



Cultural Autonomy and State Law: Minority Governance Practices and Legal Recognition

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how minority communities in Tehran understand, practice, and negotiate cultural autonomy within the framework of state law and formal legal recognition. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 24 participants from Tehran who had direct experience with minority governance practices, cultural associations, community mediation, legal assistance, or rights-based advocacy. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, followed by theoretical sampling until theoretical saturation was reached. Interviews focused on community decision-making, informal governance, interaction with state institutions, perceived legal recognition, cultural rights, and tensions between collective autonomy and individual legal protection. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, code data, compare emerging categories, and support the development of final themes. Analysis generated five main categories: autonomy as everyday community governance, conditional and uneven legal recognition, boundary negotiation between state law and community norms, protection of vulnerable insiders, and legal translation through mediation. Participants described cultural autonomy not as separation from state law but as a practical capacity to preserve language, rituals, dispute-resolution practices, kinship obligations, and community authority while remaining legally accountable to the state. However, recognition was experienced as partial, administrative, and dependent on the discretion of institutions and officials. Participants also emphasized that community governance requires internal accountability, especially where women, youth, migrants, or economically weaker members may be pressured by informal authority structures. The study shows that cultural autonomy is best understood as a negotiated legal and social practice rather than a fixed institutional status. Effective legal recognition requires flexible state frameworks that acknowledge minority governance practices while safeguarding equal citizenship, access to formal justice, and individual rights within minority communities.

Keywords: Cultural autonomy; state law; minority governance; legal recognition; legal pluralism

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Introduction

Cultural autonomy has become one of the most important and contested concepts in contemporary legal and socio-political debates on minority rights. In plural societies, minority communities often maintain distinctive practices of language preservation, family organization, ritual life, local mediation, religious authority, collective memory, and informal dispute

resolution. These practices may operate alongside state law, sometimes complementing it, sometimes filling institutional gaps, and sometimes generating conflicts with official legal norms. The central problem is not simply whether minorities should be “recognized” by law, but how recognition can be designed so that cultural self-governance strengthens justice rather than reproducing exclusion, inequality, or institutional fragmentation. This study examines this issue through the topic of cultural autonomy and state law, focusing on how minority governance practices are experienced, interpreted, and negotiated in Tehran.

The relationship between minority governance and state law is often framed through the theory of legal pluralism. Legal pluralism challenges the assumption that state law is the only meaningful source of normativity in social life. Griffiths (1986) famously argued that legal pluralism refers to the presence of more than one legal order within a social field. Moore’s (1973) concept of the “semi-autonomous social field” is especially useful for understanding minority governance because it explains how communities can generate rules, induce compliance, and maintain internal order while still being affected by wider legal and political structures. Tamanaha (2008) further shows that legal pluralism is not limited to traditional or pre-modern societies; rather, it is a general condition of modern social life, visible in the coexistence of state law, religious norms, professional codes, community obligations, transnational standards, and informal social expectations. From this perspective, cultural autonomy is not an exception to law but one of the social settings in which law becomes plural, negotiated, and lived.

The concept of cultural autonomy also has a strong normative dimension. Political theorists of multicultural citizenship have argued that equal citizenship may require differentiated rights or institutional accommodations for minority groups. Kymlicka (1995) argued that minority rights can be compatible with liberal democratic principles when they protect meaningful cultural membership and enable individuals to make choices within a secure cultural context. However, he also distinguished between external protections, which shield minorities from unjust domination by the majority, and internal restrictions, which may limit the freedom of members within the group. This distinction remains central to legal debates on minority governance because it identifies the dual responsibility of the state: to protect minority communities from assimilationist pressure while also protecting individuals within communities from coercive or discriminatory practices. In later work, Kymlicka (2007) emphasized that international minority-rights norms have increasingly shaped state approaches to diversity, although their implementation remains uneven and politically contested.

International human rights law provides important foundations for minority cultural protection. Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights recognizes that persons belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of their group, to enjoy their culture, profess and practice their religion, or use their language (United Nations General Assembly, 1966). The United Nations Human Rights Committee (1994) clarified that Article 27 establishes rights that are distinct from, and additional to, the general rights enjoyed by all individuals under the Covenant. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples also recognizes collective dimensions of cultural identity, institutions, traditions, participation, and self-determination (United Nations General Assembly, 2007). Although Indigenous rights and minority rights are not identical legal categories, both bodies of law demonstrate a broader international movement toward recognizing collective cultural life as a legally relevant dimension of human dignity, equality, and participation.

