

briefing

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Protests, discrimination and the future of minorities in Iran





A Baluch woman writes 'Women, Life, Freedom', the slogan originating in Kurdish grassroots movements and adopted by protestors across Iran, on a wall in Sistan-Baluchestan, Iran, 2022. *Credit: Anonymous.*

Minority Rights Group International

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MRG works with over 150 organizations in nearly 50 countries. Our governing Council, which meets twice a year, has members from 10 different countries. MRG has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and observer status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). MRG is registered as a charity and a company limited by guarantee under English law: registered charity no. 282305, limited company no. 1544957.

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1 Socio-political context

On 16 September 2022, 22-year-old Kurdish woman Jina Amini – also known by her government registered name Mahsa Amini – died in custody after she was arrested and detained by Iran’s morality police. The reason given for her detention was that she apparently revealed some of her hair in public. Jina’s death sparked a major social movement, over the course of which thousands of Iranians across the country have taken to the streets to demand their rights. The short and long-term consequences for Iran and the Islamic Republic of these demonstrations are yet to be seen.

At the time of writing, the nationwide protests have entered their fourth week. Women have been at the forefront of the demonstrations from the very beginning. Despite the internet blackouts enforced by the state, daily footage of female protesters standing up to the brutality of security forces has inspired millions of people across the world to stand in solidarity with them. Although women have always been active in Iran’s protests over the last five decades, this level of feminist mobilization and participation in leading the protests is unprecedented in Iran.

A Kurdish phrase was chanted at Jina’s funeral, ‘Jin, Jiyan, Azadi’, meaning ‘women, life, freedom’. These words, already central to Kurdish grassroots movements for many years, have reverberated across the country, becoming the main slogan of the nationwide protests taking place at the time of writing. As this slogan points out, women are more than participants in the movement. The protesters perceive the systematic discrimination against women to be the main barrier to their freedom. Iranian civil society is advocating for emancipation of women, which will not be obtained until women are free from the ideological control of the state. The message of Iranian protesters is powerful and has resonated around the globe in an unprecedented way. Around the world women have been cutting their hair and chanting ‘Women, Life, Freedom’, in solidarity with the women in Iran who are doing the same. Some commentators have dubbed this the first feminist revolution in Iranian history.

Jina was not only a young woman; she was also Kurdish and a Sunni Muslim. In three intersecting aspects of her identity, Jina was subject to state discrimination. Her tragic death garnered nationwide solidarity among various Iranian ethnic communities. The common grievances which were represented by the death of Jina have seemingly united communities against the governing Islamic Republic. Kurdish, Baluch, Gilaki, Fars and Arab communities are all chanting ‘Women, Life, Freedom’.

From the beginning of the uprising, the state has used violent methods to suppress activism and reinstate ‘order’. At the time of writing, over 240 people have been killed by the

security forces in the current demonstrations. Although men, women and many children have been killed across the country, a disproportionate number of the victims have been from the Baluch community in the city of Zahedan. Many deaths and casualties have been reported in Kurdistan as well.

The number of executions has more than doubled in the first half of 2022, with 251 executions compared with 117 during the same period in 2021.¹ A disproportionate number of these executions involve individuals from minority groups. The Islamic Republic has a track record of using deadly violence, particularly in the borderland areas which are populated by ethnic minorities. The political and legal history of Iran provides a better understanding of the roots of this violent state-society confrontation, particularly in the borderland regions.

The economic crisis and the lack of political accountability had already caused dangerously high tensions between state and civil society long before Jina Amini’s death. In addition to the nationwide demonstrations in 2019-2020, when at least 1,500 Iranians were killed by security forces, demonstrations continued to occur across the country.² The political and geographic extent of the protests has also widened. Although Tehran and other major urban centres were the main arenas for political protest in the past, many citizens in the peripheral regions of the country are now openly challenging the status quo. Some of the provinces that have become hotbeds of dissent are inhabited predominantly by ethnic minorities.

Although most of these demonstrations were initially triggered by economic grievances, many protesters have gone beyond their immediate economic demands to question the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and its leaders. However, in the nationwide protests of 2022, the slogans have targeted the ideological nature of the Islamic Republic from the very beginning. The stubborn refusal of the Islamic Republic to reform has resulted in a political crisis and an increasing public distrust over the current regime, which came to power by revolutionary force in 1979. Predictably, this situation has paved the way for further securitization of Iranian civil society by the state.

