



## Spotlight on Iran



May 30, 2013—Khordad 9, 1392

Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt

### Minority vote: the presidential election and Iran's ethno-linguistic minorities

The presidential election is once again raising the question of the government's policy towards the ethno-linguistic minorities that make up nearly half of Iran's population. The minorities consider the election an opportunity to reiterate their demands for a change in the policy pursued by the government against them, while some candidates are trying to win the support of the minorities by throwing around promises to improve their situation and their rights.

In the past, representatives of the reformist faction in Iran's politics tended to express a more sympathetic approach to the minorities' demands, while the conservative right usually preferred to maintain the status quo. In the last two presidential elections, the reformists' relatively sympathetic approach to the minorities resulted in higher support ratings for reformist candidates compared to conservative candidates in minority populated provinces.

At this stage of the presidential election campaign, two candidates are particularly notable for their relatively liberal approach towards the minorities: Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf and Mohsen Rezaei. Qalibaf has promised to bring minority representatives into his government if he is elected, while Rezaei has announced that he intends to implement Article 15 of Iran's constitution, which allows minorities to study in their native language in education institutions. There are other candidates trying to raise support in minority populated provinces, but so far they have not expressed commitment to changing the government's policy on minorities.

The minority issue is a particularly delicate one, requiring the candidates to exercise some caution when discussing the subject, which may be exploited by their opponents to accuse them of stirring ethnic separatism. What is more, it is highly doubtful that the regime's great concern over manifestations of ethnic separatism will allow the next president—regardless of his own stance on the issue—to promote a significant change in the discriminatory policy currently pursued towards the minorities.

### The minority problem in Iran: a delicate issue

In late April, Mehr News Agency removed a news item it had previously published on a statement made by Mas'oud Pezeshkian, the former minister of health in Mohammad Khatami's government, in a press interview. Pezeshkian, a reformist politician of Azeri

descent whose candidacy for president was disqualified by the Guardian Council, said in the interview that he intended to vote for an “Azeri-speaking candidate” (<http://www.iranpressnews.com/source/147184.htm>).

On May 25, media affiliated with Mohsen Rezaei, secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council and one of the presidential candidates, reported that two sections of a statement made by Rezaei during an election broadcast on Iranian TV Channel 1 had been censored out by Iran Broadcasting. In one section the candidate discussed the discrimination between various provinces in Iran (<http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/113137>). Apparently, these remarks were also censored out due to the delicacy surrounding issues directly or indirectly related to the problem of ethnic minorities in Iran and the discrimination against them.

The problem of ethno-linguistic minorities has been a delicate issue in Iran for several years. One example could be seen in the previous presidential election in 2009, when President Ahmadinejad’s supporters used an ethnic joke told by former president Mahmoud Khatami against reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi. A short video distributed online showed Khatami telling a joke that made mockery of Azeris during a meeting with his allies in 2003. The release of the video on the internet provoked a storm among Iranians of Azeri descent and was exploited by Ahmadinejad’s supporters to bash Mousavi, who was supported by Khatami and who is Azeri himself. Mousavi’s supporters, on the other hand, accused the president’s supporters of releasing the old video only two weeks before the elections and just prior to Mousavi’s visit to the city of Tabriz to hit his standing with the local Azeri population.

### **Ethnic minorities in the tangle of Iranian politics**

Ethnic minorities make up nearly half of Iran’s population. They reside mostly in the periphery areas and surround Iran from all directions: the Azeri Turks in the northwest, the Kurds in the West, the Baluchis in the southeast, the Turkmens in the northeast, and the Arabs in Khuzestan. The efforts made by the centralized government to merge the numerous ethnic communities into one national community have not solved their real problems. The ethnic minorities have remained concentrated in separate areas and have not gained equal access to the country’s centers of power and authority—with the exception of the Azeri minority, whose representatives have been able to integrate themselves into the ruling elite.

