

## **The Human Rights of Kurds in the Islamic Republic of Iran**

*Neil Hicks, April 2000<sup>1</sup>*

For the past twenty years there has been conflict between Iran's central government and Kurdish political movements rooted in the predominantly Kurdish region of western Iran. The level of violence has ebbed and flowed with peaks of serious conflict in 1979, the early eighties and the early nineties. Kurdish casualties are estimated (by the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI)) at more than 30,000 civilian dead in addition to 4,000 Kurdish fighters. The KDPI do not estimate casualties of the government side, and nor am I aware of official figures for losses in this internal armed conflict, but a figure in the thousands seems likely. Along with the dead, there have been many other casualties; tens of thousands of people imprisoned; hundreds of villages destroyed and hundreds of thousands of people displaced. The local economy of an already under-developed region has been severely damaged by the conflict, as of course has the Iranian economy as a whole.

The background to the human rights situation of the Kurds in Iran is that of a conflict of similar scale and perhaps even greater intensity (given the smaller relative size of the Kurdish population of Iran) as that between the Turkish state and the PKK. If the costs of the two conflicts sound similar, the political dimension of the two conflicts are substantially different, not least in the amount of international attention devoted to them. The human rights consequences of the conflicts in which modern mechanized armies have been deployed against vastly outnumbered and outgunned guerillas operating in

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rugged terrain have been similar, at least in the areas of the countries with majority Kurdish populations. I do not wish to push this comparison too far, and I want to suggest that there are two fundamental differences between the two conflicts: the religious dimension of the Iranian conflict -- approximately 75% of Iranian Kurds are Sunni Muslims, a disadvantaged minority in the Shi'ite Islamic Republic; and the degree to which the Kurdish conflict has become a central issue of domestic politics – extensively in Turkey, and hardly at all in Iran.

In this paper, I propose to examine three aspects of the situation of Iranian Kurds, each of which has implications for their human rights condition. In addition to the factor of religion, and the place of the Kurdish question in Iranian domestic politics, I will also consider the response of the international community to the situation of the Iranian Kurds. From consideration of these different aspects, a picture of the nature and scope of the human rights issues confronting Iranian Kurds will emerge. Finally some strategies for making human rights progress for Iran's Kurds will be addressed.

## **Religion**

Sunni Muslims are by far Iran's largest religious minority, making up as much as 20 percent of the population. The great majority of Kurds, Baluchis and Turkamen are Sunni Muslims. The ascendancy of the Shi'a clergy since the formation of the Islamic Republic has accentuated Sunni grievances. An Iranian Kurdish exile in London described it thus:

We Muslim Sunni of Iran bear with daily insults ushered at us by the Shi'a clergy. They destroy our mosques to build and expand theirs, they humiliate our most sacred men and values in the officially controlled media, they encourage

religious wars between Sunnis and Shi'as, they arrest, torture and kill Sunni Muftis and personalities, force Sunnis to convert to Shi'ism, forbid Sunni teaching in the schools in Sunni dominated areas, refer to Sunni ulama as apostates, and produce many volumes on Shi'ism while forbidding the printing of Sunni books.<sup>2</sup>

In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini declined to appoint as his representative in the Kurdish region the popular Sunni cleric, Ahmed Moftizadeh, choosing instead a Shi'a cleric with no local following. Friday prayer leaders, even in the Sunni mosques, are appointed by the central authorities. The dismissive official attitude towards Kurdish rights in particular, and minority rights in general, may be seen in Ayatollah Khomeini's statement from December 1979:

Sometimes the word minorities is used to refer to people such as Kurds, Lurs, Turks, Persians, Baluchis, and such. These people should not be called minorities, because this term assumes that there is a difference between these brothers. In Islam, such a difference has no place at all. There is no difference between Muslims who speak different languages... It is very probable that such problems have been created by those who do not wish Muslim countries to be united... They create the issues of nationalism... and such-isms which are contrary to Islamic doctrines. Their plan is to destroy Islam and Islamic philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

One can imagine that to Sunni ears the assumption of a unified Shi'ite Muslim identity as paramount, or more accurately, unique, must be disturbing.

The sensitivity which attends the issue of religion may be seen in the confrontation which followed the death in suspicious circumstances of a prominent Sunni cleric, Mollah Mohammed Rabi'i, in Kermanshah on December 2, 1996. His death led

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Hossein Khaligi, London Feb. 11, 1997. Taken from Human Rights Watch, *Iran: Religious and Ethnic Minorities, Discrimination in Law and Practice*, New York, Sept. 1997, p.20.