Most of the borderland provinces, which are populated by religious or ethnic minorities, are facing even graver economic, political and environmental problems. Since 2020, significant protests have taken place in the province of Khuzestan, which is home to a large Iranian Arab population. Although Arabs in Iran have faced many years of discrimination and underdevelopment, the community is now increasingly prepared to take risks within a volatile and shrinking civic space. Thus, Arabs and other minority communities are ready to challenge discriminatory policies

and practices. Yet, the state increasingly depends on violent mechanisms of social control to restrain minority activists. For example, when the people of Khuzestan protested against life threatening water shortages, the state offered no short-term solution, and instead flooded the streets with security forces which were brought in from other provinces to crackdown on protestors. Patterns of state repression of civil society demonstrate that government authorities are more likely to use excessive violence to stifle minority expression, activism or dissent in ethnically dominated provinces such as Kurdistan, Baluchistan and Khuzestan.

Furthermore, the situation in Iraq, Syria and Yemen is on the whole characterised by a dangerous combination of environmental problems and discriminatory state practices. Indeed, where discriminatory policies are enforced by the state, factors such as drought can increase the chance of both intercommunal violence and state-society conflict.

Minorities in borderland regions of Iran face harsh environmental challenges, compounded by the burden of state discrimination. These conditions are intensifying identity-based conflicts in the region, especially violent and uncontrollable forms of conflict.

Overall, environmental problems, political corruption, widespread economic crises and repression of civil society have created a ticking timebomb. Violence may develop into further conflict unless conditions are addressed at the political and legal levels. The situation is particularly serious in the borderland provinces, where longstanding discrimination and cultural repression have negatively impacted ethnic and religious minorities. As Iranian civil society builds pressure on the state, international support and action is vital at this critical juncture to support and protect vulnerable communities and activists at risk, while putting pressure on the Islamic Republic to become more accountable for its record on minority and women's rights.

2 Background on minorities in Iran

It is often surmised that ethnic and religious minorities make up approximately half of Iran's population. Despite this diversity, the central authorities have for decades imposed a homogeneous Iranian identity rooted in Persian language and culture, and, since the 1979 Revolution, Shi'a Islam. This has resulted in the repression of minority languages, faiths and cultures, and to varying degrees, the exclusion of ethnic and religious minorities largely barred from public life and the benefits of economic development. This centralizing impulse has manifested itself in the attempted assimilation of minorities, repression of regional demands for self-governance and periodic episodes of armed conflict.

From hate speech and police intimidation to denial of fundamental rights and opportunities, Iran's minorities are routinely denied equal access to justice, education, employment and political participation.

While Iran's Constitution guarantees religious freedoms, it only extends these rights to Islam and three other recognized religions – Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism – leaving practitioners of other faiths, including Bahá'ís, Sabeen-Mandaeans and Yarsanis, with no guaranteed protections. Iran's sizeable Bahá'í community has been vilified, its members have been arrested and even executed on account of their beliefs. The threat to public morality or national security is a generic charge typically

used to criminalise minority group leaders and activists, resulting in long prison sentences and even the death penalty. In recent months many incidents of harassment, destruction of property and arbitrary arrests of Bahá'ís have been reported in various provinces including Mazandaran.

Ethnic minorities, including Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks and Baluchis, have been treated as second-class citizens. These and other communities are targeted based on their ethnic identity, and have been side-lined from education, health care and other basic services. Minority-populated regions such as Khuzestan, Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchestan remain underdeveloped, with higher poverty rates and poorer health conditions overall. These inequalities have contributed to profound discontent and resentment, reflected in the arrests of thousands of peaceful demonstrators across these regions. Prison data shows that at least three quarters of Iran's political prisoners belong to an ethnic minority.

Minority women are vastly underrepresented in political positions and in the labour force and continue to grapple with legacies of discrimination in the education sector, family life and the judicial system. Those who peacefully advocate for women's rights, and minority women in particular, are often arbitrarily detained and put in prison, where they endure the harsh treatment given to political prisoners.

