

Kurds

Profile

Kurds consist of some 5 million, or 7%, of the population of Iran. They are mostly settled along the borders with Iraq and Turkey. Kurds originate from different peoples with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For example, the Kurdish dialect of Kirmanji is spoken in northern Iran and much of Turkish Kurdistan, Sorani is spoken in most of Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan. In southern Iran, Gurani which is a distinct language is spoken, but Kurds around Kirmanshah speak a dialect closer to Persian.

Historical context

Kurdish-government tensions in Iran have a long history of many centuries. However, in focusing on its recent history one can begin with Reza Khan's (later Reza Shah Pahlavi) backlash against the Kurds in 1922, recapturing control over the lands that Kurdish leaders had gained control over since 1918. He recaptured their lands and dealt ruthlessly with the Kurdish leaders. Once again, after the abdication of Reza Shah in 1941, some Kurdish leader reasserted themselves and spread their control in western Iran. The Kurds even declared the Mahabad Kurdish Republic in January 1946, but it only lasted 11 months and the Iranian government recaptured Mahabad and eliminated the Kurdish leaders involved.

The period after 1946 saw the decline in Kurdish fortunes, the co-option of the Kurdish tribal leadership and the downgrading of the political power base of Kurdish landowners through the land reforms of the 1960s.

Struggles for independence in the Kurdish regions continued after the 1979 revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini warned Kurdish leaders in 1979 that any attempts towards independence would attract the harshest response. A well-organised rebellion by the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), Komala and the Kurdish branch of the Fadayan was nevertheless launched in spring 1979. The Iranian regime responded harshly with the banning of the Kurdish Democratic Party followed by an armed campaign against the Kurds. Subsequent to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, both sides became engaged in ongoing violence in order to bring the Kurdish areas under their own control and wipe out the Kurdish guerrilla fighters. Hundreds of villages were bombed, with their lands seeded with landmines and its populations dispersed.

In 1989 the KDPI tried to enter into dialogue with the government but its leader, Abdol Rahman Qasimlu, was assassinated, as was his successor 18 months later. Many assume that the government was responsible for these killings. 1992 saw further killings, that of a senior Kurdish leader and three of his collaborators in Berlin. The Berlin courts found senior Iranian government authorities to have been behind these assassinations. Relations with the government soured yet further when, in late 2000, a Kurdish Member of Parliament publicly alleged the existence of a campaign of repression and serial killings against the Kurdish community in Iran. In the following year, in October 2001, all six members of the Iranian Parliament from Kurdistan province collectively resigned, though this was later apparently withdrawn. Their joint letter to the Interior Minister claimed that the legitimate rights of the Kurds,

especially the Sunni amongst them, were denied and their calls for justice on the political, economic, cultural and social levels had been neglected.

Current issues

Around 7 per cent of the Iranian population is Kurdish and concentrated in the north-west, along the borders with northern Iraq and south-west Turkey; another sizeable community of Kurds lives in the north-east, along the border with Turkmenistan. Clashes between Kurds and Iranian government forces came to the surface once again in recent years. Though some Kurdish expression has been tolerated in terms of publications and broadcasting, this has not included in education. In 2003 there were killings of Kurdish political activists, party members and civilians. July-August 2005 witnessed the killing of around 20 Kurds and the injury of hundreds by Iranian security forces, while a number were detained. Security forces shot at protesters who were demonstrating against the killing of a young Kurdish man, Sayed Kamal Astam, known as Shirvan Qaderi, in Mahabad on 9 July 2005. He had organized protests against the Iranian government during the June 2005 presidential elections. Qaderi's body was dragged through the town of Oromieh from the back of a jeep. Two Kurdish newspapers were also closed down, and activists and journalists were arrested. Ironically enough, on 6 July 2005 Kurdish and Sunni MPs had written to the Iranian President-elect, Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, demanding that the rights of Kurds and Sunnis be protected as upheld in the Constitution. Sunni Kurds are further disadvantaged by reason of their religion, in that Sunni congregational worship is hindered through the lack of Sunni mosques in non-Sunni dominated areas in Iran. For example, there is no Sunni mosque in the Iranian capital, Tehran. The closure of the Pakistani Embassy school in Tehran as a result of Iranian government pressure in November 2006, meant that Sunnis were no longer able to gather there for congregational prayer. By way of protest they gathered for prayer in a public park (Mellat Park) on 17 November 2006 but were dispersed by plain clothed government agents.

The Iranian regime has watched with alarm as Kurds have consolidated their autonomy within Iraq, and fears the establishment of a Kurdish state that would make claims on Iranian territory. An Iranian Kurdish militant group, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), which is affiliated with the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey, operates in Iran from bases in the rugged mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan. Tehran accuses the US and Israel of supporting PJAK, and over the course of 2007 shelled northern Iraq indiscriminately in response. The regime has extended accusations of complicity with foreign enemies to other Kurds protesting, or even talking about Kurdish issues. In February 2007, Amnesty International reported that police allegedly killed three Kurds and injured dozens more during a demonstration for Kurdish rights in the town of Mahabad. Reporters without Borders announced in July that two Kurdish journalists had been sentenced to death in the town of Marivan. Both of the journalists had written on Kurdish issues for a magazine banned in August 2005, and the prosecution cited interviews one of them conducted with Voice of America as evidence of 'activities subverting national security' and 'spying'. A Kurdish journalist and human rights activist noted for her work on women's and Kurdish issues was arrested in October 2008 and held incommunicado. In November 2008, yet another Kurdish journalist, who already had been detained for over a year, lost his final court appeal of an 11-year sentence for founding a human rights organization and criticizing the government. Reporters Without Borders noted: 'This is just a clumsy pretext for silencing a journalist who had for a long time been writing about discrimination against minorities in Iran.'