

Kurdish on Death Row


Amir Hassanpour speaks out against the practice of linguicide

In 1949, when I started attending school in the city of Mahabad in Iran, I was not permitted to speak in my native language, Kurdish. (This was the only language my classmates and I spoke.) Our teachers, also native speakers of Kurdish, were obligated to talk in Persian, which had been declared the country's only "official language" in Iran's first constitution in 1906. In 1923, a circular sent from the Central Office of Education to the education departments of all cities in the province warned:

On the orders of the Prime Minister it has been prescribed to introduce the Persian language in all the provinces especially in the schools. You may therefore notify all the schools under your jurisdiction to fully abide by this and to conduct all their affairs in the Persian language and the members of your office must follow the same while talking.

Soon after the old Qajar dynasty, which had reigned since 1781, was replaced by the Pahlavi monarchy in 1925, the ban on non-Persian languages and cultures began to be enforced through violence. The contemporary Kurdish poet Hemin, the pen name of Seyed Mohammed Amin Shaikholislami (1921–1986), recalled, in 1972, how "thousands of Kurds in schools and offices and even in the street were arrested and tortured and disgraced on charges of speaking in Kurdish."

Reading or writing in Iran's non-Persian languages was treated as evidence of secessionism, treason and violation of the territorial integrity of the state. Another Kurdish poet, Hazhar, the pen name of Abdul-Rahman Sharafkandi (1920–1990), wrote in his autobiography, published outside Iran in 1968, that he and his father had to



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Inside the old city of Diyarbakir in southeast Turkey, with its dramatic warren of alleyways and old-fashioned tenement blocks. Diyarbakir, which has a large Kurdish population, has been a centre for Kurdish nationalism.

Photos by Rita Leistner / Redux



21 March 2003—Approximately 300,000 Kurdish demonstrators attend the Newroz Festival in Diyarbakir, a celebration of the new spring which has served as a potent symbol of Kurdish identity.

hide their few Kurdish books in a metal box, which they buried in the courtyard of their village house; they would read the books only at night, burying them again before the break of day.

In addition to physical violence against the speakers of non-Persian languages, the Pahlavi regime-controlled media and educational system unleashed symbolic violence against these tongues. Turkish and Arabic were branded as “foreign languages imposed on some Iranians,” while Baluchi (a language spoken in Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan) and Kurdish were declared dialects of Persian in order to diminish their status and deny them rights. By the late 1960s, the government was seriously considering measures to replace all non-Persian languages with Persian.

The language policy of the Islamic regime, which came to power in 1979, was no different, in principle, from that of the secular monarchy. Article 15 of the Islamic constitution, which, in contrast with the 1906 constitution, does allow for the teaching of “ethnic literature” in schools, has not been implemented yet. Persian continues to be the only official language in a country where it is the native tongue of no more than half the population. Although publications in non-official languages are tolerated, symbolic violence, the vilifying of non-official languages, has not come to an end.

Kurdish fared much worse in neighbouring Turkey, where the Kurds form about 20 percent of the population. Compared with Iran, state violence against the language has been much more

extensive: it has targeted speaking and writing, the scribal and print heritage, the alphabet and its individual letters, books and libraries, status and image, music and film and every other expression in language. Geographic terms, including the names of mountains, cities, villages, streets, rivers and regions, have been Turkified. The names “Kurd” and “Kurdistan” were replaced by “mountain Turk” and “the southeast.” Symbolic violence, in the form of an extensive propaganda campaign, was conducted in order to shame the speakers into abandoning their language. Kurdish was called a dialect of Turkish corrupted by foreign influence, as well as the speech of illiterate and rural people.

Early attempts to eliminate the Kurdish language in Turkey included measures such as sending children to boarding schools, deporting Kurds to Turkish-speaking areas, fining people for speaking the language in public and resettling Turks, sometimes from other countries, in the Kurdish region.

By the late 1980s, the suppression of the Kurds and of their language and culture had become an obstacle to Turkey’s entry into the European Union. In 1991, the parliament removed the total ban on the use of Kurdish and allowed speakers of “languages other than Turkish” to talk in their language, although only in private.

Under pressure from the European Union, Turkey had undertaken, by 2002, a series of legal and constitutional reforms, in part to grant Kurds cultural and language rights. These reforms have



March 2003—Diyarbakir boasts numerous medieval mosques and madrassahs, crowned by the 11th-century Ulu Cami (Great Mosque). Here, a woman begs outside the outer walls of the main mosque, while crowds of men pass her by.

enabled the Kurds to publish journals and books and to produce recorded music, although they do so within a regime of post-publication censorship. Still, native-tongue education and broadcasting are extremely limited.

Although another reform in July 2003 legalized broadcasting in “languages and dialects used by Turkish citizens traditionally in their daily lives,” regulations continue to restrict free access of the Kurds to radio and television. In 2005, a fact-finding mission sponsored by the London-based Kurdish Human Rights Project discovered that it is still illegal for political parties to use Kurdish in any activities, such as at meetings, during election campaigns or in publicity materials.

With 20 million speakers in the early 1980s, Kurdish ranked 40th among the world’s several thousand living languages. Today, the speech community is estimated at between 25 and 30 million, divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, with islands of Kurdish populations in other countries of western Asia and a growing diaspora in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. While Kurdish has achieved the status of an official language in Iraq, it remains a threatened language in Turkey, Syria and Iran.

The politics of criminalizing the use of language, whether native or learned, has been conceptualized variously as linguicide, linguistic genocide or language killing. While it may have occurred throughout history, the practice of killing a language and replacing

it by another is associated with modernity and the rise of nationalism and its ideal political organization, the nation-state: it is the idea of constructing a single nation with one language, one territory and one state, all united and “indivisible.” Modern nation-states, from Canada to France to Australia, have pursued various shades of this policy. If in the past in North America, Australia and other Western countries, state-sanctioned efforts were undertaken to eliminate native languages, today it is market forces that deny Aboriginal and non-official languages access to mass media, popular culture and education.

Denying a language the right to be spoken and used in education and mass media is a recipe for death. Linguists predict that half the languages of the world will die by the end of this century. While many are spoken by less than a million people, the death row includes one of the sizeable languages of the world. In the Kurdish case, the state, much more than the market, is responsible for the ongoing linguicide. &

Sources:

Kurdish Human Rights Project, *Recognition of Linguistic Rights? The Impact of Pro-EU Reforms in Turkey: Fact-Finding Mission* (September 2005) and *Denial of a Language: Kurdish Language Rights in Turkey* (June 2002).