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The environmentalism of the subalterns: a case study of environmental activism in Eastern Kurdistan/Rojhelat

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ABSTRACT

Similarly to other places around the globe, Kurdistan has its environmental challenges, some of which are climate change-related and others of which are more local and specific. Nevertheless, in both cases, Kurdish environmental activists, organised in environmental NGOs, are the protectors of Kurdistan's natural environment. The study focuses on the emergence and objectives of environmental activism in Rojhelat/Eastern Kurdistan, arguing that the growth of environmental activism as NGOs is a nascent trend in Rojhelat, and requires an in-depth study of its various aspects. The research aims to conceptualise the Kurdish environmental movement and investigate the socio-political and environmental context in Rojhelat. This study is inspired by the concept of "subaltern environmentalism", articulating environmental activism as a platform deployed by marginalised communities in their response to intentional environmental discrimination by political and economic elites. Specific focus is placed on the NGO Chya Green Association, and its evolution, activity and discourse.

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They [the Iranian regime] know one day they have to withdraw from Kurdistan, that's why they are so determined to destroy it. (Sharif Bajwer in Soleimani 2020, 35)

Subordination is manifest in the disproportionate siting of environmental hazards in poor or minority communities and also in the inequitable distribution of ecological resources, both of which perpetuate the marginalisation of subaltern groups. (Egan 2002, 21)

Introduction

Human society has always been deeply connected with the natural ecosystems surrounding it. However, in recent decades, this relationship has witnessed significant changes and challenges. This study aims to shed light on the diverse range of Kurdish environmental activism, from its relationship with Kurdish national identity and culture, to its critical approach to threats facing the environment in Rojhelat, Eastern (or Iranian) Kurdistan. Below, the study asserts that environmental activism in Rojhelat has been a platform for protesting the Iranian government's socio-political and economic policies towards Iran's Kurdish population; for this reason, it has quickly turned to a securitised area, with severe consequences for environmentalists. Popularising a platform of "culturalisation of environmentalism", and attempting to alter the approach of state institutions to the natural environmental and natural resources in Kurdistan, are among the key objectives of

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environmental activism in Rojhelat. While environmental education and campaigns are the tools used in persuading Kurdish society to adopt environmentally friendly behaviour, the movement's approach to the state has taken a more confrontational path. The diverse focus of environmental activism in Rojhelat allows its conceptualisation through a theoretical framework of "environmental humanities", a category which encompasses

a wide ranging response to the environmental challenges of our time. Drawing on humanities and social science disciplines that have brought qualitative analysis to bear on environmental issues, the environmental humanities engages with fundamental questions of meaning, value, responsibility and purpose in a time of rapid, and escalating, change. (Rose et al. 2012)

Conceptual framework

A peripheral and marginalised nationality within a multinational though-Persian dominated Iranian society, the Kurdish people of Iranian Kurdistan (a region referred by the Kurds as Rojhelat/Eastern Kurdistan) have since the early twentieth century been subject to multifaceted and systematic discriminatory and exclusionary state policy in Iran. This condition has left a population of 12–15 million Kurds in Iran suffering from structural inequalities, disenfranchisement and deprivation. Mismanagement of Kurdistan's natural resources and the degradation of its natural environmental are among examples of this disenfranchisement. As asserted by Julian Agyeman (2005), structural inequalities that sustain the domination of political and economic elites often simultaneously result in environmental degradation, injustice and discrimination against subaltern communities. This study argues that the environmental struggle in Eastern Kurdistan can be asserted as a (sub)element of the Kurdish liberation movement in Iran. Conceptually this research is inspired by and has been conducted through the lens of "subalternity".

Originally the concept "subaltern" is a Gramscian term, explaining a hegemonic (oppressed-versus-repressed) relationship. As identified by Antonio Gramsci, in such a relationship the subaltern are all the non-elite groups, oppressed by the relations of hegemony within a given society and/or state. According to Gramsci (in Cayuela 2018, 36), "the only way of leaving subalternity is by reversing the existing relationship of domination-subordination". According to subaltern environmental associations and NGOs, socioeconomic, cultural and environmental subordination is used as a mechanism by the hegemonic class of society, in order to establish, reinforce and perpetuate their ruling position (Cayuela 2018, 36–37). As shown below, the Iranian government's marginalisation of the Kurds in Eastern Kurdistan constitutes an ensemble of political, social, cultural and economic subordination. In a general sense, states' failure to respond to the demands of subnational and other marginalised subaltern communities can result in domestic ethnic tension, and possibly inter-state conflict (Dawson 2000, 27). However, to conceptualise the current relationship of the state and Kurdish environmental activists through Pulido's (1996) concept of subalternity, arguably the resilience and struggle of Kurdish environmental activities and NGOs has resulted in the establishment of a counterhegemonic discourse, questioning the elitist and state-centric economic, developmental, environmental and identity politics of the Iranian government.

Movements linking socio-economic justice and environmental degradation can be found around the world. The environmentalism in Rojhelat can be analysed and studied within theoretical framework of "environmental justice". A variety of other names have been used to characterise these efforts, including "liberation ecologies", "Global South environmentalisms", "the environmentalism of the poor", and "subaltern environmentalism" (Reed 2009, 25–26). A central feature of subaltern environmentalism is its claim to be as social, political and cultural as it is environmental. Communities involved in these struggles perceive unequal power relations as the main threat to their environments, identity and livelihoods; thus, they mobilise to challenge the hegemony of the dominant regime (Pulido 1996). In its broader sense, the concept of subaltern environmentalism is applicable in explaining environmental activists' behaviour and mode of mobilisation.

At a global level, the origin of the subaltern environmentalist movement can be traced back to the 1970s. Many struggles against environmental injustices predate what is often cited as a

foundational moment in environmentalism, the first Earth Day in 1970, though it is worthy of note that these protests were mainly framed in a social context rather than as an explicitly environmental struggle. Defined within the framework of environmental justice, subaltern environmentalism indicates the grassroots environmental activism of marginalised or subordinated groups such as peasants, urban slum and ghetto dwellers, farm workers, and groups oppressed for their race, ethnicity, class, or gender. However, it is also necessary to keep in mind that subaltern environmentalism has evolved into a distinct movement and a vital exercise in self-empowerment among groups which seek to claim and protect the places in which they live and work. The social positionality of subaltern activists effectively alters the context of the environmental struggle, and histories of environmentalism must adapt to recognise this (Egan 2002, 22–23).

