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The Education of Minorities in Iran

*All must rise, the illiterate to learn and
the literate sisters and brothers to teach.
Education for all is one of the basic
needs of every nation.*

Imam Khomeini¹

1. The Aim of This Article

The purpose of this article is to present the educational situation of minorities (religious, ethnic and other groups endangered with exclusion, and the disadvantaged) in Iran. Iran was chosen due to the lack of printed publications about the country's educational issues. It was a challenge to collect and analyse material with minorities as the main focus.²

Iran is thought not to be important in the Polish educational debate due to cultural differences and its remoteness. Nevertheless, there are Polish politicians who give the Iranian theocratic republic as a good example of the changes they would like to implement in Poland. The main difference is the religion they choose to base their system upon, for M. Giertych for example, it should only be the Catholic Faith.³

If one realises this aspirational function in Polish politics exists, the choice of Iran is not so exotic as it might seem. What is more, the issue of education of minorities in Iran becomes an important topic to present, in order to gain greater insight into the above-mentioned aspirations.

¹ Islamic Republic of Iran: Report of Education for All Assessment The year 2000 ,
<http://www2.unesco.org/wef/countryreports/iran/rapport_1.html> retrieved 15.01.2006,

² The idea for this article appeared during my work on a comparative pedagogy paper (a comparison of the Iranian and Polish educational systems) and for this reason some parts of the two articles may overlap. See M. Prusinowska, System oświatowy w Iranie, retrieved 06.05.2006,
<<http://nastyku.w.interia.pl/inna%20edukacja/system%20oswiatowy%20w%20Iranie%20Magdalena%20Prusinowska.pdf>>

³ M. Giertych, Czas na kontrliberalizm, Opoka w Kraju 2001/38, <<http://www.opoka.giertych.pl/owk38.htm>> retrieved 15.01.2006

2. Method

A variety of methods could be used to collect information on this particular issue, however, I have chosen the most accessible - Internet research.

The main advantage of collecting information on the Internet is the fact that the most up-to-date documents are published there. What is more, some documents are available only on the Internet, which is especially important when looking for data about a country which is as remote as Iran is from Poland. Printed publications concerning educational issues in Iran were simply out of my reach.

In this investigation there is one major source for error or limitation. This is the question of sources in terms of objectivity and reliability. To minimise this risk, data gathered by international organisations (such as UNESCO, UNICEF, Human Rights Watch) were used.

3. General Information

The Islamic Republic of Iran (Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran), known as Persia until 1935, is a country located by the Persian Gulf and Oman Sea, in the Middle East region, with a total area of 1,648,195 sq km (for comparison: Poland - 312,685sq km). It is bordered by Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁴

The country is divided into 28 provinces. The capital city is Tehran with a population of ca. 6,800,000. The total population numbers - 71,4 million – and makes Iran the most densely populated country of the Middle East region, and sixteenth in the world.⁵

The population growth rate was 3,2% during the period 1976-1986. However, efforts have been made to lower the rate so as to minimise obstacles to social progress and sustainable development. The result was a 1,5% decline in urban and 2% decline in rural areas. In 1998 the average population growth rate was 1,47%.⁶

UNESCO report⁷ indicates an essential demographic factor – population age. More than half of Iran's population is within the age group 15-64 and about 39,5% of the total population are under

⁴ CIA World Factbook 2006, <<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/pl.html>> retrieved 15.01.2006

⁵ UNICEF documents, <http://www.unicef.pl/517_1509.htm> retrieved 14.01.2006

⁶ Islamic Republic of Iran: Report of Education for All Assessment The year 2000, op.cit.

⁷ Ibidem

14. According to this data Iran's population is one of the youngest in the world.

Another factor immensely influential on education is ethnic diversity. In Iran the range of diversity is easily noticeable: Persian 51%, Azeri 24%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 8%, Kurd 7%, Arab 3%, Lur 2%, Baloch 2%, Turkmen 2% and other 1%.

