Iran: For religious minorities, biometric identity cards threaten to become a new tool for surveillance and discrimination

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Around the world, governments and private enterprises alike are increasingly moving towards the adoption of biometric technology to enhance their daily operations in a variety of sectors – from banking to immigration to crime control.

Biometric technology involves the collection of physical data, such as fingerprints, iris scans or voice samples, which are unique to an individual. It is often lauded for the benefits it offers in terms of enhancing security, improving user experience and preventing fraud.

However, the adoption of biometric technology also poses significant challenges and threats to privacy and human rights. Some biometric identifiers can reveal sensitive information about a person – such as health status or ethnic background – which can be misused in discriminatory ways. If biometric identifiers are used in multiple types of governmental transactions and linked to a central database, they can also provide significant and detailed information about a person’s activities. Without strong protections in place, biometric data collected consensually for one purpose (such as identity verification) can easily be used for other purposes (for example, surveillance) without the knowledge or consent of the people involved.

In 2015, the Iranian government began phasing in a biometric national identity card: this is now the card issued to all new applicants and to anyone renewing an expired national identity card. The card features a smart ‘chip’ and stores biometric data including iris scans, fingerprints and facial images. The smart identity card, or the 11-digit number associated with it, are required in order to access a whole range of government services.
– from obtaining a driver’s licence to accessing a pension. Iran’s banking sector has also shifted towards the adoption of biometric methods and now requires customers to provide their smart identity card in order to carry out many banking transactions. More worryingly, Iranian officials have also announced plans that would require citizens to verify their identity using the smart identity card in order to access the domestic internet network.

In a country where citizens are already subjected to high levels of surveillance, the introduction of the smart identity card raises significant concerns. The Iranian government has already used facial recognition technology to identify and arrest protesters and political dissidents, and the collection of biometric data potentially gives it the tools to do so even more efficiently. If biometric identifiers were made a requirement in order to access the internet, Iranians who express dissenting opinions online could be very quickly identified and targeted by the state.

Moreover, mandating the use of the smart identity card across a range of sectors could give the government access to very comprehensive information about a citizen’s activities, particularly in the absence of legislation restricting the collation and use of such data. While a draft Personal Data Protection Act has been under discussion in Iran, human rights groups have criticized it for allowing personal data to be processed without individuals’ consent for vaguely defined ‘security’ purposes, and for giving individuals linked to the security apparatus power to oversee the collection of data.

Recently, Iran’s new smart identity card has also turned into a vehicle of discrimination. In January 2020, the Iranian government ceased allowing applicants for the card to choose ‘Other’ in the religion field on the application form, which had previously been one of the available options. Instead, applicants must now choose one of the four officially recognized religions given on the form – Islam, Christianity, Judaism or Zoroastrianism. This leaves members of smaller religious minorities with only two options: either lie about their religious identity or be prevented from obtaining the card.

Iran’s unrecognized religious minorities – which include the country’s sizeable Bahá’í community, as well as smaller communities such as Mandaeans and Yarsan – are already subjected to many forms of official and unofficial discrimination. They do not benefit from the legal protections offered to members of the four religions named in the Iranian Constitution. They are excluded from running for political leadership positions and often denigrated by Iran’s religious establishment. Some have faced attacks on their houses of worship or have been arbitrarily imprisoned as a result of their beliefs.

The Bahá’í community faces particularly harsh persecution from the state. The official position of the Iranian government is that the Bahá’í faith is a ‘man-made religion’ and a political movement disguising itself as a spiritual community. A 1991 government memorandum, signed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, called for Bahá’ís to be dealt with in such a way ‘that their progress and development shall be blocked’ and the government actively...
excludes them from higher education and employment. Bahá’ís are also prevented from attending religious and social gatherings, and their homes are regularly raided, with their religious books and items confiscated.

While the government did not make any official announcement to accompany the removal of the ‘Other’ religion field, the change in policy seems to have been spurred by comments from a conservative member of parliament, Mohammad Javad Abtahi. In January 2019, he criticized the inclusion of an ‘Other’ option in the identification card’s religion field, claiming that it meant the government was bestowing legitimacy on ‘deviant’ sects. He then wrote to the interior minister demanding a review of the application process for the smart identity card and the removal of the ‘Other’ option.

Since Bahá’í teachings forbid their followers from denying their faith, a Bahá’í citizen who wishes to remain faithful to the religion has no choice but to forfeit the smart identity card. This has wide-ranging implications for access to social and economic rights. The card and its unique identifier are needed to complete an array of essential functions, such as obtaining a driver's licence, applying for a credit card, buying property and enrolling in university. If, on the other hand, Bahá’í report themselves as Muslims in order to obtain the card, the Iranian government would be equipped with statistical data that it could potentially use to deny their presence and distort the true religious make-up of the country’s population.

As Iran continues to expand the usage and applications of biometric identifiers, the full implications of the transition to the smart identity card are yet to be completely understood. However, developments so far should serve as an early warning of the ways in which biometric technology can be used to accelerate discrimination, exclusion and surveillance if it is not well regulated within a rights-respecting legal framework.