The American sociologist Robert D. Bullard – also known as “the father of environmental justice” – draws strong links between environmentalism and civil rights, a product of Bullard’s deep commitment to the black civil rights movement in the US. According to Bullard, the movement for environmental equity in the US has been centred in the American South, where black Americans were deprived of their human dignity, socio-political, cultural and economic rights and opportunities, for the same reasons, and the marked ecological inequality between black and white Americans. Therefore, the region in the 1980s witnessed the emergence of small cadre of black activists who saw environmental discrimination as a civil rights issue (Bullard 1993, 2018). Bullard has studied the impact of the dumping of toxic and other kinds of industrial and household waste in black neighbourhoods, and conflict between the authorities and black communities generated by the latter’s resistance to this practice. Referencing on a wide variety of environmental conflicts, Bullard concludes that “institutional racism continues to affect policy decisions related to the enforcement of environmental regulations. Slowly, blacks, lower-income groups, and working-class persons are awakening to the dangers of living in a polluted environment” (2018, 15). Another civil rights and environmental activist, Dana Alston, in her book *We Speak for Ourselves: Social Justice, Race, and Environment*, demonstrates the positioning of environmental justice as a grassroots movement and a movement of subaltern groups. According to Alston, “Whereas mainstream groups fight environmental issues on legal and policy fronts, grassroots activism is formed and based in (and by) the communities in need of help and fights its battles there” (in Egan 2002, 25–26).

Scholar-activists such as Bullard and Alston share the belief that state sponsored-discrimination is a primary factor why people from minority communities and peripheral regions are subject to issues such as garbage dumping and other acts of environmental degradation, resulting in health problems and other communal issues. According to Bullard, state-sponsored racism and discriminatory policies toward peripheral and minority communities play a key role in environmental planning and decision-making. Framed as “environmental racism”, Bullard claims that such a policy can be reinforced by governmental, legal, economic, political, and military institutions (1993, 17).

While Bullard’s theory of environmental conflict is a product of his ethnographic research and his commitment to the black and indigenous civil rights struggles in the US, and despite the difference of regime structures in Iran and the US, his conceptualisation of environmentalism can help explain the conflicting behaviours of the Iranian regime and Kurdish environmental groups. Firstly, it provides concepts that can in many regards be applied to universal environmental issues; secondly, Bullard outlines many phenomena sharing similarities with environmentalism in Rojhelat, such as rhetorical and practical condemnations of the state’s exploitative approach to environmental and economic sustainability, and the establishment of a counterhegemonic discourse related to identity, economic growth, and the (re)distribution of wealth and power. In this regard, one can argue that a cornerstone of environmental justice movements is a fight for the empowerment of subaltern communities and people excluded from environmental decision-making. A key product of these movements is the emergence of a counterhegemonic struggle for ecological democracy. Since a major aspect of environmentalism in Rojhelat and its disputes with state institutions is rooted in conflict over natural and mineral resources (water, forests, oil, gold, etc.), it also is important to highlight that the issues faced in Rojhelat are neither limited to Iran, nor newly emerged. Communities the

world over have been faced with the environmental destruction of their homelands in the name of resource extraction. As emphasised by Scheidel et al., “the idea that wars are associated with resources is probably as old as war itself” (2020, 2).

Research method and data collection

This study employs content analysis as a research method. Content analysis seeks to analyse data within a specific context in view of the meanings someone (i.e. a group, people or a culture) attributes to them. These data constitute “texts, images, and expressions that are created to be seen, read, interpreted, and acted on for their meanings, and must therefore be analyzed with such uses in mind” (Krippendorff 2004, xiii). According to Krippendorff, content analysis is a research technique for making “replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (2004, 18). This method allows a rhetorical analysis and the drawing of conclusions about the communicator, the message or text, the situation surrounding its creation, and (sometimes) the sociocultural context of the communication. A key factor in this regard is that the data communicate a message from a sender to a receiver. Through this process, the analysts are required to consider the seven criteria of cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality, as the measures for defining a text (White and Marsh 2006, 27–28).

Written materials (texts and magazines) available online are this study’s main sources of primary data. For instance, to analyse the discourse, development, and activities of the NGO Chya Green Association (*Anjomen-e Sabz-e Chya/Çiya-i Sawzi Mariwan*, hereafter Chya), over 70 biweekly (Special Environmental Newsletters, hereafter BN Chya) and 27 monthly editions of the magazine Chya, published by the NGO from 2008 to 2018, have been invaluable. To avoid any confusion, references to the magazine will appear as *Chya* (italicised); non-italicised Chya should be understood as referring to the NGO itself. The magazine Chya was established by a group of young men from the Eastern Kurdistan city of Mariwan, with a long history of sociocultural and political activism, including Abdolvahed [Hiwa] Butimar, Ahmad Amani, Abdollah Azadian, Kaweh Kavusi, Madeh Amani, Mehdi Dariawaysi and Saman Kamran Mo’refi [Ma’rofi]. The NGO was initially established in 1999, after more than eight years waiting for official authorisation, its founders finally received permission for Chya to conduct its activities in Mariwan from Mariwan’s governor on 17 February 2008. Due to the large numbers of the editions of Chya included in this study, specific references to authors of pieces in Chya are made only in the notes, omitted from the bibliographic entries. In addition, to these mentioned sources, detailed interviews have been conducted with journalists, environmental activists, and individuals with link to the environmental movement, from within and outside Rojhelat.

Environmental activism in Rojhelat

The emergence of different environmental focus groups (including groups campaigning on issues of global warming, nuclear power, acid rain, toxic waste, dam construction, etc.), but also more generally the growing social prominence of environmental activism, have, among many other impacts, resulted in rising environmental awareness among different societies around the globe. Increasing numbers of people have become aware of the degrading effects of human activities on the environment, and the potential impact of industrial development and pollution on local ecosystems. Environmental activism has been generally defined as “organised participation in environmental issues, comprising an example of environmentally friendly behaviour rooted in the political realm, and expressed in specific activities reflecting a commitment to the environment channelled in formal settings and realised through institutional structures” (Marquart-Pyatt 2012, 684). Activists and organisations have utilised a range of tactics, including campaigns, protests and demonstrations, to convey their message.

Since the early 1970s, environmentalism has attracted mainstream attention in many parts of the world, and been a subject to academic study particularly focusing upon group membership and

organised environmentalism (Eden 1993, 743). Across numerous disciplines, including psychology, sociology, political science, and education, environmental activism has been conceptualised as a “function of specific behaviours”. Scholars, particularly in sociology and political science, have further described environmental activism as “a process of collective action to support the environmental movement, [...] or as a rational cost/benefit analysis based on the value of personally contributing to the public good” (Dono, Webb, and Richardson 2010, 178). Some conceptualisations of environmentalism and environmental activism have argued that this kind of activism is as much a social as a political movement, existing to change people’s outlook on the world, their beliefs, and their behaviour. For instance, Timothy O’riordan (1981, 3) writes that environmentalism “interacts with the social, economic and political conditions in which it finds itself, changing current paradigms of thought and action and at the same time resonating to its own successes and failures”.