In Iran ethnic diversity is also combined with language diversity. 58 % of the population uses Persian and Persian dialects, 26% uses Turkic and Turkic dialects, 9% Kurdish, 2% Luri, 1% Balochi, 1% Arabic, 1% Turkish and others 2%.

On the other hand, there is not such a diverse range as far as religion is concerned.

The majority are Shiite Muslims – 89% (NB other sources estimate the number to be 80%⁸). The second religious group are Sunni Muslims – 9%. Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Baha'i account for 2% of the population. ⁹

A characteristic of Iran is the influence of Islam on the political system. The Islamic Republic of Iran was established in 1979 by Imam Khomeini and since then the supreme leader is both the highest political and religious figure in the country. In addition to this, the Constitution and civil laws are based on Islam which can affect the balance in such a diverse society. ¹⁰

4. System of Education

The basic regulations for education have been enshrined in The Constitution of the I.R. of Iran since 1979. Article 30 of the Constitution states that education is free of charge for all.

Furthermore the article runs as follows:

"The Government is obliged to provide the required facilities for free education for all people up to the end of secondary level. It is also liable for the expansion of a higher education which is free of charge, in order to achieve self-sufficiency in the country." (However, the law also allows the establishment of private schools and universities charging school and tuition fees.) ¹¹

Compulsory education covers 6 to 10 year old children. However, there are attempts to extend the length of compulsory schooling to 8 years (lower secondary education would be compulsory too). ¹²

One of the visible changes in the education system of Iran is the fact that primary education is

⁸ Iran religious and ethnic minorities: Discrimination in Law And Practice, Human Rights Watch Report, <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/1997/iran/Iran-01.htm>> retrieved 09.01.2006

⁹ CIA World Factbook 2006, op.cit.

¹⁰ Islamic Republic of Iran: Report of Education for All Assessment The year 2000, op.cit.

¹¹ Ibidem

¹² UNESCO National Reports on the Development of Education, 2001 , <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/ICE/natrap/Iran_1.pdf>

completely within the framework of the "Education for All" programme.¹³

Government statistics show that more than 95% of Iranian children are enrolled in primary or secondary education. Taking into consideration the great number of this youthful population and economic difficulties in remote regions of the country (e.g. nomadic communities), this is a great achievement.

The total number of schools is estimated to be over 113,000 and there are over 18 million students enrolled in them. The number of teachers is estimated to be around 1 million in the whole educational system.¹⁴

Since the Iranian system of education is still undergoing formal changes I have decided to leave out a detailed description of the system and to focus on the issue of educational justice.

5. Equity in Education

Iranian plans for educational development are presented in various documents by international organisations.¹⁵ Some of the plans reveal aspirations to political correctness:

“The I.R. of Iran has been trying hard, during recent years, to increase the enrolment rate, in other words, to increase the chances of schooling for various groups of people regardless of their gender , age, tribal and ethnic diversities (...)”¹⁶

However, how in a theocratic republic (which is the case with Iran) is the idea of equity in education going to be introduced? Firstly, let us look closely at plans which focus on enrolment rate as the main equity factor.

- Implementation of the plan "Attraction of out-of school children" – the target group were children from rural areas (in the academic year 2000-2001, 37,500 children were enrolled).
- Introduction of the plan "Establishing classes for students having especial needs (slow learners)." - the focus was on providing an educated workforce.
- Plan for expanding the network of boarding schools and state exemplary schools in deprived and remote regions.
- Development of tribal schools (primary, lower and upper secondary) and schools for nomadic communities etc.¹⁷

¹³ Islamic Republic of Iran: Report of Education for All Assessment The year 2000, op.cit.

¹⁴ British Council Documents < <http://www.britishcouncil.org/iran-discover-iran-education-report.doc>.> retrieved 14.01.2006

¹⁵ See Bibliography

¹⁶ UNESCO National Reports on the Development of Education, 2001 , op.cit.

