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# THE CULTURAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DIMENSIONS OF IRANIAN CITIZENSHIP

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The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, adopted in November 1979, reflects the contradictions in political Islam, which claims to have a solution for every problem all over the world. The Velayat e-Faqih theory mentioned in the Constitution stipulates absolute leadership for the clergy based on religious text and heritage. This theory claims that the clerical leadership is infallible and sacrosanct. This theory goes against key principles which the Iranian Constitution was based on such as sovereignty belonging to the people and citizenship being the right of every individual.. The Iranian Velayet e-Faqih system confines the leading positions of power in the state to jurists, and establishes religious restrictions endangering the rights of individuals and ethnic minorities.

Along with the political and cultural influence of Velayat e-Faqih on citizenship in Iran, patterns of economic development reflect a form of ethnic, religious and regional discrimination. The state pursues economic policies to impoverish and weaken the regions where non-Persian groups are concentrated. These groups were previously identified as second class nationals. They were considered by the state as enemies and rebels and this negative attitude influenced the discriminatory role of the state towards them, particularly in ensuring they had equal rights and access to justice.

The cultural and development policies adopted by the government in Iran have worsened the citizenship crisis in Iran from two perspectives: First, they have strengthened the religion-based identity in Iran, second, they have led to the dominance of the clergy and ideological-based state institutions over the country's wealth. This study will review the dimensions of both perspectives, their influence and implications for the Iranian state through the following:

### **I- The Problems Surrounding Citizenship in Iran**

Citizenship in Iran is influenced by a number of major internal factors, most importantly the following:

#### **1- The Religious Nature of the Political System**

The Iranian government is a distinctly religious system. The first attempt to draft the Iranian Constitution took place in Paris when Ayatollah Khomeini was preparing to return to Iran. Hassan Habibi, the first vice president of the Islamic Republic was charged with this task. While he was staying in Paris with a group of Islamic intellectuals, Hassan had close contact with Khomeini. The first draft of the Constitution was finalized at the end of January 1979. It was reviewed by a committee of five jurists, in addition to Hassan Habibi. The first draft of the Constitution was published in the middle of June 1979.

Initially, the first draft did not indicate an inclination towards the theory of Velayat-e Faqih and did not assign jurists permanent positions in the state. Khomeini moved forward to adopt the principle of Velayat-e Faqih by making ideological changes. He developed this political and authoritarian theory in order to take up power, and impose his dominance and vision. This was completely finalized and crystallized after the death of Khomeini with the introduction of constitutional amendments in 1989 that led to the absolute Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist.<sup>(1)</sup>

Velayat-e Faqih established a theocratic state in Iran since the emergence of Khomeini's theory. As a result of this theory, Khomeini was able to take power and stir the 1979 revolution in Iran. The citizenship crisis appeared in the modern Iranian state as it was difficult to define its nature in light of the Velayat-e Faqih system of governance. This was in addition to the fundamental crises that Iran experienced internally, due to its multiple nationalities, races and religions. The Iranian multi-ethnic texture needs a diverse set of cultural and development policies to address the problems stemming from this diversity; the non-Persian minorities include Arabs, Kurds, Baloch, Turkmen, and Azeri.

The religious nature of the current government in Iran has resulted in many difficulties in the context of resolving the citizenship crisis. The Iranian government has been unable to merge different nationalities into a single identity and ensure justice and equality despite different sectarian and ethnic affiliations in light of the sectarian Constitution which confines all powers and rights to the Shiite Twelvers and excludes all other communities.

#### **2- The Pluralistic Nature of Iranian Society**

There are no official statistics on the pluralistic social structure in Iran, although it is broadly

made up of six national and ethnic groupings: Persian, Arab, Kurdish, Baloch, Turkmen, and Azeri.

The Azerbaijanis are the largest ethnic minority in Iran, numbering at least 12 million. However, some estimates indicate that they number approximately 20 million, or nearly a quarter of the population. Their traditional language is closer to Turkish than Persian. Most of them are Shi'a Muslims.

The Kurds are about 8 million, constituting about 10 percent of the Iranian population. Most Iranian Kurds live in the mountainous regions bordering Turkey and Iraq, especially in the Kurdistan and Kermanshah provinces. West Azerbaijan, Hamadan, Ilam, North Khorasan and Lorestan include Kurdish communities. The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, although some are Shi'a. In addition, some belong to Sufi groups or are Jewish.

