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THE FUTURE OF IRAN: EDUCATIONAL REFORM
**Educational Reform in Iran,
Human Rights Perspectives**

By Nazila Ghanea



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This working paper was produced for the Legatum Institute's workshop on Educational Reform on 12 November 2012. The workshop was part of 'The Future of Iran' project, which is designed to encourage Iranians to begin thinking about the challenges they will face if, or when, they suddenly find themselves in a position to carry out major political, social and economic reforms.

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It was back in 1968 that the United Nations marked the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Tehran through a World Conference on Human Rights. The conference urged "all peoples and governments to dedicate themselves to the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to redouble their efforts to provide for all human beings a life consonant with freedom and dignity and conducive to physical, mental, social and spiritual welfare."¹

Since then, numerous international standards have upheld the commitment to nurturing a 'culture of human rights', and there is a strong reliance on the educational sphere to contribute to this change. A human rights culture is intended to transform every individual and institution in society, impacting all governmental and non-governmental processes domestically. However, if we single out its societal objectives, the objective of advancing a human rights culture sets out an interesting challenge to civic education in Iran.

EDUCATIONAL REFORM

The purpose of this paper is to draw pointers for the future of educational reform in Iran from a human rights perspective. The focus will be on the objective of nurturing a culture of human rights through education. Although 'human rights education' would seem to imply a dedicated separate curriculum, by unpacking it below we will note that it can be taught in a variety of ways and effectively integrated through an educational curriculum.

Much has been written about a human rights culture, and its association with the rule of law, political culture, gender violence, best interests of the child, democracy, citizenship and civic responsibility. This literature also addresses the impact of a human rights culture on the political system, the public sector, legal culture and minority rights. Each of these raises a host of challenges for today's Iran, for example in relation to the absence of the rule of law, the banality of gender violence within society, the mass denial of full and equal citizenship² and the widespread abuse of minority rights.

The core components of human rights education focuses on: "both content and process related to human rights", the use of participatory methods and the adoption of "goals

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related to cognitive (content), attitudinal or emotive (values/skills) and action-oriented components".³ One author lays out the triple aspects of human rights education: "education about human rights (cognitive), education through human rights (participatory methods that create skills for active citizenship), and education for human rights (fostering learners' ability to speak up and act in the face of injustices)".⁴ The cognitive component of human rights education can be taught through a variety of educational methods and means. However, teaching the values, skills and action-oriented components of human rights, with the objective of empowering the average Iranian to speak up for injustices suffered by others, sets out a completely different threshold.

The scope of the content of a human rights education is set out by the UN's Plan of Action for World Programme for Human Rights Education, as including the following:

- (a) The strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- (b) The full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity;
- (c) The promotion of understanding, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples, and racial, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups;
- (d) The enabling of all persons to participate effectively in a free and democratic society governed by the rule of law;
- (e) The building and maintenance of peace;
- (f) The promotion of people-centred sustainable development and social justice.⁵

Human rights educational objectives are universal, indivisible, and interrelated,⁶ in the same way as human rights are in general. It is therefore not possible to single out only particular elements of the above. For example, it is not possible to aim at social justice without caring about the rule of law, or to uphold human dignity without fundamental freedoms. Nevertheless, in the interest of time, it would be advantageous to focus on point (c) human rights education in relation to upholding minority rights.

It is well-documented that minorities in Iran are subject to entrenched state-sanctioned discrimination, albeit of varying degrees. The majority of the members of these minorities suffer state-imposed discrimination or persecution, fear and abuses, above and beyond the violation of rights suffered by the general population. These abuses include those in the civil and political sphere, for example in relation to equality before the law, as well as in the economic, social and cultural sphere, for example in relation to earning a livelihood. At the international level, the rights belonging to members of minorities are enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,⁷ its General Comment 23⁸ and in the 1992 Minorities Declaration.⁹ Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states:

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“In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language”.

The challenge of seeking to establish a human rights culture in Iran, such that both people and institutions, governmental and non-governmental actors, individuals and collective, are one and all empowered to speak up for the injustices heaped upon Iranian minorities is a steep one. What would be the content of the human rights education that would seek such an objective? What methods would be used to advance the content of this education? What about the attitudinal or emotive values and skills that would be utilised? What would be the action-oriented components of such a programme? What would it use as its barometers for success, say at the societal, cultural, political and legal levels?