<sup>3</sup> Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Radio Tehran, December 17, 1979. Quoted in David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, London, I.B. Tauris & Co., 1996, p. 271.

to three days of violent clashes between Sunnis and the security forces. Demonstrators claimed that Mollah Rabi'i had been killed because of his activities in the Al-Shafe'i mosque, the major mosque in the city. Rioting arising from the death spread to cities throughout the Kurdish region.

While Shi'a religious institutions are encouraged, Sunni institutions are blocked. For example, in 1993 a newly constructed Sunni mosque in Sanandaj was destroyed by a mob of Shi'a zealots, unrestrained by the authorities. In 1994, the Sunni community of Sanandaj raised funds in order to enlarge the Dar al-Ehsan mosque. Despite the fact that all necessary building permits were obtained from local authorities, the central authorities stepped in to block the project and confiscate the funds.

The disfavored status of Sunni Muslims has a negative impact on Kurdish access to educational opportunities, to positions in state institutions and to participation in local and national politics. Piety and Shi'ite orthodoxy are important factors in gaining admission to universities, leaving Sunni Kurdish applicants at a disadvantage, and perpetuating chronic underdevelopment. Governors of Kurdish provinces are Shi'ites, often from the Shi'ite Kurdish minority. Shi'ite Kurdish politicians enjoy access to national patronage networks and call on the support of Shi'ite foundations and endowments to reward their supporters. In this way, confessional differences serve to divide the Iranian Kurdish population.

## **The Kurdish Question in Domestic Politics**

Despite playing an active role in the revolution that overthrew the Shah in 1979, Kurdish political organizations have had fraught relations with the leadership of the Islamic Republic from the outset. In common with many political movements in Iran which did not support the primacy of the Shi'a clergy in the new republic, Kurdish political movements, notably the KDPI and the leftist Komala, soon faced severe oppression from central authorities including mass arrests and summary executions. The brief hope of reconciliation between the Kurds and the new government, brokered under the interim Bazargan government, was short-lived as the clerical leadership cemented its primacy in the December 1979 Constitution. In common with other secular parties, the KDPI and Komala were banned and their supporters and sympathizers were hunted down as enemies of the state.

In 1989, after the eight-year war with Iraq the government was able to turn its military resources to pacifying the Kurdish areas which had become bases for a wide variety of armed opposition groups, many supported by neighboring states. In this period, the destruction of hundreds of villages took place, and with it the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. Currently, large tracts of the border have been seeded with landmines, hundreds of thousands of Iranian troops are garrisoned in the Kurdish region and armed clashes occur sporadically.

Despite the extent and cost of the Iranian state's conflict with Kurdish political organizations, the situation of the Kurds is not considered a crucial question facing the central government, as it is in Turkey, for example. Why should this be?

Firstly, Iranian Kurds are less educated and less prosperous than Kurds in Turkey. They are also less integrated or assimilated in Iranian society than many Turkish Kurds are in Turkish society. Secondly, surely a major reason is that the Kurdish issue has not found support in Iran from other organized political forces, as it has from parts of the left in Turkey. Those elements of the Iranian opposition which are sympathetic to Kurdish aspirations cannot organize in today's Iran where secular political parties remain banned. Thirdly, the Iranian state feels less threatened by Kurdish aspirations than the Turkish state. It has not been moved to restrict by sweeping laws Kurdish language publications or cultural activities. The Islamic Republic is not proclaimed as being for Persians, in the exclusive-sounding way that Turkey is said to be for the Turks. The Kurds in Iran are not the major ethnic minority. Azeri Turks make up as much as 25 percent of the population, and are much more wealthy, powerful and integrated in Iranian society. So the Kurds remain a peripheral concern of the central government, whose major worry is that the volatile border territory should not be used by the republic's foreign enemies.