The Balochis range between 1.5 million and 2 million in Iran and make up about the 10 million living in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Baloch are mostly Sunni Muslims and this has contributed to increasing tensions with the Shiite government in Iran. The Balochis live in the southeastern barren land of Iran. This is a poorly developed region with limited access to education, employment, health care and housing.

The Arabs constitute 2 percent of the total population of Iran. They number 1.5 million. The Arabs face repression and discrimination. The region where the Arabs live is isolated although it possesses large oil reserves, agricultural industries, shipbuilding, and petrochemicals plants. The Arabs reside mainly along the borders with Iraq in the Khuzestan Province in southwestern Iran. Most of the Arabs are Shi'a Muslims although there is also a Sunni minority. The region includes Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians.

Finally, there are the Lurs, an ethnic group of about 4.8 million people. The majority of Lurs are Shi'a Muslims. They mainly reside in the mountainous area along the western border with Iraq. Most of the Lurs live in the provinces of Lorestan, Bakhtiari, Kohgiluyeh, and Boyer-Ahmed. Some of the Lurs live in Khuzestan, Persia, Ilam, Hamadan and Bushehr. Their spoken language is similar to the Persian language.<sup>(2)</sup>

With regard to religious diversity, Islam is the religion of the majority. Most of its followers are Shiite and the others are Sunni. Within each nationality, there are those who belong to the Shiite and Sunni sects. There are also Christians among Iran's various nationalities such as the Armenians who live Tehran, Isfahan, West Azerbaijan, and the Assyrians who live around Lake Urmia.

The Jewish community resides in Isfahan, Yazd, Shiraz, Tehran, and Hamadan. There are other religions such as Zoroastrianism with its followers living mainly in Tehran, Kerman, Isfahan, and Hamadan. Finally, there is the Baha'i religion which is perceived by the Iranian state as a major threat. Iran recognizes Judaism and Christianity and its followers as the People of the Book. They have their own holy books, religious leaders, organizations, schools, and places of worship.<sup>(3)</sup>

The Sunni community is the largest of the religious minorities in Iran made up of 15 million people out of the total population of 80 million. Sunnis, who are deprived of both political and economic rights, are given little attention compared to other minorities. They reside in the border areas of Balochistan in the southeast to Kurdistan and the northwest to the Persian Gulf in the south. These regions are ethnically diverse because they include Balochi and Turkmen minorities. They are relatively large minorities.<sup>(4)</sup>

Geographically, most Iranian minorities are concentrated in the outskirts of major cities and near bordering areas with neighboring countries. This geographical reality has influenced the unity and cohesion of the Iranian state through different historical eras. It has also led to cross-border national affiliations and identity projects attracting minority groups. These minorities and others have aspirations for establishing their own national

projects. These aspirations have been strengthened as the Iranian state lacks a national cultural and developmental policy to integrate minorities and eliminate sectarianism and fragmentation.

Overall, the social map in Iran is arguably complicated. The government in Iran prevents interaction between the country's various social components and also hinders these minority communities from exercising all their political and social rights. As a result, they have attempted to resist the government's discriminatory and exclusionary policies that they have been subject to.

### **3- The Iranian Constitution and Citizenship Rights**

The Constitution deprives Sunni Muslims and non-Shi'a ethnic minorities from taking up the role of president under Article 115, which stipulates that the head of state must believe in the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the official madhhab of the country which is Shiism. With regard to nationality, the president must be of Persian descent.<sup>(5)</sup>

Iranian minorities do not have the right to manage their own affairs nor the authority to make decisions concerning their living conditions, due to their poor representation within state institutions, even in regions and governorates in which they constitute a majority of the population.<sup>(6)</sup>

Overall, the Iranian government has been able to tighten its grip on Iran's minorities by imposing the *Twelver* doctrine which is under the authority of the supreme leader. In addition, the government has changed the demographic make-up of the country and continues to adopt a policy of impoverishing non-Persian minorities. The government also prevents Arabs from speaking their language, wearing their own local uniforms, and prevents Sunnis from building their own mosques in the capital, Tehran. The government uses oppressive tools and carries out executions against its opponents,<sup>(7)</sup> in a clear and explicit violation of the Constitution and the basic rights of citizenship enshrined in it.

### **4- The Impact of Velayat-e Faqih on the Public Domain**

During and following the 1979 revolution, political movements were one of the most important elements that conflicted with the absolute and exclusive power practiced by the followers of Velayat-e Faqih. These political movements believed that Khomeini had nationalized the public sphere in Iran.

