultural and political fields for different ethnic groups to reflect their views.

So far, 179 cultural, art and research institutes and 338 publication houses have been established in provinces where ethnic groups are residing in order to help promote public knowledge and culture in these areas.

To prevent job discrimination, Article 6 of the Labour Act has banned any discrimination on the basis of race, colour or language.

To improve employment situation in less developed provinces and regions where ethnic groups are residing, special measures and policies have been adopted by the government of which mention can be made of the following: formulation of employment policies in the 3rd 5-year development plan, tax and duty exemptions, reduction of the insurance premiums and taxes of employers, entrepreneurial incentives and supporting private sector investment in job creation activities including provision of low-rate banking facilities for investors in productive and service sectors and increasing the salaries and wages of civil servants and workers working in these regions as an incentive for maintaining them in the regions.

The government has continued its activities on improvement of health situation in less developed areas in recent years. Of such activities, mention can be made of the following: Adoption of certain policies on health and medical treatment in chapter 25 of the 3rd 5-year development plan, universal medical insurance plan and organizing villagers insurance, use of the aids provided by international agencies such as UNICEF to meet the shortages existing in less developed areas, adoption of policies for creation of incentives and special privileges for physician and doctors working in rural health centers, allocation of a share of medical subjects in higher education institutions for students of deprived areas and ensuring food security in these areas by granting subsidies on staple goods.

The Ministry of Education and Literacy Movement have taken various measures to promote literacy rates in the deprived areas which have been elaborated upon in the previous and present reports.

As a result of these measures, the annual increase in the number of students in the deprived

areas have been higher than those of the other areas of the country in recent years.

The state organs involved in higher education including the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, Islamic Azad University, etc. have adopted policies to improve the quality and quantity of higher education specially in deprived areas, offered more facilities to those who wish to continue their education and recruited specialized forces for promotion of higher education in these areas.

To facilitate access to Judicial justice, councils consisting of three members have been established in provinces, towns and villages where ethnic groups are residing. One third of such councils are located in these areas and orders have been issued for membership of around 3000 people in the deprived areas in the councils.

Apart from the courts of law which can play an important role in ensuring respect for the rights of the local people, four other state organs, namely Committee of Article 90 of the Parliament, Administrative Justice Court, General State Inspectorate and the Board for Supervising the Implementation of the Constitution address the grievances of people and supervise the enforcement of laws in the deprived areas.