One shared value between Kurdish environmental activism in particular and international environmental activism in general, is that both “attach particular importance to the need for fundamental changes in values if mankind is to survive” (Cotgrove and Duff 1981). Environmental activism in Rojhelat offers a popular model of activist movement, and has a diverse focus, encompassing elements of identity, including solution-driven and change-focused activism but also publicising symbolic actions, such as the case of a poacher named Ahmad Azizi, from a small village in Kurdistan who abandoned poaching and destroyed his gun (Hassaniyan 2020a). The multiplicity of environmental focus and activist tactics in Rojhelat means that any attempt to brief a characterisation of this movement is bound to result in a simplification. Yet as mentioned above, and empirically illustrated below, the idea of an “environmentalism of the poor” usefully explains different aspects of this movement. According to Martinez-Alier, the environmentalism of the poor reflects a growing trend worldwide of indigenous, marginalised and disenfranchised people and communities resisting unsustainable economic growth and socio-economic inequalities (2002, 10–12).¹ In addition, concepts such as econationalism (Dawson 2000) are useful in analysing Kurdish environmentalists’ use of their platform in promoting Kurdish national identity and culture. Nevertheless, the essence of Rojhelat’s environmental activism, like environmentalism anywhere in the world, lies in its combination of activities aiming to conserve the local environment and to oppose the activities of individuals, groups and state institutions that cause environmental devastation.

The emergence of environmental activism in Rojhelat dates to the late 1980s. From the beginning of the movement, it was inextricably linked to Kurdish identity. Thus, a group of environmental activists, mainly university students, held a memorial for the victims of Saddam Hussain’s chemical attack on the Iraqi Kurdish city of Halabje in 16 March 1988, during the Iran-Iraq War. During this event, they highlighted the destructive impact of chemical weapons on the environment of Kurdistan. Across all the nation-states which occupy Kurdish territory in the region, both the natural and human environments in Kurdistan have suffered from severe attacks from governments. Not only Halabje, but also Sardasht, a city in Iran’s West Azerbaijan Province in Rojhelat, suffered from Saddam’s chemical attacks. The Ba’athist Iraqi government, as part of its counterinsurgency programme in Iraqi Kurdistan, destroyed over four thousand Kurdish villages; likewise, in Northern Kurdistan/Bakûr, the Turkish army destroyed several thousand villages and carried out systematic deforestation. The literature on the connections between civil war and environmental destruction suggests that the counterinsurgency tactics adopted by Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria against their Kurdish oppositions, have been aimed at undermining rebels’ ability to operate through the deliberate destruction of nature, particularly the systematic deforestation of Kurdistan (Etten et al. 2008; Gurses 2012).

According to Article 50 of Iran’s Islamic Constitution, the protection of the environment is a public duty. This article explicitly prohibits any economic (or military) activity causing environmental damage and degradation. However, despite this legal stipulation, the natural environment in different regions of Iran has suffered from various forms of destruction and degradation (Afrasiabi 2003; Ramezani Qavamabadi 2013; Madani, AghaKouchak, and Mirchi 2016). Iran’s environmental challenges have reached a critical point. Severe water and air pollution, deforestation, land

erosion, desertification, climate change, and biodiversity loss, are a few issues among many others forming the major environmental challenge faced by Iran (Atlantic Council 2018). However, compared with the extent of Iran's environmental degradation, the subject has been relatively understudied. The mobilisation of environmental NGOs or expressly political groupings, such as a Green Party, focusing on the Iranian environment's perilous position, has been almost absent in the country outside peripheral regions such as Rojhelat and Khuzestan due to the rise of econationalism among their populations. Nevertheless, there have been a small number of illuminating studies, as will be outlined shortly.

Environmental activism became more organised in the form of NGOs and associations in the late 1990s, when it was provided with a certain breathing space by the Iranian authorities who granted permission for the formation of NGOs. The late 1990s and early 2000s were characterised by the establishment of thousands of associations and NGOs across Iran, among them over five hundred environmental NGOs (Doyle and Simpson 2006, 760). Therefore, the first stage of environmental activism should be studied in the context of the relative easing of the socio-political situation in Iran, during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005).

Kaveh Afrasiabi's study of the emergence of environmental NGOs in Iran suggests that the appearance of these NGOs should be viewed in the context of Iran's nascent civil society under Khatami. In his words,

the concept of 'environmental protection' (*hefz-e mohit-e zist*) has become a popular terminology that evokes dynamic images of groups within the population committed to citizens' participation in protecting their environment, notwithstanding the litany of environmental problems affecting the health and well-being of nature, animals, and communities inside Iran. (2003, 432)

Characterised as "environmentalism from below", these environmental NGOs, with their different approaches to environmental sustainability and sustainable development, manifested a challenge to the state-centric approach to economic growth. Environmentalism from below threatened to expand beyond the bounds that the Khatami administration had envisioned; according to Afrasiabi, "the evolution of political environmentalism is watched with caution by some government officials who view it as a cover for political and secular nationalism" (2003, 433). This is evident in even a cursory review of the relationship between Kurdish environmental activists and the Iranian government. As shown in recent study of environmental activists in Iran and Rojhelat, the regime's approach to environmental NGOs and activism has resulted in the extensive securitisation of this field, subjecting activists to the regime's persecution and the threat of assassination or execution (Hassaniyan 2020a).

Simin Fadaee's study of the evolution of the Iranian environmental movement is also important. Fadaee (2011) has conceptualised environmental activism in Iran within a theoretical framework of social movements, and argues that the semi-authoritarian context in which the movement developed, "at the same time enables and limits the activities of the environmental groups. The environmentalists challenge the existing norms and structures of the society. Their main aim is to change the people's lifestyle and governmental policies towards environmental issues" (85). Nevertheless, given the evolution of environmentalism in Iran and across Rojhelat "as a movement for social change", and taking into account the current highly securitised conditions in Iran, it is clear that this field of activism has become overshadowed by a tense relationship between civil society and state.

Despite many similarities in the approaches and values shared by environmental activism in the Iranian centre (i.e. in and around the large central cities and Persian-speaking regions) and in Rojhelat, it can be argued that while the centre-based environmental groups and NGOs focus on purely single environmental issues, environmental activists in Rojhelat practise a diversified form of activism that, in addition to focusing on the environment, actively cherishes Kurdish national identity, culture and language. While environmentalism in Iran as a whole is understudied, the focus of the existing research, such as the valuable studies of Afrasiabi and Fadaee, concentrates on the core regions of Iran, while environmental activism in peripheral regions of the country remains either understudied

or totally unstudied. There is thus a double erasure of Kurdish environmentalism in Iran in the academic literature.