Our starting point¹⁰ is a context where minorities face an unjust and discriminatory distribution of national resources,¹¹ political power, socio-cultural status¹² and national development;¹³ there is a lack of recognition for minority languages as official languages and inability to use and teach minority languages at schools or in the media; minority groups are restricted on their cultural events, public engagement and political participation; common policy is to alter the demographics of particular regions in order to reduce the percentage of the minority population;¹⁴ there are higher legal irregularities,¹⁵ state violence,¹⁶ incitement¹⁷ and persecution¹⁸ targeted against them; there is no security of person, but a greater likelihood of execution, imprisonment and torture for minorities. Not all minorities throughout Iran face all of these violations

at all times, but this is indicative of the actual violations that Iranian minorities face. These realities fly in the face of countless Iranian¹⁹ and international legal standards to the contrary and lead to social volatility in some border regions where there is a concentration of minorities.²⁰

Considering this context, the barometers we set for success at the societal, cultural, political and legal levels should clearly be incremental. The suggestion for a more pluralistic and inclusive education often benefits from encouragement from civil society and, in the case of Iran today, is the only option.

In the last three years we have witnessed a very promising beginning. This is the growing understanding of shared human rights concerns between various exiled Iranian ideological and minority champions, which is enhanced through the greater debate amongst imprisoned lawyers, judges, trade unionists, student and women's rights activists and opposition supporters within Iran. The Persian media and academic debates are starting to reflect this new vista in positive ways. This offers an opening window of opportunity for human rights education towards the advancement of a human rights

The increasing remoteness from Iran challenges us to keep the objectives real and relevant for a changing Iran and a shifting Iranian demographic.

culture. As well as including the 'staple' education about human rights, there is the opportunity for a far more innovative "education through human rights (participatory methods that create skills for active citizenship), and education for human rights (fostering learners' ability to speak up and act in the face of injustices)".²¹

In terms of minority rights, for example, this points us in the direction of: developing an account of a far less chauvinistic history of Iran in ethnic and religious terms; exploring the provision of educational programmes, which allows for the inclusion of minority Iranian languages such as Arabic, Kurdish and Azeri; publishing and teaching Iranian literature that reflects renowned and literary figures from a variety of linguistic, religious and ideological traditions; a more critical insight into the political history of the country; and so on. These should be developed through on-going collaborative and consultative means.

Minority rights, of course, constitute just one area of concern for human rights education. Other areas, that should similarly be unpacked and explored include: respect for human rights and human dignity, tolerance and equality, democratic participation, rule of law, peace, sustainable development and social justice.²²

The methods used to advance these different areas of human rights concerns will differ, as will the attitudinal or emotive values and skills utilised and action-oriented components. There is not just one educational model that can be utilised towards these different human rights educational programmes that can be developed collaboratively today to provide the foundation for a more inclusive and pluralistic future for Iran. These educational objectives and programmes also face the huge practical challenge of how

to reach out to Iranians within and outside the country. Provisions such as the elaborate NGO skills-based trainings of the Iranian NGO Training Centre NGOTC²³ and even the biennial Mofid University human rights conferences²⁴ in Iran were closed down by the mid-2000s. Seminars such as those at the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS)²⁵ and Non-Aligned Movement Centre for South-South technical cooperation only allow for a very select and narrow participation in Iran. However, a variety of educational resources are building up. These are increasingly based outside Iran. They include: Tavaana's very innovative and varied online educational courses;²⁷ the BIHE's longstanding academic, values and service-focused model;²⁸ various intense, seminar-led and in-person trainings for media, legal or IT professionals; and training for youth leaders and political activism held outside Iran.

The increasing remoteness from Iran challenges us to keep the objectives real and relevant for a changing Iran and a shifting Iranian demographic. The scarcity of resources also increases the risk of such educational models merely focusing on the content or cognitive elements of human rights education. However, an increasingly polarised and traumatised population within Iran should remind us not to de-emphasise the attitudinal or emotive (values/skills) and action-oriented components.²⁹ This rests on values such as an innate sense of human dignity, high resolve, zeal and high purpose, kindness, compassion, trustworthiness, truthfulness, sincerity, kindness and compassion, justice, humanity and philanthropy, concern for the rights of others and service to humankind.³⁰ These are skills, which are essential for an active and open-minded citizenship, are critical and will be foundational to our joint future.

