

BEYOND WORDS:
Languages as Peoples' Rights



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The erosion of linguistic diversity poses a serious threat to the survival of unique worldviews, cultural practices, and collective identities. These issues are deeply connected to the wider challenges facing the sustaining of universal human rights today. The Unrepresented Nations and People's Organisation (UNPO)'s 'Preserving Identities and Re-owning Narratives' campaign (1) highlights the importance of language in enabling self-governance and self-determination. Reclaiming linguistic and cultural rights is not only about preserving heritage, it is also a powerful strategy for resisting oppression and asserting the right of Peoples to shape their own futures.

This policy brief explores the vital link between language and the right to self-determination, showing how language is a cornerstone of cultural resilience for Indigenous Peoples and Minority communities. Language is not only how people communicate, it shapes how communities understand the world, relate to their environment, and pass down identity and knowledge from one generation to the next. Language is deeply interconnected with social, economic, and political autonomy, serving as a core element of cultural resilience and a driver of self-determination at various levels of governance.

Outlining the historical and current challenges facing UNPO members, this paper examples the linguistic contexts of Catalonia, Balochistan, Khmer-Krom, and Kabylia as illustrative case studies, while acknowledging that most UNPO members and allied communities face similar challenges. Language is often one of the first targets in broader strategies of repression or exclusion, making its protection a crucial aspect of resistance and cultural survival. It forms part of the first instalment in the UNPO's 2025 webinar series 'Peoples' Rights, Peoples' Future – The Foundation of Our Shared Future', drawing attention to multifaceted challenges facing UNPO Members (2). Each Webinar addresses different issues related to the denial of the right to self-determination as it connects with other fundamental rights by different UNPO Members, with each session followed by a policy paper reflecting members' input and discussions held during the Webinar.

The structure of the policy paper begins with an overview of the background and legal context, followed by an analysis of the wider linguistic and geopolitical situation. It then moves to case studies from UNPO Members, identifies shared trends, and concludes with key takeaways and policy recommendations.

1- <https://unpo.org/campaing/preserving-identities-re-owning-narratives/>

2- <https://unpo.org/unpo-launches-its-2025-webinar-series-with-webinar-on-linguistic-rights/>

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INTRODUCTION

Language plays a fundamental role in shaping identity, preserving cultural heritage, maintaining traditional social and economic activities, sharing knowledge on the environment, and enabling political and social participation and autonomy. Language is not only a tool for communication, but a way for communities to express their identities, worldviews, and collective memories. This policy paper is rooted in the lived experiences and voices of UNPO Members, not only experts, but those whose identities and futures are shaped through lived experience. It reflects our unique role as a platform that elevates the voices of unrepresented nations and peoples who are directly experiencing the effects of linguistic repression and cultural erasure. Limitations on Peoples languages and the use of assimilationist policies directly undermine the right of Peoples to self-determination and the ability to shape their futures. Under authoritarian states, language is one of the first elements to be targeted when oppressing nations and Peoples. Yet, even democratic States employ subtle means of assimilation through policy, often facilitated by globalisation and technological advancements.

The loss of a language is not only the disappearance of a communication tool, but also the disappearance of a unique worldview and a serious erosion of cultural heritage. The current geopolitical landscape adds urgency to this issue. The crisis of the international liberal order, rising authoritarianism, and the resurgence of far-right nationalism are creating new threats to linguistic diversity. Given its importance for a Peoples' historical community and its capacity to survive and prevail in natural territories, language has been a critical means of control and domination by external actors, with its strategic significance growing. Language has been perceived as an essential element in nation-building of states, and plays a significant role in colonising peoples and ensuring homogenisation. It has been used to control non-dominant groups, including Indigenous Peoples, often leading to their exclusion or forced assimilation.

Colonial and occupation policies, including forced migrations, enslavement, massacres, and cultural and linguistic assimilation programs, have caused many Peoples languages to cease being used or remembered. Stateless nations and peoples have lost their languages or seen their use severely reduced due to military occupation, colonialism, subjugation, and assimilation. The use of language during colonisation is crucial to maintaining the oppressive structures, and equally essential in dismantling those same oppressive norms through decolonisation. Alongside mass repression, education has been one of the most powerful ways in which majority or colonial languages have been imposed upon minority children, and has historically been the most effective way to ensure the assimilation of minority communities into states.

Language has been used both as a form of oppression, and as a mobilizing force for Peoples in their struggles for recognition. The reclaiming of linguistic and cultural rights is a powerful and symbolic move in the struggle for greater self-governance and self-determination. In some cases, ensuring that Peoples have decision-making powers over language policy is an effective step towards self-determination, allowing communities to defend language and culture in a tangible way, and to mobilize towards self-determination. The defense of linguistic rights can play a central role in supporting broader claims for national preservation and self-determination. As such, arguments in favour of cultural and linguistic autonomy and reliance strengthens claims for self-determination, and can serve as a basis for mobilization and support towards its achievement, both internally and internationally. This policy paper reflects UNPO's broader strategy to defend the cultural and linguistic rights of its members as a core dimension of their self-determination. While we do not claim to be linguistic experts, we represent communities who are experts in their own realities. This paper aims to honour their knowledge and amplify their strategies of resilience.