In Rojhelat from 1997 to 2005, dozens of local environmental NGOs emerged, aiming at protecting Kurdistan's natural environment and spreading the culturalisation of environmentalism, as defined below. This period thus marked the rapid expansion of environmental activism in Rojhelat. Other than Chya, environmental NGOs based in Rojhelat include Pajin, the People's Association for Protecting the Environment in Bane (established 1999); Willat, the Bokan Institute of Environmental Defenders (1999); the Green Road of Sanandaj (2001); Hewazo, in the city of Diwandere (2001); Ilam, Kabir Kuh Green Association (2002); and more. It is worthy of note that many of the environmental activists involved in these organisations are women, some of them occupying leading roles in the environmental NGOs. Female directors of environmental NGOs in Kurdistan include Fahime Qadem Khayrian (Anjomen-e sabbz-e hefz-e mohit-e zist, Sanandaj, 2001); Ferokhloqa Mo'temedwaziri (Jam'iyet-e Kordestan-e sabz, Sanandaj, 2001), Snor Khaleli (Hewazo, Diwandereh, 2001), and Fateme Ardelan (Anjomen-e zenan-e zamin ve tose'ey-e paydar, Sanandaj, 2001). There has been an overlap with feminist concerns in the environmental movement, and women have challenged both the assault on the environment, and the patriarch of state and society.

According to Kurdish human rights activist Saied Sanandaji (2020), in Rojhelat environmental activism is a politicised area, explicable as the Kurds' reaction to the Islamic regime's destruction of Rojhelat's natural environment and plundering of its natural resources, including the transportation of water and exploitation of underground natural resources. Protesting the regime's colonial behaviour in Kurdistan has been a driving motivation behind the creation of environmental NGOs. Kurdish environmental NGOs enjoy widespread support from the local population. For instance, as one anonymous interviewee (2020) stated, the NGO Chya has roughly 14,000–15,000 members and sympathisers. Farzad Haghshenas (2020) a former Chya member, explains this popularity in the following words:

Environmental NGOs such as Chya provide a space for belonging to a serious organisation that contributes to the culturalisation of environmentalism, and warns the public of threats facing Kurdistan's nature. Most of Rojhelat's environmental NGOs were established at a time where the natural environment of Kurdistan experienced massive and systematic devastation. It was also a time when the government and local authorities not only did not care about this destruction, but their activities contributed to the acceleration of this devastation. Chya was the NGO that made and is still making sincere efforts to protect Kurdistan's natural environment from total devastation.

Kurdish environmental activists, who present an alternative to the entrenched approach of the state's environmental policies, offers a model of environmental governance referred to as "civic environmentalism". According to DeWitt John (1994, 30), this "features an emphasis on dealing with problems at state and local levels and involves a political process in which divergent values are recognized and many individuals and organizations work collaboratively to forge balanced, comprehensive solutions". However, one element of John's civil environmentalism does not apply to Kurdish environmental NGOs'/activists' relationship with governmental institutions, which is conflictual rather than collaborative. Madeh Ahmadi (2020), a UK-based journalist and political activist, describes environmental activists in Rojhelat as a revolutionary form of resistance against the authoritarian regime colonising Kurdistan. In addition to the professional focus on environmental issues, environmental activism in Rojhelat is a form of *berxodani medani* (non-violent resistance), in which environmental activists react to and resist the regime's colonial socio-political and cultural policies in Kurdistan. According to Ahmadi, "While regime institutions are involved in distributing [recreational] drugs among Kurds, environmental activists are running awareness campaigns, planting trees and spreading a culture of coexistence of human beings and nature".

The conflict between environmental activists and governmental institutions has become more evident following Kurdish environmental activists' claim for equitable distribution of natural resources and expressions of mistrust of the government's environmental management. Dale Jamieson (2007, 89) argues that justice is at the heart of environmentalism, and that the idea of

environmental justice is multidimensional. It includes the demands for the equal distribution of the benefits and burdens of human interactions with the environment, and for participation in decisions that concern the environment.

To borrow from Sunhyuk Kim's conceptualisation of the relationship between environmental activists and the authorities in Taiwan, Kurdish environmental activists/NGOs' relations with state institutions can be characterised as "conflictual engagement" (2000, 302). In many regards, the values manifested in Iran's state-centric development are increasingly inappropriate for the social and economic realities of Rojhelat. Environmental NGOs and activists have argued that the government should adopt an attitude of "negotiate, don't dictate" (borrowed from Crowe and Shryer 1995, 28). Kurdish environmental activists also demand a fair share of the natural resources the government extracts from Kurdistan, where they would benefit the local economy and not only the central Iranian economy. For example, the gold mines of Qorw-e and Saqhez in Kurdistan Province provide over 70 percent of Iran's gold and a huge revenue to the state, but make no contribution to the living condition of the local people. Such a condition of exploitation has even been reported in state-friendly media (Tasnimnews 2019).

Chya; Rojhelat's green platform

The Kurdish word *chya* (mountain) is the name of Rojhelat's most prominent and proactive environmental NGO. Chya was founded in summer 1999 to conduct environmental and cultural activities in the area of Mariwan, a city and county in Rojhelat which borders Iraqi Kurdistan. Chya views the environment (*jinge*) as a wide range of biological and cultural elements, each of which in their own way shape our thinking and lives. As Chya's eponymous magazine states,

Everything surrounding us is considered as our environment; therefore, establishing sustainable conditions of life for ourselves and future generations requires responsible interaction with our surroundings. Specifically, our environment is composed of elements such as water, soil, air, and living beings, which have a huge impact on our existence and lifecycles. The destruction of these would be equivalent to our own elimination. (BN *Chya* October 2008, 1)

Explaining the reasons for its emergence and continued work, Chya has stated that "due to the absence of a serious focus on environmental education [in Iran] aimed at providing environmental knowledge and stopping the rapid destruction of the environment, we are determined that, by establishing Chya, we will take steps in this regard" (BN *Chya* October 2008, 1). The impact of Chya's activists has been seen particularly in regions around Mariwan which have previously been damaged by wildfires, unsustainable extraction and exploitation of natural resources, and land speculation.

Countering wildfires in the forests of Mariwan has been a major task. In this regard, one of the initial steps taken by Chya following its emergence was the creation of a local, non-governmental fire brigade (BN *Chya* April–May 2009, 2). Mobilising the public in putting out wildfires has been a key element of Chya's activity, referred to in every number of its magazine *Chya*. Chya has criticised the government, as well as the (Kurdish) elites and well-educated residents of the city, for their lack of contribution to solving local environmental issues. In their own words, "We recognise that Chya is not a fire brigade; however, due to the state institutions' lack of contribution, and the public's lack of participation in putting out wildfires, Chya has to do the job" (Hosseini 2010, 6).

