MEMBER PROFILE

IRANIAN KURDISTAN

Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan
Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan

Last updated: November 2017
**Status:** Region of Western Iran

**Population:** 8-10 million, estimated to be 11-15% of the population of Iran

**Areas:** 111,705 km², comprising the four western provinces of Kermanshah (24,998 km²), Ilam (20,133 km²), West Azerbaijan (37,437 km²) and Kurdistan (29,137 km²)

**Capital:** Mahabad

**Language:** Kurdish

**Religion:** Sunni Muslims (66%), Shi’a Muslims (27%), indigenous and minority religions (Yarsan, Yazidis and Yarsan, 6%), Christians and Jews

**Ethnic Groups:** Kurdish and Azerbaijani Turks

**UNPO REPRESENTATION: Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) and Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan**

The PDKI is a social democratic party led by Mustafa Hijri. PDKI is a member of the Socialist International and has representation offices in various European countries, including in the US, Canada and Australia. PDKI joined UNPO in 2007.

PDKI was established in 1945. A year later, the party founded the Republic of Kurdistan, with Mahabad as its capital. Following the demise of the Republic of Kurdistan in 1946, the Iranian military ruled with an iron fist in Kurdistan. The Iranian state banned PDKI, thus forcing the party to operate clandestinely. Following the 1979 revolution in Iran, PDKI could operate freely for a short period. However, the Islamist regime that came to power following the revolution was as hostile to democracy and Kurdish demands for autonomy as the previous regime. The Islamic Republic too banned PDKI and other Kurdish organizations and tried to re-impose military rule over Iranian Kurdistan. This resulted in a war that lasted until the 1990s.

PDKI has consistently called for negotiations with the Iranian state to find a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue. Negotiations between PDKI and the Iranian state took place in 1988 and 1989. On July 13, 1989, Iranian diplomats assassinated PDKI’s General-Secretary Dr. A. R. Ghassemloou during negotiations in Vienna, Austria.

The party aims for Kurdish national rights within a democratic federal republic in Iran, and its policies are based on freedom, democracy, gender equality and secularism.

PDKI has long been seen as one of the main representative organisations for the Kurds.

The Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan is a social democratic party led by Abdullah Mohtadi, its Secretary-General. It is affiliated with the Socialist International and has headquarters in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and branches and representatives in several countries in Europe and in North America. It joined UNPO in 2015.

Komala was established on 27 October in 1969 by a group of Kurdish university students following a series of deep social, political and cultural upheavals in the Kurdish and Iranian society. Very much like all other political formations at that time Komala was, due to the monarchic despotism of the Shah, forced to commence its activities as an underground organisation. During the 1970s Komala grew to become one of the main opposition parties in the Kurdistan region of Iran. In 1979 it joined the Iranian Revolution hoping it would end the oppression of Kurds and Iranians. But the nature of Komala’s democratic movement was in sharp contrast with the Ayatollah’s islamist movement which made an eventual clash
between the two inevitable, leading to the deaths and imprisonments of several thousands of its members.

Komala aims to attain a democratic, federal, secular and pluralist Iran where all nationalities can have the autonomy to protect their own rights and interests.

OVERVIEW

Iranian Kurdistan, also known as eastern Kurdistan, is the unofficial name given to a region in Western Iran inhabited by Kurds. It stretches from Mount Ararat in the north to the Zagros Mountains in the south. The region shares borders with Iraq, Turkey and Armenia, all of which are home to indigenous Kurdish populations.

The region forms a distinct cultural-geographical territory called Kurdistan. Although Kurdistan is rich in natural resources, at least 30 years of economic exploitation has alienated the Kurds from access to these resources, leaving much of their economy reliant on agriculture.

Iranian Kurdistan has a mixed population of Shi’a and Sunni, as well as followers of the pre-Islamic Kurdish religion of Yarsan. Religion does not form the basis of Kurdish national identity. This is the case in spite of the Iranian state’s persistent policy to divide Sunnis and Shi’a in Kurdistan. Kurdish history, language, culture as well as the systematic oppression of the Kurdish people, irrespective of which religion individual Kurds adhere to, form the basis of Kurdish national identity as well as a national awareness of a shared destiny.

Although the Kurdish people and Kurdish organisations took part in the 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini declared Jihad against the Kurdish people due to their demands for democracy in Iran and autonomy for Iranian Kurdistan. As a result, there has been a sustained military, economic and psychological war waged against the civilian population in Kurdistan, which has led, according to the Kurdistan Peace and Development Society, to a ‘systematic genocidal campaign’. This phenomenon has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of innocent people. Iranian Kurds have long struggled for improved governmental representation and protection of their basic human rights through the creation of a federal state.