LEGAL & INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK

The right to language for national minorities and Indigenous Peoples is embedded in international law. Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) prohibits discrimination based on language. Both the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (Article 2) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (Article 26) prohibit discrimination on linguistic grounds. Furthermore, in Article 27, the ICCPR states that persons belonging to minorities shall not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture or to use their own language. Likewise, Article 2 of the 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities states that persons belonging to these groups have the right to enjoy their own culture and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination.

Similarly, the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes in Article 13 that indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop, and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems, and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places, and persons. In Article 14, it states their right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions, providing education in their own languages in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Finally, Article 16 further recognizes their right to establish media in their own languages. The legal framework on Indigenous languages highlights the importance of protecting, promoting, and preserving these rights as an integral part of self-determination as an expression of national identity and broader linguistic diversity.

Despite the adoption of the 1992 Declaration at the General Assembly by consensus, there is currently no global, legally binding document dedicated to safeguarding the linguistic identity of minorities. Members of minority groups enjoy the individual human rights stipulated in international human rights documents, which, while more likely to be legally recognised, are still frequently violated, with collective rights even less likely to be acknowledged or implemented in practice. Improvements in the protection of ethnic, linguistic, or religious minorities as a legal issue and on a global level are negligible. International law is failing to meet the needs of minorities, including linguistic minorities, to preserve their cultural uniqueness and national identity.

REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Regionally, language rights for minorities and Peoples are enshrined in various international and regional legal frameworks, with the European and African legislative systems taking steps toward recognising these rights. In Europe, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, adopted in 1992 by the Council of Europe, provides a significant legal framework for the protection and promotion of regional and minority languages. The Charter recognises the importance of linguistic diversity and aims to protect the rights of speakers of regional and minority languages in areas such as education, media, and public life. Article 7 of the Charter encourages member states to provide opportunities for the use of regional and minority languages in the public sector, as well as in official documents and communications.

Similarly, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), adopted by the Council of Europe in 1995, further supports the protection of minority rights, including linguistic rights. It should be highlighted here that while Indigenous rights protection and promotion falls under the remit of minority and national minority law, the opposite is not true, with Indigenous Peoples always constituting a minority within a state, and not all minority groups being considered Indigenous Peoples. Article 5 of the FCNM ensures that national minorities have the right to freely express their identity and use their language in private and public life without facing discrimination. Additionally, the European Union has made efforts to protect linguistic diversity, as seen in its support for multilingualism and the inclusion of minority languages in EU institutions, even though not all minority languages are fully recognized within the EU's legal system.

In Africa, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) recognises linguistic rights as part of cultural rights. While the ACHPR does not explicitly address linguistic rights in the same detail as the UDHR or the UN's Indigenous rights declarations, it implicitly acknowledges the importance of preserving cultural identity (3), which encompasses linguistic participation as a core component of participating in cultural life. The African Union also emphasises the protection of Indigenous languages as part of its broader strategy to promote cultural diversity and protect Indigenous Peoples (4). However, regional efforts like the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Pan-African Cultural Congress have highlighted the need for more specific legal mechanisms to protect Indigenous and minority languages.

Both regional systems recognise the importance of language in the preservation of cultural heritage and identity, but they also face challenges in effectively implementing these rights. The legal frameworks in Europe and Africa have made important steps in acknowledging the linguistic rights of minorities and Indigenous Peoples, but these protections remain incomplete and are often inadequately enforced. Many of these languages continue to face threats of extinction due to political, social, and economic pressures, and the rights of linguistic minorities are not fully realised in practice.

This paper uses several key terms, self-determination, language rights, and Peoples, that carry both legal and political weight. Each is contested, often shaped by historical, cultural, and geopolitical contexts. To avoid ambiguity, it is important to clarify how UNPO understands and applies these terms and how they are linked.

Self-determination is a foundational principle of international law. It is enshrined in the United Nations Charter (Article 1(2)), which affirms the importance of "developing friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples." This right is further recognised in common Article 1 of both the ICCPR and ICESCR, which state that "all peoples have the right of self-determination," and is expressly recognised as a right for all peoples. For the UNPO, self-determination is understood as the right to determine their own destiny, in particular, to choose their own political status and to determine their own form of economic, cultural and social development (5). It is a core right because it enables communities to exercise agency over their present and future and maintain their identity and integrity in the face of external domination or assimilation.

3- Article 17(2)

4- For example: Article 7 of the African Charter for African Cultural Renaissance (2006). African Union Resolution on Indigenous Populations/Communities in Africa ACHPR/Res.334(EXT.OS/XIX)2016. African Union join the UN Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), aimed at preserving, revitalising, and promoting Indigenous Languages.

5- UNPO Strategy, <https://unpo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/UNPO-Strategy-2024-2027-Final-Online.pdf>

The right to self-determination belongs to “Peoples” but who qualifies as a “People” is not strictly defined in international law. UNPO adopts a practical and inclusive interpretation, in that Peoples are communities with a shared sense of identity, often defined by common language, culture, historical experience, and connection to a land. Language plays a critical role in this definition. It connects individuals into a collective identity and sustains intergenerational continuity. When a language is lost or forcibly repressed, the social connectedness of a People are weakened. This can lead to a diminished recognition of that group as a distinct “People” by a state or the international community, which in turn affects their ability to claim self-determination and other collective rights. As such, the loss of a language is not only a cultural tragedy, it threatens the recognition of Peoples as rights-holders under international law and undermines their ability to access those rights.