Chya's founding statement emphasised that Chya is not a political organisation, something repeatedly stressed by its members (BN *Chya* October 2008, 1). Instead, members and sympathisers of Chya describe the NGO and its mouthpiece *Chya* as fulfilling a series of diverse, harmonious functions, such as being "a green tribune for "green thinkers" [*sawzbir*]", and "the voice of cultural, civic, and environmental activists" (BN *Chya* July 2009; Monthly *Chya* November 2015, 1). Regarding the role of *Chya* magazine as a platform that allows the voice of the marginalised to be heard, Amin Azizi (2011b, 3) refers to the magazine as "the voice of the oppressed".

Chya's ambitions and popularity have exceeded its immediate locality; therefore, it has been referred to as "a phenomenon" (Karimian 2010, 9). Its achievements have even received some recognition, albeit limited, from the Iranian government. In a country-wide environmental competition in 2014, Mariwan represented by Chya received the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's prestigious award *Jayezay-e Milliy-e Mohit-e Zist* (the National Environmental Award). Mariwan has since been baptised "the environmental capital of Kurdistan" (IRNA 2014).

Chya enjoys a widespread popularity among Kurds as a result of its dedication to its aims. The presence in Chya of well-known local figures such as Sharif Bajwar, is another reason for its popularity and success. Bajwar was a leading Chya activist, who alongside Omid Hussainzade (Koneposhi) and two rangers, Rahmat Hakiminya and Mohammad Pajohi, died while attempting to put out a wildfire in August 2018 (Soleimani 2020). Chya's popularity has been further enhanced through activities such as collecting public donations for areas in Kermashan province hit by the earthquake of November 2017. According to Haghshenas (2020), "While the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps" [IRGC] tent for collecting donations received only two pickup truck donations of goods, Bajwar's tent [the Chya tent] received 33 pickup truck donations from the public to support Kermashan. This was clear evidence of the public's trust in Chya'. Kaveh Ghoreishi (2019), a Kurdish journalist, describes Chya's impact in the following terms:

Imagine a person walking the distance between several cities to save a few [stray] puppies. Another person, a poacher, destroys his gun and abandons hunting forever. His act spreads to other cities from the next day, and becomes a symbol against poaching. Or imagine, a group of young men and women walking from house to house to discuss environmental and health issues with the public. And a young doctor couple treating animals for free at their home on the weekends. Imagine the mobilisation of an entire city for putting out wildfires, with the minimum equipment, as if they are rescuing their own children from death.

Running an NGO as proactive as Chya, with a focus on a wide variety of sociocultural and environmental activities, systematically publishing biweekly and monthly bulletins, has required a substantial budget. Environmental activists relate that public donations, mainly the contributions of wealthy local individuals, have been the only financial source supporting Chya's activity. The CEO and members of Chya's management board are all volunteers with other occupations, who have dedicated a great deal of their time and resources to carrying Chya towards its target. The regular appearance of *Chya* magazine over a period of a decade (2008–2018), aside from a few short interruptions, has been a unique achievement. From 2008 to 2013, Chya published 70 biweekly editions available to the public for free. From 2015 to 2018, 27 monthly (rather than biweekly) editions of *Chya* appeared, distributed in five Kurdish-populated provinces in Rojhelat: Kurdistan, Lurestan, Ilam, Kermashan, and Western Azerbaijan. The biweekly editions of *Chya* had an informative layout, and mainly focused on environmental news and reports of Chya's activity. At the time of the change to monthly publication, the magazine's editorial line shifted to become strongly critical towards the Iranian government. The state's military forces, the IRGC and the army, are frequently referred to as the culprits behind the environmental degradation of Kurdistan. This discursive shift has been explained as a "reaction to the increasing number of wildfires [...] and governmental, private and public activities with damaging impacts on the environment" (Ahmadi 2020).

The IRGC's plan to construct an oil refinery next to the Lake of Zrebar (hereafter Zrebar) in 2015–2016, has been a major source of dispute between Kurdish environmental activists in Mariwan and local authorities. At this time, *Chya* featured articles under headlines such as "Building a Refinery Next to Zrebar?! A Massive Catastrophe is Waiting to Happen", and "Zrebar is a Red Line", highlighting the devastating impact of the environmental activity of the IRGC and other state institutions, and denouncing this plan (Monthly *Chya* October 2017, 1). Chya's protests were not limited to written statements. To protest the refinery plan, Chya organised several peaceful mass protests, mobilising up to 14,000–15,000 protesters from Mariwan and surrounding areas in February 2015, who marched from Mariwan toward Zrebar. The extent of the protest meant the IRGC cancelled the project, or at least delayed it until an undefined time (Haghshenas 2020). Another example of the mobilisation of

mass protest against environmentally damaging activities was the Save Kani Bel Campaign (*Kampan-e nejat-e Kani Bel*), for which Chya organised 3000 individuals and a host of local NGOs in 2016. The protests against the construction of a dam on Kani Bel, a natural spring in Kermashan Province and a symbolic hallmark of identity and culture in Rojhelat, included a hunger strike of ten environmental activists (Rahimzadeh 2016, 58–59).

Chya is one of dozens of Kurdish environmental NGOs in Rojhelat, each with a local focus limited to the city or governorate that has issued them authorisation. For instance, Chya's activities are limited to Mariwan, Sewlawa and surrounding areas. Kurdish environmental and human rights activists state that this form of localisation has been imposed upon them by the authorities, aimed at keeping these NGOs under tight control and reducing their operational capabilities as much as possible. For instance, Sanandaji (2020) explains, that even though Kurdish NGOs, including environmental NGOs, are registered with the authorities and have been issued the authorisation for conducting their legal activities, their expansion and increasing popularity means they are viewed by the regime as a security threat. For this reason, the regime does not allow a region-wide Kurdish environmental NGO with branches in different cities of Rojhelat.

As shown in the author's recent study, environmental activism in Rojhelat has suffered an immense securitisation. While harassment, jail sentences and assassinations of environmental activists have resulted from this securitisation, self-censorship and enduring fear and anxiety are also part of the everyday lives of environmental activists and their families (Hassaniyan 2020a). I have observed the presence of such a climate of fear imposed on environmental and civil society activists during my attempts to arrange research-related interviews with environmental activists. The brief responses of most of them to my initial communication went along the lines of "We are sorry we are not able to help you. Please do not mention our NGO in your research". Chya has not been an exception from this state of securitisation, and has spoken out vocally against it. A statement published in *Chya* protested the "unexplained arrests" of its members Sharif Bajwar, Behroz Darwand, and Mohammad Iraj Qaderi by the IRGC's intelligence service Itellat Spah on 23 July 2011 (BN *Chya* August 2011, 2). Nevertheless, the list of arrests, torture, and killings of environmental activities in Rojhelat has become longer in the intervening years.