At the same time, recognition is never a neutral legal act. Taylor (1994) argued that recognition is a vital human need because identity is partly shaped through public acknowledgment. Misrecognition, therefore, may impose harm by reducing a group or person to an inferior or distorted status. Fraser (2000), however, warned that recognition should not be reduced to identity politics or cultural affirmation alone. For Fraser, justice requires attention to status equality, redistribution, and participation. This critique is important for the present study because minority governance cannot be evaluated only by asking whether a cultural identity is recognized. It is also necessary to examine whether recognition improves access to justice, reduces

institutional inequality, and enables minority members to participate as full social and legal actors. Recognition that merely labels a group as culturally distinct, without improving institutional responsiveness or protecting vulnerable members, may become symbolic rather than transformative.

A major challenge in cultural autonomy debates concerns the internal diversity of minority communities. Benhabib (2002) criticized views of culture that treat communities as bounded, homogeneous, and unchanging. Cultures are internally contested, historically dynamic, and shaped by ongoing interpretation. Phillips (2007) similarly argued against reified notions of culture, warning that public authorities may unintentionally empower conservative or dominant voices within minority communities when they assume that “community leaders” speak for all members. Shachar (2001) described this as the problem of “multicultural vulnerability,” where policies intended to protect minority cultures may expose women or less powerful members to intra-group inequality. These critiques do not reject cultural autonomy; rather, they demand a more careful legal architecture that recognizes community practices while ensuring individual rights, voice, and access to external legal remedies.

Legal anthropology further shows that state law and local justice are connected through translation, mediation, and adaptation. Merry (2006) demonstrated that international human rights norms are not simply imposed from above but are translated into local contexts by activists, intermediaries, and community actors. This process can generate new meanings, hybrid practices, and practical compromises. Ewick and Silbey (1998) similarly emphasized that legality is experienced in everyday life, not only in courts or statutes. People encounter law through bureaucratic documents, institutional routines, community advice, fear of sanctions, moral language, and ordinary stories about rights and obligations. Therefore, understanding cultural autonomy requires empirical attention to how minority actors describe law, how they decide when to use state institutions, and how they interpret the legitimacy of community-based governance.

In urban settings such as Tehran, these issues become particularly complex. Tehran is a major metropolitan center in which different ethnic, linguistic, religious, and migrant communities interact with state institutions, civil associations, schools, courts, municipal authorities, and informal networks. Minority governance practices in such a setting are rarely territorially autonomous in a formal constitutional sense. Instead, autonomy is often practiced through community associations, religious institutions, kinship networks, language classes, cultural ceremonies, informal mediation, charity systems, and advisory roles performed by elders, lawyers, activists, or local representatives. This form of autonomy is practical rather than sovereign. It depends on the capacity of communities to preserve identity, resolve internal disputes, transmit norms, and negotiate recognition from state bodies without necessarily possessing formal legislative or administrative power.

Despite the importance of these processes, much legal scholarship continues to analyze minority rights primarily through constitutional doctrine, international legal standards, or normative theory. These approaches are necessary, but they do not fully explain how recognition is experienced by those who navigate the boundary between community authority and state legality. Qualitative research can contribute to this gap by examining the meanings that participants attach to autonomy, recognition, legitimacy, and justice. Semi-structured interviews are especially appropriate because they allow participants to explain how governance practices work in everyday life, where they succeed, where they fail, and how they are perceived by different actors.

Accordingly, this study investigates minority governance practices and legal recognition in Tehran through a qualitative design. It asks: How do minority community actors understand cultural autonomy? What forms of informal or semi-formal governance do they describe? How do they experience recognition by state institutions? What tensions emerge between collective cultural authority and individual legal protection? By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to debates on legal pluralism, multicultural citizenship, and socio-legal recognition. The study argues that cultural autonomy should not be understood as separation from state law, nor as simple absorption into state legal uniformity. Rather, it is a negotiated legal and social practice that requires institutional flexibility, participatory recognition, and rights-based safeguards.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design to explore how minority governance practices are understood and negotiated in relation to state law. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research aimed to examine meanings, experiences, institutional perceptions, and interpretive processes rather than measure predetermined variables. The study was informed by socio-legal and legal pluralist perspectives, which emphasize that law is experienced not only through formal statutes and courts but also through social norms, community institutions, administrative encounters, and everyday practices. The research focused on cultural autonomy as a lived and negotiated phenomenon.