After the Islamic revolution, the ethnic minorities—with the exception of the Azeris—brought up demands for autonomy, which were rejected by the regime. The minorities feel themselves discriminated against and neglected by the centralized government. Iran's centralized development strategy has created wide socio-economic gaps between the center and the periphery and an unbalanced division of national resources. In addition, the authorities prevent those who belong to ethnic minorities to get education in their own language in their schools, which goes against Article 15 of Iran's constitution.

In recent years minorities' representatives have been increasingly vocal about the escalation of government discrimination against them, and even appealed to international instances and human rights organizations in order to create pressure that would lead to a change in the government's policy against them. These claims have been rejected by the government, and President Ahmadinejad even stated at a meeting with government employees held in April 2013 in Khuzestan Province, populated mostly by the Arab minority, that there is no racial discrimination in Iran whatsoever (Mehr, April 22).



In the past, representatives of the reformist faction in Iran's politics tended to express a more sympathetic approach to the minorities' demands for a change in the government's policy towards them, while the conservative right usually preferred to maintain the status quo. During his presidential term in 1997-2005, President Khatami promoted a policy intended to enhance the integration of the minorities into state institutions. In the previous presidential election campaign, reformist opposition candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi repeatedly stressed his support for granting equal rights to the minorities and his commitment to work for the implementation of Article 15

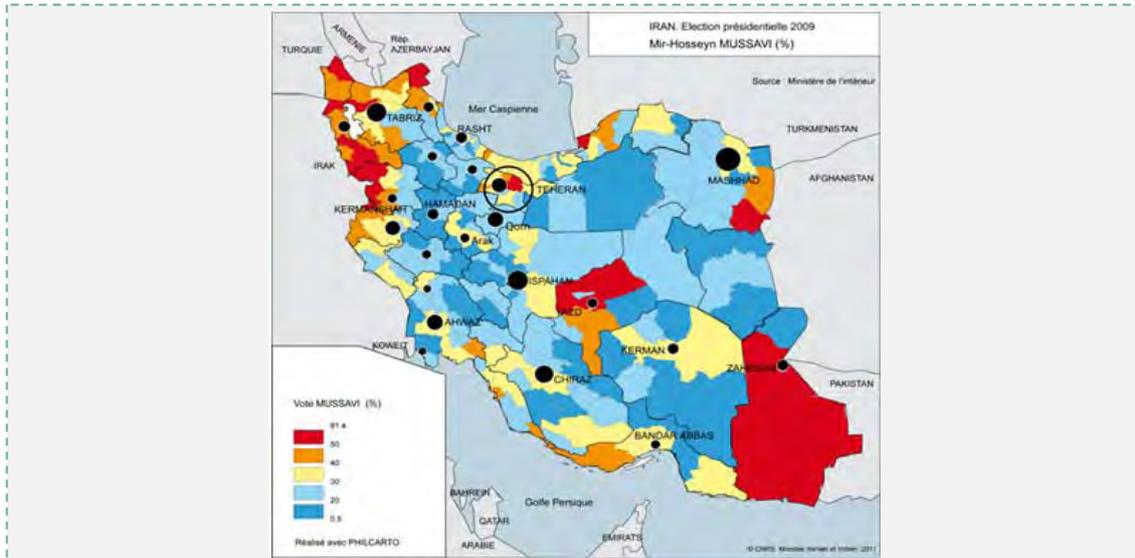
of the constitution. In public appearances in provinces where Azeris make up the majority, he even gave some of his speeches in the Turkish-Azeri language.

In the last two presidential elections (2005 and 2009), the reformists' relatively sympathetic approach to the minorities resulted in higher support ratings for reformist candidates compared to conservative candidates in minority populated provinces. In the first round of the 2005 election, reformist candidate Mostafa Mo'in won the highest support rating among the seven candidates in Sistan-Baluchistan Province, populated mostly by the Baluchi minority. Reformist candidate Mohsen Mehr-Alizadeh, of Azeri descent, came in first in the three Azeri-populated provinces in northwest Iran. Another reformist candidate, Mehdi Karoubi, came in first in provinces populated by the Kurdish and Arab minorities.