Language is central to how communities express who they are. It carries history, shapes unique worldviews and structures relationships with land, law, and within or between communities. For UNPO members, language rights are not secondary cultural concerns, they are essential for self-governance. When a community loses the right to educate its children in a native language, it also loses the right to make meaningful decisions about its future. Exclusion from language policy decisions is a direct exclusion from political decision-making, and therefore from self-determination. Language is also a practical tool of empowerment; it enables civic participation, access to justice, and transmission of knowledge. Conversely, the repression or erosion of language often leads to cultural silencing, exclusion, and political invisibility.

LINGUISTIC AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

According to UNESCO, at least 40% of the over 7,000 languages estimated to be spoken in the world today are gravely endangered, on average, a language disappears every two weeks (6). The UNESCO World Atlas of Languages has developed the following categorisation based on the level of threat among the 8,315 identified languages worldwide:

- No longer in use - 1,181 languages;
- Endangered/unsafe - 2,698 languages;
- Definitely endangered - 2,362 languages;
- Critically endangered - 383 languages;
- Severely endangered - 463 languages;
- Potentially vulnerable - 1,163 languages;
- Safe - 65 languages.

The trends driving languages toward extinction have worsened and accelerated in recent decades. Structural factors such as globalisation, mass migration, and neo-colonialist practices pose increasingly alarming challenges.

AUTHORITARIAN AND NATIONALIST POLICIES

The global order built based on values of human rights and international law since 1945 is facing serious challenges. The rise of new power dynamics, competition, and the spread of authoritarian governments are creating a more unstable and unpredictable international order. For marginalised communities, particularly those fighting to protect their language rights and identities, this shift has made difficult situations even more fragile. The international system has long prioritised state interests over minority rights, and the current geopolitical climate is making it increasingly challenging for unrepresented peoples to defend their cultural and linguistic heritage, and their aspirations for self-determination.

In many countries, in particular under authoritarian regimes but increasingly in democratic states too, there is growing pressure to conform to a single national identity, often defined by the dominant language. Governments often introduce policies that favour a majority language in education, media, and public life, while marginalising and even suppressing minority languages as a consequence. These policies are not only an administrative choice, they can be used as political tools to control and assimilate, particularly prominent in non-democratic states. Language is often one of the first targets in broader efforts to weaken or erase national identities. Forced language substitution, the banning or restriction of native tongues, and other assimilationist strategies are used to break cultural continuity and silence resistance. In this environment, linguistic repression becomes part of a wider strategy to dismantle the foundations of entire communities and prevent them from exercising their right to self-determination.

GLOBALISATION

Globalisation also plays a significant role in the decline of minority languages, and the current linguistic and geopolitical context. As global trade, commerce, and communication increasingly favour dominant languages, both internationally and within a given state, minority languages are pushed further into the margins. Mass migration, both internal and external, often results in the adoption of the majority language by newcomers, who often see it as essential for social and economic integration. This shift exacerbates the erosion and disuse of native and minority languages within public spaces, as younger generations raised in migrant communities often grow up speaking the dominant language, weakening intergenerational transmission of minority languages and their role in all areas of public life.

TECHNOLOGY

The rise of digital communication and technology has also contributed to the decline of minority languages, threatening their existence. Online platforms, social media, and digital content are primarily in the major global languages. Social media and digital communications tend to favour content creation and consumption in major languages, leading to the formation of online communities primarily in these dominant languages. This further diminishes the use of minority languages in digital spaces, putting their intergenerational transmission at risk. This dominant presence in digital spaces makes it harder for minority languages to gain visibility and relevance in a changing world.

This leads to a shift where minority language speakers, particularly the youth, may prioritise learning and using dominant languages to engage with global networks, access information, and participate in online communities. The result is a decline in linguistic diversity as individuals are increasingly pressured to abandon their native languages in favour of more widely spoken ones. Further, the widespread use of major language in artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies builds on this issue. Language models, translation tools, and speech recognition systems predominantly focus on major languages, leaving minority languages underrepresented or completely absent from these technologies. This lack of support for minority languages further marginalises them in the digital realm and limits their potential for growth in future technological innovations.

LINGUISTIC PERSECUTION AND CULTURAL GENOCIDE

The suppression of minority languages is often part of broader efforts to eradicate the cultural identity of marginalised groups. For instance, linguistic persecution against Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar languages in Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine, language substitution and assimilation policies targeting Uyghurs in Xinjiang by Chinese authorities, forced assimilation policies by the Iranian authorities against Kurds and Kurdish speakers, and ethnic cleansing practices that have eradicated the Armenian language in Nagorno-Karabakh are some examples of silenced linguisticicides of the present era. In Western Europe, French and Spanish authorities continue to intensify pressure against minority languages such as Catalan, Basque or Breton, particularly in education, using legislation and judicial mechanisms to further reduce their presence. The following section will explore UNPO Member case studies on a deeper level.

