



ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN: Minority rights violations during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement

Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran

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REPORT OVERVIEW

Background

▶ During the protests that began on 16 September 2022, **pre-existing structural discrimination and marginalization enabled the commission of gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity against members of ethnic and religious minorities.** The long-standing grievances stemming from decades-long systematic impunity for violations committed against these communities culminated during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement.

▶ To quell the protests in provinces populated by ethnic and religious minorities, **the Government launched a concerted militarized response and used unnecessary and unlawful use of lethal force against peaceful protesters which led to ethnic and religious minorities experiencing the highest numbers of deaths and injuries of the entire movement.**

▶ **Arrests were carried out en masse, with detention-related violations**, including torture and rape, often accompanied by ethnic and religious undertones.

▶ The Government, moreover, routinely **misconstrued minority rights activism in the context of the protests as posing a threat to national security**, resulting in arresting, detaining and prosecuting human rights defenders, religious leaders.

▶ Two years after the protests began, **the Mission is not aware of any meaningful criminal investigations of high-ranking officials for crimes committed against members of minorities in connection with the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement.** Accountability remains elusive, leaving members of minority communities languishing in a vicious cycle of violence and impunity.

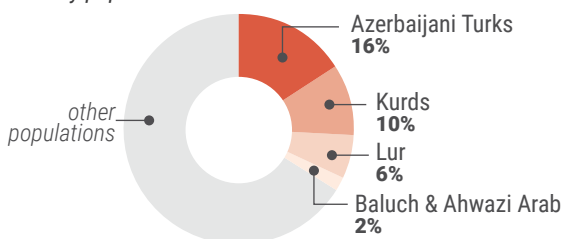
In its report, *“They have dehumanized us”: Minority rights violations during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, the Mission finds that through its conduct in repressing the protests in the western, north-western and eastern provinces, the Islamic Republic of Iran:

<p>1 Violated its obligations under the ICERD, and minorities’ rights:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to be protected by the State against violence or bodily harm to freedom of opinion and expression of peaceful assembly to freedom of association to freedom of thought, conscience and religion 	<p>2 Violated the ICCPR, and minorities’ right to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> enjoy their own culture profess and practice their own religion use their own language life not be subjected to torture and ill-treatment personal liberty and security fair trial 	<p>3 Violated minorities’ rights alongside the commission of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> unlawful deaths extra-judicial executions arbitrary arrests unnecessary and disproportionate use of lethal force rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence enforced disappearances gender persecution 	<p>4 Violations amounting to the crimes against humanity, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> murder torture imprisonment persecution rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence enforced disappearances other inhumane acts <p>as committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against a civilian population, namely women, girls and others expressing support for human rights.</p>	<p>5 Committed in the context of the protests, intersected with persecution on gender, ethnic and religious grounds under human rights law — ethnic and religious minorities were the victims of violations of international human rights law and crimes against humanity.</p>
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AFFECTED POPULATIONS

- ▶ **Affected minorities comprise ethnic Kurds and Baluch minorities**, as well as others, including Azerbaijani Turk and the Ahwazi Arab.
- ▶ The **Baluch and the Kurds as well as many Ahwazi Arabs are predominantly followers of Sunni Islam** (8 to 10 per cent of Iran’s population), and thus, considered ethnic and religious minorities.
- ▶ The **Azerbaijani Turks account for 16 per cent of Iran’s population**, followed by the Kurdish minority at 10 per cent, Lur at 6 per cent, while the Baluch and Ahwazi Arab make up 2 per cent.

Minority populations in Iran



- ▶ **Ethnic and religious minorities are generally concentrated in the western, north-western and eastern border provinces of Iran**, including Kermanshah, Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan as well as Sistan and Baluchistan provinces.

Provinces with concentrations of ethnic and religious minorities particularly affected in Iran



The names shown and designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

STRUCTURAL DISCRIMINATION IN IRAN



INSTITUTIONALIZED DISCRIMINATION

- ▶ Iran's Constitution **guarantees religious freedoms to practitioners of Islam, and three other religious minorities:**

Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians

Atheists, as well as other faiths including Sabeen-Mandean, Yarsanis, and the Baha'i, are afforded neither recognition nor protection under the Constitution.