The study was conducted in Tehran. Twenty-four participants took part in semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected because they had direct experience with minority cultural governance, community mediation, minority rights advocacy, cultural associations, legal counseling, or interaction between community institutions and state bodies. The sample included community representatives, cultural association members, legal professionals, social workers, educators, and civil society actors who had worked with ethnic, linguistic, religious, or migrant minority communities in Tehran. Purposive sampling was used at the first stage to identify participants with relevant experience. Theoretical sampling was then used to include additional participants who could clarify emerging categories. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that additional interviews no longer generated substantially new themes or analytical insights.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions on participants' understandings of cultural autonomy, forms of community governance, informal dispute-resolution practices, interactions with state law, experiences of legal recognition, institutional barriers, and the protection of individual rights within community structures. Sample questions included: "How is cultural autonomy practiced in your community?", "What types of issues are usually handled through community-based mechanisms?", "When do people prefer state institutions rather than community processes?", "How do state institutions recognize or fail to recognize minority governance practices?", and "What tensions arise between community authority and individual rights?" Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in a private and respectful setting. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed an iterative process of familiarization with transcripts, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, store codes, compare coded segments, retrieve excerpts, and develop thematic maps. Coding began inductively, allowing categories to emerge from the data. In later stages, the analysis was interpreted through concepts from legal pluralism, recognition theory, and minority rights scholarship. Codes were compared across participant groups to identify both shared patterns and divergent experiences. Particular attention was given to tensions between collective cultural autonomy and individual access to legal protection.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study used prolonged engagement with the data, peer debriefing, memo-writing, and an audit trail of coding decisions. Credibility was strengthened by comparing participant accounts across different roles and community experiences. Dependability was supported through systematic documentation of interview procedures, coding stages, theme development, and analytic decisions. Confirmability was supported by reflexive memos that recorded the researcher's assumptions and interpretive choices. Transferability was addressed through thick description of the research context, participant characteristics, and thematic findings. Ethical principles included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymization of transcripts, and the right to withdraw from the study. Participants were identified using codes such as P1, P2, and P3, and no identifying information was included in the findings.

Findings

The study included 24 participants from Tehran. Thirteen participants were men and eleven were women. Participants' ages ranged from 26 to 64 years. In terms of role, 8 participants were community representatives or cultural association members, 5 were lawyers or legal consultants, 4 were social workers or NGO staff, 3 were educators involved in minority cultural or language programs, and 4 were activists or mediators with experience in community-state relations. Regarding educational level, 5 participants had a bachelor's degree, 12 had a master's degree, and 7 had a doctoral or professional legal degree. Participants reported experience with different minority contexts, including ethnic, linguistic, religious, and migrant communities living in Tehran. The frequency distribution showed that most participants had more than five years of experience in community-related work, with 7 participants reporting 1–5 years, 10 reporting 6–10 years, and 7 reporting more than 10 years of relevant experience.

Participants described cultural autonomy primarily as an everyday practice rather than a formal legal status. For many participants, autonomy meant the ability of a minority community to preserve its language, rituals, religious practices, family traditions, educational activities, and internal forms of consultation. Community governance was often organized through cultural associations, religious centers, informal councils, elders, family networks, and trusted mediators. Participants emphasized that such practices did not necessarily aim to replace state law. Instead, they helped communities manage ordinary problems before they escalated into formal legal disputes. One participant explained, "For us, autonomy does not mean being outside the law. It means that we can solve small problems in our own language, with people who understand our customs, before the issue becomes a court case" (P6). Another participant stated, "The community center is not a court, but people come there because they feel heard. They believe the person listening to them understands both their legal problem and their cultural background" (P11). This category shows that cultural autonomy was understood as practical self-governance based on trust, cultural knowledge, and social proximity.

The second category concerned the uneven nature of legal recognition. Participants reported that state institutions sometimes acknowledged minority cultural practices, especially in ceremonial, educational, religious, or administrative contexts. However, this recognition was often experienced as conditional, informal, and dependent on the discretion of officials. Participants distinguished between symbolic recognition and effective recognition. Symbolic recognition included permission to hold cultural ceremonies, maintain religious events, or organize language-related activities. Effective recognition, however, meant that institutions would take minority needs seriously in legal, educational, administrative, and welfare decisions. A lawyer participant noted, "Recognition exists in some places, but it is not always predictable. One office may cooperate, while another office treats the same issue as suspicious or unnecessary" (P3). Another participant stated, "The law may not directly prohibit our cultural work, but the absence of clear procedures makes everything dependent on personal relationships and negotiation" (P17). Participants therefore viewed recognition as incomplete. They did not describe an absolute denial of cultural autonomy, but rather a system in which recognition was fragmented, bureaucratic, and vulnerable to inconsistency.