As Raphael Lemkin wrote in 1944, nations are vital elements to the world's community and richness, each contributing to global culture and knowledge through their unique values and ways of life. The idea of a nation signifies constructive cooperation and original contributions based on genuine traditions, culture, and a well-developed national psychology (7). When a state deliberately targets a language for elimination, whether through bans, forced substitution, or policies that suppress its use, it is not just attacking a means of communication, but trying to dismantle a people's identity. This form of cultural destruction, also known as linguistic genocide or "linguicide", amounts to cultural genocide. It is especially common under authoritarian regimes, where language is used as a tool of power and control. By forcing linguistic uniformity, these governments aim to weaken the social and political fabric of ethnic and indigenous groups. The result is often the marginalisation of entire communities, who face growing stigma, loss of identity, and barriers to full participation in public life.

7- Raphael Lemkin, "Axis Rule in occupied Europe: laws of occupation, analysis of government, proposals for redress"



MEMBER CASE STUDIES

The difficult reality faced by many UNPO members is that their languages are being coercively marginalised, oppressed and killed, slowly and over generations. Languages are brought to their end through processes of assimilation, where a linguistic minority is forced to adopt the language of the dominant majority. Just as language forms the basis of nation-building processes, it can also be used as a tool for eradicating nations by suppressing their linguistic distinctiveness and all other socio-cultural knowledge embedded in the language. Minority languages will only survive if they are used, and not limited to the privacy of the home. A language can continue to exist if it can be used in all domains of public life such as education, the justice system, administration, media, political participation, and all areas of economic, cultural, and social life.

At the intersection of language and self-determination, linguistic persecution impacts a significant number of UNPO member communities, with the below case studies providing examples from four different members. These case studies were presented by experts from each member community at UNPO's 2025 webinar celebrating Mother Tongue day (8), and highlight ongoing and intersecting issues on language:

- Catalonia - the Catalan language faces increasing legal and factual restrictions in Spain, particularly in education and public administration, as part of a broader campaign to repress Catalan identity following Catalonia's push for self-determination.
- Balochistan (Pakistan) - The Balochi language is being actively suppressed by the state of Pakistan, accelerating its decline in speakers. Since Pakistan's occupation in 1948, ongoing conflicts and state policies have systematically eroded the Balochi language and identity.
- Khmer-Krom - The Khmer language is facing a severe erosion, with Vietnamese dominating all areas of life with no attempt to preserve Khmer. Children obtain a limited education in Khmer, with many unable to read or write in their mother tongue. Khmer is also absent from media and public documents, with personal names often changed to Vietnamese.
- Kabylia - Kabyle has been denied official recognition since Algeria's independence in 1962, despite being the mother tongue of the Kabyle people. Kabyle remains excluded from official spaces such as administration and the judiciary, with refusal to acknowledge Kabyle as a distinct language and culture, undermining the identity of the Kabyle people.

8- <https://unpo.org/unpo-launches-its-2025-webinar-series-with-webinar-on-linguistic-rights/>

CATALONIA

Catalonia, one of Spain's wealthiest and most industrialised regions, has a rich history of sovereignty, autonomy and unique cultural heritage dating back centuries. The origins of the dispute between the Spanish authorities and Catalan pro-independence movement can be traced back hundreds of years, where the contemporary Catalan national liberation movement found its roots in its long-standing struggle for self-determination and recognition of its distinct cultural, linguistic, and national identity. Since 1714, forced assimilation policies and continued persecution of Catalan language and culture has been continuous; intensifying during the Franco dictatorship between 1939-1975. The transition to democratic rule in the late 1970s brought greater promises of autonomy for Catalonia, with the enacting of the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia in 1979 granting devolved powers of self government (9).

Despite democratic transition, tensions between Catalonia and the Spanish Government persist, exacerbated by economic disparities, perceived injustices in fiscal redistribution, disputes over the recognition of Catalan identity, the undermining of linguistic policies aimed at protecting the Catalan language, and recentralising attempts by the Spanish authorities. 2010 was a landmark year in this regard, with the Spanish Constitutional Court ruling on a legal challenge to the 2006 Catalan Statute of Autonomy, striking down key provisions related to Catalonia's recognition as a nation, language rights and fiscal policy. This decision sparked mass protests in Catalonia and intensified calls for self-determination.



In November 2014, the Catalan government held a non-binding consultation on independence, in which 2,344,828 Catalan voters took part, 83.95% voting in favour of secession (10). The growing demand for autonomy, stemming from decades of repressive policies that sought to quash autonomy, resulted in a self-determination movement firmly taking hold in Catalonia.

Nation-building often involves efforts to create a unified identity, and this can sometimes lead to the repression of any languages or ethnicities that do not align with the dominant national image. In multinational states like Switzerland and Finland, multiple languages and cultures coexist, contrasting with models attempting to suppress diversity. In Catalonia, Catalan is an official language alongside Spanish. However, Catalan's status as co-official language is often overshadowed by the insistence on Spanish also being co-official in the community. Catalan is used in schools with a bilingual approach, but there has been growing pressure from the Spanish judiciary to enforce measures that favour the Spanish language. The situation is particularly challenging because, while all Catalan speakers are bilingual, not all Spanish speakers are bilingual in Catalan. This discrepancy has made the promotion of Catalan more pressing, especially in light of the large Latin American immigrant population in Catalonia, many of whom speak Spanish as their first language.