FOOTNOTES

1. United Nations, 'Proclamation of Teheran', Final Act of the International Conference on Human Rights, May 1968, UN Doc A/CONF. 32/41 at 3 (1968), www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/l2ptichr.htm (last accessed October 2012)
2. For example, in relation to the children of Iranian mothers and Afghani fathers.
3. Monisha Bajaj, 'Human Rights Education: Ideology, Location and Approaches', 33.2 Human Rights Quarterly, May 2011, pp. 482-483
4. Monisha Bajaj, 'Human Rights Education: Ideology, Location and Approaches', 33.2 Human Rights Quarterly, May 2011, p. 483, drawing from Amnesty International's Human Rights Friendly Schools framework
5. United Nations, 'Plan of Action: World Programme for Human Rights Education', First Phase, New York and Geneva, UNESCO and OHCHR, 2006, p. 12
6. See, for example, UNFPA, Human Rights Principles, available at www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/PAActionEducationen.pdf (last accessed October 2012)
7. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, G.A. Res. 2200, U.N. GAOR, 21st Sess., Supp. No. 16, at 52, U.N. Doc A/6316 (1966)
8. General Comment 23 on Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
9. UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, G.A. Res. 47/135 (18 December 1992)
10. The examples in this paragraph are drawn from the following publication: Nazila Ghanea and Binesh Hass, 'Seeking Justice and an end to Neglect: Iran's Minorities Today', London: Minority Rights Group, 2011, available at www.minorityrights.org/10535/briefing-papers/seeking-justice-and-an-end-to-neglect-irans-minorities-today.html (last accessed October 2012)
11. Unverifiable reports put 76% of the population of the province of Sistan-Baluchistan below the poverty line, in stark contrast to the national rate of 18%. See, for example, statements by Mohammad Reza Sarawani, Deputy of Social Affairs in Sistan-Baluchistan, as they were reported by the official news agency Shana on 31 December 2007. For an estimate of the national poverty rate as of 2007, see Government of the United States of America: Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook, Population Below Poverty Line, 2010, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2046.html (last accessed October 2012) For a more detailed report on poverty in Iran, see D. Salehi-Isfahani, 'Has Poverty Increased in Iran Under Ahmadinejad?', The Brookings Institute, 5 August 2008, www.brookings.edu/opinions/2008/0805_iran_salehi_isfahani.aspx (last accessed October 2012)
12. For example, the process of screening or gozinesh means Iranians are selected or excluded from various positions on the basis of an assessment of their perceived ideological suitability, and their loyalty and commitment to the Islamic Republic. For example, students deemed politically active or otherwise 'undesirable' are regularly suspended or expelled from university. See: Human Rights Watch, 30 September 2003, www.hrw.org/en/news/2003/09/30/iran-stop-punishing-student-activists (last accessed October 2012), and Denying the Right to Education, Human Rights Watch, Iran: Stop Punishing Student Activists, October 2006, www.hrw.org/backgrounder/mena/iran1006 (last accessed October 2012) Those who 'fail' these screenings, for example non-Muslims or the politically 'suspect' are either excluded or eventually purged not only from the upper echelons of power, but also from more minor positions of 'influence' in society, such as securing or continuing in university teaching positions.
13. When the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing visited Iran in 2005, he reported that in Ahwaz, Khuzestan's capital, "thousands of people [were] living with open sewers, no sanitation, no regular access to water, electricity and no gas connections", despite the fact that the province has been the cornerstone of Iran's massive oil-wealth for more than a century. M. Kothari, Economic, 'Social and Cultural Rights: Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living', UN doc. E/CN.4/2006/41/Add.2, 21 March 2006, daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G06/119/30/PDF/G0611930.pdf?OpenElement (last accessed October 2012) For an interview by Kothari on this topic, see 'Interview with Human Rights Special Rapporteur, Miloon Kothari', IRIN, 9 August 2005, www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=25364 (last accessed October 2012)
14. For example, a leaked secret letter allegedly written by former Vice President Mohammad Abtahi briefly outlined a policy to radically alter the demographics of Khuzestan by moving Arabs to other parts of the country, whilst moving non-Arabs into the region, the end in mind being a reduction of the province's Arab population to a third of what it was in 2005. See: Ahwazi Arab Human Rights Organization, Human Rights and the Ahwazi Arabs, July 2006, where the original letter and translation are available in Appendix 1, www.hic-mena.org/documents/dossier.pdf (last accessed October 2012) In February 2006, Amnesty International reported that government-directed migration of non-Arabs into Khuzestan is linked to economic policies that offer zero per cent interest loans to migrants but not Arabs. See: Amnesty International, Iran: New Government Fails to Address Dire Human Rights Situation, 16 February 2006, www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/010/2006/en/bd1cac6f-d45e-11dd-8743-d305bea2b2c7/mde130102006en.html (last accessed October 2012)
15. The summary trial and subsequent execution of Bahman Samandari is a case in point. Bahman Samandari was arrested on 17 March 1992 and executed the next day whilst the international community was in session at the UN Commission on Human Rights. Baha'i International Community, The Baha'i Question: Cultural Cleansing in Iran, September 2008, New York, pp. 62-63, available online at news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/TheBahaiQuestion.pdf (last accessed October 2012). Disregard for due process and the law in general is systemic in Iran and not limited to the state's treatment of its minorities. It is, however, especially pronounced in their case. The example of the Baluchis is also very grave. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has recognised their particular vulnerability to summary trials and executions. See, for example, the following report from August 1998 which cites an interview by a government official in the state's Ettela'at newspaper (25 February 1998) endorsing orders to execute suspected militants upon capture: 'Question of the violation of human rights and fundamental freedom [...]: Report of the sub-commission under commission on human rights resolution 8 (XXIII): Declaration on the Islamic Republic of Iran', UN doc. E/CN/Sub.2/1998/NGO/32, 24 August 1998, www.unhcr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/TestFrame/e8fd3e68a3e4b563802566880051d10e?OpenDocument (last accessed October 2012) Some observers have noted that as a result of these orders, one in three executions in Iran are of the Baluchi people.

