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MINORITIES DISILLUSIONED BY IRAN'S DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT



Vancouver, Canada: Iran's large Azerbaijani minority feels disappointed and ignored by the pro-democracy movement, which has been widely praised internationally for opposing the Iranian government's attempt to rig the June 12 election.

The sense of disillusionment among Iranian Azerbaijanis, who make up almost a quarter of the country's population, has emerged from coverage of the post-election crisis by the [Association for the Defense of Azerbaijani Political Prisoners in Iran \(ADAPP\)](#), an advocacy group that works from Canada. ADAPP is a new partner of the Advocacy Project (AP).

[Farzin](#), an AP Peace Fellow volunteering with ADAPP, said Azerbaijanis and other minorities have been savagely treated by Iranian authorities during the crisis - first for supporting the opposition and second for demanding the right to enjoy their own culture and language.

But this has not been acknowledged by the followers of Mir Hossein Mousavi, the main opposition candidate, because they are mostly Persians and share the government's concern that minority rights would threaten Persian hegemony in Iran, he said.

This bias extends to the Persian media, and the alternative media, which has been celebrated internationally for escaping the heavy hand of Iranian censors. ADAPP's press releases have been ignored by the Voice of America's Persian service, which is normally receptive to criticism of the Iranian government, as well as the BBC and Radio Farda. Major online media outlets, like the Huffington Post, have also been silent about the plight of Iran's minorities.

"There has been absolutely no reporting on Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Baluchis, Semitic Peoples,

Afghanis, Turcomens, Qashqai and Ahwazi Arabs," reports Farzin, who was himself born in the Azerbaijani town of Urmia.

Farzin's [blog](#) has offered a dramatic, and highly personal, alternative perspective on the election crisis. They began on an optimistic note before June 12, as the two main candidates competed for the large Azerbaijani vote. Mr Mousavi, who is himself an Azerbaijani Turk, toured the Azerbaijani towns of Tabriz and Urmia and addressed enthusiastic crowds (shown above) in Azerbaijani. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also visited Tabriz and claimed to speak Azerbaijani.

But even as the President was speaking, police were rounding up dozens of known Azerbaijani activists. The government response to protests (shown below) after the election was also swift and brutal. Two pro-democracy protesters died in Urmia and 300 were arrested, including two activists, Behnam Sheykhi and Mahmud Ojaghli, who worked for Mr Mousavi's campaign. Three protesters were beaten to death in Tabriz.



This was just the latest in a long campaign to suppress minority rights, but it prompted no statement of regret from Mr Mousavi, his followers, or the Persian media. As a result, areas with a high percentage of minorities - including Kurdistan, Baluchistan and Khuzestan - have seen no major protests since the election.

"People in these regions - especially in Azerbaijan - believe that no matter who comes to power, their rights will not be supported. So they are not taking an active role," said [Fakhteh Zamani](#), Founder and President of ADAPP.

Yashar Hakkakpour, a spokesperson for the ADAPP, said that Mr Mousavi isn't trusted by Azerbaijanis because he failed to support minority rights during his term as Prime Minister. Mr Mousavi also remained silent in 2006, when thousands of Azerbaijanis took to the streets to protest a political cartoon that pictured Azerbaijanis as cockroaches. Scores were detained, beaten and even killed. Hundreds were arrested.

In his [blog](#), Farzin observes that Iran will not enjoy true democracy or peace until the "racism" in Iranian society is eradicated and Persians embrace linguistic and cultural rights for Azerbaijanis and other minorities.

"In this current movement, minorities must finally be guaranteed these rights," he wrote. "Otherwise, why would they risk their lives for the status quo? What's in it for them?"

- Read [Farzin's blog](#)
- Learn more about [ADAPP](#)
- Watch a [video interview](#) with ADAPP Founder Fakhteh Zamani