9- 'In the Name of Unity: Spain's Campaign of Repression and Use of Anti-terrorism Charges Against the Catalan Self-Determination Movement', Abel Riu and Elysia Rezki, July 2023. <https://unpo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/In-the-Name-of-Unity-Report.pdf.pdf>

10- Ibid

There is a need to encourage the use of Catalan in public life, as it is supposed to be used in public administration, with citizens holding the right to communicate through it with local and state bodies. However, the erosion of these rights are more prominent, as government bodies are increasingly reluctant to recognise it. Official documents are often available in Catalan, but the default is still Spanish, and the presence of Spanish language media - television, radio, and newspapers - far outweighs Catalan media, leading to greater exposure to Spanish than Catalan. The legal framework for Catalan's use is enshrined in the Statutes of Autonomy for all three Catalan-speaking territories. These statutes recognise Catalan as co-official, but in Valencia, where the government is run by the Spanish nationalist People's party, the status and rights of the Catalan language have been subtly eroded. In contrast, Catalonia's government, run by the Socialist Party, has treated the language more favourably, though not perfectly. The political situation has had significant implications for the language's defense. While the legal framework is not in a bad state, it is not as robust or defended as it should be.

Today, while there is a general perception that Catalan is protected, there are significant legal and political challenges. For example, changes to Valencian law are undermining the status of the language, and there is increasing pressure to challenge Catalan in public spaces. In Catalonia, the situation is somewhat better, though demographic changes present new challenges. Recent polls show the use of Catalan is declining, with approximately 30% of the population using it as their primary language (11). This represents a worrying trend, particularly because the number of Catalan speakers is actually higher than ever due to population growth. The paradox is that while there are more Catalan speakers than ever before, the percentage of people using the language is on the decline, posing a significant threat to the future of its vitality.

BALUCHISTAN

The Baloch people span across present day Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, with this paper focusing on the experiences of the Baloch people of Pakistan. Baloch and Pashtoons are the two prominent ethnic groups within Balochistan, contributing to the region's wide cultural diversity. Baloch, known for their distinct language and rich cultural history, have inhabited the region for centuries and play a significant role in shaping Balochistan's political landscape. The Pashtoons, also known as Pathans, have a large population, particularly in the Northern areas of Balochistan, and bring their unique traditions, language and culture to the multicultural landscape of Balochistan. Both communities coexist in this region, contributing to social and economic development (12).



In 1948, Balochistan was forcibly incorporated into Pakistan, where the Baloch remain politically unrepresented and a marginalised minority. Across Iran and Pakistan, the Baloch endure gross human rights violations and systemic marginalisation. For example, stemming from a lack of representation in decision-making processes in Pakistan, the Baloch community have campaigned for their independence, right to self-determination, and recognition of their distinct cultural, linguistic, and national identity.

11- [Nationalia statistics](#)

12- <https://balochistan.gov.pk/history-of-balochistan/>

Such advocacy is often met with military aggression, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings sanctioned by the Pakistani government. While the Baloch people face similar human rights issues across the region, divergences emerge between those situated in Pakistan and Iran. For instance, the situation in West Balochistan (Iran) has been impacted by the broader unrest in Iran, with the government's response to protests being marked by violence and repression (13).

The role of language in developing a distinct cultural or national identity is undeniable, particularly when examining the history of Balochistan. Before the creation of Pakistan, the British drew borders that split the Balochistan region into three parts. One portion was left to govern itself, while another was given to Pakistan and the remaining ceded to Iran. This division played a significant role in the linguistic landscape of the region, a legacy that continues to affect the Baloch people today. British Balochistan has been included in maps from the very beginning, but over time, certain areas have seen their native language fade away, with some Baloch people identifying as such but no longer speaking their mother tongue. In the Iranian part of Balochistan, the dominance of the Balochi language has been steadily eroded, with people trying to learn other majority languages to secure better job opportunities. For years, the Baloch have faced a form of linguistic genocide, a struggle that has been compounded by political and economic hardships. Despite these challenges, Balochistan has been a key site of colonial resistance and an intellectual hub in Pakistan.

Following the 1948 occupation by Pakistan, Balochistan saw several conflicts during the 1960s and 70s, with its longest conflict ongoing to this day. These wars have led to forced evacuations, the burning of homes, and the absence of education in the Balochi language. Despite Balochistan contributing to a significant amount of Pakistan's natural resources, the region lacks essential services such as education, media, newspapers, and academies. While student groups in Balochistan have worked tirelessly to self-publish, they are frequently under attack by security forces, who seize their books and suppress their efforts. Though the Baloch people speak other languages, Balochi remains a central part of their identity, and yet it struggles to survive in the broader public sphere, particularly as other languages in the region face similar marginalisation.

The lack of a standardised written system for Balochi only adds to the language's vulnerability, despite thousands of books being published in the language. Uppsala University in Sweden is currently the only institution in the world dedicated to teaching Balochi languages and creating dictionaries, although scholars working on these projects have been increasingly targeted, and sometimes killed. Ultimately, solutions to this linguistic crisis and broader persecution to the Balochi people require state action, but the people of Balochistan have not given up. By joining resources, creating courses, and distributing the language, there is still hope that change can occur. An example of this includes UNPO action in supporting the community to create a Magazine aimed at language preservation and revitalisation (14). The collective will of the Balochi people remains a powerful force in preserving and promoting the Balochi language and culture, especially withing the broader struggle towards self-determination.