¹⁷ Ibidem

6. Ethnic and Religious Minorities

Iran is obliged by international agreements to respect citizens rights regardless of their race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or any other attitudes, nationality, origin or any other status. These regulations are supposed to guarantee everyone the basic right of equality before the law, as well as equal access to education, health care and so on.

Iran's Constitution includes many articles prohibiting discrimination because of race or origin (for example Articles 3 and 19). There are also regulations concerning the freedom of religious minorities. But in fact they concern only Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian communities, as only these minorities are granted the right to perform religious rites and religious education in Iran (Article 13). What is more Article 14 states:

“The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with equitable 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 addition, Article 15 grants the right to the local or ethnic language and the possibility of teaching ethnic literature in schools under condition of establishing Persian as the official language.¹⁸

Discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities seems to be widespread in Iran, even examples of the breaking of basic Human Rights have been noticed by international organisations.¹⁹ This paper is limited to only some of the practices of discrimination in education.

6.1 The Education of Ethnic Minorities

There are some examples of practices planned to help ethnic minorities. One of these are pre-primary courses. The main aim of kindergartens is to prepare children for education in primary school. Due to the ethnic diversity of Iran in bilingual regions this objective was extended by adding a one-month preparatory course. The course was provided to deal with the high repetition rate (first grade) in these bilingual areas where children have problems with Persian language proficiency, often due to lack of pre-primary education centres. These preparatory courses have been held annually since 1989, with The Ministry of Education being responsible for their organisation.²⁰

¹⁸ Iran religious and ethnic minorities: Discrimination in Law And Practice, Human Rights Watch Report, <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/1997/iran/Iran-06.htm>> retrieved 09.01.2006

¹⁹ Iran religious and ethnic minorities: Discrimination in Law And Practice, Human Rights Watch Report, op.cit.

²⁰ UNESCO National Reports on the Development of Education, 2001 , op.cit.

In spite of this, international organisations warn that discrimination is a big problem in Iran. For instance the Azeri minority, 24% of the Iranian population, faces problems of discrimination, and mainly in the field of culture. According to a Human Rights Watch Report, in schools there is no instruction in the Azeri language, at universities there is no Azeri literature institute (it is interesting with regard to this that the less numerous Armenian minority has such an institute). The Azeri are however undertaking actions aiming to introduce the Azeri language as a second language in regions inhabited by the Azeri minority, instead of Arabic.²¹

The Beloch minority also encounters repression. In this case the repression started under the rule of Pahlavi. The reason was fear of the Beloch movement which could have threatened the integrity of the Iranian state. Discriminatory practices comprised of a ban on the Belochi language, a prohibition on wearing Belochi clothes in schools, while the publishing of Belochi books and newspapers was considered a criminal act. What is more, a government controlled density rate of the Beloch population was imposed to hinder their consolidation.

After the revolution of 1979 not much has changed. The new government has continued to ignore the Beloch language and its culture in the educational system. The majority of teachers are of non-Baloch origin and the Beloch minority is poorly represented at universities (in the academic year 1995-96, only 9 out of 2000 students at Zahedan University originated from this minority and it is a region where the Beloch population is in the majority).²²

The Arab minority is not an exception as far as cultural discrimination is concerned. The representatives of this minority claim that the present government is acting in the same way as the old regime in order to uproot Arabic culture. The facts seem to support their claims: there is no Arabic newspaper dealing with Khuzestan regional issues (it is a region with a large Arab population), Arabic newspapers printed in Iran are designed for Arabs abroad, in primary schools the Arabic language is absent, while in secondary schools the focus is set only on religious texts. What is more, the Arab minority does not feel properly represented in the government and the administration.²³

6.2 The Religious Education of Minorities

Unfortunately, no matter how many liberal regulations can be found in Iranian law (even the

²¹ Iran religious and ethnic minorities: Discrimination in Law And Practice, Human Rights Watch Report, op.cit.