The Iranian state has also tried to limit the impact of NGOs, even on a local scale, through more institutionalised methods. From July to December 2010, Chya monitored 886 cases of wildfires in the forests of Mariwan and Sanandaj. Chya's public denunciations of the local authorities' mismanagement of wildfires in the 2010s can be identified as the catalyst for increasingly tense relations between Chya and governmental institutions. As a result of this antipathy, the local authorities have excluded Chya from coordinated activities aimed at solving Mariwan's environmental challenges. Chya has protested against this exclusion, writing on one occasion

The local authorities, despite Chya's undeniable contribution to solving environmental issues and its active effort in averting thousands of wildfires, have excluded Chya from taking part in crucial environmental meetings, among them meeting of the Committee of Crisis Management on 21 June 2011. (BN *Chya* August 2010; June 2011, 2)

Culturalisation of environmentalism

Culturalisation, or the establishment and spreading of a widespread culture privileging environmental sustainability with a role to be played by individuals, households, businesses, industries and institutions, has been among the key tasks of Chya in Kurdistan. The culturalisation of environmentalism can be understood as the process of social adaptation to environmentally-friendly behaviour, and the acquisition of values and behaviours compatible with the environmental values promoted by environmental agencies, NGOs and associations. This can be acquired through environmental education, itself a process of gaining awareness of the world around us, with its beauty and resources that must be used responsibly. Altogether, this approach should lead "the individual to value nature and to seek to preserve it" (Ramírez and Santana 2019, 1). Despite strong public

support for the culturalisation of environmentalism, this has not been an easy task. Frequently powerful forces, such as state institutions and opportunist local figures, have stood in the way of Chya's aim of the comprehensive realisation of culturalisation of environmentalism. However, Chya's activity towards this target has resulted in the emergence of noteworthy new trends in the community that has been Chya's operational base.

The motto "We are an element of nature, and not its owner", has been a central value in the practice of environmentalism in Kurdistan. Based on this and similar mottos, such as "I think green, that's why I exist", awareness campaigns have been mobilised on the threats facing the environment (Azizi 2009, 1). Promoting a culture of coexistence between nature and human beings has been a principal element of this project. Highlighting potentially destructive approaches to economic growth and development, and the unsustainable extraction and overconsumption of natural resources, as major root causes of environmental destruction, environmental activists in Rojhelat have encouraged policy makers and the public to rethink their approaches to, and interactions with, nature. According to Heshmat Qorbani (2015, 6), achieving such a goal requires promoting environmental education, which is as or even more important than regular education, since it is desperately required for rescuing the planet from total destruction.

On the communal level, a wide range of activities have been organised by Chya as elements of the culturalisation of environmentalism, including clean-up activities and training the community in waste management and recycling. For instance, the frequent clean-ups of cities and neighbourhoods by members of the public has become routine in Mariwan. According to Haghshenas (2020), "this decade-old practice of cleaning cities and neighbourhoods has now become a culture. This hopefully will spread to other parts of Kurdistan and will remain as part of Chya's legacy for future generations". These endeavours are not limited to urban areas. As reported in *Chya* under the section *Jinge parezi le gondokani Mariwan* (Environmentalism in villages of Mariwan), Chya's educational teams travel to and offer activities in villages and remote areas. These environmental trips have offered environmental workshops, health and hygiene education, helped established women's groups, and facilitated discussions of the everyday challenges faced by women in these communities. Referring to Chya's culturalisation of environmentalism, Ahmadi (2020) states that

For me, seeing a 70-year old man from a remote village in Kurdistan, carrying a garbage bag and collecting rubbish, not from his household, but cleaning wild areas and public spaces of litter left by others, is evidence of Chya's achievement and its close ties with the public. But it is also evidence that the people have taken environmentalism to their hearts.

Chya has also organised anti-poaching activities and campaigns for the release of birds and animals in captivity, for ensuring biodiversity and as a sign of respect for the lives of other creatures. A remarkable example is the impact of the act of the abovementioned poacher Ahmad Azizi from Dereke, a village of Mariwan: "Azizi, after decades of poaching, publicly crushed his gun and the cages, and released his captive partridges. Images of Azizi's actions spread through different Kurdish and non-Kurdish media platforms" (Hassaniyan 2020a, 364).

Rojhelat is known for its four distinct seasons and moderate climate, and its colourful natural sites have been increasingly popular tourist destinations for internal tourists from other parts of Iran in recent years. Mariwan has not been an exception. In particular, the beauty of Zrebar and its ecosystem has meant that Zrebar, known as the *Negin-e Sabz* (the Green jewel) has been the region's most attractive tourist destination. Zrebar has hosted many tourists; however, it has also suffered from destructive activities. In addition to the abovementioned threat of the construction of an oil refinery, the activities of private investors, land speculators, governmental institutions, and touristic activities, have each in their way caused damage to Zrebar's ecosystem. For instance, irregular and illegal construction activities, such as the construction of residential, commercial and military compounds, are examples of activities threatening the environmental sustainability of Zrebar (BN *Chya* July 2009, 3). Recognising the vital importance of Zrebar and other natural sites in Mariwan to the local economy as tourist destinations, Chya has proposed the establishment of a "green economy

and sustainable tourism" (*gerdeshgeri-e paydar*), in which protecting the environment should be prioritised above any other activities in this region. A key element of sustainable tourism is encouraging local businesses to not overcharge for the services they offer tourists, an aspect Chya weighs highly in its programme of the culturalisation of environmentalism.

Recognising and promoting the role of women in different aspects of life, not least in solving Kurdistan's environmental challenges, has been another element of the culturalisation of environmentalism. The term "ecofeminism" may illustrate Kurdish environmentalists' claim of the intersection of interests between women and environment. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva explain that "Ecofeminism, a "new term for an ancient wisdom" grew out of various social movements – the feminist, peace and the ecology movements – in the late 1970s and the early 1980s", draw strong links between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature (2014, 13). Holding a gendered perspective on environmental issues, ecofeminists consider women as victims of environmental degradation, but also active agents in movements for environmental protection and regeneration (Agarwal 1992; Warren 1997). Due to women's involvement in food production and farming throughout history, particularly in the civilisations of the Near, Middle and Far East, Mies and Shiva (2014) and Warren (1997) identify women as being closer to nature. Women in the Third World in particular are immediately dependent on nature, and have a special practical and social knowledge of it (Shiva in Agarwal 1992, 124–125). Ecofeminists thus claim that women have a particular stake in ending the harmful human domination of nature, and "healing the alienated human and non-human nature" (Agarwal 1992, 120). Feminist environmentalism argues that one cannot eliminate the male domination of women under patriarchy without working to dismantle all forms of domination, including human domination of the natural world.