13- <https://unpo.org/member/west-balochistan/>

14- <https://branzbaluch.com/>

KHMER-KROM

The Khmer-Krom live throughout the Mekong Delta region of Viet Nam, an area they have continuously inhabited for thousands of years. Despite being one of the largest indigenous groups in Viet Nam, they are not afforded indigenous status and instead are labelled by the Government as one of 53 ethnic minority groups. Following the decline of the Khmer Empire in the 13th century, the Khmer were subjugated first by the Viet Nameese, followed by French colonisers and again by the Viet Nameese administration upon its re-establishment in 1954.



The reunification of Viet Nam under a communist regime in 1975 led to the collectivisation of indigenous Khmer agricultural lands. Large resettlement efforts brought an influx of Kinh Viet Nameese into traditional Khmer lands. Government policies in the intervening years promoted the Viet Nameese language and resulted in decreased access to public institutions.

The Khmer language is an integral component of the Khmer-Krom's identity, traditions and culture. While the Constitution of Viet Nam provides that "every ethnic group has the right to use its own spoken and written language to preserve its own identity and to promote its fine customs, practice, traditions and culture" (15), in reality the Khmer-Krom are severely limited in their ability to speak and learn their own language due to lack of active support and restrictions from the government.

The absence of indigenous status is representative of a larger system of repression that leads to violations of numerous civil and political rights by the Government of Viet Nam against the Khmer-Krom. This is evident in overly restrictive policies with respect to the use of the Khmer language and the practice of Theravada Buddhism, whereby Khmer language teaching is rarely provided and while Theravada Buddhism itself is heavily regulated by the government; designated merely as an organisation without the full status of a religion. Young Khmer are therefore unable to speak their own language while also unable to fully speak Vietnamese which severely limits their opportunities within society. For example, the Khmer language is only taught in a limited number of schools for a few hours a week (16). In response to the absence of a multilingual curriculum, and in order to preserve the Khmer language, Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks attempt to teach Khmer in their temples. However, religious teachers attempting to teach Khmer language classes in village pagodas are often subject to intimidation and imprisonment (17).

15- Article 5, Vietnam Constitution; see also, Article 21 of Law 28/2001 on Cultural Heritage, as amended by Article 1, paragraph 6, of the Amended Law 32/2009/QH12 on Cultural Heritage, which provides for the protection of the spoken and written languages of ethnic groups in Vietnam

16- Submission to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights - The 3rd Cycle Review of the Universal Periodic Review of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 32nd Session" Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation, January - February 2019, at <https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=5940&file=EnglishTranslation>

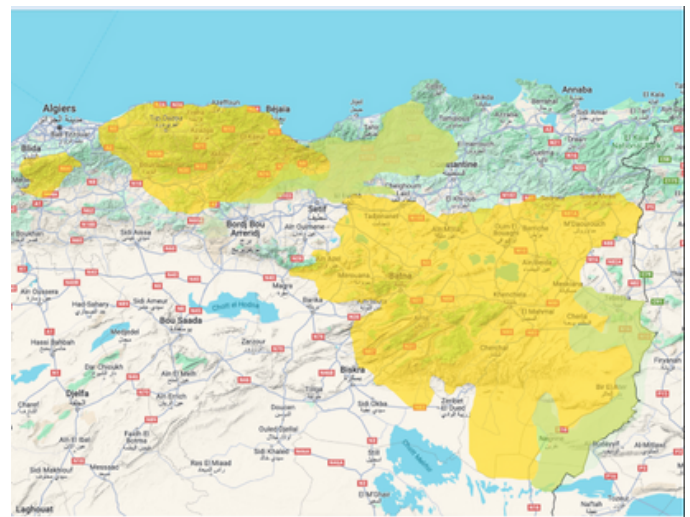
17- 'Denied Recognition: Vietnam's refusal to recognise the indigenous and religious rights of the Khmer Krom', Merce Monje, Elysia Rezki, and Asa Solway, September 2021. <https://unpo.org/downloads/2718.pdf>

Other forms of language suppression practised by the state include the replacement of Khmer language with Viet Nameese in the state associated Viet Nam Buddhist Sangha (VBS)- which Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks are forced to practice. The Khmer-Krom are also prevented by the government from having their own independent media. Broadcasting, which is provided in the Khmer language in Kampuchea-Krom, is controlled by the government and used to propagate its own policy and agenda. The media also cannot refer to place names in the Khmer language - having to use the Viet Nameese version instead. Accordingly, the inability for the Khmer-Krom to freely use their own language severely hampers their ability to express their cultural heritage. In the 1970s, a government policy was undertaken forcing all the Khmer-Krom, and other minorities, to change their names to Viet Nameese names (18). Khmer people have complained about distortions created by the phonetic transcription of Khmer names into Viet Nameese script, as a result of which, people feel they cannot use indigenous names for their children or for places. Reportedly, changes in the administrative structure of the territory have had a significant impact on topographical names, and Khmer family names and the names of localities and institutions, such as pagodas, have been replaced by Viet Nameese names (19).

