

## The Gains and Risks of Kurdish Civic Activism in Iran

Allan Hassaniyan *In*: 295 (Summer 2020)

On July 13, 2020, two young Kurdish men, Diako Rasoulzadeh and Saber Sheikh-Abdollah, were **executed** by the Iranian government on fabricated charges of involvement in bombing a military parade in Mahabad in 2010. They were also members of Komala, a banned Kurdish political party. **Amnesty International** notes that, “There has been an alarming escalation in use of the death penalty against protesters, dissidents and members of minority groups in Iran.” The Kurdish region is the most **militarized** in Iran, a situation that dates back to the Islamic revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). The persecution and alarming number of executions of political and civil society activists among the Iranian Kurds are repeatedly featured in annual reports by the United Nation’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). In the OHCHR’s July 2019 report, **Javid Rahman**, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, confirms that almost half of political prisoners in Iran are Kurdish activists while Kurdish people make up just ten to 15 percent of Iran’s population.

The Kurds in Iran have been engaged in a century-long struggle against sovereign authority in Tehran. While armed insurgency has been one element of Kurdish politics in Iran—especially in the late 1940s, 1970s and 1980s—the Kurds’ response over the past 40 years to the state’s authoritarian policies in Kurdistan has also taken the form of civic activism, especially in the spheres of publishing, language instruction and environmental activism.

The Kurds’ central demand is autonomy and the right of self-determination within the legal and political framework of a democratic Iran, which has been the main objective of the Kurdish struggle since the Iranian revolution. For example, the Kurdish movement, especially its leading political organization the **KDPI**, framed its claim for national rights in terms of democracy for Iran and autonomy for Kurdistan (*Demokrasi beray Iran, khodmokhtari beray Kordestan*). The state, which represses Kurdish social and political activity as a threat to Iran’s national security, rejects this call outright.<sup>[1]</sup> In the absence of legal political parties in Iran, Kurdish civil society (which refers to associations that are legally recognized by the local, provincial and central government) has had to innovate new methods of resistance to authoritarian rule, even though the securitized nature of Kurdish-state relations has made this task extraordinarily challenging.

Kurds living under the rule of the Islamic republic have, however, succeeded in creating counter-hegemonic discourses that challenge the state’s nationalist identity as well as its cultural, developmental and security politics. But academic conversations and studies of Kurdish politics in Iran remain narrowly focused on the activities, and armed insurgencies, of the mainstream political parties of Iranian Kurdistan: the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), the Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (Komala) and the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), all of which are considered illegal by the Iranian state.<sup>[2]</sup> This limited academic view is peculiarly similar to Tehran’s own framing of Kurdish politics. As a result, Kurdish civil society’s approach to claiming their social, political and cultural rights under the rule of the Islamic republic remains relatively unknown to the outside world as well as to many Iranians whose knowledge of Kurdistan is limited to state media.

The conflict between state institutions and Kurdish environmental groups in particular reveal competing approaches to economic development, sustainability and security. Environmental activists denounce the government’s industrial and development policies in Kurdistan as unsustainable, overly state-centric and detrimental to the natural environment, leaving the Kurdish region even further underdeveloped and deprived. The state responds to environmental activism as if to a security threat, using harsh measures such as imprisonment and executions.

### The Rapid Expansion of Kurdish Civil Society

The election victory of reformist clergyman Mohammad Khatami in May 1997 and his two consecutive presidential terms (1997 to 2005), is often referred to as the moment of the birth of Iran’s contemporary reform movement.<sup>[3]</sup> Supporting the reformist front at the ballot box was one of the ways Kurds expressed their support for democratization of the state—specifically, the de-centralization of power and greater transparency, meritocracy and rule of law. Many candidates from Kurdish reformist groups were elected to the Iranian parliament in the sixth election (2000). In the seventh general election in 2004 however, Kurdish reformists, like other reformist groups, were shut out of parliament when the Guardian Council stepped in to vet, and reject, reformist candidates, which led to a decline in voter turnout.

Nevertheless, the years of reform improved the political and cultural situation in Kurdistan to some degree by facilitating the formation of a variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society groups.<sup>[4]</sup> Since then, Kurdish civil society has entered a new phase, with various sectors criticizing the state’s policies in Kurdistan. For instance, a peripheral form of national and cultural identity is seeking to challenge the state’s claim of a homogeneous and unified Iranian identity. This critique is neither new nor unique to the Kurds: Other non-Persian and non-Shiite communities in Iran also challenge the state’s formulation of Iranian identity, such as the Azeries, Arabs, Baluch and Turkmens, but it appears to have accelerated in recent decades, becoming widely popular and politicized.

