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## **Education Policy and Diversity Accommodation in Iran**

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***Abstract:***

*The main aim of education is to sustain pupils ethnic or cultural identity, cultivate a sense of pride in their history and achievements and help create cohesive ethnic communities. Educational institutions are often the heart of a community and are central agents of socialization. Schools can be an important channel through which to promote social cohesion and address community issues of inter-cultural, inter-religious, or inter-ethnic relations. The education system is also a public institution, and as such, can create open and participatory processes through which the community can exert influence. If education policy is not sensitive to the issue of social cohesion and does not incorporate the perspectives of key stakeholders, it can be divisive and alienating, contributing to injustice and violence.*

*One of the major documents reflecting change in education system in Iran is National Fundamental Change in Education System document. According to this document, some strategies regarding national identity and solidarity. The Constitution of Iran contains a great potential for policies regarding minorities and ethnic groups with different race, language and culture. The constitution is the foundation of all the public policies in regard with culture, language and educational.*

### **1. Education Policy and Multicultural Education**

The main aim of education is to sustain pupils ethnic or cultural identity, cultivate a sense of pride in their history and achievements and help create cohesive ethnic communities. A good education should expose pupils to different conceptions of the good life, systems of belief and mode of acceptualizing familiar experiences, and get them to enter into the spirit of other cultures, see the world the way they do and appreciate their strengths and limitations. Students are members of their ethnic and cultural communities, citizens of their political community and also a human being. A good educational system needs to attend to all three. It should help pupils understand the history, social structure, culture, languages, and so on of their cultural and poetical communities in order to enable them to understand themselves better and find their way around in these communities. However, to limit education to this is to take a highly impoverished and narrow view of it. Education is concerned with humanization not just socialization, with helping students become not just good citizens but also integrated human beings with well-developed intellectual, moral and other capacities and sensibilities, and able to feel at home in the rich and diverse human world. (1)

### **2. The Importance of Education Policy**

Educational institutions are often the heart of a community and are central agents of socialization. Schools can be an important channel through which to promote social cohesion and address community issues of intercultural, inter-religious, or interethnic relations. The education system is also a public institution, and as such, can create open and participatory processes through which the community can exert influence. If education policy is not sensitive to the issue of social cohesion and does not incorporate the perspectives of key stakeholders, it can be divisive and alienating, contributing to injustice and violence. According to John Dewey, education obviously has an individual role (increasing one's knowledge levels) but education also has a societal role where schools function as a mechanism to transfer 'values into future citizens' and to socialize them in preparation for their future voting rights.(2) It is the nature of this subcritical role that is often misunderstood in education policy. On the other hand, Bernstein (1971), witty emphasizes that, "How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge, it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of the social contract". (3)

### **3. Public Policy and Diversity in Iran**

Among all the other policies regarding ethnic groups, it seems that the most effective method which is compatible with the current situation of Iran in terms of social and political issues is the model of unity in plurality; which is based on national unity and ethnic cohesion while preserving ethnic cultures and identity.(4)

Apparently, by applying the model of unity in plurality, the advantages of using the other models of cohesion and pluralism are reached and the policies are directed towards increasing social capital in national level. That is because through using this model, the

relationship of ethnic individuals is increased and also such relationships does not create a barrier against relationship with other ethnic groups and finally the national social capital is guaranteed.

#### 4. The Reasons Why the Model of Unity in Plurality Is Appropriate for Iran

- a. The humanity and epistemological foundations of this method are compatible with the humanity aspects and beliefs of Iran society
- b. This model is compatible with the principles of Iran political system
- c. This model is compatible with the ethical and geographical structure of the country (5)

Therefore, based on the situation and attributes of social and cultural diversity in Iran and due to compatibility of "Unity in Plurality" model, and because this model works with humanity and epistemology norms of Islamic political system, we can analyze the policy formulating in Iran with this model. Now, we explain the backgrounds of different policy making in three different dynasties; i.e. Gajariyeh, Pahlawi, and Islamic Revolution.

##### 4.1. Public Approaches Regarding Policies for Ethnic Minorities in Iran

Political and social researchers have divided the national laws into three public classifications in their studies and works:

###### 4.1.1. Modern Approach and National-Oriented (Idealistic Model)

Iran's current constitution is one of the achievements of Islamic revolution in Iran which was composed by the lawmakers who reflected their ideas in it. Any national constitution is the fruit of thinkers' thought and the thinkers avoid any injustice approach towards the desires and interests of the citizens and refrain from any inequalities, such as racial, religious, language and national ones. The constitution is the outcome of a comprehensive approach to the concepts of nation and nationality which does not accept any partiality; Iran constitution as a national covenant and the basis for all rules and policies takes a modern approach based on religion and considers ethnic minorities.