Shortly after the victory of the revolution, the Iranian political scene witnessed a significant growth in political parties and organizations. The political forces in that period were based on two main axes: the right and the left, and religious and secular.

At this stage, the traditional Islamists, especially the clerics who supported Khomeini, were among the forces that were able to invest in their social incubators and use their symbolic capital for attracting popular support in order to obtain legitimacy, moral and public support. Using religious occasions as a platform, the political message was delivered to the masses.<sup>(8)</sup>

The nature of their slogans as well as their mobilisation power contributed towards creating a tacit alliance with the opposition forces that overthrew the Shah. Khomeini intentionally did not focus on establishing a religious government in that period. He instead focused his slogans and political rhetoric on creating a unified doctrine against the Shah and prioritized this. This strategy paved the way for Khomeini to build alliances with various opposition groups, even with belligerent groups.<sup>(9)</sup>

The Revolutionary Council was established in Paris through a decision by Khomeini. He set out his powers and mandate. Khomeini also drafted the main political policies and general goals to be pursued, achieved and completed. Khomeini possessed ultimate

decision making power over tactical and strategic decisions as he exemplified when he laid the foundations of the Constitution and revolutionary courts. He appointed judges himself and granted the courts unlimited powers.

In January 1988, Khomeini announced a decree that the Islamic state had the right to ignore Islamic teachings when decisions were passed and laws were enacted. The only principle to be followed was that all laws must be made to ensure the continuation of the ruling government. In the same decree, Khomeini pointed out that this holy and divine principle was derived from the concept of absolute sovereignty embodied in the Prophet Mohammed.. According to this principle, if a decision is to be made for the sake of ensuring state survival all Islamic laws including fasting and Hajj can be cancelled.<sup>(10)</sup>

On February 6, 1988, Khomeini established a council to evaluate what would be in the best interests of the state. He appointed the members of this council, and defined their tasks and powers. Khomeini gave the Expediency Council the power to make the final decision on disputed issues. In addition, the new council had permission to enact legislation on its own initiative without involving the Parliament and the Guardian Council.<sup>(11)</sup>

There was no provision in the Iranian Constitution calling for the creation of such a council. However, the council was the embodiment of limiting governance to the jurists and clerics, represented by Khomeini at the time.

Khomeini's theory of Velayat-e Faqih represented absolute leadership for the jurist leader. It is based on the premise that Khomeini or his successor as the supreme leader of the Islamic revolution in Iran, is responsible for all Muslims around the world. Obedience to him is obligatory as is obeying the forthcoming Imam Mahdi. He is the Mahdi's deputy. The supreme leader is not appointed through elections. He is elected by an elite group of jurists who have reached the clerical rank of grand ayatollah. . Khomeini said that the criteria needed to qualify for the Imamate is similar to that for Velayat-e Faqih. Appointing a guardian jurist is logical and similar to appointing a guardian to minors. The guardian of the nation does not differ from the guardian of minors in terms of responsibility. Khomeini granted excessive powers to the Guardian of the Islamic Jurist. He believes that the government of the Guardianship of the Jurist is a branch of of the absolute guardianship of the Prophet Mohammed, and one of the primary rulings of Islam. It has greater priority over all sub-rulings including prayer, fasting, and Hajj. The supreme leader is above the Constitution and positive laws [human-made laws]. His decisions are perceived as divine laws that are enforceable.<sup>(12)</sup>

Therefore, although the Islamic Republic of Iran has a president and an elected Parliament, they are not really important political decision makers. If any decisions are made by the president of the Republic, or a law is passed by Parliament, these would be enforceable only after being approved by the supreme leader and the Guardian Council, which is also not elected by the people. This council is charged with approving the eligibility of candidates to run for presidential and parliamentary elections. The most important points considered by the council when approving candidates is their loyalty and compatibility with the ideas and orientations of the government led by the supreme leader .<sup>(13)</sup>

##### **5- The Policy of Marginalization and Exclusion**

Diversity is an enriching factor in every society. Diversity can be harmonious, ensuring the integration of all communities to ensure national cohesion. However, the Iranian reality is that minorities and the regions where they live suffer from various setbacks including deliberate neglect, inadequate security, a lack of basic services and an absence of development. Therefore, the regions populated by minorities are among the poorest and most underdeveloped in Iran. In addition, these regions suffer from higher levels of unemployment compared to other regions

and the rate of economic development is the lowest compared to the rest of the country. This leads to the emergence of resistance, resulting from continuous repression, economic marginalization and the lack of social and political representation. Consequently, this deepens feelings of isolation and ostracism, which leads to minorities forming separatist and armed movements to defend their identity.<sup>(14)</sup> This phenomenon has escalated in recent years, prompting clashes and security confrontations between the government and minority groups in their areas, especially in the Baloch areas.