DISCRIMINATION ON THE BASIS OF RELIGION

- ▶ The Constitution and the Islamic Penal Code of Iran **allows for prosecution on religious grounds for expressing views perceived to be critical to, or derogatory of Islam. Punishment may include prison sentence, or even the death penalty.**
- ▶ Despite afforded constitutional protections, **Sunni Muslims face restrictions in freedom to worship; they may not build mosques in large cities.**
- ▶ **Baha'i are prohibited from practicing their religion in public**, including from opening houses of worship.
- ▶ **Mandatory hijab rules and regulations are enforced on all women and girls irrespective of their religion**, or lack thereof, or beliefs.



LACK OF EQUALITY BEFORE THE LAW

- ▶ **Different penalties for Muslims and non-Muslims** embedded in Iranian laws.



RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE

- ▶ Access to learning in minority languages is **not allowed.**

Baha'i are either prevented from starting their studies after passing exams or expelled afterwards for refusing to formally deny or recant allegiance to their faith.

Kurdish language activists have been arrested and detained.



RIGHT TO WORK AND PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE

- ▶ State policies further **exacerbate the effects of laws that discriminate on the basis of religion and belief.**

Government vetting for Government jobs and State corporations **excludes "non-recognized" religions, as well as Sunni Muslims.**

Baha'i are barred from entering the public sector altogether.



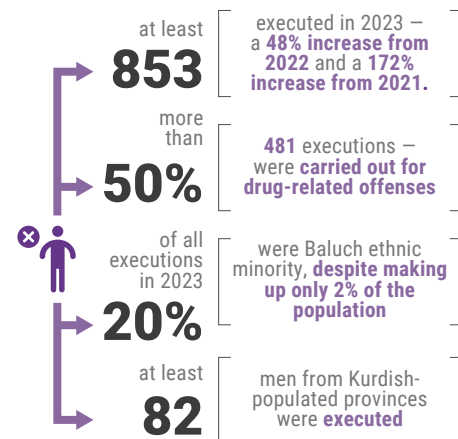
DISPROPORTIONATE RISK OF EXECUTIONS FOR SECURITY OFFENSES

- ▶ State rhetoric **misconstrues members of ethnic and religious minorities as posing a threat to national security:**

Contributing to a disproportionately high risk of being prosecuted for security offenses and sentenced to death.

- ▶ **Striking surge in executions, especially after the 2022 protests:** likely indicative of a **state tactic to instill fear and terrorize communities** to ultimately suppress dissent in minority-populated provinces.

- ▶ According to credible human rights organizations in 2023:



14 other Kurdish individuals were executed in other parts of the country



HATE SPEECH

- ▶ State officials and media regularly **describe Kurds, Baluch and Ahwazi Arab ethnic and religious minorities as "separatists," "terrorists," or "foreign agents."**

Baha'i and Gonabadi Dervish religious minorities are **referred to as a "perverse sect."**



ECONOMIC ISOLATION

- ▶ Structural discrimination and marginalization have led to **economic neglect and further isolation of ethnic and religious minorities.**
- ▶ **11.4% unemployment rate in Sistan and Baluchestan and 10.2% in Kurdistan** – both **higher than the national average** of 8.9%.

- ▶ **Sistan and Baluchestan:** Some parts record **unemployment rates as high as 60%**, **highest recorded illiteracy and infant mortality rates** in the country.
- ▶ Greater **barriers for women of minority backgrounds to access employment** in the public sector due to **compounded discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity and religion.**

CRACKDOWN ON MINORITY REGIONS



USE OF FORCE RESULTING IN KILLINGS AND INJURIES

- ▶ credible figure of **551** people killed in 26 out of 31 provinces of Iran in the context of the protests including as many as 49 women and 68 children

- ▶ **Almost half of the killings** comprised members of ethnic and religious minorities:

credible figure of **121** deaths recorded in Sistan and Baluchestan followed by **45 deaths in Kurdistan** and **60 in West Azerbaijan**

- ▶ Protests in Kurdistan province marked the first victims of **protest-related killings and injuries.**
- ▶ **Significant number of killings in the context of the protests** in West Azerbaijan – ongoing investigations.



