

Iranian Azerbaijanis

1. Introduction

The Azerbaijani population of Iran is the largest linguistic minority group in Iran, comprising anywhere from 25-35% of the total population of Iran. They reside primarily in North and Northwest Iran, in the provinces of East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan and Ardabil.¹ Azerbaijanis speak a dialect of Turkic, closely related to Azerbaijani Turkic spoken in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Despite the fact that Iranian Azerbaijanis have shared a long history with Persians, Azerbaijanis face cultural, linguistic and economic discrimination along with other minorities in Iran.

The roots of racism in Iran began in 1925, when the newly appointed king of Iran, Reza Shah, implemented a policy of cultural and linguistic homogeneity and assimilation for all nations of Iran. The Persian language and culture became dominant and those who spoke minority languages were barred from education and media in their native tongues. Members of ethnic and linguistic minorities in Iran were forced to feel ashamed of their mother tongues and culture, and from childhood, faced assaults in state-run media. Azerbaijanis in particular have been compared to donkeys and cockroaches. This policy of cultural hegemony continued after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, despite the Islamic Republic's constitutional guarantees for linguistic and cultural rights.

Currently, the Azerbaijani language is banned in schools; Azerbaijani language journals and journals calling for the proliferation of Azerbaijani linguistic and cultural rights are shut down and their contributors are arrested; Azerbaijanis are banned from gathering at Babek Castle to celebrate their national hero; they are also forbidden from celebrating Sattar Khan and Bagher Khan, Azerbaijani heroes of the constitutional revolution of 1905; Azerbaijanis are forbidden from assembly during International Mother Language Day; Azerbaijanis are barred from political representation; they are deprived economically and face high illiteracy rates; shops with Azerbaijani Turkish names are effectively shut down and forced to "Persianize" the names²; and many of those who advocate for broader linguistic and cultural rights for Azerbaijanis are detained arbitrarily by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS)³, held indefinitely and tortured, (on occasion murdered in custody), and released only to be tried and sentenced to heavy terms in Iran's worst prisons such as the notorious Evin Prison. As a result of the aforementioned, the Azerbaijani rights movement is two-fold: (1) rights activists are struggling to promote the basic *human rights* of language and cultural expression and against the unlawful

¹ Significant populations also exist throughout Iran, including in the capital of Tehran. Since a formal census of ethnic minorities has never been conducted in Iran, the population estimation of Azerbaijanis varies greatly depending on the source.

² Abbas Lisani, a prominent Azerbaijani activist, was forced to change the name of his shop "Chanilibel". He was issued a warrant on March 19 and forced to change Azerbaijani Turkic name to a Persian one or face closure of his shop. This is merely one case among many.

³ Known internally as Ettelaat.

seizure, torture and death and (2) right activists are in a constant battle for the promotion of *civil rights* against ethnic discrimination and shameful belittling of Azerbaijani language and culture.

2. Related Events

Iranian Azerbaijanis have increasingly called for the proliferation of cultural and linguistic rights since the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991. In recent years, various events have contributed to the re-establishment of Azerbaijani cultural identity and the promotion of these rights:

- From 2003-5 Iranian security officials increased policing efforts to monitor activities at the famed Babek Castle, once home to Azerbaijani national hero Babak Khorramdin. In June 2005, many Iranian Azerbaijanis participating in the annual gathering at the castle Kalayber were arrested. At least 21 were documented to have been sentenced to prison terms of three months to one year on charges such as "spreading propaganda against the regime" and "establishing organizations against the regime."
- In May 2006, massive demonstrations took place in towns and cities in the Azerbaijani provinces of Iran to protest at a cartoon published on May 12, 2006 by the state-owned daily newspaper *Iran*, which was regarded as offensive to Iranian Azerbaijanis in a time of ethnic frustration. Hundreds to thousands were arrested during and after the demonstrations, some of whom were tortured in prisons. Iranian Azerbaijani sources note that dozens (possibly up to 50) were massacred and scores were injured, which included cases of blindness from anti-riot spray guns. Each year the government continues to crack down heavily on the anniversary of the May 2006 demonstrations. After participation in the riots, Abbas Lisani, a prominent Azerbaijani activist, was sentenced to 30 months in Yazd Prison.
- During the UNESCO-recognized International Mother Tongue day in February 2007, tens to hundreds of protesters were arrested during peaceful rallies aimed at promoting Azerbaijani language instruction in grade schools.
- On May 14, 2009, an internet video emerged of former president Mohammad Khatami telling cruel and belittling jokes about Azerbaijani Turks in Iran. After the release of the video, activists organized peaceful demonstrations in the cities of Tabriz, Urmia, Ardabil, Miyandoab and Meshginshahr. More than 35 activists were detained arbitrarily and held with their whereabouts unknown.
- Roughly 100 activists were arrested in a government-sponsored fitness walk on May 22, 2006. Protesters were arrested while chanting "Turkish language schools". Among those arrested was University Professor Alireza Farshi, who had been held in arbitrary detention until his release on August 25 on bail of 76,000 USD.
- In the aftermath of the Iranian post-election crisis, Iranian Azerbaijanis took to the streets in protest of the election results. 300 protesters were arrested in the predominantly-Azerbaijani city of Urmia alone. On June 15, eyewitnesses reported 3 protesters were