The nationalization of the public sphere, the monopolization of political, social and cultural spheres and state economic dominance did not deprive broad sectors of society of their rights (i.e. participation and self-expression) but the aforementioned provoked minorities to revolt against the state in the 1980s, a period known as the 'revolution of the minorities'. In addition, many protests erupted against the restrictions enforced by the Velayat-e Faqih governance system because protesters believed that they were being deprived of their rights. This sentiment was echoed in the protests that broke out in 1999, 2009, and 2017. There was also an escalation of factional protests, especially in marginalized areas, and protests involved a broad spectrum of society including: women, workers, students and truck drivers. All Iranians live under authoritarian religious rule, a unified cultural spectrum, and enforced discrimination.. This reality created a wide gap between the ruling elite and the people. In addition, it resulted in a wide gap between the dominant ethnic group and other ethnicities as well as between the dominant sect and other sects and religions. It reflects the clear imbalance within the structure of the Iranian state, and the unequal treatment of minorities under its laws.

## **II- The Cultural and Developmental Dimensions of the Citizenship Issue in Iran**

In light of the complexities of the political, social and economic realities resulting from Iran's structural, religious and political factors, cultural and developmental dimensions emerged. Their manifestations have been associated with the theory of Velayat-e Faqih. These two dimensions and their interactions on the Iranian scene as well as their impact on citizenship can be outlined as follows:

### **1- Undermining Basic Rights and Weak Participation and Representation**

Under the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, we can say that influence over Iran's political, social and cultural scene is centered primarily around the supreme leader of the Iranian Republic, the institutions under his direct authority, and the group of conservative clerics traditionally supported by the supreme leader of the Republic. This support has a sectarian context, deeply entrenched in nationalization and racism. Although there are popular and direct elections for some traditional and non-traditional institutions including the presidency, Parliament, local councils and others, those who are accepted and have the opportunity to hold positions in these institutions must be believers in the principle of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist and abide by the government's policy and religious orientation.<sup>(15)</sup>

Article 151 of the Iranian Constitution stipulates that the president of the Iranian Republic must be elected from among the country's religious and political personalities possessing the requisite qualifications, and most importantly, "The belief in the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the official madhhab of the country."<sup>(16)</sup> This condition means that the Iranian political system is a sectarian system, rather than a popular one that has the support of all members of society, and confines leading positions of power in the state to believers of the Twelver Ja'fari school.

Article 12 of the Iranian Constitution stipulates, "The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Islamic Jaafari school of thought, and this article will remain eternally

immutable.”<sup>(17)</sup> This means that all positions of the state will be allocated only to those who follow this doctrine. Therefore, followers of other Islamic sects and other religions are unable to hold high-level positions in the Iranian state. This means confining the general political field in Iran to a certain sectarian elite and excluding all other political affiliations, ideologies, and intellectual perspectives in the country.

This article also undermines minority participation through restricting their right to organization. The Constitution itself stipulates this restriction in Article 26 of the Constitution. It states, “The formation of parties, societies, political or professional associations, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to one of the recognized religious minorities, is permitted provided they do not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic.” This allows the government to restrict the rights of minorities to form political organizations.<sup>(18)</sup>

Article 26 stipulates that the formation of parties, associations and political bodies are permitted and they enjoy political freedom, including those belonging to religious minorities as long they “do not contradict national unity, the basis of the Islamic Republic and Islamic values.” Article 27 also allows for the holding of public meetings and organizing marches, provided that they are not detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam. These rights are only theoretical and have never been granted in reality, even under laws that were later approved. For example, the legal framework for political participation is unfair. The electoral system in Iran does not meet international democratic standards and the right of organization and assembly are prohibited by the state. It is only permitted for loyalists. There is no freedom of expression and there is no freedom for trade unions. The rights of minorities and all matters relating to citizenship and the participation of women are ambiguous. The regulations and laws issued later were set to restrict the participation of non-Muslim minorities in the state, to limit to the largest extent possible the political participation of women, and to limit the participation and rights of non-Jaafari Islamic schools in the government and decision-making.<sup>(19)</sup>

## **2- The Consolidation of Sectarianism and the Imposition of a Religious and National Identity on Society**

The cultural, religious and ethnic indicators are undoubtedly among the most important in terms of assessing the extent of national integration. This promotes harmony and strengthens the identity of the state and society. Therefore, society appears to be strong whenever differences diminish and inequalities recede.