Language

Kurdish is an Indo-European language. The majority of the population speaks the two main dialects of the Kurdish language; Kurmanji and Sorani. It consists of a continuum of languages and dialects spoken in Kurdistan. Today, Kurdish in Iran is spoken only at home. Before the centralising policies of the Iranian State were introduced in the aftermath of the Second World War, this language was taught in schools in Kurdish areas. Following the Iranian Revolution, the situation of Kurdish language further worsened: newspapers, magazines and radio broadcasts in Kurdish were banned, and most Kurdish speakers have been forced to learn Farsi.

Economy

The region of Iranian Kurdistan is rich in natural resources and provides a significant percentage of water to the rest of Iran. Nonetheless, there has not been much investment in the economic development of Kurdistan, which is part and parcel of the Iranian state’s policy of systematic discrimination against Kurdistan and the Kurdish people. This blatantly
of revenue, which itself has been affected by government policies of planting landmines in agricultural fields, closure of borders as well as confiscation of land vital to the relocation of livestock for agricultural production in Kurdistan.

Social Development

One of the key factors contributing to the lack of social development in Kurdistan has been the Iranian state’s policy of systematic discrimination the Kurdish people. All school teaching is conducted in Farsi and Kurdish children are denied the right to education in their mother tongue. This is a barrier to the transmission of Kurdish history, language, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literature to future generations.

Discriminatory state policy has prevented many children from accessing education and has contributed to the extremely high levels of illiteracy in Kurdistan. Whereas Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution allows the use of minority languages in public, this is not implemented in practice, making the government’s actions illegal under the country’s constitution.

In addition, compared to the 30 other provinces in Iran, Kurdistan is ranked as one of the worse of five regions in terms of average cost of food, average income, general illiteracy, adult illiteracy and poverty. There is also an estimated unemployment rate of around 50% in Kurdistan. This reality demonstrates the impact of the Iranian state's policy of systematic oppression against the Kurdish people.

Culture

Both music and dance play a key role in Kurdish culture. The use of ancient instruments and songs is vital in festivals and in order to pass on traditional stories. Kurdish music and songs also play an important role in the cultural production of the Kurdish national liberation movement.

Dance similarly plays a large part in the cultural celebrations of Iranian Kurds. Traditional round dancing is used in festivals, birthdays and marriages.

Kurdish culture also promotes hospitality, toleration of diversity and peaceful coexistence with other cultures. Politics has strongly influenced the development of Kurdish culture since the beginning of the 20th century. The Republic of Kurdistan has had a lasting impact on Kurdish political culture, as evidenced in the Kurdish movement’s adherence to democracy, liberty and gender equality. Although some segment of Kurdish society remain conservative, especially concerning gender relations, the commitment of the Kurdish national movement in the various parts of Kurdistan to gender equality has paved the way for an increasing role of Kurdish women in Kurdish culture and politics. For example, some
of the prominent Kurdish poets, artists and writers are women. Kurdish women are also playing important roles in Kurdish politics and military affairs, thus reshaping Kurdish culture.

Religion

The vast majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims whose ancestors converted during the 7th Century Arab conquests. There are also a large number of Shi’a Muslims within the Kurdish population primarily living in the Ilam and Kermanshah provinces of Kurdistan.

A small minority of the population follows traditional and indigenous religions such as Yazdanism/Yazidism and Yarsan, which have been practiced by the Kurds for nearly 2,000 years.

UNPO PERSPECTIVE

UNPO strongly condemns the policies and actions taken by the Iranian government against the Kurdish people in Iran, particularly since 1979. Specifically, UNPO condemns Iran’s military approach, which has claimed tens of thousands of lives, the widespread human rights abuses, systematic discrimination in employment, education and housing and their continued exclusion from political participation.

Minority representation in politics and society is vital for a strong democratic leadership and UNPO believes that Iranian Kurds require a more substantial role in deciding their own future. The issue of federalism in Iran has long been a neglected issue and democratic decentralisation means the distribution of central government power, allowing marginalised national minorities to participate more effectively in local affairs.

For almost two decades, UNPO has been working to promote this and other solutions to the institutional and administrative discrimination facing marginalised ethnic, religious and national minorities. By working in conjunction with the Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran, PDKI, Komala and other active representatives of Iranian civil society, commitments have been made to promote both the desire of Iranians for new thinking in their domestic governance and a peaceful consensus.

UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE

The PDKI seeks a democratic and federal Iran. They believe that the peoples of Iran have the right to self-determination and seek regional autonomy in a federalised context and as a means for the devolution of central power to allow the Kurdish people participation in government activities that directly affect their lives. They are also determined to provide equality in education, housing, economic access and specifically workers social and economic demands.

Socially, the PDKI also requests the equality of men and women in society and within the context of the family as a means of facilitating cultural change. The PDKI calls for a
separation of religion and the state, consequently establishing a secular system of
government as an instrument for ensuring the end of religious discrimination and
marginalisation.

**Komala** calls for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question and the minority repression in
Iran by a new constitution built upon the principles of federalism and democracy. As one of
the first contemporary feminist and socialist movements in an otherwise conservative and
patrarchal Kurdish society Komala still maintains that a prerequisite for a lasting and
participatory democracy is an extensive fundamental rights package that ensures all
individuals as well as the environment to be adequately protected. Komala’s political
platform covers fundamental values such as dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity, citizens’
rights and justice.

Komala’s Secretary-General, Mr Abdullah Mohtadi, has said that despite the current
President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, being perceived as a moderate, he has not taken any
significant steps in the recognition of Kurdish rights and, on the contrary, the number of
executions has increased in the past few years.

The **PDKI and the Komala Party** signed in 2012 an alliance agreement stating their peaceful
cooperation on matters of mutual interest. The two parties announced their common belief
in a secular, democratic, federal and pluralistic political system in Iran. They believe the
Iranian constitution should be based on the principles set out in the UN Human Rights
Charter, including with respect to the political and national rights of the Kurdish people and
of other ethnic and religious minorities. Other common values are equality between women
and men, freedom of the press, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of
association, environmental protection, and dialogue as a way of resolving conflicts and
issues.

**POLITICAL SITUATION FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The current Kurdish political situation in Iranian Kurdistan stems from a long history of
territorial partition, denial of Kurdish identity and oppression of the Kurdish people. The
contiguous Kurdish territory known as Kurdistan was first partitioned between the Ottoman
and Persian Empires in 1514. Nevertheless, Kurdish principalities controlled Kurdistan until
the processes of centralization in the Ottoman and Persian Empires in late 19th century.
Kurdistan was again divided following the First World War while the Kurdish people,
promised a state of their own, were forcefully incorporated into four hostile states. The
Kurdish people, divided between Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, have since then survived
forced assimilation and genocide.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Kurdish national movement opposed the Iranian
state’s polices of denial and assimilation. During the Second World War PDKI managed to
establish the short-lived Republic of Kurdistan. Following the demise of the republic and the
execution of the Ghazi Mohammad, the president of the republic, the Iranian state imposed
absolute military rule over Kurdistan.

Unsurprisingly, the Kurds overwhelmingly welcomed the fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty in the
winter of 1979, ending the authoritarian rule of the Shah, who had systematically suppressed
the national minorities in Iran for decades. Having long fought for regional autonomy and
self-governance within federal Iran, Kurds in Iran saw participation in the 1979 revolution as
a key opportunity to achieve their goals. However, the post-revolutionary Islamist regime
proved to be as hostile to the Kurdish people’s demands for democracy and self-rule and
has since then opted for military approaches in response to Kurdish demands for rights.

The Kurds, including Kurdish leader Abdul Rahman Ghassmiou, won several seats in the
post-revolution assembly of experts, which was responsible for drafting the new
constitution. But the regime then suspended those elected. As a result, many Kurds were deprived of rights in the Iranian Constitution, which saw Shia primacy endorsed and made no provisions for regional autonomy. At the first elections of the new Islamic Republic, the polls in Iranian Kurdistan were declared void and Kurdish representatives were not allowed to enter in the Iranian Parliament.

Still in 1979, security forces of the Iranian government raided and destroyed entire Kurdish villages and towns. Ayatollah Khomeini said that the concept of an “ethnic minority” is contrary to Islamic doctrines and soon after declared a Jihad (Holy War) against the Kurdish people. Thousands of Kurds were sentenced to death after summary trials. Repression and military attacks in Iranian Kurdistan increased with the new regime. Moreover, Kurds suffered from the Iran-Iraq war, in that their lands were used as a frontline during the 8 years of conflict.