Participants repeatedly discussed the need to negotiate boundaries between community norms and state law. Informal mediation was valued because it was faster, less costly, and culturally familiar. However, participants also acknowledged that not all disputes could or should be handled internally. Cases involving violence, serious financial conflict, coercion, child custody, inheritance disputes, or gender-based harm were described as requiring formal legal protection. A community mediator explained, "There are issues we can discuss inside the community, but there are lines we cannot cross. If someone's safety is at risk, it must go to the legal system" (P8). Another participant said, "The difficult part is knowing when community advice becomes pressure. Sometimes families say they want to protect tradition, but the person involved feels trapped" (P19). This theme demonstrates that participants did not understand autonomy as unlimited community authority. Rather, they viewed legitimate autonomy as requiring an active boundary between cultural self-governance and state-based rights protection.

The fourth category concerned the position of vulnerable members within minority communities. Participants emphasized that cultural autonomy can empower communities, but it can also reproduce internal inequalities when decision-making is dominated by older men, economically powerful families, religious authorities, or socially influential actors. Women, youth, recent migrants, poorer families, and individuals who challenged community expectations were described as particularly vulnerable to informal pressure. One female participant stated, “Sometimes the word ‘culture’ is used to silence women. They say this is our tradition, but no one asks whether the woman herself agrees” (P14). Another participant noted, “Young people respect the community, but they also want choices. If recognition only strengthens the elders, then it is not real justice” (P21). Participants argued that community governance needs internal accountability, including consultation with women, youth, and less powerful members. They also emphasized the importance of access to state law as a protective option when internal mechanisms become coercive. This theme highlights the central tension between collective recognition and individual rights.

The final category described the role of intermediaries who translate between state law and community norms. Participants identified lawyers, educated youth, NGO workers, social workers, association leaders, and bilingual mediators as important actors who help community members understand legal procedures while also helping state officials understand cultural contexts. These intermediaries reduced mistrust, explained documents, accompanied people to offices, mediated misunderstandings, and reframed rights claims in language acceptable to institutions. One participant explained, “Many people do not reject state law; they are afraid of it because they do not understand the process. A mediator can explain the law in a way that does not make them feel humiliated” (P5). Another participant stated, “Recognition happens when someone can translate both sides: the community’s concern and the institution’s legal language” (P23). This theme suggests that cultural autonomy and legal recognition are not connected only through formal legislation. They are also connected through practical translation, relational trust, and actors who move between legal and cultural worlds.

Discussion

The first major finding was that cultural autonomy was experienced as everyday community governance rather than formal political separation. Participants described autonomy through ordinary practices such as language maintenance, cultural education, religious ceremonies, internal consultation, informal mediation, and collective care. This finding aligns with legal pluralist scholarship, which argues that law-like norms and governance practices exist beyond formal state institutions. Moore’s (1973) concept of the semi-autonomous social field is particularly relevant because minority communities in this study appeared capable of generating rules, expectations, and compliance mechanisms while still remaining embedded in state law. Similarly, Griffiths (1986) argued that legal pluralism exists where multiple normative orders operate in the same social field. The participants’ accounts support this view by showing that community governance is not necessarily anti-state; rather, it functions as a practical layer of social ordering that addresses issues of trust, cultural understanding, and accessibility. This also corresponds with Ewick and Silbey’s (1998) view that legality is lived in everyday settings and interpreted through ordinary social relationships. In this study, cultural autonomy was not an abstract legal doctrine but a set of practical arrangements through which people attempted to make law socially meaningful.

