

Religious Minorities in Iran

Introduction:

Today a minority is defined as a sociological group that does not constitute a politically dominant voting majority of the total population of a given society. A sociological minority is not necessarily a numerical minority — it may include any group that is subnormal with respect to a dominant group. The minorities do not hold the same set of religious, social or racial principles with the majority. There are many clear examples of this in the world. Therefore, it can be said that the word "minority" is a varying concept i.e. the concept of minority varies due to racial or religious differences. For example, a black Christian man is a minority in Europe because of his race but the very same person is a minority in Iran for his religion.

One hundred years ago, the late Hassan Modarres, one of the most notable supporters of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, said the following about the rights of the minorities and the necessity of the presence of representatives of these groups in the Parliament of Iran based on the provisions of the Constitution: " the political truth would entail having three representatives present in this sacred assembly to represent Christians , Jews, and Zoroastrians . This would guarantee the unity and solidarity in Iran". His Eminence also had this to say about the equal rights of the religious minorities: "the rights and interests enjoyed by the Muslims should also be enjoyed by the minorities. They must never even think that they have less rights compared to Muslims" (*"Modarres and Five Periods of Legislation"*, by Mohammad Torkaman).

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran which is the culmination of the values in a Islamic society and the fruition of the efforts and endeavors of the Iranian nation defines religious minorities in its 13th article: "Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free

to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education".

Article 14 says:" In accordance with the sacred verse; ("God does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with those who have not fought against you because of your religion and who have not expelled you from your homes" [60:8]), the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights. This principle applies to all who refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran". In his book entitled *Tahrir-ol-vasyleh*, Imam Khomeini (May His Soul Rest in Peace) defines religious minorities as "those who live under the protection of Islam i.e. the Jews, Christians who have holy books in their religions and the Zoroastrians with all the branches within them being equal (e.g. Protestantism and Catholicism). The religious minorities can freely practice all their religious rites and rituals freely in an Islamic state which is duty-bound to protect their rights the best way possible.

Religious minorities are respected in Islam and are absolutely free to practice their religious rites. Just like other religious and ethnic groups, they enjoy freedom and liberty and are free to preserve and protect their own languages, traditions, and customs which guarantee their survival and propagate them amongst their own people.

In addition to the above-mentioned and according to the official rules and regulations of the country, the religious minorities enjoy a series of rights and privileges as follows:

1- Parliamentary privileges

Based on article 64 of the Constitution, religious minorities have 5 representatives in the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran (Parliament); a number that is significant considering the small number of religious minorities living in Iran. Parliament gives these representatives a good platform to inform the public of the problems of the groups they represent. This clearly shows the importance that I.R. Iran attaches to these citizens.

2- Theological and religious privileges

As mentioned before, religious minorities can freely practice their rites and customs and hold their religious ceremonies in Iran. In this line, I.R. Iran has granted them facilities to hold their religious ceremonies. One of these facilities is the possibility of the entry of religious figures (bishops etc) to Iran as the heads of religious delegations. Moreover, religious minorities enjoy so much freedom of action in performing their religious ceremonies in their churches, temples and synagogues. For instance, the Christians have nearly 250 churches in various parts of Iran in which they perform their religious rites freely and without any problem whatsoever.

In addition, the religious holidays of the religious minorities are respected by I.R. Iran and special programs are broadcast by IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting) on the occasion of a holiday marked by these people.

3- Schools

Although there is no law preventing religious minorities from getting educated in public schools, there are special schools for religious minorities so that they can have more freedom in teaching their religious

lessons. In Tehran alone there are 23 special schools special religious minorities.

Moreover in 2003, it was approved to officially hire 200 teachers from religious minorities in order to enhance the quality of these schools. This is indicative of the importance I.R. Iran attaches to religious minorities' right to education.

4- The Press

In order to raise the consciousness of their community and their coreligionists, the religious minorities have their own newspapers and monthlies. The Armenians living in Iran publish the ELIK Newspaper, Araks Monthly, Peyman Quarterly etc. The Jewish community has Tamouz periodical and Ofoghe Bina Monthly and the Zoroastrians have Forouhar Monthly and Amordad Weekly. It needs to be mentioned that the "Alik Institute" affiliated to the Armenian minority group has had long history and presence in Iran's press and not only publishes newspapers but has also published various books in Armenian language.

5- The associations and social institutions of the religious minorities

Considering the fact that just like other MPs the representatives of religious minorities spend most of their time on national issues and, thus, are left with little time to pursue the matters related top their own communities, the I.R. Iran has recognized their right to establishing associations in the Parties and Associations Law (approved in 1991). Since these associations are very important to I.R. Iran, it has always been tried to establish a friendly relationship with them. Right now in Iran the religious minorities have nearly 60 social and cultural associations.

6- Finances

The religious minorities are entitled to the annual budget of the country just like every other citizen. In addition, I.R. Iran has always granted financial aid to each and every religious minority to strengthen the national solidarity e.g. the aid by the government in 2002 approved by the cabinet. The government used to help religious minorities financially outside the annual budget of the country, however thanks to the efforts and follow-ups made by the government and relevant organs, the parliament approved that official allocations would be envisaged for the religious minorities in the annual budget of the country. Accordingly the following allocations have been earmarked as aid to the associations and institutions of the religious minorities:

- 17,500,000,000 for 2005
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- 15,000,000,000 for 2007
- 20,000,000,000 for 2008
- 30,000,000,000 for 2005

7- Legal matters

One of the demands of the religious minorities was always to have the right to receive blood money (diyeh) equal to that received by the Muslims. Actually blood money was a matter that religious minorities referred to as discrimination. Hence the government and the members of the parliament followed up on the matter and as the result the following text was approved by the State Expediency Council of the I.R. Iran and added as an amendment to article 297 to the Islamic Punishments Law of Iran (ratified in 1991):

"Based on the official order of the Supreme Leader of I.R. Iran, the blood money paid to religious minorities as recognized by the Constitution is to be equal to that paid to Muslims".

In 2002 a directive was issued by the High Council of Recruitment regarding the employment of the religious minorities recognized by the Constitution. According to this directive "the government of I.R. Iran is obligated to create equal conditions for the employment and having access to job opportunities for all the applicants including Muslims or the followers of other religions recognized by the Constitution"

A committee was formed in 2001 in the political Bureau of the Interior Ministry of Iran following the direct order of the then President. Furthermore in order to have a unified procedure in all state-run organizations and organs and also to facilitate interactions with religious minorities, I.R. Iran has envisaged a committee to make policies about the affairs of the religious minorities in the fourth development plan (article 20) which is now in its final stages.

8- The Policy-making committee for affairs of the religious minorities

In order to have a unified procedure in all state-run organizations and organs and also to facilitate interactions with religious minorities, I.R. Iran has envisaged a committee to make policies about the affairs of the religious minorities in the fourth development plan (article 20). At the suggestion of the Interior ministry, the relevant bylaws have been prepared and sent to the cabinet and are now in their final stages.