In the early stages after the revolution and a three-month-long war, the Kurds from Rojhelat negotiated over the terms of Iranian Kurdistan’s autonomy with Tehran, through a delegation headed by Mamsta Sheikh Ezzedin, which consisted of members from both Komala and PDKI. However, this came to an end on 13 July 1989, when Dr Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, Secretary-General of the PDKI, was assassinated in Austria alongside two of his colleagues, as they were negotiating with Iranian envoys. Dr Ghassemlou’s successor, Dr Sadeq Sharafkandi, met the same fate on 17 September 1992 in Berlin, as he participated in the Congress of Socialist International. Moreover, two prominent leaders of Komala were assassinated by the Islamic Republic of Iran of which one was Foad Mostafa Soltani, killed on 31 August 1979, and the other Sadiq Kamangar, murdered on 4 September 1989. These four assassinations led an inert era for the Kurdish political movement in Iran.

Over the following decades, Kurdish suppression by the Iranian regime has only worsened, reaching new levels of human rights violations during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and later Hassan Rouhani. In 2015, following the nuclear deal which lifted economic sanctions, a new phase in the relations between the world’s powers and Tehran heightened the fear that Rouhani’s new status would allow him to escape scrutiny over Iran’s human rights records.

HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION AND CURRENT ISSUES

The human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran has repeatedly been condemned by the international community, human rights NGOs and activists. According to the United Nations General Assembly 2015 report on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the standards of the country in terms of right to life, right against torture, freedom of expression, freedom of association, religious freedoms, women’s rights and minority rights are very low.

This is true for all citizens of Iran, but the Kurdish population is disproportionately affected compared to ethnic Persians. Kurds are subject to repression, discrimination, unequal access to education, execution, detention, torture, arbitrary killings and major violations of freedom of association and assembly. It is reported that since the beginning of President Rouhani’s mandate, repression, execution and arbitrary arrests in the country and in the Kurdish region in particular have plummeted.

Execution, detention, torture, and arbitrary killing

According to statistics published by international human rights organisations, numbers of executions in Iran have largely increased since the advent of President Rouhani, with 658 executions in 2011, 518 in 2012, 665 in 2013, 721 in 2014 and between 960 to 1050 in 2015 – of which only 364 were announced by the government. Indeed, the government officially recognises only a small number of the total executions it carries on. The execution toll in
2015 has been reported as the highest in over 10 years. From April to June 2015 there has been an average of four executions per day. Iran is believed to annually execute the highest or second highest number of people in the world.

Death penalty is not limited to violent offences, but concerns individuals charged of drug trafficking (around 65% in 2015), murder, rape, adultery, same-sex relations, apostasy (conversion from Islam to another religion), “insulting the Prophet”, “national security crimes” like “sowing corruption on Earth”, financial corruption and others. Many of these executions are public, and often sentences are handed down in the absence of legitimate court proceedings.

There also remains serious concern as to the execution of juveniles (people younger than 18 at the time of the crime), of which a large proportion consists in Kurdish minors. Despite having signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibits the death penalty for minors, Iran is the only country in the world known to publicly execute juveniles. In February 2015, the case of a young Iranian Kurd, Saman Naseem, was brought to international attention by human rights NGOs and activists. Naseem had been sentenced to death under charges of being a member of a Kurdish opposition group and of having been involved in armed confrontation with Iran’s Revolutionary Guards. He was arrested in 2011 at the age of 17. The young man was thought to have been executed in February, but was still alive in July that year.

Thousands of Iranian Kurds have been detained for lengthy sentences in the absence of fair trials under charges of subversion, membership to illegal organisations that promote their social, economic, cultural and linguistic rights, or “enmity against God”. In the many published reports on the issue, the recital of episodes of mistreatment, torture and unfair trial standards is widespread. Legal punishment comprises also practices such as blindness, amputation and flogging. For instance, Omar Faghihpour, a Kurdish political prisoner, has been serving his life sentence since 16 years and has never been able to leave the prison for one day.

Most of the charges Kurds are faced with are “Mohareb” (enmity against God) and “propaganda against the state”. This includes being member of a Kurdish group, party or association.

**Curtailed freedom of civil liberties**

Kurds face discrimination in employment, housing, political participation, and the exercise of their cultural, civic and political rights. There are severe restrictions on civil liberties such as the right to life, freedom of expression, of religion, of the press, and of assembly. Indeed, protests are severely repressed by security forces.