Whether Kurdish women's involvement in the environmentalist movement in Rojhelat really constitutes ecofeminism or feminist environmentalism is uncertain, and further research is required. Nevertheless, Mansour Sohrabi (2020) argues that Rojhelat indeed has an ecofeminist movement. Despite cultural and authoritarian barriers limiting women's participation in socio-political and cultural activities, Kurdish women environmentalists have established their presence in the wider environmental movement. Membership in environmental associations has provided Kurdish women with a platform for action regardless of their gender, in which they can participate shoulder-to-shoulder with male activists in socio-cultural and environmental activities. These women have thus become crucial agents for the promotion of environmentalism. According to Sohrabi,

one example among many others is Kurdish women's active participation and contribution to the annual popular festival *Zagrosane*, and planting oak seeds. This is an enviro-cultural event that has contributed greatly to the sustainability of the endangered forests of Zagros, at a time when these forests are suffering from challenges such as disproportional timber cutting, and huge wildfires. (2020, 95)

On multiple occasions, Chya has co-organised activities with environmental NGOs run primarily by female environmental activists. For instance, in 2010, a major tree-planting event hosted by Chya took place in Mariwan, in which 500 members of the public in Mariwan planted over 1200 trees; the Anjomen-e Zanan-e Rah-e sabze Kordestan (the Women's Association of the Green Road of Kurdistan) participated in the event (BN *Chya* March 2010, 2). *Chya* has covered topics including "women's role in the interaction between environment and economy", "women and the environment", and "women's leading role in utilisation and protection of environment" (Koneposhi 2009, 4; Kurdistanian 2016b, 3; Rafi'i 2017, 6). The focus on gender diversity has meant the encouragement of women and their representation in all the activities organised by Chya. In this regard, Chya has established a committee named the Women's Committee of Chya, tasked with "assessing and promoting the role of women in the culturalisation of environmentalism". However, while women are well-represented in Chya's activities, there have as yet been no women on its leadership board.

Groups defined by gender, class, and religious or national identity, may all provide the basis for environmental justice movements. In fact, both at global and intra-state levels, it is mainly the poor,

minorities, and other marginalised groups that suffer most harshly from environmental hazards, forced to pay the price for environmental degradation while the privileged may escape harsh conditions (Dawson 2000, 23–26). Despite many environmental activists' assertion of environmentalism as non-political, in Rojhelat environmentalism's engagement in multifaceted activities has turned it into a platform for uplifting Kurdish national identity, culture, and language. Highlighting the links between Kurdish national identity and Kurdistan's nature (forests, mountains, rivers, etc.) is a clear feature of environmental activists in Rojhelat; therefore, *Chya* reminds its audience that "environmentalism is a task of patriotism" (BN *Chya* February 2011, 7). By drawing a link between Kurdish national identity and Kurdistan's natural environment, and spreading awareness among the Kurdish people of the threats facing this environment, one writer for *Chya*, Anwar Rewshen (2009, 3), points to Kurdistan's forests as a national treasure, stating that "as a repressed and deprived nation, nature is our only capital".

Dawson's study of environmental justice movements across the Third World provides a framework for explaining environmentalism in Rojhelat and its attitude towards Kurdish identity and culture. This characteristic reflects a trend of environmental justice in which environmentalism has become intertwined with demands for greater protection of minorities' national rights, leading to an amalgamation of the fight for environmental protection and the struggle for equal and just treatment of ethnic, national, racial, regional and gender-based groups. In Dawson's words, this "offers the potential to transform environmentalism from an abstract and largely elitist cause to a far more powerful and diverse movement, deriving its strength from the rallying cry of justice and equality" (2000, 23).

Kurdish environmentalists' cherishing of Kurdish national identity and culture, alongside their struggle for ecological justice, can be explained through the lenses of "econationalism", a synthesis of environmentalism, national identity, and the struggle for justice. According to Dawson, "In both environmental justice and eco-nationalist movements, opposition to an environmental hazard is grafted on to a campaign for group justice, which may involve rectification of injustices or the achievement of justice through complete political sovereignty for the group" (2000, 27). In subaltern studies, econationalism (or ecological nationalism) refers to the iconification of native species, landscape and other natural/ecological hallmarks in a way that appeals to nationalist sentiment. For instance, in Rojhelat the Zagros mountain range, the oak trees of Kurdistan, Kani Bel in the Kermanshan Province, and Lake Kani Berzan in Mahabad, are a few examples of natural features repeatedly referenced in texts and images produced by environmentalists and describing the beauty of Kurdistan.

As mentioned above, the monthly *Chya* has also served as a platform for denouncing the Iranian regime's discriminatory policies toward Kurds in Rojhelat. *Chya's* criticisms of environmentally damaging state activities, such as deforestation due to industrial timber-cutting, the IRGC's counterinsurgency measures (especially over the last two decades, with the justification that forests serve as hiding-places for Kurdish fighters, the IRGC has shelled and burned forests in Rojhelat), transportation of Kurdistan's water resources to central Iran, and the state's exploitation of Kurdistan's mineral and other natural resources, have included the description of Rojhelat as an internal colony of the Iranian state (Qaderi 2015, 3). *Chya* has described the destruction of Kurdistan's environment as "eco-terrorism", and the state as an "eco-mafia" (Monthly *Chya* January 2017). For instance, Mas'oud Binande (2017, 1–2) has claimed that the Kurds in Rojhelat are the subject of a

state of exception and unequal centre-peripheral relations, in which Kurdistan is a peripheral and isolated region captured in an unpredictable and exploitive economic system. The production system in Kurdistan is product of a centralised economic system imposed on Kurds, resulting in massive deprivation.

The discriminatory policies of the state have been linked to the state's management of wildfires in the forests of Rojhelat and the northern regions of Iran. Comparing the authorities' handling of the wildfires in Mariwan to the approach in the northern Iranian province of Golestan, Maryam Nezeri

(2010, 8) has accused the authorities of discriminating against the Kurds and their region. In her own words,

The tragedy is revealed as even more painful when the authorities close their eyes when 30 hectares of oak trees in Mariwan and Sarwabad burn down, but they only pay any attention to the fires in Golestan. These forests of Kurdistan have been on fire for several months, and state institutions have done nothing to control these fires. The authorities not only did not help the Kurds when they fought the fires, but also accused them of lying.

Nezeri's statement refers to the claim of Mariwan's governor, Mohammad Kiyani, that the wildfires were occurring due to natural factors, such as summer heat. Kiyani rejected the environmentalists' claim of human-made wildfires, stating "It cannot be denied that the wildfires are occurring due to natural reasons; however, some individuals with political motives, or personal issues against the authorities, have described these wildfires as being manmade" (Kiyani cited in BN *Chya* November 2010, 2).

The social, political and economic disenfranchisement of Kurds in Rojhelat, reflected in the destruction of its environment and exploitation of its natural resources, has meant that Kurdish environmental activists have raised questions about the state-centric and elitist definition of "security and development" used in Iran. For instance, in articles published in *Chya*, Kurdish environmental activists and intellectuals assert "the need for deconstructing the concept of development", "development based on indigenous values and premises", and the standpoint that environmental security is "more important than national security" (Koneposhi 2015, 6; Daswar 2016, 4; Kurdistani 2016a, 3). They ask for a sustainable economic and political system respecting Rojhelat's environment and natural resources, account for the rights and wishes of its population. By challenging the state's developmental activities such as the construction of dams and oil refineries, they demand that any developmental activities in Kurdistan should consider the environment, and adopt a model of environmental security agreed upon by the region's population (Azizi 2011a, 3; 2016, 1).