3 Discrimination in practice

Ethnic and religious minorities – including Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds, Bahá'ís, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and others – are a vital part of the Iranian national fabric. Despite their diverse histories, they share a long experience of discrimination and denial of basic rights, which in many cases goes back to the birth of the Iranian state. Many provinces where ethnic minorities are concentrated are impoverished and underdeveloped, and in some cases these regions are still plagued by landmine contamination and other legacies of war. Minorities are excluded from high-level posts in the government, judiciary and military, and they are likewise underrepresented in senior and mid-level posts in many fields of employment. Minorities are vulnerable to harassment, arrest, hate speech and attacks on their places of worship.

The outbreak of nationwide protests in Iran, which began on 28 December 2017, shows the level of discontent many Iranians feel, not least given the lack of progress on major economic, political, and social grievances. Significantly, recent protests have encompassed a number of major cities in minority-populated provinces, such as Khuzestan, East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, Lorestan, Ilam and Sistan-Baluchestan. Disillusionment is often fuelled by forces of discrimination, environmental degradation, and economic neglect, which are defining aspects of life in minority areas. Protesters are increasingly using their own minority languages (Arabic, Baluchi, Kurdish, Lur) to chant and communicate slogans during public demonstrations. In the case of some Arab protesters, demands have become specific to the needs of ethnic groups.³ Iranian authorities arrested thousands of people following the eruption of large-scale protests at the end of 2017. By 2018, the organization Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRAI) documented the arrests of 2,455 protestors, although a member of parliament cited a much higher figure (3,700).⁴ Iran also witnessed an upsurge in women's rights activism throughout the protests in recent years, resulting in a government backlash against women human rights defenders.

Throughout 2020, 2021 and 2022, numerous demonstrations have taken place in Iran, including the nationwide teachers' protests, the farmers' protests, the labour rights protest in Haft-Tapeh, protests in Khuzestan over the shortage of water, and more recently protests in Abadan and several other cities triggered by the collapse of Metropol towers. Between June and October 2021, over 350 protests took place.⁵ One of the most notorious examples of how lethal force was applied against protesters took place in mid-July 2021 in over 20 cities in Khuzestan Province, subsequently extending to other areas including

Isfahan, Lorestan, East Azerbaijan, Tehran and Karaj. The demonstrations have been referred to as the 'Uprising of the Thirsty'. Over 360 individuals were arrested and widespread use of unlawful force against protesters, many of whom belong to the Arab minority, was documented, including the killing and injuring of participants.⁶ These developments are a stark illustration of the tensions that can result from long term marginalization and denial of rights of a significant segment of the population.

Despite the multifaceted nature of Iranian politics, the introduction and implementation of anti-discrimination legislation would help to address the root cause or demands of these protests. Although changing the discriminatory socio-political structures is not an easy task, realisation of an anti-discrimination law in Iran would be an important and achievable step to pave the way for more cohesion and equality in the country.

Detentions and executions

Minorities continue to be the targets of arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and execution on political and national security-related charges at disproportionately high rates. In many cases, ethnic and religious minorities have been arbitrarily arrested and detained in connection with a range of peaceful activities such as advocating for linguistic freedom; organizing or taking part in protests; being affiliated with oppositional parties; campaigning against environmental degradation in their areas; or simply participating in religious or cultural activities. Minority women advocating for equal treatment, an end to rights violations and reform of discriminatory policies are frequently subjected to threats, harassment, arrests and imprisonment. For minorities, the simplest forms of ethnic rights activism are often deliberately misconstrued by the authorities as a threat to national security, or else are falsely conflated with separatism. For example, Arabs have been targeted for expressing their ethnic identity through Arabic-language poetry and traditional clothing.⁷ Kurds are often detained for mere membership in Kurdish political parties.⁸ Between January and October 2021, just under 500 Kurdish individuals, including teachers, border couriers, artists, human rights and environmental rights defenders, lawyers, and journalists, were arrested or detained.⁹

