

Appendix I

The interview with Khdr Hajoyan, the Head of Yezidi National Union and Chief Executive Officer in Ezdikhana Newspaper (Yerevan)

Gagik: How do you assess the situation with the protection of the rights of national minorities in the Republic of Armenia?

Khdr Hajoyan: Of course, you know that in Armenia there are 11 recognized national minorities in Armenia. One of the largest among them is the Yezidi national minority. According to the latest population census in Armenia of 2011 there are 35 508 Yezidis in the territory of Armenia. What is about general situation of Yezidis as a national minority in Armenia we have a lot of opportunities to preserve our (Yezidi) culture and also to develop it. First and the largest thing I want to talk about is that first time in the world we have published a Yezidi newspaper in Armenia. It was called Yezidi voice, the publishing (Financial) support was by the government of Armenia. It is in publication from 1990. After Armenia's independence (1991, from Soviet Union) Yezidi people also got independence, in the sense that Yezidis in Soviet Union were not recognized as an ethnicity, they were considered as kurds, of course it was not true because we are different, we have our own language, traditions, etc. We don't hate other people but just we tell the truth. At that time leader of Yezidis, may he rest in peace, Mr. Aziz Tamoyan with his followers visited Moscow, where he represented true Yezidi history and all documents with 15 000 Yezidi signatures to the Special Committee of National Minorities of the Soviet Union and they checked it and recognized Yezidis as the ethnicity. When he (Aziz Tamoyan) came back to Armenia with his followers he created first Yezidi organization – Yezidi National Union, which is in action till now. It was first organization in Yezidi history. After that Armenia signed a lot of important documents, related to national minority protection, the most important among them is The European Charter for Regional or Minority Protection. After that in 2005 Armenian Government published the Yezidi textbooks for students from 1st to 12th classes. Nowadays in Armenian schools Yezidi children are learning their mother tongue. We don't have this opportunity in other countries, only in Armenia. Not only language but also national literature. It is one of the most and great things that we have in Armenia and what we don't have in our historical place in Iraq. More that 40 villages and cities where Yezidis are compactly living, they are learning in Armenian schools as classes. We have Yezidi language programs in the public radio of Armenia. There are some state institutions (state bodies) for national minority issues.

Gagik: How do you assess the activities of state bodies working with the national minorities?

Khdr Hajoyan: They are very helpful. They are coordinating all national minority activities, every time we are doing meetings with heads of this institutions and also with state representatives, and they are like a bridge between national minorities with the government. This platform is very helpful for us. Usually, some members of Parliament are also joining to those meetings. It is one of the biggest instruments to use it and check the issues.

Gagik: The amount of 20 million, what is the efficiency of this amount and its distribution?

Khdr Hajoyan: Thank you for this important question. Of course, you now that it is too small amount for all 11 national minorities. Every time we ask Armenian government to take measures to increase this amount and support for national minorities, because for example our(Yezidi) community is a big community even for only our own programs it is so small that we cannot do more good works. Sometimes we are doing many activities by our own means in our community. It is very difficult, but we hope...as on meetings with Council when we are talking about this problem, representatives of government are making promises to check this issue. Of course, it is post-Covid and postwar situation and we understand that there are many difficulties and we are in difficult time, but in the future, problem will be solved.

Gagik: What about activities of radio and TV in relations to national minorities?

Khdr Hajoyan: When there are minority holidays we appreciate the work of tv and radio among the national minority programs. Every time, when it is needed, they are coming and recording everything related to our community. But there are some problems. For example related to our language. In Armenian public radio we have our program in our language, but in case of TV it was

only one time when they gave 30minute program and it was welcomed by our community, but after that it was closed, I don't know why.. It was kind of 7 or 8 years ago.

Gagik: What is about the problem of early marriages among the Yezidi girls? Are there any measures or attempts by Armenian government to solve this problem?