Since the beginning of the revolution in 1979, political discourse of a certain nature has dominated all aspects of life in the public and private spheres. The influence of this political discourse expanded beyond geopolitical boundaries of the Iranian state establishing a sectarian discourse reflecting the political system of the state and all of its representatives including the clergy. This sectarian discourse embodied a limited Iranian identity in which only the Shiite sect was acknowledged and recognized. This is enshrined in the articles of the Iranian Constitution which highlights the superior status of the Jaafari school, and whoever follows this school, thus it constitutes an authority within Iran. This hampered opportunities for integration among all components of Iran society.<sup>(20)</sup>

The state plays a role in strengthening national religious identity in accordance with the ideology adopted by the clergy, coupled with the Shiite doctrine embraced by the state. Therefore, the empowerment of “Persian” has become an officially announced Iranian policy, especially in the last two decades since Mohammad Khatami’s term. He confirmed more than once during his two terms that “Persian” was not only a language,

but a civilization and a nation. This approach was adopted by his successors, especially Ahmadinejad. The latter issued in August 2007 a republican decree that necessitated Persianization of cultural, scholarly and literary life, and all other aspects of life in Iran. This in turn undermined the basic rights of other communities.

### **3- Results in Ethnic Discrimination and the Denial of Self-Expression for Minority Groups**

The Iranian political system has been facing condemnation due to it denying freedom of religion and belief, as well as depriving minorities of their right to education, right to write in their mother tongue and right to celebrate their own culture. Discrimination on the basis of race and religion is widespread in Iran, both in law and in practice, and in the political, social, cultural and economic spheres. Moreover, the government responds to minority demands and appeals to abolish discrimination through further repression and violence, arbitrary arrests, torture, and unfair trials and execution.<sup>(21)</sup>

Consequently, Persians have all rights, while all other ethnicities and minorities have no rights and are oppressed. The government tries to destroy their heritage and historical traditions, identities and nationalities, and to eradicate any trace and presence of them since these national and religious minorities do not have basic rights. According to the strategy of "Persianization" in Iranian society, the government in Tehran considers other ethnicities, based on its geographical borders, as a serious threat to Iranian national security. This was evident in their organization of some external conferences on Iranian nationality. For example, a conference was held in Geneva in March 2015. It included human rights personalities and Iranian activists, as well as the Iranian Nobel Prize-winning lawyer Shirin Ebadi. There was also the conference that was held by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) in Brussels in July 2015, which was attended by representatives of Ahwazi Arabs, the Kurds and the Baloch. They believe that Iran does not represent them in international organizations, especially in the United Nations.<sup>(22)</sup>

Iran's oppressive position towards minorities varies in its form and intensity. However, the general pattern is the nationalization of all minorities and forcing them to adopt and express the identity shaped by the Iranian political system. The oppression imposed on some minorities is apparent in them being deprived of the right to practise their rituals, and speak their own language by not granting them equal citizenship.<sup>(23)</sup>

Women in Iran face a number of legal and social obstacles, not only limiting their lives, but also their livelihoods. This in turn results in staggeringly unequal economic outcomes. Although women constitute more than 50 percent of university graduates in Iran, their labor participation does not exceed 17 percent. The Global Gender Gap Report of 2015, prepared by the World Economic Forum, ranks Iran among the last five countries (141 out of 145) for gender equality, including equality in economic participation. Particularly, unemployment among women is twice as high as men.<sup>(24)</sup>

Religious minorities who belong to the Shiite sect itself also face repression by the government, such as the Dervish and some followers of Shiite religious currents themselves, including the supporters of the Shirazi movement who demonstrated in front of Iranian diplomatic missions in Kuwait, Britain and Iraq to express their opposition to the arrest of Hussein Al-Shirazi in Qom, son of the religious Marja, Sadiq Al-Shirazi.<sup>(25)</sup>

However, using its arbitrary and repressive tools, the Iranian government destroys the cultural, societal, and civilizational identity of minorities. It seeks to eradicate the identity of minority communities from regions in Iran. The government is active in many regions that have a non-Persian majority through changing demographics, impoverishing and preventing the advancement and economic development of these regions, in addition to displacing their residents to areas under government control.<sup>(26)</sup>