The second finding concerned conditional and uneven legal recognition. Participants did not describe recognition as entirely absent, but they repeatedly emphasized its inconsistency. Recognition was often dependent on administrative discretion, local relationships, and the attitude of particular officials. This finding supports recognition theory while also showing its institutional limitations. Taylor (1994) emphasized the importance of recognition for dignity and identity, but the present findings suggest that recognition must be operationalized through stable procedures, not merely symbolic acknowledgment. Fraser’s (2000) critique is also relevant here: recognition becomes insufficient when it fails to change status inequality or improve participation. Participants valued cultural ceremonies and symbolic acknowledgment, but they regarded these as inadequate when not

accompanied by predictable institutional access, legal clarity, and administrative responsiveness. Kymlicka's (1995, 2007) work on minority rights also helps explain this result. Minority recognition must protect cultural membership in ways that are institutionally real, not merely rhetorical. The findings therefore suggest that minority governance requires a shift from discretionary tolerance to rule-based, transparent, and participatory recognition.

The third finding showed that participants constantly negotiated boundaries between state law and community norms. This finding challenges simplistic views that present cultural autonomy and state law as mutually exclusive. Participants valued informal mediation because it was culturally familiar, accessible, and less adversarial, but they also recognized that serious disputes require formal legal protection. This finding aligns with Tamanaha's (2008) argument that legal pluralism is a normal condition of modern legal life, involving multiple overlapping normative systems rather than a simple opposition between official and unofficial law. It also reflects Merry's (2006) analysis of legal translation, where global or state norms are adapted into local contexts through intermediaries and practical negotiation. The participants' emphasis on boundaries is especially important because it shows that legal pluralism does not require abandoning state responsibility. Instead, the state must define safeguards while allowing space for culturally meaningful problem-solving. Community mediation may support justice when it is voluntary, transparent, and rights-compatible; it becomes problematic when it prevents individuals from accessing formal remedies.

The fourth finding concerned vulnerable insiders within minority communities. Participants warned that cultural autonomy may empower communities but also strengthen internal hierarchies if recognition is granted only to dominant representatives. This finding strongly aligns with Shachar's (2001) concept of multicultural vulnerability, which describes how group-based accommodation may unintentionally expose less powerful members to intra-group inequality. Phillips (2007) similarly criticized approaches that treat culture as fixed or assume that male elders, religious authorities, or traditional leaders represent the whole community. Benhabib's (2002) critique of bounded and homogeneous culture is also supported by the findings. Participants described minority communities as internally diverse, with disagreements across gender, generation, class, migration status, and education. Therefore, legal recognition should not treat community authority as automatically legitimate. Recognition must include participatory mechanisms that allow women, youth, poorer members, and dissenting voices to be heard. The findings suggest that cultural autonomy is most defensible when it expands both collective survival and individual agency.

The fifth finding highlighted mediation and legal translation as crucial mechanisms connecting cultural autonomy to state law. Participants described bilingual mediators, lawyers, NGO workers, educators, and community representatives as actors who translate legal procedures into culturally understandable terms and explain community concerns to state institutions. This supports Merry's (2006) argument that legal norms travel through translation and localization. It also expands the meaning of recognition: recognition does not occur only when a statute names a minority group; it also occurs when institutions become capable of hearing, interpreting, and responding to minority experiences. In this sense, mediators function as socio-legal bridges. They reduce fear of bureaucracy, help prevent misunderstandings, and create pathways through which minority members can access formal justice without abandoning cultural identity. This finding suggests that legal pluralism is not only a structural condition but also a communicative practice. The quality of legal recognition depends heavily on the people, institutions, and procedures that make translation possible.

Overall, the findings indicate that cultural autonomy should be understood as negotiated interdependence rather than isolation. Minority communities do not necessarily seek to exist outside state law; rather, they seek meaningful space to preserve cultural life and manage internal affairs while being treated as legitimate participants in the legal order. This interpretation contributes to multicultural citizenship theory by showing that minority rights are not only claims for difference

but also claims for institutional relationship. Kymlicka's (1995) distinction between external protections and internal restrictions is useful here. Participants sought external protections against assimilation, invisibility, and bureaucratic disregard, but they also recognized the dangers of internal restrictions when community authority becomes coercive. A rights-compatible model of cultural autonomy must therefore combine collective recognition with individual guarantees.

The study also contributes to socio-legal understandings of recognition by showing that recognition operates at multiple levels. At the symbolic level, it involves respect for cultural identity. At the administrative level, it involves clear procedures and institutional responsiveness. At the interpersonal level, it involves respectful treatment by officials, mediators, and community authorities. At the protective level, it involves access to formal remedies when community processes fail. These levels are connected. Symbolic recognition without administrative clarity produces uncertainty. Administrative recognition without cultural understanding produces alienation. Community autonomy without rights protection produces vulnerability. State law without cultural translation produces mistrust. Therefore, effective recognition requires a layered framework in which cultural practices are respected, institutional procedures are clarified, and individual rights remain enforceable.