16. One notorious incident of state brutality came in July 2005 when Shivan Qaderi, a 25-year-old Iranian Kurd, whom locals described as an opposition activist, and authorities as a smuggler and criminal, was shot dead along with two others and had his body bound and dragged by the police through the streets of Mahabad in the province of West Azerbaijan. This led to six weeks of protests across Kurdish regions that resulted in dozens of deaths, thousands of arrests, and the closure of a number of Kurdish news outlets that had been reporting on the protests. See: Amnesty International, 'Ethnic minorities singled out for attack in Iran', AI Index Number NWS 21/009/2005, 35.9, *The Wire*, October 2005, www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/NWS21/009/2005/en/57d840c6-d4a7-11dd-8a23-d58a49c0d652/nws210092005en.pdf (last accessed October 2012) Minorities are also highly overrepresented in prisons, in death row and in the rate of executions. For a discussion of capital punishment in Sistan-Baluchistan, see: Amnesty International, *Iran Executions Send a Chilling Message*, 29 March 2010, www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/iran-executions-send-chilling-message-2010-03-30
17. Bahá'í International Community, *Inciting Hatred: Iran's media campaign to demonize Bahá'ís*, 2011, available at www.bic.org/inciting-hatred-irans-media-campaign-demonize-bahais (last accessed October 2012). Also see same link for an October 2012 report on *The Bahá'ís of Semnan: A Case Study in Religious Hatred*.
18. "It is clear that those religious minorities that are essentially cultural, ethnic associations who have long resisted or forbidden conversions into the faith have generally suffered less in Iran, with those with a previous history of Muslim conversions being repressed most". N. Ghanea, 'Ethnic and Religious Groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran', UN doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.5/2003/WP.8, 5 May 2003, pp. 19-20, available at [www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/AllSymbols/09521F127B6419D0C1256D250047D9E6/\\$File/G0314153.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/AllSymbols/09521F127B6419D0C1256D250047D9E6/$File/G0314153.pdf?OpenElement) (last accessed October 2012) In 1991, a secret memorandum of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council was formulated at the request of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. The document, which bears his handwriting and the signature of another senior cleric, Hojatolislam Seyyed Mohammad Golpayegani, Secretary of the Council, states that the government should ensure that the "progress and development of the [Bahá'í] shall be blocked". The document (see original in the appendix to the FIDH document cited below) outlines a number of policies to this end, including denying them positions of influence; denying them employment if they identify themselves as Bahá'í; expelling them from university 'either in the admission process or during the course of their studies once it becomes known that they are Bahá'í; and ensuring that they are educated in schools "with strong religious ideolog[ies]". The official response from the Iranian government at the time was that the document was a forgery, though, as with the Abtahi memo, apocryphal or otherwise, the facts on the ground seem to buttress the verity of the document. See *Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme [FIDH], 'Discrimination against religious minorities in Iran'*, Paris, August 2003, www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/ir0108a.pdf (last accessed October 2012)