The Balochistan region, which includes southwest Pakistan, southwestern Afghanistan, and eastern Iran, is of strategic importance to Iran. It is the third largest Iranian province. This region stretches from the Strait of Bab Al Salam to Karachi in Pakistan. The region's population is estimated at 20 million, in addition to 700,000 Balochis. It has been suffering since Iran seized the region in 1928, during the era of British colonialism which witnessed many crises and complications. The government seized agricultural lands and ownership was transferred to Shiite Iranians. The government also banned local religious and national celebrations of the population of the region. It prevented locals from using their own language. The government did not allow any development projects in this region and prevented access to education which was only limited to specific groups. The educational system was subject to sectarian prejudices and biases.<sup>(27)</sup>

The reality of the Al-Ahwaz region reflects the deterioration of economic and social conditions as a result of marginalization and racial discrimination. Although this region has special historical, national and cultural aspects, the government's policies in dealing with this region reflects a pattern of discrimination against national, religious and ethnic minorities. It has deliberately eradicated the region's heritage and identity by changing its essential features, prohibiting the use of local languages in governmental agencies, departments or in schools and universities. It prevents the region's people from naming their children with Arabic names and wearing Arab dress. The government seeks to change the names of cities, villages and rivers which have Arab origins and derivations. This policy aims to erase any Arab presence in this region, such as "Muhammarah" which became "Khorramshahr" and "Meesan" which was renamed "Dasht Azadkan." In addition, this region faces job discrimination and its residents cannot be employed in certain bodies and institutions. Official figures issued by the Iranian Prison Service reveal that about 24,000 citizens are in Iranian prisons, specifically in the Karun and Spidar prisons in Al-Ahwaz.<sup>(28)</sup>

#### **4- Consolidation of Division and Stirring the Community Against Minorities**

Within its political discourse directed towards minorities and anti-government groups, the Iranian government incites the Iranian public against the demands of minorities. Given the domination of the media, the majority of the Iranian people cannot comprehend the reasons behind the minority protests. They are always seen as factional demands. These allegations are promoted by the Iranian government, politically and religiously, through its religious platforms and institutions that influence internal public opinion.

Treason and being a foreign agent are the routine charges that the government deploys against protesters and minorities. This justifies the government's use of repression by state organs and militias that pay absolute allegiance to the government. The government is equipped to deal with such protests. This repression has religious and legal justifications such as preserving the religious and Islamic values of the republic.

In addition to the traditional repressive measures used against all citizens, minorities and marginalized groups who oppose and confront the government, there is a model of "cultural security" that was invented by the Iranian government. It includes the use of external hostilities to consolidate its grip at home, increase its popularity and counter any party opposing the government and its policies. It also imposes a cultural blockade on society, and strictly monitors anything that would affect the country's Persian identity in general. The Iranian government also maintains a tight grip on traditional and modern media, and blocks social media.<sup>(29)</sup>

#### **5- Repressive Practices and Denial of Basic Rights**

Ethnic minorities suffer from discriminatory treatment. For example, Arabs, Kurds, and Balochis

– who follow Sunni doctrine – face difficulties. In addition to being ethnic minorities who are derogated and face discrimination, their suffering is increased further for sectarian reasons because they are Sunni minorities. For example, more than 1.5 million Sunni Muslims reside in Tehran, but they cannot establish a mosque where they can practice their rituals.<sup>(30)</sup>

The Iranian Constitution does not allow the believers of the Sunni school of any nationality to run for the post of president of the republic, since those who have the right to run for the presidency are limited to the believers of the Twelver Jaafari school of thought. Article 12 of the Constitution provides that: “This principle shall remain eternally unchangeable.”<sup>(31)</sup>

This type of discrimination is applied to all positions. The Sunnis are deprived of assuming leading positions in the army, the government, and local authorities, including the authorities in the regions in which they constitute the majority of the population. One of the cases of discrimination against the Sunnis is the suspension of the membership of Sepanta Niknam, the Zoroastrian member of the municipal council of Yazd city, after one of the fundamentalist candidates who lost in the elections challenged the validity of his membership. The fundamentalist candidate also filed a complaint with the Administrative Court of Justice on the pretext that Niknam is not Muslim and has no right to represent Muslims.<sup>(32)</sup> However, the council withdrew its decision and the deputy resumed his position.