DISTINCTIVE CONDUCT TO REPRESS PROTESTS IN ETHNIC AND RELIGION MINORITY-POPULATED PROVINCE

- ▶ Pre-existing securitization, for real and perceived security threats in the west, north-west and east border regions, created a permissive environment for security forces to repress the protests in ethnic and religious minority populated provinces.
- ▶ The State launched a concerted, heavily militarized response to repress protests with military-grade weapons and ammunitions designed for military purposes, often immediately after a protest had begun, at a higher rate, and in a consistent manner.
- ▶ Such weapons included assault rifles, including AK-47s, automatic, semi-automatic, and heavy machine-guns, including DshKs (anti-aircraft gun for low-flying aircraft in military operations).



ESTABLISHMENT OF CHECKPOINTS

- ▶ Security forces erected checkpoints in and around hotspot protest cities in ethnic and religious minority populated provinces.
- ▶ Curfew was imposed in Mahabad in November 2022 and, reportedly also in Tabriz between at least 21 and 26 September 2022.



INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

- ▶ Internet restrictions and complete shutdowns by the State much more prevalent in Sistan and Baluchestan, Kurdistan and parts of West Azerbaijan, often in a pre-emptive manner.
- ▶ Internet restrictions and/or complete shutdowns coincided with peak protest time periods, including in October 2022 when protests increased to mark 40 days of the death in custody of Jina Mahsa Amini.
- ▶ Complete internet shutdowns during the “Bloody Friday” protests on 30 September 2022; recurrent shutdowns during regular Friday prayers in Sistan and Baluchestan continued well into 2023, when large-scale protests in the country had already subsided.

BLOODY FRIDAY: 30 SEPTEMBER 2022 ZAHEDAN, SISTAN AND BALUCHESTAN



- ▶ Highest number of casualties in one day recorded during the “Bloody Friday” protests on 30 September 2022 in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchestan, one of the most impoverished provinces in Iran, home to the Baluch ethnic religious minority.
- ▶ The Mission found that, in repressing the protests on that day, State security forces resorted to using lethal force, disproportionate to the threat posed by some of the protesters to public order resulting in unlawful and extra-judicial killings.

I saw around 30 people being shot in the head and torso and killed. I also saw a 10-year-old boy fall, and he was bleeding from his neck. He was a protester. He used to sell water and chew gum during the Friday prayers from a small shop, some 100 meters from the police station. I believe he was shot by security forces.”

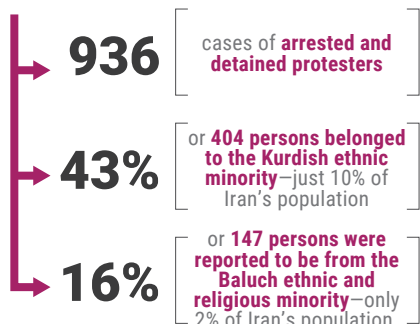
– Witness to “Bloody Friday,”
Zahedan, 30 September 2022

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND DETENTION



ARRESTS

- ▶ Arbitrary arrests of protesters, including children, as well as bystanders or others who provided medical care to injured protesters.
- ▶ Data collected by credible human rights organizations showed:



TORTURE

- ▶ Ministry of Intelligence and IRGC officials held members of ethnic and religious minorities in unofficial facilities often incommunicado and in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance.
- ▶ Torture included beating, flogging, holding detainees suspended by their arms for days, waterboarding, placing them in stress positions, and leaving them outside in the cold for hours.

Methods also included solitary confinement, exposing detainees to bright lights, and sleep deprivation.

- ▶ Women belonging to ethnic and religious minorities were subjected to particularly brutal acts, including gang rape and rape with an object, in acts also amounting to torture.



DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES

- ▶ Security forces humiliated and ridiculed victims’ cultural, spiritual, and religious values, calling them “dogs,” “debile,” “violent,” “rebels,” “terrorists,” or “acting against the State.”
- ▶ Members of ethnic and religious minorities were then convicted of national security offenses, such as “propaganda against the system,” “insulting the Supreme Leader,” leading an “illegal gathering,” and affiliation with opposition groups and parties.
- ▶ The Mission found, in the cases it investigated, that the State generally equated activism by the protesters with threats to national security, criminalizing protected conduct, in violation of international human rights law.

OTHER HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES



IMPACT ON CHILDREN BELONGING TO MINORITIES

- ▶ The **impact on children**, and minority children in particular, is **transgenerational** – the **multifaceted harms of which may be expected for decades to come**.
- ▶ **Child protesters** belonging to ethnic and religious minorities were **exposed to multiple forms of violence, including killings and maiming, arrests, enforced disappearances, detention, as well as torture and rape and other forms of sexual violence**.