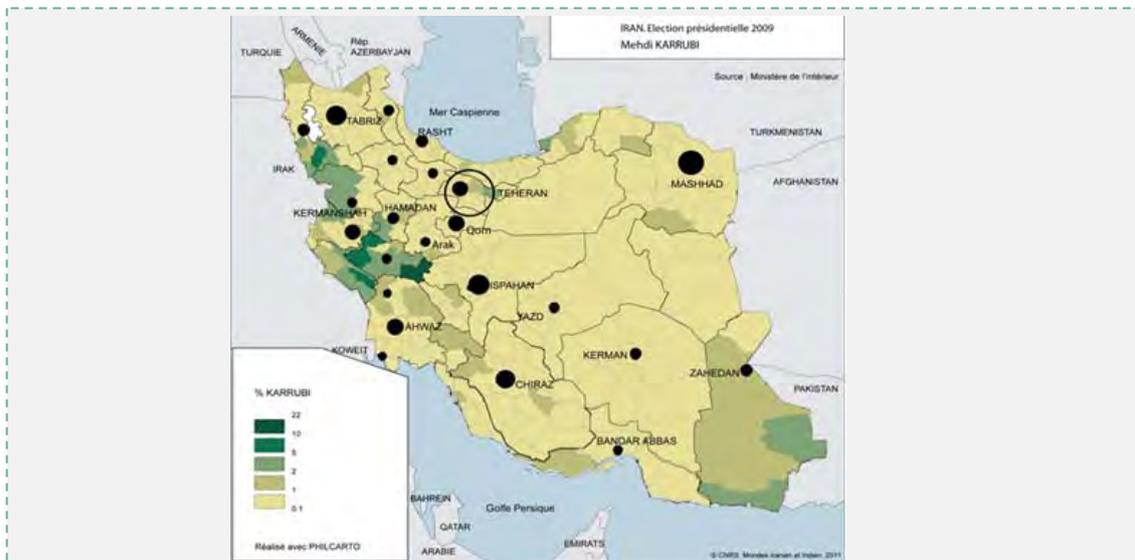


Source: [www.irancarto.cnrs.fr](http://www.irancarto.cnrs.fr)

In the 2009 election, reformist candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi also won higher support ratings in minority-populated provinces.



Support for Mir-Hossein Mousavi in the 2009 election (source: [www.irancarto.cnrs.fr](http://www.irancarto.cnrs.fr))



Support for Mehdi Karubi in the 2009 election (source: [www.irancarto.cnrs.fr](http://www.irancarto.cnrs.fr))

## The positions of the 2013 presidential candidates towards the minorities

The presidential election is once again raising the question of the government's policy towards Iran's ethnic minorities. The minorities consider the election an opportunity to reiterate their demands for a change in the government's policy towards them, while some candidates are trying to win the support of the minorities by throwing around promises to improve their situation and their rights. At this stage of the presidential election campaign, two candidates are particularly notable for their relatively liberal approach towards the minorities and their demand that they be treated more favorably by the government: Tehran's Mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf and Expediency Discernment Council Chairman Mohsen Rezaei.

During a visit held by Qalibaf in the beginning of the election campaign in Kurdistan Province in the country's northwest, the mayor of Tehran noted that, when he had served as commander of the internal security forces (1999-2005), he took pains to integrate Sunni Muslims into Iran's police force as unit commanders. During the visit Qalibaf met with Sunni cleric Hajj Mamosta Hussamaadin Mujtahedi, the Kurdistan Province representative in the Assembly of Experts, who expressed his political support for Qalibaf's presidential bid (<http://shafaf.ir/fa/print/186145>).