###### 4.1.2. Realistic Approach

The second theory explains that Islamic Republic of Iran's approach regarding ethnic groups is based on a mixture of two viewpoints, i.e. pluralization and integration. This theory is of the belief that the mentioned viewpoints are the basis for the policies regarding ethnic groups. In other words, based on this theory all the citizens of Iran, including all the ethnic minorities and cultures are the citizens of the Islamic Republic of Iran and regardless of their cultural differences they have equal citizenship right; meanwhile the nation of Iran is defined based on their cultural characteristics. There is a good groundwork and potential in the Islamic Republic of Iran for applying both policies, i.e. pluralization or integration; however, in spite of legal permissions, mentioned in clauses 15 and 19 of the Constitution, the government's approach is toward utilizing local and regional capacities and capabilities.

###### 4.1.3. Unity in Plurality

The third theory explains that the approach of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding ethnic groups and policies for them is unity while preserving ethnic diversity based on equal rights of citizens regardless of their ethnic, language and cultural differences (6).

##### 4.2. "Diversity and Accommodation" in Iran Constitution

The Constitution of every country acts as the written framework which is the legal foundation for all the decisions, plans, policy making, and strategies regarding political, cultural, economic, social and scientific issues. Therefore, we can consider the Constitution of every country as a reflection of social, political and legal issues as well as the governing law. The rights of ethnic groups and minorities is considered in Iran's Constitution because Iran is a society formed by different ethnic groups such as Turk, Fars, Lor, Kord, Baluch, Arab, Gilak and Mazi.

Some clauses of the Constitution deal with authority and rights of minorities in Iran and include maintaining national unity, education, and intercultural issues. These clauses are 2, 3, 12, 14, 15, 16, 19, 24, 26, 30, 64 and 175. With a quick overview we can say that Iran's Constitution comes with two approaches, i.e. public-oriented and specific-oriented approach. In the public-oriented approach, the main focus is on God, justice, and humanity for all the members of the society. In fact, this approach concentrates on God, justice and man.

In the specific approach, what is important is considering others and facilitating social life for minorities. Since Iran's Constitution backs up all practical actions, we can consider that there are two main approaches for cultural issues: first, national integration policy and second, multicultural policy which is related to the minorities and ethnic groups. In fact, Iran's Constitution is based on Dual Citizenship, which means public citizenship and specific citizenship. In both types of citizenships, the constitution's goal is social health. In the first type, the Constitution seeks to create national unity, consensus, and creating a holistic society. For instance, the clauses 2, 3, and 30 deal with justice, equality, independence in political, economic, social, and cultural aspects, national unity, free education for all the citizens, facilitating higher education (clause 3), stopping discrimination, providing material and spiritual facilities for the public (clause 3), expanding and consolidating Islamic brotherhood and public cooperation (clause 3). Therefore, according to the mentioned clauses, Islamic Republic of Iran intends to make a national cohesion and equality and ensure the right of all the citizens; moreover, it intends to pay attention to the minorities. While they preserve national cohesion, they are allowed to practice their religious and cultural rituals and norms, provided that they do not damage national cohesion. For instance, clause 12 of the Constitution introduces Islam and 12<sup>th</sup> Imams as the national religion; however, it respects other religions and allows the followers

to practice and teach their rituals and religious ceremonies. (7) Clause 13 states that the Zoroastrians, the Jews, the Armenians, and the Christians are recognized and free to practice their ceremonies. In fact, these two clauses of the Constitution intend to expand respecting others rights with different religious beliefs. The dual-approach Constitution is also clear in clause 15 and 19. Clause 15 specifies the rights and authorities of the minorities in Iran. Although the official language is Farsi (integration policy), the minorities are permitted to have their own publications and media in local language and develop their library and teach their local language (multicultural approach). Clause 19 of the Constitution states that all the citizens of Iran are equal regardless of their color, race and ethnicity. Therefore, we can consider the Constitution with two national and universal approaches regarding citizenship regulations. Clause 26, recognizes the activities of minorities and their institutes provided that independence, freedom, national unity and Islamic criteria are preserved. This clause shows that the policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding the minorities are based on both approaches, i.e. integration and preservation of minority rights. The policies, call for national unity and integrity, and at the same time respect multiculturalism. (8).

## 5. Educational Policies in Iran

### 5.1. Education System in the Ancient Time

The education policies during ancient time can be summarized as below

Religion and Ethics goal: religions can be considered as the first educational base for man. Religions have deeply mixed the role of education with the culture of people. In Avesta, there is a special chapter about education of children, teacher and spiritual leader. In the book of Advice written by Bozorgmehr, there is mentioning about the importance of religious education. The author recommends everyone to spend one third of each day on religious education. In fact, we can say that the main part of education in ancient time of Iran was religious and ethical education (9).