Without control over their language, the Khmer-Krom are forced to assimilate, leading to the gradual loss of language, and connection to their collective identity and culture. For true self-determination, there must be respect and recognition for linguistic and cultural diversity. Bilingual education programs and at least co-official language status are essential to ensure the survival of the language. Official recognition of Khmer as an indigenous language, along with expanded language instruction integrated into curricula, would provide much-needed support. Protecting religious and cultural practices is equally vital to preserving the heritage.

KABYLIA

The Kabyle people are one of the several Berber indigenous peoples to Northern Africa, mainly present in Algeria, Morocco and Libya. There are approximately 10 million Kabyle people, most of whom reside in the cultural, natural, and historical region of Kabylia, currently under the territorial governance of Algeria. Coming from one of North Africa's most ancient civilisations, the Kabyle people's identity has been shaped over thousands of years through a shared common history, language and culture. The Kabyle people proclaim secular beliefs and mainly speak the Kabyle language, a derivative of Berber/Amazigh language, as well as French and Algerian Arab (imposed through schools and all institutions).



Within their homeland, the Kabyle are frequently subject to marginalisation and discrimination through repressive laws and policies enacted by the Algerian state (20).

18- Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation, 'The case of the indigenous Khmer-Krom people - Conference report November 2018' (2018) at <https://unpo.org/downloads/2507.pdf>.

19- Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights (2015) A/HRC/28/57/Add.1, p. 16.

20- 'Kabylia in Decay: Algeria's criminalization of self determination movements.' UNPO, April 2022.

Efforts to force assimilation through the Arabisation and Islamisation of Algeria since its independence from France in 1962 have been instrumentalised to suppress Kabyle language, culture, and traditional customs, as well as thwart movements based on the secular and democratic values which are integral to Kabylis. Those who speak out in defense of their fundamental rights are confronted with intimidation and violence from the state. Consequently, due to fear of persecution and the framework of systematic discriminatory policies in place, many Kabylis have been forced to seek refuge abroad. Despite the Algerian Constitution's recognition of the right to self-determination, the state authorities have consistently and relentlessly suppressed any support for the Kabyle's right to self-determination, often through means of violence. The Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylia (MAK or MAK-Anavad), the main political body representing Kabyle interest, and Kabyle people themselves, reject the position taken by the government of Algeria to continue exercising authority over Kabylia. A significant number of Kabylis now support an autonomous Kabylia, regaining the independence it had lost in 1857 when it was annexed to French colonial Algeria.

Following Algeria declaring independence in July 1962, tensions began to develop between the Kabyle leaders and the central government with the Socialist Forces Front (FFS) party of Hocine Ait Ahmed, and Wilayas III and IV (Kabylia and Algiers) opposing the FLN's political Bureau centered around the first President of Algeria Ahmed ben Bella and the forces led by FLN's command. At the time, there was only one radio station, and following the end of the French colonial rule, Algeria reduced its broadcast time to just a few hours per day. Kabyle people were subjected to continued political persecution, facing particularly immense repression. In 1963, FFS questioned the authority of a single-party system, which resulted in two years of armed confrontation in the region, leaving four hundred dead, in particular 500 Kabyle and most of the FLN leaders from Kabylia, and eastern provinces either executed or forced into exile. The FLN then began conducting policies of Arabisation to conquer Francophone influence, neglecting Amazigh languages as a result. The dictatorship nature of the FLN severely impacted Kabyle rights and identity, exposing it to erasure altogether (21).

In order to escape this persecution, many Kabyls began presenting themselves as Amazigh or aligned with other identities, as they were denied the right to be recognised as a distinct people. In 1980, following the banning of the conference by writer Moloud Mammeri on traditional Kabyle poetry, riots and strikes broke out, followed by several months of demonstrations on university campuses in Kabylia and Algiers, known as the Berber Spring, demanding the officialisation and recognition of the Kabyle language (22). The success of the school boycott and the demand for recognition helped bring the Kabyle language into the public eye, along with other languages from the Berber family. To continue denying their existence, Algeria was eventually pressured into recognising Berber in constitutional terms, but Arabic remained the dominant language, granted national and official status. After Morocco recognised Berber as an official language, Algeria followed suit, but the recognition was largely symbolic. In practice, Berber is not used in government administration, the judiciary, or the public sphere.

21- *ibid.*

22- *ibid.*

For decades, the Kabyle people have continued to fight for their self-determination and the recognition of their language and culture, often facing brutal crackdowns from the Algerian authorities. In recent years, this struggle has intensified, with Algerian authorities again endeavoring severe clamp downs on protesters, journalists and activities following Covid-19 restrictions lifting after 2021, with arbitrary arrests and prosecutions for engaging in peaceful protests and expressing dissenting political opinions visible on social media. The Algerian government's persistent refusal to acknowledge Kabyle as a distinct language and culture continues to undermine the identity of the Kabyle people, with the speaker emphasizing that denying a people's language is an explicit attempt to erase their very existence.

COMMON TRENDS

PUBLIC SPACES

Linguistic rights in the public sphere are essential for ensuring that communities can effectively participate in all areas of societal, political, and economic life. Across the case examples, the denial of linguistic rights in public institutions such as education, government, and media highlights a broader issue of political disenfranchisement and exclusion. In each case, the state's refusal to fully support or promote the minority language reflects broader efforts to centralise control, suppress dissent, and marginalise non-dominant cultural and national identities; denying those communities the opportunity to engage with current events or participate in public debates. The media's dominance by majority language reinforces the dominance of the majority's language and culture as the only legitimate one, leaving marginalised communities underrepresented and politically powerless.