- ▶ Credible information reviewed by the Mission indicates that in the context of the September 2022 protests:



- ▶ Children were also **subjected to violence in the context of the systematic repression of students**, with arrests and beating also occurring on school premises.
- ▶ **School poisonings were more prevalent in minority-populated provinces** including Khuzestan, home to Ahwazi Arabs, as well as other cities and provinces, namely Borujerd, Mazandaran, Ardebil, and Khorasan, where Azerbaijani Turk and Lur ethnic minorities traditionally reside.



PERSECUTION OF SUNNI RELIGIOUS LEADERS

- ▶ Persecution of ethnic and religious minorities **most evident in the targeting of religious leaders**:

Sunni leaders with prominent voices were routinely silenced through summons, arrests, detention, restrictions on freedom of movement and religious practices, prosecution, and in one case, through the **imposition of the death penalty**.

- ▶ To justify these restrictions, **State authorities vilified and deliberately misconstrued outspoken Sunni religious leaders** as posing a threat to national security.



CRACKDOWN ON CIVIC SPACE

- ▶ **State restrictions on civic space on the basis of misconstruing minority rights activism** in the context of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement with threats to national security.
- ▶ **Trade unionists** in ethnic and religious minority populated provinces **faced increased pressure to restrict their activities**.

- ▶ **Kurdish women human rights defenders arrested and detained** in particularly high numbers:

at least **39**

Kurdish women arrested by security forces between Nov. 2022 and Nov. 2023 in various cities in Kurdistan



DISCRIMINATION INTERSECTING ON ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND GENDER GROUNDS

- ▶ **Women belonging to ethnic and religious minorities experienced distinct harms compounded by pre-existing discrimination** and violence against them both as women, as well as by virtue of their status as ethnic and religious minorities.
- ▶ **Sexual violence against women belonging to ethnic and religious minorities was accompanied by ethnic and religious undertones**, markedly interwoven with gender-based insults illustrative of the institutionalized structural discrimination against women and girls in Iran.

- ▶ **Security officers weaponized sexual and cultural taboos**, especially in traditional communities, to punish women for supporting the movement.

- ▶ **Security officers also took advantage of generalized tolerance and encouragement of violence against LGBTQ+ people** in Iranian society, to punish them for supporting the protests.

- ▶ Credible information indicated that **arbitrary arrests of Baha'i women increased during the September 2022 protests**, in an apparent effort by the State to accelerate the reported prosecutions of members of the Baha'i community.



You, Baluch people, it would be better for us if you just all die. Your entire generation should be destroyed. As a Baluch woman, how do you even dare to stand against the State?

– *Intelligence officer to a detained Baluch woman, September 2022, Sistan and Baluchestan.*



IMPUNITY

- ▶ There are **no viable routes for domestic accountability in Iran**.
- ▶ **Accountability pathways for members of ethnic and religious minorities** who are victims of gross human rights violations and international crimes, including crimes against humanity, **remain far less probable**.
- ▶ **Challenges for victims and survivors to obtain truth, justice and reparations persist, including:**

- **Laws, regulations and practices that fundamentally discriminate** against minorities in Iran remain in place.
- **Killings and injuries of members of minorities perpetrated** in the context of the September 2022 protests, **attributed by the State** to “opposition groups,” “terrorists,” or “unknown elements.”
- **Fears of reprisals by security forces**, families coerced into not filing complaints, including through conduct whereby State officials withhold bodies of victims and put pressure on family members to not file a complaint or speak up.
- **Magnitude of detention-related violations**, including torture and rape, carried out in isolation by members of security officers who often bore no insignia and concealed their identities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Iran:

- **Amend its Constitution** to ensure recognition, equal rights and protection for all ethnic and religious minorities in Iran.
- **Repeal discriminatory provisions** in the Islamic Penal Code, including those enabling prosecution and punishment on the basis of religion or belief.

To State Parties to the ICERD:

- **Enter into negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran** with regard to the latter’s compliance with its substantive obligations under the ICERD.
- **Bring the matter of minorities in Iran** to the attention of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination pursuant to Article 11 of ICERD.

- **Invoke the responsibility of Iran as a State Party** for breaches of obligations erga omnes partes to demand compliance with said obligations under the ICERD and claim cessation of the violation of the obligation, as well as guarantees of non-repetition.