In Achaemenian Dynasty, educating people was organized in family, temples, and private governmental schools.

### 5.2. History of Education after Islam

The year 459 AH is an important date in the history of Islamic education. During this year, the first school, founded by Khaje Nizam al-Mulk, who was one of the ministers of Seljuks Dynasty, opened in Bagdad. Similar schools started in different parts of the Islam world until small cities and villages had schools, along with other large and important cities.

From the beginning of Islam, the number of students increased gradually so as the number of courses. The majority of the time of learners in these schools was spent on religious research studies rather than other Humanities courses. As the result, these schools were connected to one another as the founders of jurisprudential schools of thoughts, i.e. Shafe' i.e. Hanafi, Maleki and Hanbali (10).

### 5.3. Education System in Iran

The documents related to the education of Iran show that in September 1911, the National Parliament approved compulsory education. In 1294 Hegria, the parliament presented the law of supervision of parliament on the education system as an amendment and from this date on, the education system of the country was regulated and organized and the government could officially supervise and monitor the education system. The education system of Iran includes nursery school, primary school, high school, higher education institutes and university. The official education system of Iran was created after Constitutional Revolution and after legislating the Constitution and its amendment.

After victory of Islamic revolution, a council was formed to change the educational system fundamentally, this council titled, Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution" was formed in March 1986 and formulated strategies for the education system of the country which were approved in August 1990 (11).

## 6. Specifications of Education System of Iran

### 6.1. Justice Based

Justice is one of the most important values in the education system of Iran which has different items, including accessibility for everyone which means decent facilities and opportunities should be accessible for everyone and all the discriminations (ethnic, race, gender, sex, class) regarding right of education should be eliminated.

### 6.2. Active Role of Government

According to the written principles of philosophy of education in IR Iran, the principles of education are: Islamic state, family, the media, and the NGOs. As the base of guiding individuals and society, the Islamic state plays a central role in formulating policies, programs and planning for official and public education. (12)

### 6.3. Managing Change and Leading Social Changes

According to the Philosophy of Education of IR Iran, the definition of education is acquiring necessary competencies for realizing and correcting situation of self and others and preparing for a decent life in all aspects.

### 6.3.1. Value-Centered Based on Rationalism

According to the philosophy of education of Iran, the process of official and public education is an effective process and the values are based on rational plans and reasonable for the learners.

### 6.3.2. Emphasizing National Unity and Social Cohesion, While Accepting Diversity and Plurality

One of the realities of Iran society, accepting several subcultures and minorities, languages and religions.

Flexibility based on standards: As one of the tools for building consensus, the education system should be loyal to the core values and principles and a definite standard; however, the system should be flexible and adaptable for the subcultures and minorities. (13)

### 6.3.3. Religion-Centered (Conformity of All Components and Aspects with Islamic Standard System)

This component is a fundamental and central issue in public and official education. One of the outstanding features of the education system of Iran is that it is religion-based.

### 6.3.4. Relying on Islamic Culture and Civilization

The education system should be based on Farsi language, culture and literature and it should emphasize Iranian identity as the national identity in the public and the official education system. (14)

## **7. Civil and Political Education in Educational Programs in Iran**

One of the major political and social goals is civil education and this issue has received serious attention in educational policies in Iran. According to the socio-political dialogue in Iran after the revolution, a lot of attention was given to the civil education when planning for educational policies. The result of this attention was to empower and promote the education system in order to realize some concepts such as civil society, lawfulness, accountability, freedom, collaboration. Therefore, they formulated the policies so that the educational activities move in the direction of economic, social and cultural development. Some of the outstanding activities were: establishing the students' council, students' parliament, as well as a student's organization in order to expand and encourage students to collaborate in social and cultural activities, transferring administrative activities to students in a particular day each year, the "Benmar Program" for involving students in social and political issues of the country and finally, the program entitled, "National Plan for the Youth Dialogue" (15).

Therefore, civil and political education in the education system of Iran is a function of Islamic dialogue and the dialogue with the elites and leaders of society. According to Imam Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the elements of political education are: awareness, self-knowledge, freedom, independence, justice and right-direction (16). Realization of these elements in social and political education systems will lead to refraining from discrimination and racial and religious conflicts and education is a means serving the developmental purposes in terms of political and social aspects.