Iran has one of the highest execution rates in the world. The country's Penal Code sanctions the use of the death penalty for more than 80 different offences, many of which do not meet the threshold for 'most serious' crimes under international law, such as adultery, homosexual relations,

drug possession and *moharebeh* (a vague term, meaning 'enmity with God').¹⁰ Furthermore, many of the offenses carrying the death penalty are among the charges used to target and convict minorities. Consequently, minorities form a disproportionate share of those executed every year, and the number of executions is rapidly rising. Drug-related offenses and *moharebeh* are two examples of prison sentences that have been overwhelmingly used against minorities. In the case of drug-related crimes, the overrepresentation of Baluchis and other minorities is linked to the impoverishment and marginalization of their areas, as in the case of Sistan-Baluchestan, where drug trafficking has flourished across the province's porous borders with Afghanistan. Between 1 January and 17 November 2021, over 40 Baluchi and over 50 Kurdish individuals were executed.¹¹

In addition to forming a disproportionate share of those sentenced to death through the judicial system, minorities

are also the victims of indiscriminate killings by Iranian security forces. This is an issue particularly in the border provinces, where many members of minority groups have turned to smuggling due to the lack of viable employment alternatives. For example, the Baloch Activists Campaign estimates that at least 100 people are killed every year in anti-smuggling operations in Sistan-Baluchestan Province, some of whom are innocent bystanders.¹² Similar tactics are used against couriers working in Kurdish majority areas, known as *kulbaran*. Faced with high unemployment rates and threats to traditional farming activities as a result of landmine contamination, many Kurds have turned to smuggling commodities such as tea, tobacco and fuel across the border.¹³ However, efforts by Iranian officials to tighten border security have resulted in hundreds of deaths or injuries to *kulbaran* over the years. In June 2022 alone, at least 13 *kulbaran* were injured by Iranian border forces. Of these, 12 were shot and one was beaten.¹⁴ The victims are

Why is there a heavier political crackdown in the minority borderland regions?

Although Iran has millennia of written history, the modern Iranian nation-state started to emerge in the early 20th century. The Pahlavi dynasty started a radical nation-building project which centred around the centralization of power and the Persian language. In other words, the Pahlavi dynasty adopted an ethnocentric nation-building model that paved the way for a top-down set of homogenization policies. Not surprisingly, the ethnic and linguistic minorities who primarily lived in the borderland regions were affected by these policies. Accordingly, the state-society relations in these areas were far from harmonious in the Pahlavi era. The state concentrated most of the resources in the centre of the country, and yet it feared foreign interference in the periphery. The state was particularly afraid of foreign ties with Iranian Kurds and Arabs. Although much has changed after the Iranian revolution in 1979, the centrist Pahlavi approach was inherited by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In the early days of the Islamic Republic, the clashes between Islamist revolutionary forces and Kurdish militias indicated that state-society relations under the Islamic Republic was going to be as bad, if not worse, than in the Pahlavi era. The Islamic Republic adopted an uncompromising approach towards ethnic minorities and was not prepared to give them many concessions. The authoritarian nature of the Islamic Republic was not compatible with the notion of distributive power, and the new political elite opposed any form of devolution. Although political repression is felt across the country, communities in the minority border regions are subject to additional scrutiny by security forces. The Islamic Republic periodically uses more violent methods to keep the population of these regions under its control.

Regardless of political frontiers, many people from Iranian Kurdistan cross the border to Iraqi Kurdistan either for family visits or to do business. The organic connections between the Kurdish populations on both sides of the border makes the regime even more suspicious. Today, most Iranian Kurdish parties do not have a separatist agenda. In fact, they call for democracy and a form of federalism that would grant them more autonomy rather than independence from Iran. Despite this, Iran uses the pretext of separatism for crackdowns on Kurdish activists. The Islamic Republic's approach toward Arab and Baluch communities is the same. Although Khuzestan is the richest province in Iran in terms of natural resources, some of the poorest communities live in this area, mainly comprising Arab Iranians. The Islamic Republic uses the pretext of 'external conspiracy' to suppress Arab activists who call for better living conditions. Challenges such as drought, air pollution and underdevelopment are creating significant resentment with the state, which is only met with harsh politics from the government.

Regional geopolitical factors are also important. Many countries in the wider region accuse Iran of interference in their internal affairs and view the Iranian state as a source of instability. Hence, any major political eruption in Iran can potentially involve regional interests. The development of organic grassroots political activism in any minority border region is likely to attract the attention of external actors who may use potential unrest to their advantage, for instance to place more pressure on the governing state. This exacerbates government repression of civic activism and places local minorities at greater risk of violence and abuse.

not only Iranian Kurdish citizens. Iranian military forces in the frontier areas also killed and wounded two tradesmen from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).¹⁵

Socio-economic marginalization and discrimination

Areas inhabited by minorities are disproportionately underdeveloped when compared to Persian-majority provinces. This is the result of a clear and long-term pattern of neglect by the central government.