Perhaps recognizing their relative weakness within Iranian national politics, the major Kurdish political group, the KDPI, has long embraced moderate goals of greater Kurdish autonomy within a unitary Iranian state, and has shown willingness to negotiate with the central authorities. Indeed, the KDPI's most celebrated leader, Dr. Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou was lured to his death in Vienna in July 1989 at the hands of envoys of the Iranian government who had supposedly come to negotiate peace. This incident was described thus by Amnesty International in 1990, strongly indicating Iranian government responsibility for this attack:

In July [1989] Addul Rahman Ghassemlou, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, was killed in a Vienna apartment together with two companions while taking part in negotiations with Iranian government representatives. In November [1989] the Austrian authorities issued arrest warrants for three suspects in connection with the KDPI killings. The suspects included Iranian government agents who had left Austria or gone into hiding in the Iranian Embassy in Vienna after the killings.<sup>4</sup>

Other KDPI leaders abroad were targeted by the Iranian regime's infamous hit-squads, which have mercifully become less active in recent years. Rumors are currently circulating that negotiations between the KDPI and the government may be in the offing following a meeting between PUK head Jalal Talabani and KDPI leaders in Erbil in March of this year, in which Talabani is reported to have recommended talks.

In an interview in *Sobh-e Emrouz*, Iran's largest circulation daily newspaper, on April 6, 2000, Governor of Kordestan province, Dr. Abdullah Ramazan Zadeh was asked about these reports. He commented that the high-level of participation of Kurds in the recent parliamentary elections demonstrated that "armed groups have been rejected by the people of Kurdistan," and that "Kurdish political leaders should catch up with their people." The newspaper, which supports President Khatami, went on to note that many voters in Kurdish areas had supported reformist candidates who will be new members of parliament in the sixth Majles, when it convenes in June. (My own review of election returns from Kurdish districts indicated that about half of the decided seats had indeed swung to reformist candidates in February, but not by wide margins. About a third will be decided in second round voting, and about 20 percent remain with previous incumbents.)

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<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 1990*, London 1990, p.125.

Prior to the elections, the KDPI had issued a statement urging the Kurdish population and the Iranian population as a whole “not to remain indifferent” to the elections, noting that the “liberation movement of the population” of the last few years had made the elections worth contesting.

From this, and from the voting behavior noted above, we may infer that the largest Kurdish political movement holds out some hope for the reformist policies of President Khatami, something to which I will return in a moment.

### **International Pressure**

The situation of the eight to ten million Kurds of Iran has attracted remarkably little international attention. Even the diplomatic outrage that followed the assassination by Iranian agents of KDPI Secretary General Sadegh Sharifkandi and three of his associates in the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin in 1992 did not focus on the situation of the Iranian Kurds. Neither the European Union, nor the United States have included the rights of the Kurdish minority on their lists of desiderata presented periodically to the Iranian government as a condition for the normalization of strained relations.

Frankly, this is unlikely to change any time soon. Iran is not subject to the Council of Europe mechanisms, and the EU admission criteria which have placed a spotlight on Turkey’s treatment of the Kurds. Nor do Iran’s Kurds administer an autonomous region seen as a strategic asset in the West’s struggle against the central



government, as in Iraq. Iran's Kurds are therefore wise to look to the Iranian national context for an improvement in their situation, rather than looking West for salvation.

Here I think we can draw some parallels between the situation of the Kurdish political movement and other political movements outside the clerical oligarchy that has ruled Iran for the last twenty years. The rhetoric of President Khatami and the reformists clearly holds some promise for these groups that have been kept out in the political cold, or worse, for the last two decades. Upholding the rule of law, building civil society, respecting freedom of expression and diversity of opinion, and consolidating democracy would be welcome steps for Kurdish and other secular political movements.

The main question for the Iranian Kurdish movement, for a resolution of conflict and a better human rights context, is can Khatami and the reformists carry through their reforms in practice? This is the same question that many people inside and outside Iran are asking.

If the reformists are successful, then a loosening of clerical control would mean greater self-determination in Kurdish regions of Iran. But the obstacles to the reform movement first securing a grip on the levers of power, and then tackling the economic and social problems confronting the state are immense. The essence of the legal problem facing Iranian Kurds is not that there is a body of discriminatory anti-Kurdish legislation. There is little such law. The Kurdish political movement faces the same obstacles confronted by other pluralistic, secular political movements—that much law in the Islamic Republic permits arbitrary clerical rule and fails to protect basic freedoms.

Constitutional provisions establishing the right to freedom of expression, and other basic freedoms, are rendered impotent by claw-back clauses asserting the primacy of undefined Islamic interests. The Shi'a clerical political elite has arrogated to itself the right to determine what these interests are. Thus we may see a common interest between reformists and Kurdish political aspirations, and, it is to the effort of establishing Iran as a state of law that I would direct the energies of those wishing to improve the lives of Iran's Kurdish population.

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