

Testimony of Sharif Behruz in U.S. Congress

Testimony of Sharif Behruz, Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan's Representative to the US Before the Iran Working Group United States House of Representatives

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Congressman Kirk, Congressman Andrews, first, allow me to thank the Iran Working Group and its honourable members along with the Leadership Council for Human Rights and its President Ms. Kathryn Porter on behalf of the people of Iranian Kurdistan for putting together this hearing to look at human rights conditions in Iran from the perspectives of national minorities, something that, unfortunately, we do not witness often.

As you all know by now Iran is a country where other than the Persians, other nationalities such as Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchies and Turkmans and some other ethnic and religious minorities live.

Iranian Kurdistan consists of the western provinces of: Ilam, Kermashan, Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan. The province of Lorestan, based on historical facts is also part of the Iranian Kurdistan region and Kurdish national culture.

Though there are not accurate data on the population of Kurds as with other nationalities, the Kurdish population in Iran is well above 10 million which is approximately 15% of Iranian population. The Kurdish area of Iranian Kurdistan is 125,000 sq km which is about 8 percent of total Iranian land.

Successive regimes in Iran have denied the nationalities their rights and fair share of power for various but identical reasons. The current Islamic regime under the banner of "one official language" claims that all the nationalities as Iranian and Muslims constitute the bigger Islamic world; hence talking about the rights of the nationalities represent a major threat to the unity of Iran and the Islamic world. Such policy with chauvinistic intentions will leave behind appalling consequences for the people under oppression.

The nationalities of Iran are deprived of all their national, cultural, civil and political rights: The nationalities' pre-schoolers are forced to be educated in Persian, their non-mother tongue, due to the regime's single official language policy; therefore the children of the nationalities of Iran are deprived from one of their most basic rights. As stated in the latest State Department's Human Rights Report, "the government in Iran consistently denies minorities their constitutional right to study and use their language in schools." As a result of this discriminatory policy the illiteracy rate among the non-Persian nationalities is immense.

Any legitimate political, cultural and even economical demands of the non-Persian nationalities is heavily rejected and repressed under the auspices of separatism and agents of foreigners. The Kurdish political activists, even human rights activists get imprisoned under the numerous demonizing pretexts of smugglers, thieves, thugs, espionage, spies and western agents, and they get tortured, killed and even executed.

Unlawful detentions, torture, harassment, executions and disappearances have become a daily routine in the Kurdish areas. So far, hundreds of Kurdish personalities and political, religious, cultural, human rights and even women's rights activists have been the victims of the state terrorism of the Islamic regime in Iran inside and outside of Iran.

According to the information collected by various human rights organization, hundreds of Kurdish activists are kept in the prisons of the regime under awful conditions. Death threatens the lives of many political activists whose whereabouts are unclear. Unfortunately, State Department's human rights report on Iran does not ethnically categorize the vast human rights violation against nationalities and in their areas; however, the latest report does refer to a widespread detention of Kurdish journalists among them, Mohammad Sadiq Kabudvand, arrested by plainclothes security forces and sentenced to one year in prison on charges of "inciting the population to rebel against the central state. Also on July 16, a revolutionary court in the Kurdish city of Marivan sentenced Kurdish journalists Adnan Hassanpour and Abdolvahed "Hiva" Boutimar to death on charges of espionage and "acting against national security." According to reporters Without Border, the trials were not public and their lawyers were not permitted to attend.

Due to lack of investment in the Kurdish areas, poverty, unemployment, addiction, migration and suicides have taken a dreadful toll in this region. The poorest areas of the country are those inhabited by ethnic minorities; consequently, the quality of life of the largely local population is poor.

In Iran under the regime of Islamic Republic religious persecution and discrimination has also been legalized along with national oppression against Kurds who are majority Sunni. According to State Department's report Sunni Muslims in 2007 encountered societal and religious discrimination and harassment at the local, provincial, and national levels. Many Sunni religious leaders have been disappeared or held in detention.

You are well aware that the official religion of the state is Shiite Islam, and only the followers of this branch of Islam can take on high ranking positions in the executive, judiciary and armed forces; therefore, most of the Kurds in Iran suffer from triple layers of oppression from the Islamic regime in Iran. Furthermore, the Kurds in Iran are always screened when attending higher education, applying for employment, investment and even mobility within and outside the country due to their Kurdishness.

The history of Iran in the last 100 years has proven that one of the main causes of failure of democratic movements in Iran has been neglecting the cultural and national plurality of Iran. In other words, struggle for democracy without satisfying and considering the rights of the non-Persians who are more than half of the population would not make much sense. Unfortunately, today many Iranian groups who consider themselves democrats think otherwise. While in the future any attempts to democratize Iran without solving the question of nationalities is doomed to failure and it will only remain as a utopia; furthermore, it would be in the long-term interest of the United States to take into consideration the true fabric of Iranian society vis-À-vis its nationalities when dealing with Iran.

Iran is a large and rich country, and enjoys a considerable geographical and strategic position. Whatever role, either constructive or destructive, Iran can play in the world stage depends on the dominant political system over this country. Iran under the Islamic Republic lacks respect for human rights, and the people are systematically oppressed; the religious minorities are discriminated against and in the regions belonging to the nationalities ethnic cleansing has become widespread, and its population are viewed as second class citizens. The government demonizes women, creates instability in the neighbouring states and supports terrorist organizations financially and logistically. It meddles in the Middle East Peace Process, adopts state terrorism as its policy and supports international terrorism, and most importantly such regime challenges the international community in acquiring deadly atomic weapons.

On the contrary, a democratic and decentralized system in Iran can lead its society towards development; recover its devastated economy, create political stability inside and assist in bringing about stability, security in the region, and most importantly, as an effective member of the international community can strengthen world peace.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to your questions.