Khdr Hajoyan: You know this problem is very often connected to families. This is not a Yezidi tradition that Yezidi girls have to be married so early, no. Our religion teaches us to give our lives to education and to knowledge and we have many prayers about it. But sometimes many Yezidis are giving wrong information, saying that this (early marriages) is our tradition we need to marry early. No. In my research I found that this is very connected to the issue of Yezidis being close to the genocide. It is somehow the awareness of being the subject of the genocide again. Maybe you noticed that many of Yezidis are involved in agriculture and mostly in animal husbandry and it is also the sign of apprehension of genocide. So they think that in case of new threat they would take the animals and go away. But you need to know as well that there is tradition of kidnapping. This is also a big problem in the community. And you need to know that this problem among Yezidis is typical only in Armenia and Russia. So I know many Yezidi parents that afraid to send their daughters to universities, because they afraid that they will be kidnapped.

Gagik: It brought us to our next question about education for national minorities and measures taken by the state in the issue of the usage of native language by the minorities. How will you rate the policy of government in the issue of education for minorities and quality of Yezidi textbooks?

Khdr Hajoyan: For us it is very important to have those textbooks. They are including our literature and language and really, before these books we had very few Yezidi poets, but as those textbooks were published we have many children that started to write in Yezidi language, this is one of the biggest things we have (publication). It is interesting that now even Armenian children want to learn Yezidi language at those classes. But we have a problem with quantity of Yezidi teachers. There are many villages with great population of Yezidis with the will to learn their mother tongue, but have no possibility, because of the absence of teacher. We are applying to ministry of education to solve this problem. It is a problem. The coauthor of textbooks is able to prepare new teachers, but we need support of ministry of education.

Gagik: I see a big percentage of migration of representatives of Yezidi minority and one of the most popular destination is Russia (to find work and earn money). What is the most important reason of this migration in your opinion?

Khdr Hajoyan: You know that just like Armenians, Yezidi people also going to Russia to find a work. There are social problems. Maybe some of them are travelling with their families. And among other things there is always a threat coming from Azerbaijan, for Azerbaijan we (Yezidis) are considered as devil worshipers, and may be you know that one of our heroes, Qyaram Sloyan, who was recognized as a national hero by the President of Artsakh(Karabakh) was beheaded by Azerbaijani soldiers in April of 2016, he was beheaded because they(Azerbaijanis) knew that he is Yezidi. But Yezidi people are fearless and I don't think that many Yezidis are migrating because of war threat. They know that Armenia is our state. They all know that one day they will come back. And I was in many families that migrated to other countries and most of them are sure that they will back to Armenia and that the migration is only for work and it is temporal. So the most important reasons are economical.

Gagik: What is the attitude of representatives of the Yezidi minority towards military service in the army of the Republic of Armenia?

Khdr Hajoyan: Well, they take it as a duty and go to serve. We have many brilliant examples of Yezidi service in Armenian army. I cannot say that all Yezidis want to serve, there are people who afraid, because they are only sons in their families and it is very important for Yezidis to have at least one who will continue the tree of life(family).

Gagik: What would you expect from the international law commitments?

Khdr Hajoyan: I rate it positively. But there are some problems and the biggest problem for minorities is the financial problem. And of course the issue of language. Many schools are reducing the hours of teaching the Yezidi language and this is mainly due to funding and rates. And many Yezidis teach in schools only for reasons of patriotism.

Gagik: Are the international obligations of RA visible for the minorities in the country?

Khdr Hajoyan: In general we feel the fulfilment of those obligations, but still there are some problems, such as the language usage issue. There are also many important documents about rights of minorities that are not translated to Yezidi language. Of course we will be more happy if they will be translated. There are also problems connected with citizenship and passports. It is little bit hard for non-Armenians to gain citizenship of Armenia. We discussed this issue in the Parliament and talked to Alen Simonyan (the chairman of the Parliament). And one more important thing is the absence of the law about minorities. All the process of minority recognition is done by the force of tradition.

***Gagik:* Do you feel discrimination towards Yezidis in Armenia?**

Khdr hajoyan: Basically, there is no discrimination. On the part of the state, it is absent at all, but sometimes in society there are cases of discriminatory treatment of representatives of our minority, sometimes this is due to the fact that they confuse us with the Kurdish people, and sometimes only because of not knowing our features. For example, some time ago, I witnessed a situation when a person blamed the Yezidis for assisting the Turks during the Armenian genocide. And a couple of months ago, on the part of one woman on social networks, there was a case of discrimination and statements in relation to the Yezidis. We appealed to the National Security Service to take action against her, but it should be noted that in the comments to this woman's post, a huge number of Armenians defended the Yezidis and condemned this woman.