19. The Iranian Constitution formally provides a number of provisions with regard to some of its minorities: Article 3(14) provides for equality of all before the law. Article 13 states that Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians 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" but only within the limits of the ubiquitous and undefined 'law'. Article 14 enjoins the Muslims of the Islamic Republic to respect the human rights of non-Muslims and to treat them in "conformity with the ethical norms and principles of Islamic justice and equality", and "[t]his principle applies to all who refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran". Article 15 permits the use of "local and ethnic languages" and the teaching of "ethnic literature" in schools, whilst establishing Persian as the official language. Article 19 states: "All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights, and colour, race, language, and the like do not bestow any privilege".
20. In May 2006, a state-owned weekly ran a cartoon that depicted a cockroach uttering the English equivalent of 'huh?' in Azeri whilst in conversation with a Persian-speaking boy. The cartoon, drawn by an ethnic Azeri Mana Neyestani who had the misfortune of being so badly misinterpreted by many quickly, triggered waves of protests. Initially mobilised on university campuses in Tabriz, the provincial capital, the gatherings soon led to other protests in regional cities and towns, resulting in the closure of many shops and bazaars, and the gathering of tens of thousands of people on the streets and ultimately in front of the parliament in Tehran. The government responded by shutting down the weekly and jailing its cartoonist and editors. Amnesty International reported that, 'Hundreds, if not thousands, were arrested and scores reportedly killed by the security forces, although official sources downplayed the scale of arrests and killings'. See: Amnesty International, *2007 Annual Report for Iran*, www.amnestyusa.org/annualreport.php?id=ar&yr=2007&c=IRN (last accessed October 2012) See also: British Broadcasting Corporation, *Iran Azeris protest over cartoons*, 28 May 2006, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5024550.stm (last accessed October 2012)
21. Monisha Bajaj, 'Human Rights Education: Ideology, Location and Approaches', *33.2 Human Rights Quarterly*, May 2011, p. 483, drawing from Amnesty International's Human Rights Friendly Schools framework
22. United Nations, *Plan of Action: World Programme for Human Rights Education, First Phase*, New York and Geneva, UNESCO and OHCHR, 2006, p. 12, available at www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/PActionEducationen.pdf (last accessed October 2012)
23. See: Navid Ahmadi, 'Three NGOs Closed Down in One Day', *Rooz online*, 3 April 2007, www.roozonline.com/english/news3/newsitem/article/three-ngos-shut-down-in-one-day.html (last accessed October 2012)
24. For Mofid University Center for Human Rights Studies see: www.mofidu.ac.ir/HomePage.aspx?TabID=3968&Site=chrs.mofidu&Lang=en-US (last accessed October 2012)
25. See: ipis.ir/Pageltem-428.aspx (last accessed October 2012)
26. See: www.csstc.org (last accessed October 2012)
27. Tavaana: E-Learning Institute for Iranian Civil Society, <http://www.tavaana.org> (last accessed October 2012)
28. Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, <http://bihe.org> (last accessed October 2012)
29. Monisha Bajaj, 'Human Rights Education: Ideology, Location and Approaches', *33.2 Human Rights Quarterly*, May 2011, pp. 482-483
30. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, p. 37, available online from reference.bahai.org/en/t/ab (last accessed October 2012)

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