The monthly editions of *Chya* also feature a regular section titled *Kolber Name*. This focuses on the root causes of the exploitive socioeconomic system imposed on Kurdistan, which has resulted in the appearance of the *kolberi*, porters of goods from neighbouring states across the borders of Rojhelat. While this does not at first sight relate to environmental concerns, this phenomenon nonetheless springs from the same relationship of domination from which also derive the threats facing nature in Rojhelat. In Kurdish, *kolberi* refers to the cross-border labour in which people, of varying ages, known as *kolbers* carry goods such as foodstuffs, electronic devices and mechanical parts on their backs across the borders of Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Criminalised by the Iranian state, *kolbers* face violence, imprisonment and killing from Iranian security forces. Soleimani and Mohammadpour's study (2020) of this precarious profession in Rojhelat exposes the danger of *kolberi*, as *kolbers* are regularly shot by Iranian border forces, or die from injuries sustained in the mountains, walking into minefields, or exposure to extreme cold. The phenomenon of *kolberi* evinces an entrenched de-development in Iranian Kurdistan, a by-product of exceptional security conditions created by the state itself. Soleimani and Mohammadpour claim that *kolberi* is a symptom of internal colonialism (2020, 741–742). Soleimani and Mohammadpour conceptualise the social position of *kolbers* as follows:

The legal status of *kolberi* is unclear as it serves the state's overall policies of control and assimilation in Kurdistan. Although, *kolbers* often hold state IDs, it is up to the Iranian border patrol to recognize or refuse them. More often than not, *kolbers* are shot by the said forces for doing cross-border transfer of goods. Therefore, the subjection of *kolberi* to the arbitrary exercises of a capricious state constitutes a manifest example of the *state of exception*: neither entirely legal nor clearly criminalized. It signifies Kurdish liminal economic life that can both be tolerable and warrant death. While the Islamic Republic of Iran keeps other borders relatively open to the international trade, it arbitrarily kills those Kurds who carry goods on their backs as their only means of eking out a living. (2020, 742)

The *Chya* articles which document the stories of the *kolbers* killed during their work, assert that the figure of the *kolber*, their exploitation and the killing they face, are products of a centre-peripheral

relationship imposed on the Kurds (Sharifi 2017, 6). In this regard *Chya* has become a voice for the otherwise voiceless *kolbers*. The heavy suppression of the Kurds including the everyday killing of the *kolbers*, the plundering of their natural resources, the massive destruction of Kurdistan in the name of development, and the underinvestment in the region's infrastructure, have led the activists of *Chya* to confront the Iranian authorities with questions such as "What is our share of development?", and "Why do the highways, railways and prosperity not reach Kurdistan?" (Fethi 2017, 6; Mohammadnejad 2018, 78).

One topic that has systematically been covered in *Chya* is the campaign for education in Kurdish and mother languages other than Persian in Iranian schools. Amin Azizi, in a column entitled "Language Politics" included in every number of *Chya*, has argued for the importance of education in mother languages, discussing examples of countries with successful bilingual or multilingual education systems. Azizi (2017, 5) condemns political regimes that deny people the right of speaking, and receiving education in their mother tongue, equating denial of the mother language with "racism and genocide". Azizi and *Chya's* love for the Kurdish language springs from the same source as *Chya's* appreciation for and defence of the environment of Rojhelat, which has always been a central subject of Kurdish poetry and literature.

Conclusion

This study has argued that environmental activism in Rojhelat is a nascent trend, with its origins in the late 1980s. The movement's underlying motivations are the protection of Rojhelat's natural environment from the Iranian state's destructive military, economic and developmental activities; spreading popular consciousness of environmental concerns; and promoting principles of direct democracy, gender equality and ecological well-being in a needs-based economy (Hunt 2019). Kurdish environmental activist groups from different parts of Kurdistan, despite differences in their specific histories and practices, share fundamental values such as viewing the environmental and ecological struggle as part of the liberation of all humanity (Hunt 2019, 3), campaigning for direct democracy in the states where they live, and viewing humans as a part of nature rather than its owner.

Through the deforestation and wildfires of recent decades, resulting in part from the IRGC's shelling of highlands and national parks, the Islamic regime has escalated its war on Rojhelat, as part of its efforts against the Kurdish movement. Kurdish civil society, with its environmental activists on the frontline, has been the main, if not the only, defender of Rojhelat's nature, and the main opposition to the regime's destructive policies. Accounting for the emergence, evolution, practices and discourses of Kurdistan's environmental activists, this trend should arguably be viewed within the context of the Kurdish liberation movement in Rojhelat and other parts of Kurdistan and as a form of civilian resistance, in addition to its place within the global environmental movement. In such an authoritarian political regime as the Islamic Republic of Iran, and with no space or opportunity to claim national rights through other forms of political organisation, environmentalism and econationalism have become an effective platform for expressing criticism of the regime's politics in Rojhelat, and demanding the cultural, economic and national rights of Kurds in this part of Kurdistan.

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is by definition and practice, an authoritarian regime which for forty years has maintained and centralised its power by using violence against real and perceived opponents. In such a totalitarian regime, "in each realm of life for each purpose there is only one possible channel for participation and the overall purpose and direction is set by one center", defining the legitimate goals of any civic activism and ultimately controls them (Linz 2000, 70–71). The Kurds and their national movement in Rojhelat have, beyond any other non-Persian nationality, suffered from sovereign suppression. Sweeping militarisation and securitisation of different aspects of life have left Kurdish civil society with a diminishing space for mobilising against the regime's discriminatory policies in Kurdistan. Similarly to many other aspects of civic activism in

Rojhelat, environmental activism has suffered immensely, with long-term imprisonment, executions and, in some cases, cold-blooded assassinations of environmental activists conducted by the IRGC and other Iranian security and intelligence forces (Hassaniyan 2020b). Nevertheless, the practices of environmental activism, framed through a Kurdish-specific ecotationalism, have arguably achieved a continuation of the Kurdish national movement, serving the Kurdish endeavour for achieving equal and just treatment in a multi-national Iran.

Notes

1. Joan Martinez-Alier classifies environmental movements into three categories: the “cult of wilderness”, the “gospel of eco-efficiency” and the “environmentalism of the poor”. He characterises these three categories “as channels of a single river, branches of a big tree, or varieties of the same crop, [with] a lot in common, and all three are opposed by anti-environmentalists or despised or neglected by them” (2002, 1).

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