Sistan-Baluchestan, where the Baluchi ethnic group forms the majority of the population, is Iran's poorest province.¹⁶ The majority of the population lives below the poverty line – 64 per cent and 77 per cent in urban and rural areas respectively. The province performs poorly on many key development indicators, as well as having the highest illiteracy and infant mortality rates in the country, an estimated two thirds of the province lack access to clean drinking water.¹⁷ Despite the fact that the province is rich in gas, oil, gold and marine resources, the government's investments in economic development have not taken into account or benefited local Baluchis.

In Khuzestan, the source of most of Iran's oil wealth, very large numbers of Arabs live in informal housing settlements, often as a result of displacement. Thus, these community groups often have no access to functioning sewage systems, electricity, clinics, schools and other basic services.¹⁸ Like Sistan-Baluchestan, the province suffers from low literacy rates and high rates of infant mortality and child malnutrition.¹⁹ Khuzestan is believed to have one of the highest suicide rates due to poor social and economic conditions affecting the local population.²⁰ Similarly, the province of Ilam has one of Iran's highest suicide rates, which is connected to the overall underdevelopment of Kurdish-majority provinces.²¹ Poor living conditions in Kurdish regions are underpinned by a history of forced resettlement and land confiscation, as well as inadequate reconstruction efforts following the end of the Iran-Iraq war.

Severe water shortages and other environmental and land related issues in Khuzestan, Isfahan and Sistan-Baluchestan pose a great risk to the minority population's right to health and adequate standards of living. What is more, the overall underdevelopment of minority areas means that many people are unable to access adequate healthcare services. For example, in Sistan-Baluchestan, the under-provision of health clinics in remote and rural areas has contributed to the province's below-average life expectancies.²² The province likewise has one of the highest under-five mortality rates in the country, surpassed only by Kurdistan. Making matters worse, these same provinces are marked by acute healthcare challenges, chief among which is air pollution. In 2013, the World Health Organization named Ahwaz as the most polluted city in the world,²³ a

title which it had held since at least 2011.²⁴ The Kurdish cities of Sanandaj and Kermanshah were also listed among the most polluted in the world.²⁵ According to environmentalists, the pollution in Khuzestan is linked to the Iranian government's long-term policies of river diversion, dam construction and drying of marshes for oil excavation, which have led to the rising incidence of toxic dust storms in the region.²⁶ This in turn has led to an increase in respiratory illnesses and cancer.

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, discrimination in the workplace is institutionalized through the practice of *gozinesh*, a mandatory screening process that anyone seeking employment in the public or para-statal sector must undergo. *Gozinesh* – found in the 1995 Selection Law, Article 2 – involves assessing prospective employees' adherence to Islam and their loyalty to the Islamic Republic. The *gozinesh* process is administered by the Supreme Selection Council as well as the Ministry of Intelligence, which is responsible for investigating applicants' former political views and their degree of repentance from them. The *gozinesh* criteria not only bar adherents of non-recognized religions from seeking employment, but also disadvantage Sunnis and anyone who holds views contrary to the official values of the Islamic Republic.²⁷

In the case of the Bahá'í minority, exclusion from wide-ranging fields of employment is official state policy and part of a larger campaign of persecution targeted against this community. Such a policy finds its basis in a 1991 memorandum issued by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution and signed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, which calls for Bahá'ís to be dealt with in such a way 'that their progress and development shall be blocked'. The memorandum further states that 'employment shall be refused to persons identifying themselves as Bahá'ís.' According to one estimate, around 10,000 Bahá'ís were fired from public sector jobs after 1979, not to mention all those prevented from being recruited in the state sector ever since.²⁸ The authorities deploy a range of tactics to prevent Bahá'ís from earning a stable income in the private sector, including refusal to issue commercial licenses, harassment of Bahá'í business owners, and confiscation of land and merchandise.²⁹

