

Iran: regionalism, ethnicity and democracy

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The Tehran government's failure to deliver economic improvement is fuelling discontent among Iran's non-Persian minorities, says Nayereh Tohidi.

Iran has always been a multi-ethnic and multicultural country. Persian (Farsi) may be the official language, but it is only in recent years that speakers of the language have become a majority of the population. There are many other language-groups, including Turkic (spoken by Azeris, Turkmen, Qashqais, and Shahsevans), Kurdish, Arabic, Baluchi, Armenian, and Assyrian.

Most Iranians who speak these languages perceive their ethnic identity as a complement to their national identity. Indeed, it has long been understood and widely accepted that this diversity is an asset to one of the world's oldest continuous civilisations. Yet recent events and trends reveal that the settlement between the Persian majority and the ethnic minorities is under pressure, in ways that are putting the country's political future into question.

The Azeri protests

The latest spate of ethnic-related unrest in Iran was the massive demonstrations of Azeris in Iran's northwestern province of Azerbaijan from 22-28 May 2006. These have highlighted the growing role that ethnic issues play in Iran's domestic politics and international relations; at the same time, their significance has largely been eclipsed by the

international attention devoted to the crisis over Iran's nuclear researches.

The trigger of the protests was a cartoon published in the 19 May issue of *Iran*, a state-owned newspaper based in Tehran, which depicted Azeris and their language in insulting terms (including the use of cockroach imagery). Many Azeris – a group that comprises a quarter of Iran's 68 million people – were outraged when they saw or heard about the cartoon. A protest was initiated by Azeri students in Tabriz, the regional capital, and the smaller cities of Ardabil, Urumiyeh, and Zanjan. These soon spread further, and were followed by the closure of shops and bazaars, and the gathering of tens of thousands of people on the streets.

It is striking that the focus of the protests soon shifted from the controversial cartoon to broader socio-political issues. The demonstrators started to attack some government buildings and to demand the resignation of local officials and police authorities who had ordered repressive measures against the overwhelmingly peaceful protests. Several people, including journalists working for Turkic-language newspapers or websites, were arrested; other citizens were severely beaten by police.

The cartoon seemed to serve as a catalyst for the expression of long-held grievances and suppressed feelings of humiliation and resentment by many Azeri people. The slogans of the demonstrators – among them "down with chauvinism", "long live Azerbaijan", and "Azerbaijan is awake and will protect its language" – reflected both ethnic-related grievances and anti-establishment sentiments.

In order to defuse the crisis and divert people's anger, the state authorities shut down the *Iran* newspaper and jailed the cartoonist and editors, who issued an apology to the Azeris. This did not appease the outraged Azeris; they had sought an apology from the minister of culture and Islamic guidance, and from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad himself. The minister belatedly apologised, but President Ahmadinejad did not: indeed, he blamed the turmoil on foreign elements and linked it to western pressures over the nuclear issue.

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei reinforced this view days later with talk of a "foreign plot" by Iran's "desperate enemies" who are trying to disrupt national unity by instigating ethnic unrest in Iran. Meanwhile, Azerbaijani cities remained under a semi-curfew, and filled with special anti-riot guards and plainclothes security men reportedly deployed from Iran's southern provinces.

Azeri activists concluded their wave of demonstrations on 28 May in front of the *majlis* in Tehran. The gathering was immediately disrupted by the police, but the Azeris activists managed to issue a carefully crafted resolution. This outlined a brief historical narrative of the unjust and discriminatory distribution of national resources, political power and socio-cultural status among ethnic and religious minorities in Iran since 1925; it then went on to list eleven Azeri-Turkic demands.

This ambitious list included recognition of Azeri-Turkic as an official language and its use as a medium of education in schools; the right to a free press and media in Azeri-Turkic; and the right to hold cultural events and to organise NGOs, political parties, and trade unions.

The events of 22-28 May proved themselves to be a catalyst in Iran. In subsequent weeks, hundreds of prominent intellectuals and political activists of various orientations have issued statements calling for urgent reforms of the state's policies and behaviour in relation to ethnic and religious minorities in Iran.

Ahmad Zeidabadi, a prominent political analyst, says: "Among the many problems that have gripped Iran, the ethnic issue is the most complicated, most difficult, and most sensitive one, so much so that one cannot even easily talk about it."

The Azeri protests, then, may herald an era when discussion of Iran's ethnic diversity and problems – hitherto confined to ethnic-activist circles – enters the public arena and helps to shape the debate about Iran's political future.

The politics of a wound

This would represent a radical departure from modern Iranian history, in particular from the ideology of the "homogenous" character of the "Aryan race" that developed in the 20th century. Since the central government in Tehran crushed the autonomous governments of Mahabad (Kurdistan) and Tabriz (Azerbaijan) in 1945-46, it has seen any ethnic-related demands as a security issue threatening Iran's territorial integrity. Against this, the overwhelming majority of ethnic-rights activists in Iran declare themselves to be against secessionism.

Both the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamist Republic labelled ethnic activists as "secessionist" and/or "agents of foreign manipulation". While under the Shah's regime the main foreign culprit provoking ethnic tension was assumed to be the Soviet Union and occasionally pan-Turkism promoted by Turkey, the Islamist regime has typically blamed the United States.

A specific factor the Tehran authorities highlight is the "South Azerbaijan Television" (Gunaz TV), based in Chicago, the first twenty-four-hour TV station in the Azeri-Turkic language. Gunaz TV proclaims its struggle against "Farsi chauvinism" and aims for the revival of "Azeri national identity." The station is broadcast via the Turkish satellite TurkSat 2A, leading Iranian officials to request Turkey to suspend its licence. Gunaz TV claims to be independent, but the government in Tehran perceives it to be part of the US state department's \$75 million programme to help promote regime change in Iran.