## **6- Economic Marginalization and Insufficient Developmental Attention**

Historically, the bazaar plays an important role in shaping Iran's social and economic reality. Businessmen represent a strong class that has influence and privilege at the official level, as well as respect and prestige at the grassroots level. There is also a broad economic role for the clergy. They have financial resources and wide-ranging economic institutions. These two classes are largely linked due to intertwined interests. They have an extensive historical alliance which has aided these two classes in influencing Iranian society as a primary active force within it, under a Shiite religious cover. This alliance has served the interests of the two groups and maintained their presence at the top of the political, economic and social pyramid. This religious-financial alliance has impacted the rest of society and its different groups and communities. It also impacted the allocation of wealth based upon sectarian and regional considerations serving these two classes with their Persian and Shiite affiliations.<sup>(33)</sup>

Shiites and those belonging to the Persian ethnic grouping have a better economic position than followers of other sects. It seems that greater opportunities are available for them to assume important positions in ministries and national institutions, the armed forces, the police, and other state apparatuses. The Revolutionary Guards are granted more privileges such as higher salaries and employment benefits, wider networks of personal relationships, and influence over society. The doctrinal nature of the IRGC grants senior positions to its personnel as they —believe in Velayat-e Faqih — and the Twelver Shiite school of thought.

The economic dimension of the citizenship crisis is reflected in the expansion of the economic role of the IRGC. Wealth is concentrated in the IRGC's hands and the tasks assigned to it far exceed the limits of its military role. Some believe that the growing role of the IRGC forces in the economy is considered as a religious-economic and military alliance to secure the existing sectarian political system and protect it against the wave of anger in society with all its ethnic and sectarian components.<sup>(34)</sup>

Ironically, the areas populated by minorities are among the regions rich in resources. Yet they are the poorest regions, and suffer from the policies of economic discrimination and deliberate developmental negligence by the authorities. We can cite a number of manifestations of marginalization and economic discrimination referred to by the Iranian

professor of sociology, Dr. Saif Alahi. He pointed out that minority regions suffer from:

“Lack of water access and poor living conditions in a vastly expanded country; centralized administration; marginalizing them from participating in political life, ignoring their demands and needs following the modernization movement; the predominance of an ethno-centric policy, economic and social inequalities between ethnic groups; inequality in human development between ethnic groups, and unbalanced and disproportionate development in ethnic minority areas.”<sup>(35)</sup>

Some water project plans were aimed at weakening Iranian non-Persian minorities. The projects also ignored the distribution of equal development benefits among the regions. As a result of this politicization, the water plans pursued by successive governments since the revolution exacerbated the water crisis and damaged Iran's ecosystem in general, as well as the ecosystem and agricultural activities in those specific areas. This increased the minorities' sense of isolation and strengthened their desire to rebel against the state and to separate from it.<sup>(36)</sup>

For example, government projects contributed to pumping 1.1 billion cubic meters annually from the waters of the Ahwaz region, specifically towards the central region of Isfahan. Similar policies led to the drying up of the Hamon River in the Balochistan region.<sup>(37)</sup>

In fact, the diversion of river streams in Al-Ahwaz was not based on scientific studies, but rather on unstudied technical reasons. It was reinforced by political decisions that were designed to bring about a demographic and social change harming the Arab minority and serving the central areas of the Persian majority. Following the emergence of catastrophic environmental effects, Iranian officials started to feel the impact of the decisions of five successive governments, not only against the Al-Ahwaz region, but also for the future of water in the whole country.<sup>(38)</sup>

According to an Amnesty International report: “Minorities in Iran are subject to discriminatory laws and practices, including restricting access to basic facilities such as land, housing, water and sanitation, confiscation of property, and the denial of public services and the right to work in the public and semi-public sector as well as in the private sector. The right to work is always based on selective procedures of a complex ideological nature that are centered on political or religious belief and loyalty to the Islamic Republic, including the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist which forms the basis of the political regime.”

The report points out that discrimination has various forms, including restrictions to employment, decent housing, social services, education, and the denial of the right to equally participate in cultural activities. One of the examples of these violations is what the state did between 2004 and 2006 in confiscating more than 200,000 hectares of land inhabited or owned by members of the Arab minority for state projects without consulting them or compensating them with an appropriate amount. For example, the state built sugar cane plants and fish farms. This indicates that there is an informal policy aimed to dispossess Arabs in Iran of their land, amounting to forced eviction.<sup>(39)</sup>

Iran is a rentier state. The revenues of its oil exports, which constitute a big portion of the state budget, enable the government to distribute wealth unfairly in accordance with its political considerations. Dependent on these resources, the government supports policies of a sectarian and nationalist nature. However, the government neglects to advance development in a balanced way that is in accordance with the country's social and geographical texture. This leads minorities to feel that they are not a partner in this wealth and they are excluded from power.