### Resistance Through Language and Culture

The new civil society organizations bring public attention to domestic violence, criticize the state’s approach to child marriage and child brides and point out the poor condition of schools and educational institutions in Kurdistan. They also campaign for education in Iranian schools to be conducted in Kurdish and other languages other than Persian, which is promised by the constitution but was never instituted. Since the early twentieth century, Kermashan province (particularly its capital city Kermashan) has been at the center of the state’s linguistic assimilation policies in Kurdistan. Promoting Persian as the only medium of educational instruction has been deployed by the Islamic republic and its predecessor regimes. The state attempts to enforce this policy through intimidation and arrests: In July 2020, Zahra Mohammadi, a Kurdish-language teacher in Sanandaj, was **arrested** and given a ten-year sentence for her activism. Kurdish resistance to language policy is also not unique to the post-revolution era, as Kurdish manuscripts from the eighteenth century attest: The legendary Kurdish poet Khana Qubadi (1700-1759) stated in a poem, “even though they say that Persian is sugar, for me Kurdish is sweeter.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Student publications in particular have become a platform to denounce the government’s socioeconomic policies in Kurdistan. They describe state-Kurdish relations in Iran as a center-periphery relationship, where the center not only neglects the rights of Kurds, but also actively attempts to assimilate Kurds and marginalize their culture and identity.

Student activists also argue that the development and prosperity found in other areas of Iran has not reached Kurdistan due to the state’s failed development policies and political centralism.<sup>[6]</sup> Their claim challenges the popular slogan, often repeated by certain elites of the Islamic regime, that “Iran is for all Iranians.”

[Kurdish identity in Iran is being reconstructed through an emphasis on identity and raising consciousness. For instance, Kurds are commonly referred to by the state as an Aryan people that shares historical roots with Persians. However, bilingual media produced by Kurdish students has taken a starkly different line over the last two decades. Activists assert that “we have to reclaim our identity and reframe the identity of our land and cities” and point to the Kurdishness of cities such as Kermashan, the city with the largest Kurdish population in Iran.<sup>[7]</sup> The promotion of a self-defined form of Kurdish identity, distanced from the state-promoted form of Iranian identity (that draws upon Aryanism and Shi’ism) is a visible element of these publications. Referring to the Kurds as “the people of Zagros,” a terrain with different geographical, cultural and social characteristics to southern, central and eastern Iran, this self-identification proclaims the historical difference between Kurdish and Persian identity.

### Environmentalism in the Defense of Kurdistan

Environmental activism is another significant trend among Kurds in Iran, especially over the last decade: Almost every city in Iranian Kurdistan now has its own environmental society. The Kurdistan Green Association, Environmental Protectors of Willat, the Chya Green Association and the Association of Green Thinkers are examples of environmental NGOs and associations that are campaigning for the protection and preservation of Kurdistan’s natural environment. Awareness campaigns, such as documenting the destructive impact of dams, clear-cutting and deforestation, are a major activity of these associations.<sup>[8]</sup> Criticizing and challenging the state’s industrial and military projects in Kurdistan and their degrading effect on nature are further aspects of Kurdish environmentalism.

A core grievance of local Kurdish environmental organizations is the deforestation resulting from wildfires. As documented by Chya Green Association, the Zagros forest suffered from over 2,100 cases of wildfires from 2009 to 2015 in the region of Mariwan. According to journalist **Ammar Goli**, these wildfires have occurred mainly as result of military drills or the counter-insurgency tactics of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), since the dense forests, according to the IRGC, are used for cover by the Peshmerga guerrilla fighters of the KDPI, Komala and PJAK. Another core critique surrounds the use of water. When central parts of Iran, such as Tehran, Isfahan and Kerman, suffer from drought and water shortages, the government—concerned with maintaining economic activities there—transfers water, mainly from Kurdistan’s rivers and lakes, to those regions. This practice has provoked protest from different sections of Kurdish civil society, including environmental activists.<sup>[9]</sup>

Local mobilizations against environmentally damaging activities include several peaceful mass demonstrations organized by Chya to protest the IRGC’s plan to construct an oil refinery next to Lake Zrebar. Chya mobilized up to 15,000 protesters from Mariwan and the surrounding areas in February 2015 to march from Mariwan toward Zrebar. Due to the substantial size of the protest, the IRGC cancelled the project, or at least delayed it indefinitely.<sup>[10]</sup> Chya also organized the Save Kani Bel Campaign in 2016, which involved 3,000 individuals and a host of local NGOs. The protests against the construction of a dam on Kani Bel, a natural spring in Kermashan province and a symbol of Kurdish identity and culture, included a hunger strike by ten environmental activists.<sup>[11]</sup> Despite their protest and campaigns, major elements of the Daryan Dam, constructed on Kani Bel and Sirwan River, were completed in 2018.