killed in the city of Tabriz as well as two in Urmia. None of these deaths were reported in the Iranian mass media.⁴

3. Constitutional Rights

Articles 15 and 19 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran guarantee educational rights for Iranian minorities. Article 15 guarantees that “the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian,” while Article 19 assures that “all people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe which they belong, enjoy equal rights; color, race, language and the like, do not bestow any privilege.” To date, these articles have not been respected or implemented within Iran. The use of Azerbaijani Turkic is forbidden in grade school and various Azerbaijani student journals and publications⁵ have been shut down. Even education in Azerbaijani music is restricted.⁶

Education disproportionately favors the dominant ethnic group in Iran. Aside from the fact that the Azerbaijani language is banned in primary and secondary schools, Azerbaijan provinces of Iran face the highest illiteracy rates behind Baluchistan and Kurdistan provinces. Those who wish to speak out against educational reform are barred from rights enjoyed by the dominant ethnic group, such as access to higher education. Azerbaijani activists Behzad Jiddi, Shahram Shogi and Ibrahim Shahbazi are currently barred from entering graduate school as a result of their contributions to journals favoring Azerbaijani language instruction in schools. Azerbaijani Turkic representation in Iranian mass media is non-existent. Persian media sources are also reluctant to represent minority regions of Iran as they do predominantly Persian areas. Adequate coverage was not given to the May 2006 demonstrations nor were Azerbaijani regions of Iran properly covered during the 2009 post-election crisis.

Article 27 of the Iranian Constitution allows peaceful assembly except against Islam. For Azerbaijanis, this right has not been respected. In recent years, all peaceful demonstrations calling for the promotion of human rights for Iran’s Azerbaijani population have been violently suppressed, while scores have been arrested.

4. Violations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Articles 9 through 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights prevent arbitrary detention and unfair trial procedures for those detained. These rights are grossly violated in the case of Azerbaijani linguistic and cultural rights activists. In many cases, rights activists are detained arbitrarily by the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) for an indefinite period of

⁴ The election protests were coupled with protests in favor of linguistic and cultural rights for Iranian Azerbaijanis. Since June 15, as a result of the lack of media coverage in the Azerbaijani provinces of Iran and the brutal crackdown in the immediate aftermath, Iranian Azerbaijanis have not participated in any protests.

⁵ Azerbaijani student journals which have been shut down include *Bulud, Ulus, Nasim, Araz, Ozluk, Oyanish, Sattar Khan, Kimlik, Yoldash, Aydin Gelecel, Gunesh, Yarpaq, Teleger, Yashil, Yol, Anayurdu, Achiq Soz, Sayan, Isil Ay* and *Khalaj*.