Members of ethnic minorities face multiple barriers to seeking employment, and unemployment rates within their communities are disproportionately high. This is undoubtedly linked to the discrimination they face on account of their ethnic and/or religious identity (in the case of Sunnis), as well as the overall lack of meaningful employment opportunities in their areas. According to government data, out of the top 20 Iranian cities with the highest unemployment rates, 18 are in Arab, Kurdish and Baluchi areas.³⁰ The female economic participation rate in Iran is one of the lowest in the world.³¹ Women from minority backgrounds are particularly disadvantaged when seeking public sector employment, having to grapple with

both gender and religious or ethnic discrimination. The province with the highest levels of female unemployment is Kermanshah, populated primarily by Iranian Kurds, where the unemployment rate for women is 29.5 per cent.

In Khuzestan, home to Iran's largest oil and gas reserves, unemployment rates among Arabs are incommensurate with the region's natural wealth. Oil and gas companies overwhelmingly hire employees from other areas instead of hiring local Arab workers, despite repeated demands placed on foreign companies to impose a quota compelling them to hire local labour. As a result, many Arabs are forced to make a living by working in the informal sector. Large-scale development projects in Arab, Baluchi and Kurdish areas have involved land confiscation and forced evictions of the local population, and inward population transfers from outside the region.

Language and education discrimination

Despite the constitutional provision permitting the use of minority languages in media and literature, authorities have harshly restricted the use of languages other than Persian in all aspects of public life. Moreover, the right to mother tongue education for minority children has never been legally recognized nor guaranteed in practice. Ethnic minorities are often prohibited by civil registry officials from giving their children names in their own languages and geographic place names continue to be changed from minority languages into Persian. The Iranian authorities have also repressed minority language publications and cultural associations for many years. Additionally, lack of access to mother tongue education, particularly at the primary level, has been shown to be a factor in the relatively low academic performance and high dropout rates of ethnic minority students, at least when compared to Persian students.³²

The Iranian government asserts that 'members of the ethnic and linguistic groups other than [Persian] are free to not only speak their own languages but also to publish in and teach such languages in their own schools'. Yet in recent years, minorities advocating for greater linguistic and cultural freedoms have been arrested, detained and even executed. For example, Hadi Rashidi and Hashem Shabani, founders of an Arabic-language and cultural institute called Al-Hiwar, were executed in January 2014 on charges of *moharebeh*. In November 2021, Turkic language teacher and Azerbaijani-Turk activist, Parviz Siabi, was sentenced by a revolutionary court to 16 years' imprisonment (a maximum 10 of which are enforceable). In October 2021, 12 Azerbaijani-Turk activists who were arrested during protests in Ardabil in October 2020 were each sentenced to 14 months in prison and 74 lashes.³³ In February 2020, Kurdish language teacher Zahra Mohammadi was sentenced to 10 years (later reduced to five by Court of Appeals) on charges of 'forming groups

and societies with the aim of disrupting national security'. Mohammadi is the director of the Nozhin Socio-Cultural Association where her activities included teaching the Kurdish language and literature.

Domestic legislation and international norms guarantee the right of all Iranians to receive an education. However, both legal and practical constraints circumscribe minorities' ability to access education. In the case of religious minorities, entrance requirements established by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution prevent minorities from registering for university unless they claim to belong to one of the recognized religions. Sabean-Mandaeans, Yarsanis and other unrecognized religious minorities have had to declare themselves Christian or Muslim on their applications forms to access higher education.³⁴ Individuals from minority groups are known to have been dismissed once their religious affiliation becomes known.

Bahá'ís are the religious minority most severely affected by the denial of the right to education, in part because their religious code prohibits them from misrepresenting their faith. As a result of government restrictions on access to university education, some community members founded the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education in 1987, many of whom were later imprisoned.³⁵

In the case of Iran's ethnic minorities, especially Baluchis, Arabs and Kurds, challenges in accessing education are linked to the overall underdevelopment and impoverishment of their areas. In Sistan-Baluchestan, for example, many school buildings are substandard mud structures that pose safety risks for students. To make matters worse, schools are few and far between in remote areas, and many families cannot afford the cost of transportation. Moreover, many people living in remote areas have no access to government offices to obtain official identification documents, which are required to register for schooling.