The denial of linguistic rights in public spaces, and even when language rights are enshrined in law, highlights broader struggles for political self-determination, cultural recognition, and legal enforcement in the public sphere, as evidenced in all case examples. Collectively, linguistic rights in the public sphere are not only based upon preserving the language, but also ensuring participation in all areas of life. When minority languages are excluded from education, government, and media as a few examples, the affected communities are effectively denied equal rights and opportunities as the majority population.

ASSIMILATION & RESISTANCE

Language is not only a means of communication but also a key element in the construction and preservation of cultural and national identities. For excluded groups, language often represents a fundamental form of resistance against state efforts to erase or dilute their heritage. Across the case examples, language can be seen as a powerful tool towards self-determination, where its preservation and revitalisation deeply intertwines with the continued struggle for autonomy. When states impose assimilation policies, they seek to suppress minority languages through promoting monolingualism, with the aim to create a uniform national identity. These policies are more than just about language- they are an exercise in control, marginalisation, and the denial of the right to preserve one's culture and identity.

In response to such assimilation efforts, language becomes a powerful tool of resistance. For many marginalised communities, maintaining and using their language is not just an act of cultural preservation but a direct challenge to state efforts to erase their distinct identity. The struggle for linguistic rights is tied to the broader struggle for recognition, equality, and self-determination. Language is a symbol of resistance, as a way for communities to assert their right to define themselves and protect their heritage in the face of external pressures. When communities resist assimilation policies through language preservation and revitalisation, they are not only protecting a means of communication but also ensuring their right to exist as distinct cultural and political entities.

EDUCATION

Education plays a central role in nation-building and the preservation of cultural and linguistic identities. In the case examples, the educational system is often used as a tool for assimilation, with the state imposing the dominant language and culture in an effort to create a unified national identity. This leads to the marginalisation of minority languages and cultures, as they are excluded from curricula, and students are required to learn and use official languages to participate in public life. Such policies not only restrict access to education in a community's native language but also undermine the transmission of cultural heritage from one generation to the next. When a language is not taught in schools or used in official documents, it places additional barriers on students who already face obstacles due to their background. The pressure to assimilate through language can often lead to poor academic performance, social exclusion, and limited opportunities for economic and political participation.

The struggle for linguistic rights in education is deeply connected to the broader issues of self-determination and autonomy. When minority communities advocate for their right to education in their own language, they are not simply advocating for better access to schooling, they are demanding recognition, equality, and the right to define their own future. Despite the challenges posed by assimilation policies, the determination to preserve language and culture through education remains a crucial part of ensuring distinct Indigenous or national identities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

With regard to the protection and promotion of linguistic rights in the pursuit of self-determination, it is clear that many different contexts experience the same cross-cutting issues, although at different scales. The relationship between language and self-determination are intertwined, with language forming one of the most significant markers of a distinct cultural or national identity, and with the need to protect such identities and to create their own policies creating a strong drive for many nations and peoples towards self-determination.

Yet, when states control the use of languages, it becomes increasingly difficult for communities to preserve their own identity, with assimilation policies actively undermining languages and threatening the survival of entire cultural groups. Oppressive states often target languages first, as a tool for erasing distinct cultural identities and peoples in what can be termed *linguicide*. While exceptions of course exist, it is crucial that the preservation of languages and histories are prioritised going forward, utilising new technologies and programs moving into the future. Language is not only a means of communication; it is a vital expression of identity, and its protection is essential for the survival of all cultures and peoples.

As a global advocate for minorities, indigenous communities, and unrepresented nations and peoples, the UNPO recognises the value of linguistic diversity as a cornerstone of self-determination and makes it a key priority to support our members in preserving their cultural and linguistic identity. We strive to create a platform in the international arena for our members to freely maintain, promote and celebrate their history, language and culture, thus creating a space of remembrance, acceptance, and - where applicable - resistance. Minoritised communities deserve not only a right to use their language freely, but also be educated in that language and to have decision-making power over language policies that affect them. Our recommendations are as follows:

RECOMMENDATIONS

The UNPO urges all states and the international community to take concrete steps to uphold and protect linguistic and cultural rights, and to support the distinct identities of Indigenous Peoples and minority communities. In particular, we recommend that states:

- Guarantee the respect and recognition of linguistic diversity and diversity among peoples within the nation state, and recognition of the distinct identities of indigenous peoples and minority groups, in line with applicable international law;
- Cease all assimilationist policies, or policies adversely affecting the protection and development of minority languages;
- Grant official recognition to minority and indigenous languages;
- Ensure the accessibility of mother tongue languages in education at least to the level of bilingual proficiency;
- Protect and promote the use of mother tongue languages in public life, including, but not limited to, the right to reply, access to official documents, within local and regional governance, political participation, economic activities, and all areas of social and cultural life;
- Ensure the protection of traditional religious and cultural expression;
- Grant the right of a peoples or minority group the ability to develop and participate in the implementation of policies relating to their own language, education, self-governance, traditional economic and cultural activities, and other matters directly impacting the protection and promotion of their rights.

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