Furthermore, the nature of internal and external projects adopted by the government does not depend on minorities and societal components as a partner in decision-making.

The government may also establish and improve its relations with groups abroad and fund them with the Iranian people's money, while it leaves its society to suffer from economic crises and complicated living conditions.

### **III- The Repercussions of the Crisis**

The deepening of the citizenship crisis in Iran has led to a vulnerable situation for the Iranian national state. We can point out the manifestations of this in the following:

#### **1- Growing Calls for Separation**

In light of the sectarian dominance in the country, vast segments of Iranian people, including minorities can not express themselves. They are not included in the statehood project; the government has not launched any policies to engage them in the framework of the state. Consequently, they have become more isolated and rebellious.

The inevitable outcome here is authoritarianism and the dominance of one culture over the whole country, unbalanced development, and economic marginalization leading to injustice and a perception of being undervalued. The suppression of demands and protests led to a shift towards political violence, broad demands by marginalized and excluded minorities to separate from the state and the emergence of armed groups adopting separatist projects.

Some groups abroad have also been active in expressing their demands for secession. They have moved to turn international public opinion against the Iranian government by taking advantage of Iran's deteriorating international relations, especially with the West. Some groups representing minorities have had broad popularity among the minorities they represent. For example, the Ansar Al-Furqan group, which is one of the organizations opposing the Iranian government in Balochistan, formed at the end of 2013 through the integration of the Al-Ansar movement and Al-Furqan party. The Ansar Al-Furqan group belongs to the Jundallah Organization. Both groups belong to the Baloch Sunnis. They adopted the vision of opposing the Iranian government. This group has been describing the government in their literature as an occupying power in their region for nearly eight decades. In 2005, the region witnessed what is known as the Al-Ahwaz Uprising, which was a series of popular protests. It resulted in the arrests and executions of Arab activists.

The Al-Furqan Party is concentrated in the Sistan-Baluchistan region of eastern Iran. This region is mostly Sunni, who constitute 95 percent of the population. Thus, minorities whose rights are being undermined by the government, and feeling a sense of isolation and non-citizenship, are launching separatist movements to restore their rights, regain their identity with full citizenship, and break free from the government's grip and its exploitation by rising up against the state.<sup>(40)</sup> There are also Turkmen and Kurdish human rights organizations in the Al-Ahwaz region. Some of them use religious slogans, while others protest in search of independence. Other organizations call for social justice within the framework of the state.<sup>(41)</sup>

Armed movements are also active in the Kurdistan region of Iran, most importantly: The Kurdistan Free Life Party, The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, and Kurdish People's Protection Units, which raise the banner of insurrection in the face of the arbitrariness and repression of the state and adopt a separatist project within the framework of the dream of the great Kurdish state.<sup>(42)</sup>

#### **2- The Escalation of Political and Social Protests**

Iran has been witnessing social mobilization and popular protests since the end of 2017, which have included many cities and regions.<sup>(43)</sup> The popular protests have extended to many areas

inhabited by religious and national minorities – where high levels of repression is used and fragile infrastructure is apparent . The protests also escalated in major cities. The northwestern regions witnessed the same thing. These areas are inhabited by a number of ethnic minorities. The economic inequality among Iran's regions is one of the main reasons for the geographical nature of the intensity and spread of the demonstrations. However, the direct triggers of the protests are likely linked to the political and security dynamics in the country and within each of the governorates.<sup>(44)</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The outcomes of building the modern state in Iran, from the beginning of the twentieth century until today, have been largely modest. The Pahlavi state failed to complete its modernist project and it also failed to bring harmony between Iran's conflicting identities. The Pahlavis adopted a secular project to separate Iran's past from its present. The Islamic Republic faced the same problems when it adopted a religious theocratic project, basing its ideas and foundations on historical Shiite experiences. Both models tried to impose a certain identity on society and its component parts. In spite of the contradiction between the secular project adopted by the Shah's government before the revolution and the religious project adopted by the government emanating from the theory of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, neither of them reached a national consensus agreed upon by all societal groups. The two projects, with their cultural rhetoric and development policies, embodied only a tyrannical project, one with a secular face and the other with a religious one. The common element between both models is that they failed to contribute to strengthening the state's structure through the integration of its components and the promotion of citizenship and coexistence. Consequently, Iran's internal conflict continues at all political, cultural, economic, and social levels. This has ultimately led to the current vulnerability the Iranian state is experiencing, risking the possibility of state fragmentation or collapse at any point in time.

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