The magazine *Chya* has been an important platform for criticizing the state’s approach to development and sustainability. The environmental activist, Amin Azizi, reports on government activities such as the construction of dams and oil refineries and demands that any development in Kurdistan should consider the environment and adopt “a model of environmental security defined by this region’s population.”<sup>[12]</sup>

These tense relations between the politicized and active sections of Kurdish civil society and the Iranian government have further exacerbated the poor relationship between the state and the Kurds in Iran. The main result is deeper securitization and militarization of the Kurdish region by the state’s security and judicial institutions. Some state officials have also labelled Kurdish environmental activists as “anti-development” to justify their persecution and imprisonment by the state. For instance, Mariwan’s governor, Mohammad Kiyani—in reaction to protests by local environmental activists of the authorities’ mismanagement of environmental issues and pursuit of environmentally degrading development activities in Mariwan—called them the “actions of individuals with political motives and actions hampering local development.”<sup>[13]</sup>

The securitization of environmentalism is a countrywide issue and not necessarily limited to the Kurdish region. The mysterious **death** of the environmental scientist Kavous Seyed Emami, co-founder of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, in Evin prison, as well as the plane crash and deaths of 16 environmentalists flying from Tehran to Yasuj on February 18, 2017, are examples of the difficult conditions facing environmental activists across Iran. As shown in **recent studies**, however, the extent to which the state responds to activists as a security threat varies by region.<sup>[14]</sup> Long-term imprisonment, executions and, in some cases, cold-blooded assassinations of civil society and **environmental activists** conducted by the IRGC are among the dangers faced by Kurdish civil society. While there are few concrete signs of alliances being built across ethnic and regional boundaries at this moment, it is clear that this possibility frightens the central government and could/should be part of the struggle to build a more democratic Iran and autonomy for Kurds.

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#### Endnotes

- [1] Abbas Vali, *The Forgotten Years of Kurdish Nationalism in Iran* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 39.
- [2] Nader Entessar, “The Kurdish Mosaic of Discord,” *Third World Quarterly* 11/4 (October 1989), and Farideh Koohi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran: Pastoral Nationalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
- [3] Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, *Democracy in Iran, History and the Quest for Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 128–131.
- [4] The Kurdistan Democratic Student Union (2005), People’s Message (*Payam-e Madoom*, 2003) and The Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan/RMMK (*Rekxerawi Mafe Mirovi Kordestan*, 2005) are examples that were established during the so-called reform era. The *RMMK* was later declared illegal and the founder, Kurdish lawyer and journalist Mohammad Seddigh Kaboudvand, was **arrested** in 2007 and served ten years in prison.
- [5] Khana Qubadi, “Even though they say that Persian is sugar, for me Kurdish is sweeter,” *Srwa* 1/1 (1985), p. 3. [Kurdish]
- [6] Ayub Mohammadnejad, “Why Highway, Railway and Prosperity Does not Reach Kurdistan,” *Ruwange* 12/9-10 (Winter 2018). [Kurdish]
- [7] Porya Almasi, “Zagros’ Gold at the Rate of Silver,” *Kermashan* 1/5 (2016), p. 8. [Kurdish]
- [8] Hayder Rohi, “Dams Destructive Impact on the Environment,” *Chya Sociocultural Monthly* 1/2 (December 2015), p. 3. [Kurdish]
- [9] Allan Hassaniyan, “Environmentalism in Iranian Kurdistan: Causes and Conditions for its Securitisation,” *Conflict, Security and Development*, 20/1 (2020).
- [10] Author’s interview with environmental activist, Farzad Haghshenas, May 22, 2020.
- [11] Dlniya Rahimzadeh, “Kani Bel, National Treasure,” *Rwange* 1/1 (January 2016). [Kurdish]
- [12] Amin Azizi, “Dams: Development and Progress or Questionable Steps?” *Biweekly Chya* 3/67 (September 2011). Amin Azizi, “Security and the Rights of Ethnonational Groups,” *Chya Sociocultural Monthly* 1/6 (April 2016). [Kurdish]
- [13] *Biweekly Chya* 52 (November 2010), p. 2. [Kurdish]
- [14] Hassaniyan, “Environmentalism in Iranian Kurdistan.”



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