## **8. Elements of Cultural Democracy in the Vision of Iran's Educational Policies**

Having a glance at the goals of Iran's education system set in recent centuries, we realize that the policymakers have always considered "Desirable Man" in their visions. A comparison between strategic plans for expanding cultural democracy with the four pillars of learning according to UNESCO clarifies that Iran's Education Vision is compatible with the UNESCO learning pillars. Therefore, realizing these elements in educational policies, prepares the situation for expansion of cultural democracy in Iran's multicultural society. (17)

## **9. Goals of Iran's Education System Vision**

1. Political knowledge: (political understanding, political thinking, national independence, national integrity and dignity, national interest, national unity, defense and resistance, poetical collaboration)
2. Social knowledge: (lawfulness, accountability, patience, social understanding, social collaboration, coexistence and cohesion, social justice, preserving social values, communication skills, social change)
3. Cultural-artistic knowledge: cultural understanding, preserving and expanding cultural heritage, cultural unity and plurality, artistic aesthetic, national identity, cultural-artistic values)
4. Intercultural knowledge (International): intercultural understanding, intercultural cooperation, Islamic solidarity, international compromising and understanding (18)

## **10. Meaning of Citizen and Educational Programs in Iran**

Dorkim is of the belief that different educational systems are used for the citizens are: Different in different periods in terms of goals, philosophy, method and content and second, Education are done according to the cultural, economic and social structure of every society. Iran's society has also its characteristics. Iran's integrated society, made by different cultures, is formed by coexistence of all different ethnic groups. So the official education plays an important role in creating cohesion among different cultural groups and promoting national culture. Accordingly, the members of ethnic groups are defined in the form of citizens without inclination toward a special culture and this is how a nation lasts. (19)

According to the intercultural and civil values as reflected in the Constitution, which are also based on the "Good Governance", Iran's education system, particularly in the primary level, should promote the good governance values for good citizenship; some of the factors of good governance are:

- Good behavior: (refraining from hostile interaction against other citizens' beliefs)
- Respecting the rights of other citizens regarding their beliefs and religion
- Having equal response when faced with different race, color and cultures
- Respecting the law
- Attempting to make all citizens as the members of a national society
- Considering self in the position of others (20)

All the mentioned factors in a multicultural society decrease tension and division between cultures and eliminate them to some extent. Good citizenship increases tolerance of people for accepting cultural differences and create a peaceful society in which citizens accept others and respect the law. Following are the five lessons, regarding intercultural relationship, which are part of primary textbooks; these lessons promote coexistence of all Iranian citizens:

1. Liking others
2. Considering self in the position of others
3. Expanding social collaboration and cooperation
4. Respecting the rights of others (minorities and ethnic groups)
5. Interrelatedness (all of us are the members of the same body) (21)

### 11. National Document of Fundamental Change in Education System

One of the major documents reflecting change in the education system in Iran is National Fundamental Change in Education System document. According to this document, some strategies regarding national identity and solidarity are considered which are:

- Creating the situation for improving social cohesion and national unity and reviving Islamic-Iranian identity
- Developing educational curriculum based on geography and environment of the provinces specially rural and nomadic areas (22)

### 12. Educational Programs to Achieve Identity-Related Goals

1. Presenting a united picture of the nation, emphasizing the role of religion, language, history, culture and the borders of the country
2. Expanding the identity-related factors among citizens in order to strengthen national solidarity and a sense of belonging
3. Necessity of defining a clear framework of different social components in order to facilitate cultural congruence and create social consensus (23)

The two major parts of the value statement regarding diversity and tolerance are:

- a. That it is based on educational justice in quantity aspects (for all and mandatory) and quality aspects ( respecting differences in individuals, gender, minorities, and cultural and geographical ones
- b. That it emphasizes protecting national unity and social cohesion and observing the right of minorities, cultures and regional rights and special identity (based on
- c. common Iranian-Islamic identity) (24)

### 13. Conclusion

The Constitution of Iran contains a great potential for policies regarding minorities and ethnic groups with different race, language, religion, and culture. The constitution is the foundation of all the public policies in regard to culture, language and religion.

According to the document of fundamental change in education system and the two mentioned parts of its value statement, it is clear that the policymakers paid special attention to national solidarity, social cohesion and justice in education based on individual differences, gender and cultural and geographical differences.

The national document for fundamental change in education is one of the most important documents emphasizing protection of national unity and solidarity, ethnic diversity, and cultural and regional differences based on Islamic-Iranian common identity. The results of the "philosophical and scientific analysis", of the National Education Document based on the educational factors in multicultural educational system shows that the education system is more compatible with the attributes of multicultural environment including: strengthening local and national identity, observing differences in terms of personal, regional, and gender, accepting unity along with plurality, solving disputes in a peaceful manner, familiarity with different cultures in national and international domain.

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