**Qalibaf on a visit to Sanandaj, Kurdistan (source: [www.fardanews.com/fa/news/263070](http://www.fardanews.com/fa/news/263070))**

Qalibaf recently held a visit to Khuzestan Province in which he promised to bring representatives from all ethnic minorities into his government if he is elected president. At a meeting with the heads of Arab tribes in the province, Qalibaf said that, even though he himself was born in Mashhad, he was reborn when he was fighting in Khuzestan during the Iran-Iraq War, and his identity was reshaped in the spirit of the province's Arab inhabitants. He told how, throughout the entire war, he fought by the side of the Arab tribes living in the region, and said that he witnessed their heroism and dedication to Islam and their country. The Arab inhabitants have proven, Qalibaf said, that language and ethno-national affiliation are unimportant (<http://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/4396010>).

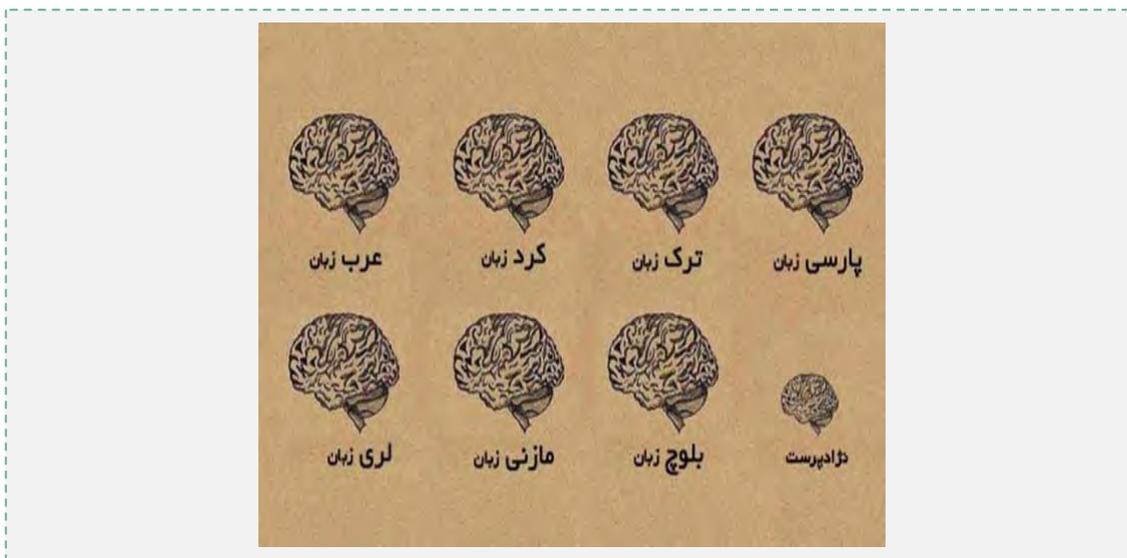
Mohsen Rezaei, too, announced his intention to work for the benefit of the ethnic minorities. Rezaei, who was born in Khuzestan Province, himself belongs to an ethno-linguistic minority—the Luri-Bakhtiari people. When Rezaei ran for president in the 2009 elections, the former Revolutionary Guards chief brought up the problem of

ethnic minorities in Iran and held several visits to provinces with significant minority populations.

Rezaei chose to begin his current presidential campaign in Sistan-Baluchistan Province. During his visit in the province, Rezaei announced that there is more to Iran than just Tehran and stressed the need to develop all the provinces in the country. He noted that, if he is elected president, he will make it a top priority to develop the backward regions in the country, and that it is for this reason that he chose to start his presidential campaign in Sistan-Baluchistan Province, plagued by a particularly severe poverty and unemployment crisis (<http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/321170>).

Rezaei not only promised to develop all of Iran's provinces—he has announced recently that he intends to implement Article 15 of Iran's constitution on the right of the minorities to education in their own native language. He noted that there is no reason to be concerned about the use of the different languages spoken in Iran in universities. Rezaei stressed that he recognizes the culture and languages of the minorities, and that there is no reason to sacrifice local cultures for the all-Iranian national culture ([www.asriran.com/fa/news/275981](http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/275981)).