⁶ A music education center run by Hasan Demirchi was closed down on March 11, 2009 for promotion of Azerbaijani Turkic music.

time. They are usually barred from visits from their families and prevented from access to lawyers. It is common for the judge to allow release of those detained only with heavy bail terms. After their release from intelligence custody, they usually face unfair trials and are given heavy prison terms. Azerbaijani activist Said Matinpour was arbitrarily detained on May 25, 2007 for contributing to journals written in Azerbaijani journals and visiting Turkey for a conference on the Azerbaijani minority in Iran. He was released on bail of 550,000 dollars after 278 days of arbitrary detention in the MOIS section of the notorious Evin Prison. During his detention he was severely tortured, given mind-altering drugs and forced to give a false confession of his activities. He was reported to have suffered digestive problems as well as severe headaches and back problems upon his release. He was finally given a trial for his charges in June 2009, where he was sentenced to 8-years in Evin Prison. He is currently serving out that term.

Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights guarantees against cruel and inhuman punishment for detainees. This article has also been violated in numerous occasions against Azerbaijani linguistic and cultural rights activists. In many cases, Azerbaijani activists are arbitrarily detained by MOIS agents, tortured and forced to give false confessions. The methods of torture are brutal. On July 15, 2009, Azerbaijani author and human rights activist Hamid Valayi was severely beaten in custody and suffered injuries to his legs and head and many of his teeth were reportedly shattered. In February 2009, brothers Ramin Sadeghi and Mohammad Sadeghi faced brutal torture without a formal explanation of the cause of their detentions.⁷ The psychological and physical torture they endured included being hanged upside down for two days, receiving electric shock to sensitive areas of their bodies, severe beatings and lashings with cables, sleep deprivation and a constant barrage of insults and humiliation.

On occasion, Azerbaijanis are tortured to death or sentenced to death by hanging or stoning. In June 2008, Azerbaijani activist Ferhad Mohseni Negharestan was found dead in a park in the predominantly-Azerbaijani city of Tabriz two weeks after he had been detained by Iranian security officials after an Azerbaijani rights demonstration. Government officials prevented an autopsy of Negharestan's body and monitored attendance to his funeral. In July 2009, an Azerbaijani woman named Sakineh Mohammadi was sentenced to death by stoning on the charge of adultery, which she has adamantly denied.

5. Recommendations

The plight of minorities in Iran is an issue which rarely receives attention in international media. Despite that fact that the Supreme Leader of Iran claims Azerbaijani roots, Azerbaijani linguistic and cultural rights are systematically suppressed and those who wish to speak out are subjected to arbitrary arrests, inhumane torture and murder. Prison sentences are disproportionately longer and harsher for members of minority groups than those of the dominant ethnicity.

It is imperative that the UNPO urge the government of Iran:

⁷ At the time, it was believed that they were arrested as a result of their activities promoting Azerbaijani linguistic and cultural rights. During the interrogations, they were forced to give confessions of crossing the Araz River into the Republic of Azerbaijan and establishing links with foreign organizations.

- To allow education in Azerbaijani Turkic in Iranian schools and allow for Azerbaijani Turkic media to proliferate in Iran, as guaranteed by Articles 15 and 19 of the Iranian Constitution;
- To release all prisoners of conscience who have been unlawfully arrested for advocating broader Azerbaijani linguistic and cultural rights;
- To cease all arrests and detentions of Azerbaijani linguistic and cultural rights activists who assemble peacefully and contribute to journals in favor of the proliferation of human rights for Azerbaijanis;
- To allow uninterrupted peaceful assembly of Azerbaijani demonstrators in favor of linguistic and cultural rights as guaranteed by Article 27 of the Iranian Constitution;
- To allow for interrupted instruction in the Azerbaijani Turkic language, music and cultural affairs and allow for shops to be named in Azerbaijani Turkic;
- To halt all arbitrary detentions of Azerbaijani activists by Intelligence officials prior to trial and cease torture of activists and forced confessions as guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- To allow for fair trials of activists and dismiss confessions that have been given under torture;
- To allow detainees proper access to a lawyer and visits from their families as well as release information on the cause of detention at the immediate point of arrest;
- To allow publication of journals, student journals and various media to be granted in the Azerbaijani Turkic language as well as allow coverage of issues related to Iranian Azerbaijani provinces in state media and the Iranian press;
- To halt all belittling jokes, racist statements and anti-Azerbaijani propaganda in the media and by prominent members of the Iranian government.
- To halt false charges of “propaganda against the regime” and “maintaining links to foreigners” as well as to halt accusations of pan-Turkism for Azerbaijani linguistic and cultural rights activists.