



Kurdish Lobby Australia

## Re: Human Rights abuses in the Kurdistan Region of Iran

Kurdish Lobby Australia calls upon the Australian government to request that the Iranian government treat and respect the Kurdish minority and other ethnic and religious minorities in Iran in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Constitution of Iran. With the presidential and local council elections on 16 May now over, we wish to draw your attention to the circumstances of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities in Iran.

### Background

According to archaeological and written records, Kurds have occupied western Iran for over 3,000 years, their forbears having established the Median Empire, which is referred to in the Old Testament. Today, Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in Iran. They are estimated to number 11–13 million, or 10–12 percent of the population. They mainly live in the provinces of Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Hamadan, Ilam and Khorasan. Iran has attempted to Persianize all its ethnic minorities to eradicate linguistic, religious and cultural differences, with Kurds a particular target since the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini declared a holy war on the Kurds when Kurds rebelled against being denied political representation in the 'Assembly of Experts', which was tasked with writing a new constitution. Between 1979 and 1983, an estimated 10,000 Kurds were killed, including 1,200 political prisoners and at least 1,000 civilians.



Above: Executions of Kurds at Sanandaj airport, 1979. The person lying down is a teacher who had his leg broken during torture.

Left: Islamic Revolutionary Forces executing Kurdish men in Mahabad, September 1979.

## **Governance in Iran**

In Iran, the president, parliament (Majlis) Assembly of Experts and local council members are elected after a vetting process that determines who can stand for election. On 16 May the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani was re-elected for a second term. He is considered a moderate, who wishes to engage with the world. In his first term he promised Kurds and other minorities limited language and cultural rights, and continues to promise these rights, despite little progress.

The Ministry of the Interior appoints provincial governors. In 1997 President Khatami appointed the first and only Kurdish provincial governor in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The current governor of Kurdistan province has no knowledge of the Kurdish language, culture or heritage.

Each town and village is run by an elected council whose members elect a mayor. The government vets all candidates who run for council. Kurds are often barred from running because they have not served in the government or army. This is because Kurds are systematically discriminated against due to their ethnicity and religion. The majority are Sunni Muslim.

The Constitution of Iran permits the establishment of political parties provided they are not a threat to national unity, Shia Islam or the Islamic Republic. As a consequence, although there are five main political parties in Iran, ethnic-based, socialist and communist political parties are banned. The banned parties are popular among Kurds.

## **Other systematic discriminations**

Kurds face severe restrictions on freedom of association and assembly. To operate an NGO requires permission from the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Information. Under the Ahmadinejad Presidency, many NGOs in the Kurdish regions were closed. NGOs in the Kurdistan region continue to face harassment because they allegedly 'threaten national security', 'disseminate propaganda against the state' or 'insult the state'. According to the US State Department Iran 2015 Human Rights Report<sup>1</sup>, *'The government continued to use security law, the media law, and other legislation to arrest and prosecute Kurds for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association. Authorities suppressed legitimate activities of Kurdish NGOs by denying them registration permits or bringing security charges against persons working with such organizations.'* (p.39)

## **Underdevelopment in Kurdish-majority provinces**

Kurdish-majority provinces are rich in natural resources but lack infrastructure and services, and have a high rate of unemployment. For instance, in the province of Kurdistan unemployment is 45 percent and the income per capita is half the country's average. There

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of State, State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour. Iran 2015 Human Rights Report, retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/253135.pdf>

are cases where a company has sacked all Kurdish employees and replaced them with Persians. Due to the high rate of unemployment many people earn money by carrying goods across the border into Iraq at great personal risk. Around 5,000 of these couriers have licences, which limit the number of trips they can make per month. Others carry goods across the border illegally. In 2016, 122 couriers died crossing the border, along with hundreds of their horses. People and horses were either shot dead by Iranian border forces or killed by land mines left over from the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Many couriers have their goods confiscated, and are imprisoned for various offences.



### **Education and publishing in the Kurdish language**

Kurdish school students are denied an education in their mother tongue. This means that often children starting school must learn a new language. They can also face discrimination from teachers who insist children not speak Kurdish at school.

Kurds can also be denied places at a university because of their ethnic and/or religious background. Some progress occurred in 2015, when the government allowed the University of Kurdistan - Sanandaj to introduce courses in Kurdish literature and history and in some secondary schools the Kurdish language was introduced as an elective.

Although several TV programs and radio stations broadcast in Kurdish (e.g. Radio Mahabad, Sna, Kermashan and the Tehran-based Radiolran network), and some magazines and newspapers are published in Kurdish, the government must approve all publications. Many Kurdish language publications are banned. The government must approve content, with political discussion a dangerous undertaking. Kurdish writers and journalists can be arrested and charged on the grounds that they 'threaten national security', 'disseminate propaganda against the state' or 'insult the state'. According to the US State Department Iran 2015 Human Rights Report, *"Minorities did not enjoy equal rights, and the government*

*consistently denied their right to use their languages in school.” (p.38) ... These groups reported political and socioeconomic discrimination, particularly in their access to economic aid, business licenses, university admissions, job opportunities, permission to publish books, and housing and land rights.” (p.39)*

### **Imprisonment and the death penalty**

Systematic arrest, imprisonment, torture and excessive use of the death penalty are ongoing practices in Iran, with Kurds especially targeted. In 2016, Iran had 1,074 political prisoners. Of these, 40 percent were Kurds although Kurds make up only 10–12 percent of the population. According to the 2015 US State Department report, *‘The government disproportionately targeted minority groups for arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention, and physical abuse.’ (p. 38) ... ‘In pretrial detention in Evin Prison, authorities reportedly repeatedly subjected members of minority ethnicities and religions to more severe physical punishment or torture than other prisoners, regardless of the type of crime ...’ (p.39)*

Iran executes more prisoners than any country other than China. Executions in Iran are increasing in number. Kurds are overrepresented in those who receive the death penalty. According to the Association of Human Rights in Kurdistan of Iran (AHRKI) in 2016 Iran executed some 500 prisoners of whom at least 90 were Kurds. Kurdish Human rights activists executed in 2016 include Naji Kiwan, Ali Kurdian, Haidar Ramini, Nadir Muhamadi and Ruhman Rashidi. These people were charged with ‘conspiring against the Islamic Republic of Iran’. Forty-nine Kurds were executed for drug related crimes, 21 for ‘enmity against God’, one (Mohammed Abdollahi) for membership of a Kurdish political party and others were executed for alleged murder, rape, robbery or for ‘unknown reasons’. It must be noted that people can be found guilty of drug offences whether or not they committed the crime as these offences automatically incur the death penalty.

Those executed were often forced to confess under severe torture. For instance, Fardin Hosseini was executed in Karaj Prison on 21 January 2016. Fardin practiced the Yarsan religion. He had been in prison for six years, during which time he suffered extreme torture. At his trial he was deprived of a lawyer.

### **Kurdish aspirations in Iran**

Kurds in Iran aspire to an autonomous region within a democratic federation of Iran.

### **Kurdish Lobby Australia**

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