The findings further suggest that urban minority governance differs from territorially based autonomy. In Tehran, cultural autonomy was not described as formal self-government over a defined territory. Rather, it was practiced through associations, informal networks, religious institutions, educational programs, and mediation practices. This is important for legal theory because many models of minority autonomy are based on Indigenous peoples, national minorities, or territorially concentrated groups. Urban minorities may require different forms of recognition, such as support for cultural centers, language activities, advisory councils, legal aid, community mediation standards, anti-discrimination procedures, and participatory consultation. These forms of recognition may be less visible than constitutional autonomy, but they are highly significant in everyday life.

From a policy perspective, the study indicates that state institutions should not view minority governance only as a risk to legal unity. Properly structured, community-based governance can reduce conflict, improve access to justice, strengthen trust, and support social cohesion. However, this requires safeguards. Community mediation should be voluntary and should never block access to courts or administrative remedies. Community representatives should not be treated as the sole voice of the group without consultation with women, youth, and marginalized members. Legal recognition should be accompanied by training for officials, legal literacy programs for minority communities, and referral pathways for cases involving violence, coercion, or serious rights violations. Such measures would allow cultural autonomy to operate within a framework of equal citizenship.

This study has several limitations. First, the study was conducted only in Tehran, and the findings may not fully represent minority governance practices in smaller cities, rural areas, border provinces, or communities with different demographic and institutional conditions. Second, the study used semi-structured interviews, which provided rich interpretive data but did not include direct observation of community mediation sessions, court interactions, or administrative procedures. Third, participants were selected because they had experience with community governance or legal issues, so the sample may overrepresent individuals who are more institutionally engaged or legally aware than ordinary community members. Fourth, because minority identity and governance can be sensitive topics, some participants may have avoided discussing controversial experiences in detail. Finally, the study examined multiple minority contexts together, which allowed comparison across experiences but limited the depth of analysis for each specific community.

Future research should examine cultural autonomy and legal recognition in different regions and compare urban, rural, and borderland settings. Comparative studies could explore whether minority governance practices differ across ethnic, linguistic, religious, and migrant communities and how local institutional cultures shape recognition. Future studies should also include the perspectives of state officials, judges, municipal actors, school administrators, and court personnel to better understand how

institutions interpret minority claims. Ethnographic research could observe community mediation, cultural association meetings, and administrative encounters to capture practices that may not be fully expressed in interviews. Further research should also focus specifically on women, youth, migrants, and economically marginalized members within minority communities to understand how internal power relations affect access to justice and participation.

Legal and administrative institutions should develop clear, transparent, and rights-compatible procedures for engaging with minority cultural organizations and community representatives. Training programs should help officials understand cultural diversity, minority rights, and the difference between legitimate cultural accommodation and harmful coercion. Community-based mediation mechanisms should be supported only when they are voluntary, accountable, and connected to formal legal remedies. Minority communities should be encouraged to include women, youth, and marginalized members in consultation processes. Legal literacy programs should be made available in accessible language so that minority members understand both their cultural options and their formal legal rights. Finally, partnerships between legal professionals, social workers, cultural associations, and civil society organizations can strengthen trust and improve access to justice.

Conclusion

This study explored how cultural autonomy and state law are negotiated through minority governance practices in Tehran. The findings show that cultural autonomy is not experienced primarily as separation from the state, but as the practical ability to preserve cultural identity, manage community affairs, and resolve ordinary disputes in culturally meaningful ways. At the same time, participants emphasized that recognition by state institutions remains uneven, conditional, and dependent on administrative discretion. The study also found that legitimate cultural autonomy requires clear boundaries between community-based governance and formal legal protection, especially in cases involving coercion, violence, gender inequality, or vulnerable members.

The study contributes to legal pluralism and minority rights scholarship by showing that minority governance is best understood as a negotiated relationship between community authority and state legality. Recognition should not be limited to symbolic acceptance of cultural difference. It must involve institutional responsiveness, procedural clarity, participatory consultation, legal translation, and enforceable safeguards for individual rights. Cultural autonomy can support justice when it protects collective identity while expanding, rather than restricting, the agency of members within minority communities. Therefore, the central challenge for state law is not whether to recognize minority governance practices, but how to recognize them in ways that are democratic, inclusive, accountable, and compatible with equal citizenship.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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