The political atmosphere is extremely repressive concerning Kurds, who cannot create parties or organisations advocating for their rights. For instance, Peshwa Saleh-Zadeh, a Kurd, has been sentenced to 30 months incarceration for “plotting” against the government and for affiliation with a Kurdish opposition group. He was executive member of an NGO as well as being responsible of a website featuring news.

The press is also strictly monitored and only newspapers and magazines close to the government are permitted. Therefore, Kurdish publications are banned. According to Reporters Without Borders, Iran ranks 173 out of 180 in the state of freedom of the press worldwide.

As of March 2016, the number of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Iran is estimated at 821, of which around 285 are Kurds.
Restricted linguistic rights and high illiteracy rates

Kurdish is banned from being used as a language of instruction in primary education. The lack of education in mother-tongue has an effect on the region’s literacy rate: in 2011, this rate was of 78% in Iranian Kurdistan, compared to approximately 90% in regions inhabited by ethnic Persians. In addition to language restrictions, this phenomenon is caused by other factors such as poverty, discrimination, early marriage among girls, and lack of obligatory primary education.

The Iranian government prohibits the publication of newspapers, journals and books in Kurdish language, and persecutes people who protest against this policy. Kurdish is therefore spoken mainly at home, as schools are not allowed to teach it.

Activists claiming the recognition of their cultural and linguistic rights are subject to imprisonment and potential execution.

Increasing suicide rates

Suicide has become a widespread phenomenon in Iranian Kurdistan. The number of suicides committed by Kurdish youth has greatly augmented in the last years, with not much reaction by the authorities. For instance, only in July and August 2015, 18 Kurds committed suicide, 13 of which were women. This phenomenon is thought to be caused by poverty, unemployment, and discrimination, among others.

KEY QUESTIONS

Why does the Kurdish minority seek a federal Iran?

Historically the creation of a democratic federal state has been used to unify different regions, provinces and ethnicities in one and the same polity. Federal states are characterised by a union of partially independent regions or states united through a federal government. The idea of creating a federal state specifically in Iran has consistently been recommended as a long-term solution to promote inclusion of minority issues and accommodate diverse ethnic groups who live within Iran.

Decentralizing Iran, through a revised constitution, would provide semi-autonomous self-rule for the Kurdish people, and would contribute to safeguarding the peaceful coexistence of all its religions and ethnic minorities while contributing to upholding human rights values and preserve the unity of the country. Unity in diversity should be the motto. Influence in the decisions which affect minorities and increased ownership over the management of resources will provide increased long-term stability throughout Iran.

Iran’s unity will be most convincingly preserved in the context of pluralist diversity within a federal ruling system under a revised system which facilitates democracy and social justice. Federalism need not weaken Iran. It could instead facilitate unity on voluntary grounds, provided that all ethnic groups’ identities and interests are respected in a federal system of government.

Who are the Khorasani Kurds?

Whereas the Kurds represented by UNPO are located in the western Iran, the Khorasani Kurds make up a population of about 1.5 million living in the north-eastern region of Khorasan, Iran. The Khorasani Kurdish region is found within the current north-eastern borders of Iran and the southern borders of Turkmenistan, in the northern sector of what has historically been known as the Province of Khorasan. Their history in this small region dates back to the seventeenth century during the Safavid Dynasty. Kurds were forcibly moved to Khorasan during this period as the result of war waged between the Persian and
Ottoman Empires. Their move was enforced as a result of lost land in the Kurdish region and the political will of the Shah at the time.

In modern day Iran, the Khorasani Kurds represent about 70% of the population in the area. Most of them talk in the Kurmanji dialect. The area of Khorasan suffers from poverty, illiteracy and destitution. Over the past 50 years the area has been undeveloped with no opportunities for prosperity, and its people have suffered economic, cultural and political persecution. This is highlighted by a 23% rate of illiteracy - a result of government policy to only educate in the Persian language in Iranian schools. Their culture is further neglected through regressive state policies and there are no institutes dedicated to political, cultural or economical progression for the population. Leaders and intellects, who petition for equality and inclusion, are consistently prosecuted, insulted, oppressed and jailed.

**RELEVANT LINKS**

The [Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan](#)
The [Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan](#)
[Global Security: Kurdistan-Iran](#)
[Cultural and civil society of Khorasani Kurds](#)
[Association for Human Rights in Kurdistan of Iran-Geneva (KMMK-G)](#)
[Kurdish Human Rights Project](#)
[Kurdistan Press Agency](#)
[Iran Human Rights Documentation Center](#)
[Webpage of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran](#)
[Information about political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Iran](#)