In the wake of these remarks, Tabnak, a website affiliated with Rezaei, posted an article on the discrimination that exists against minorities concerning their right to use their native language in the education system. The website stressed that the ethnic minorities have contributed to Iran's literary and linguistic development, and took issue with the fact that in recent years the authorities have imposed anti-constitutional restrictions and have banned the use of local languages in minority-populated areas. For example, the Department of Education in Kermanshah Province released a memo banning teachers in the Kurdish-populated province from using the Kurdish language as the language of instruction in education institutions. Tabnak praised Rezaei for bringing up the issue of minorities' right to study in their own language as part of his campaign. According to the website, Rezaei's bringing up the subject has given the minorities hope that, in the future, they will be allowed to use their language in the education system (<http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/321934>).



**“Iranians of all races are equal”**: the captions under the normal-sized pictures read, “Persian speakers”, “Turkish speakers”, “Kurdish speakers”, “Arabic speakers”, “Baluchi speakers”, “Mazanderani speakers”, “Luri speakers”. The caption under the small picture reads, “racists” (Facebook page of Rezaei’s supporters, [www.facebook.com/drmohsenrezayi?ref=stream](http://www.facebook.com/drmohsenrezayi?ref=stream)).

Other presidential candidates are also trying to raise support in provinces populated by ethno-linguistic minorities. So far, however, they have made no statements that would demonstrate their intent to work for a change of the status-quo in the policy towards minorities. Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Supreme Leader’s advisor on international affairs who is running for the conservatives, recently visited Khuzestan Province and met with representatives of the Arab tribes, who even spoke to him in Arabic. Velayati also met with Sunni clerics living in the province (<http://www.meliyat.com/fa/news/35811>).



Source: [www.velayati.ir](http://www.velayati.ir)

As part of his presidential campaign, Supreme National Security Council Chairman Sa'id Jalili, who is running for the Steadfast Front, affiliated with the radical conservative right, also conducts intensive activities in provinces where minorities reside, such as Sistan-Baluchistan. However, his activity in these provinces is a manifestation of his effort to broaden his support base in periphery areas with a greater concentration of relatively underprivileged populations, and not necessarily a liberal approach to the ethno-linguistic minorities living in these areas.

Of the eight presidential candidates, it appears that Mohammad Gharazi, the former minister of petroleum in Mir-Hossein Mousavi's government (1981-1985), holds a particularly negative attitude towards the ethnic minorities. According to a biography posted on the BBC Persian website, after the Islamic revolution Gharazi was the governor of Kurdistan and Khuzestan, and played a key role in suppressing the regime's opponents in these two provinces. According to the regime's opponents, at the time Gharazi was considered one of the main opponents of movements that worked within the Kurdish and Arab populations to promote their national rights ([www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/05/130525\\_112\\_ir92\\_election\\_candidates\\_profile.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/05/130525_112_ir92_election_candidates_profile.shtml)).

While the presidential candidates' efforts are underway, the minorities' representatives are taking advantage of the election campaign to bring up their demands. For example, Hasan Amini, a Shari'ah judge in Iranian Kurdistan, said that candidates who include the national and religious demands of the minorities in their election platform will have the support of the Sunnis and the minorities ([www.rahesabz.net/story/70410](http://www.rahesabz.net/story/70410)).

It is likely that, as part of their campaigns, the presidential candidates will continue their endeavors to raise support among the ethno-linguistic minorities, particularly when considering their significant percentage in the population. However, the minority issue is a highly delicate one, requiring the candidates to exercise some caution when discussing the subject, which may be exploited by their opponents to accuse them of stirring ethnic separatism. What is more, it is highly doubtful that the regime's great concern over manifestations of ethnic separatism will allow the next president—regardless of his own stance on the issue—to promote a significant change in the discriminatory policy currently pursued towards the ethno-linguistic minorities in Iran.