²² Ibidem

²³ Ibidem

Constitution) the fact is that religious minorities are suffering from officially sanctioned discrimination and education is one of the most affected areas. The Ministry of Education clearly states its main goal:

“Strengthening and stabilising students' spiritual and religious fundamental beliefs by explaining and teaching Islamic and Shiite principles and culture on the basis of the Holy Quran , the Prophet's tradition and his 13 innocent family members' actions (P.B.U.T)”²⁴

Restrictions also apply to teachers, as the Ministry of Education assuring Islamic education a special place in the Iranian education system, demands that teachers fit into the pattern of Islamic “high and supreme attributes”.²⁵

The basic religious conflict is between Shiite Muslims and Sunni Muslims, which are the largest religious minority in the country. The Sunni Muslims’ estimated membership is around 10 million, a majority of which live in the south west, south east, and north west. The Constitution provides Sunni Muslims a high degree of religious freedom but the fact that the Shiite doctrine is the official religion causes some discrimination.

This is fully visible for example during entrance examinations to universities – all candidates must take an exam in Islamic theology (based on the Shiite doctrine). Such practices restrict access to higher education for religious minorities. In addition to this all students of public schools (including non-Muslims) must study Islam.²⁶

Religious discrimination especially affects the Baha'i minority which is defined by the government as a counter-revolutionary political “sect”. As a result different official decisions have been made to eliminate the Baha'i as a religious community. One of the documents stated that Baha'is “would be permitted to enrol in schools only if they did not identify themselves as Baha'is”. In addition to this the government recommended special kinds of segregation: Baha'is should be enrolled only in schools with “a strong and imposing religious ideology”. The same document ordered the expelling of Baha'is from universities when their identity becomes known.²⁷

Non-formal education is also not allowed for the Baha'i community, while Baha'i meetings and religious education, even when taking place in private houses, is strongly restricted. Nevertheless,

²⁴ Islamic Republic of Iran: Report of Education for All Assessment The year 2000, op.cit.

²⁵ UNESCO National Reports on the Development of Education, 2001 ,
<http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/ICE/natrap/Iran_2.pdf> retrieved 15.01.2006

²⁶ International Religious Freedom Report 2004, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour,
<<http://www.state.gov/drl/rls/irf/2004/35497.htm>> retrieved 07.01.2006

²⁷ Ibidem

there are some changes. For example the government has eased the restrictions and allowed Baha'i children to enrol in public primary and secondary schools.²⁸

The problem of discrimination also affects the religious minorities acknowledged by the government. Zoroastrian, Jew and Christian have the right to private religious education but the right is limited by such regulations as the content of religious textbooks (and not just religious textbooks) having to be accepted by the Ministry of Education. An additional impediment is the order to control all non-Persian religious texts by the Ministry which often results in cancellation of the publication (because of translation costs which are too high).²⁹

7. Conclusions

The Islamic Republic of Iran has legal regulations concerning the protection of not only ethnic and religious minorities but also other disadvantaged groups (e.g. women, disabled children). What is more, in the international arena, Iran seems to promote documents which include evidence for such liberal laws. However, in practice all the above mentioned groups suffer different degrees of discrimination. The reasons for this situation are diverse:

- economic (e.g. to develop the infrastructure of schools and institutions for disabled children and nomad tribes a lot of funds are needed)
- religious (Iran is a theocratic republic with only one official religion – the Shiite doctrine - the government and administration is obliged to promote it actively; already such a situation is discriminatory but there are also documents revealing actions aimed at subordinating other religions)
- political (e.g. the political conflict between Iran and Israel causes hostility towards the Jewish minority)

Fortunately, changes in the government's attitude toward minorities are visible. International organisations like Human Rights Watch have contributed immensely but constant involvement in protection of the rights of minorities is a necessary factor for further change.

²⁸ Ibidem

²⁹ Ibidem

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