The factors intimated above lead to high dropout rates and lagging educational attainment indicators. For example, data reported in 2016 indicates that the dropout rate among Ahwazi Arabs is 30 per cent at the elementary level, 50 per cent at the secondary level and 70 per cent for high school.³⁶ In 2018 an Iranian MP stated that the Ahwaz region was ranked the lowest in the country in terms of educational growth, and over 12,000 Ahwazi children of primary school age had permanently left full-time education that year.³⁷ More recent reports confirm that Ahwazi children are forced to drop out of full-time education, most of them before reaching a secondary level of education, often before they learn to read or write.³⁸ Literacy rates are lower in Sistan-Baluchestan than in any other Iranian province. Notably, the literacy rate among women from rural areas is much lower than the literacy rate among women from urban areas – 72.8 per cent versus 88 per cent respectively. In addition, the gap between male and female literacy rates is much wider in rural areas – 11.1 percentage points, compared to 5.5 percentage points in urban areas –

showing that gender discrimination, and not only economic factors, is also at play.³⁹

Girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys, a problem compounded by the lack of female teachers, lack of proximity to schools, early marriage, participation in agricultural labour, and cultural and religious prejudice.⁴⁰ As a stark illustration of this reality, dropout rates for girls are reportedly 53 per cent before secondary school in Sistan-Baluchestan.⁴¹

4 Conclusions

There is evidence to suggest that since the election of President Ibrahim Raisi and the appointment of Gholam Hussain Mohseni Eje'i as the head of the judiciary in 2021, the human rights situation in Iran has deteriorated. At the present time, as the state faces a major crisis of legitimacy, the Islamic Republic has resorted to further securitization of civil society. The state shows very little tolerance for dissent and is prepared to use excessive force to maintain control. In recent months, the state has increased its crackdown, not only on the actors who explicitly question the system but also on civilians who do not represent a lifestyle or identity that is compatible with the ideological particularities of the Islamic Republic. In this period of tension and unrest, the repressive policies of the state are felt particularly across borderland minority regions known to have historic,

linguistic and ethnic connections to countries on the other side of the border.

The Islamic Republic has also increased its discriminatory policies against religious minorities including Sunni Muslims and Bahá'ís. Although the country at large is facing a harsh economic crisis, regions that are populated by ethnic minorities are now experiencing even harsher economic and environmental realities than in previous decades.

Many had warned that if no steps are taken to address the grave socio-political and economic situation, the right conditions are in place for a major social eruption of dissent, particularly in the borderland regions of Iran. This eruption was sparked in September 2022, and civil society now awaits the changes that the latest protest movement in Iran will have on the lives of women and minorities in the country.

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Protests, discrimination and the future of minorities in Iran

This briefing examines how discrimination of minorities has contributed to rising tensions and long-standing grievances in Iran. It highlights patterns of repression of minority activism, languages and cultures, and to varying degrees, the exclusion of ethnic and religious minorities from public life and economic development. In particular, the briefing focuses on the experiences of ethnic minorities in the borderland regions of the country where the centralizing impulse of the Islamic Republic of Iran has manifested itself in the attempted assimilation of minorities, repression of regional demands for self-governance and periodic episodes of violence. Using a minority rights lens, the briefing contextualises and historicises the social uprising that was sparked in September 2022 with the custodial death of Jina Amini, also known as Mahsa Amini. It provides insight into some of the conditions that have fuelled protestor demands in recent years including, environmental problems, political corruption, widespread economic crises and repression of civil society.

This briefing ultimately emphasizes identity-based discrimination as a root cause of many of the conditions that have led to the 2022 civil society uprising. Although the political future of Iran remains uncertain and the pathway of change is unclear at the time of writing, this briefing argues that a peaceful and prosperous future for minorities cannot be secured unless efforts are undertaken to address long-standing and structural discrimination at all levels.

While this briefing focuses on discrimination against minorities, a detailed and complementary analysis and account of gender-based discrimination in Iran can be found in the report *'Beyond the Veil: Discrimination against women in Iran'* by Minority Rights Group International, Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and Centre for Supporters of Human Rights.



Minority Rights Group International 54 Commercial Street, London E1 6LT, United Kingdom
Tel +44 (0)20 7422 4200 Fax +44 (0)20 7422 4201 Email minorityrights@minorityrights.org
Website www.minorityrights.org



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