In any case, the wave of protest in Azerbaijan can hardly be attributed to the influence of an amateur, poorly-operated TV station that is only few months old. The "blame the foreigners" game of the Islamist government may find an echo among some pan-Farsi nationalists who see pan-Turkists in Turkey and post-

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Soviet Azerbaijan as the real culprits in this case. But neither state-run nor any major independent media in the US or Turkey has expressed support for the Azeris protests. A pan-Turkist website led by Mahmoud Chehregani, the Iranian-Azeri self-styled leader of the "National Movement of Southern Azerbaijanis" who has ties to the US and Baku, expressed disappointment with Turkey's "indifference toward the heroic uprising of Azeri Turks against the bloody suppression in Iran."

In Baku too, no official sources expressed support for what opposition papers such as *Azadlik* called the "uprising in southern Azerbaijan". Moreover, Ilham Aliiev's government in Baku attempted to persecute two independent weekly papers for publishing "divisive and offensive" cartoons against Iran's leader and president. A few days later, Chehregani was deported from Baku. These events seem to indicate the influence of Iran's Islamist government in Baku rather than Baku's influence on Iran's identity politics.

Thus, the Iranian authorities cannot explain away the recent ethnic-related clashes by blaming outsiders. The Azeri incidents are not alone: there has also been unrest in other border provinces with large minority populations – Kurdistan, Khuzestan, Baluchistan, and to a lesser extent Turkmenistan. If any external provocation and manipulation is being attempted, it could only have an effect if there already existed a widespread sense of discrimination, deprivation and resentment toward the central government inside Iran.

The dynamics of tension

In addition to contingent factors like the *Iran* cartoon, three further processes are tending to reinforce ethnic and regional tensions in Iran.

First, minority politics in Iran – whether related to gender, religion or ethnicity – are in an age of increasing globalisation influenced by a global-local interplay. The geopolitical changes in the greater middle east since the breakup of the Soviet Union and the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq have created new regional dynamics. The newly independent republics of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan and the *de facto* independent Kurdistan of Iraq – all with cross-border ethnic kin in Iran – are bound to affect identity politics in these countries.

Second, an uneven and over-centralised (mostly Tehran-centered) strategy of development in Iran has resulted in a wide socio-economic gap between the centre and the peripheries. A great part of the grievances of ethnic minorities in the provinces is due to the uneven distribution of power, socio-economic resources, and socio-cultural status.

The US has usually supported the territorial integrity of Iran, including the homogenising and assimilationist policies upheld by the Pahlavi dynasty. But some analysts argue that during the past fifteen years, a new shift in US policy has occurred whereby some Washington neo-conservatives openly support the political demands of major minorities in Iran such as Arabs, Baluch and Kurds. Many Iranians worry that Washington (or Tel Aviv) want not just regime change in Iran, but a transformation in Iran's geopolitical map. Iran, it might be said, is too big for them.

Third, Iran's constitution enshrines the right to the use of local languages in schools and media alongside Farsi, as well as provincial autonomy. Yet none of these guaranteed rights have been implemented. The presidency of Ahmadinejad has even reversed what flexibility has been shown by appointing local officials close to the Revolutionary Guards who show no sensitivity to centre-periphery or ethnic dynamics.

But in opposition to these trends, other forces are at work. A growing discussion over possible strategies to resolve ethnic issues is underway. The perils of both secular, national-chauvinist homogenisation under the Pahlavi dynasty and of religious, *Shi'a*-Islamist segmentation under the Islamic Republic have become apparent to an increasing number of Iranians of all ethnic backgrounds. Iran's intellectuals and reformers are discussing whether a federal system within a democratic polity might be the answer. Many argue that it is only within the context of a democratic constitution and an even-handed, decentralised socio-economic development strategy that Iran can develop a much-needed civic rather than an ethnocentric national identity.

The way forward

Some among the secular nationalist elites as well as Islamists in Iran have been wary about ethnic rights, especially language diversity. They worry that teaching in ethnic languages may threaten Iran's territorial integrity and national unity. Yet Iran's history offers little basis for this apprehension. Azeris, for example, have played major roles in every turning-point of Iran's modern history.

This was true even during the constitutional revolution (1905-1911) when the overwhelming majority of Azeris could not even speak Farsi. Another example is the popular satirical paper *Mulla Nasr al-Din* (edited by an Azeri-Turk, Mohammad Jalil Qulizadah) that was crucial in enlightening people in Iran and across the Caucasus at the turn of the 20th century; its sharply anti-clerical and anti-despotic cartoons were originally published in Azeri-Turkic as well as Farsi.

Ethnic differences intersect with religious and gender differences in Iran. The theocratic nature of Iran's polity based on the supremacy of *Shi'a* Islam relegates religious minorities such as Zoroastrians, Christians, Jews, and Baha'i to an inferior position. The *Sunni* Muslims who compose 9% of Iran's population mostly belong to ethnic minorities. A revealing example is the fact that Tehran is one of the rare capitals around the world where no *Sunni* mosque can be found.

In this light, the implementation of the constitutionally-protected rights of ethnic minorities in Iran may only resolve part of the problem. The subordinate status of religious minorities in Iran – and of women, a distinct but closely-related issue – is sanctified by the constitution. The struggles for democracy and for minority rights are intimately linked in Iran: only an egalitarian reform of the constitution can guarantee that all Iranians regardless of their gender, religion and ethnic backgrounds will in future equally share ownership of their own country.

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