

Introduction

Since the 1979 revolution Iran's religious and ethnic minorities have suffered human rights violations at the hands of successive governments. Although Iran is party to several international covenants that protect the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), religious minorities are viewed with suspicion and treated as a threat to a theocratic system that imposes a strict interpretation of Shi'a Islam.

Christians, Baha'is, Sufi Dervishes and Sunni Muslims have been executed judicially and extra-judicially, and tortured, imprisoned or generally harassed on account of their faith. An official campaign against Muslim converts to Christianity has been escalating since 2009, and has at times been accompanied by a rise in anti-Christian rhetoric from senior officials. The Baha'i community, which remains unrecognised officially, and the Dervishes, have increasingly been targeted with hate speech. They face a raft of discriminatory and repressive policies, including with regard to education and burial sites.

Arbitrary arrest and sentencing on spurious charges

President Rouhani, who came to office in August 2013 and was re-elected in May 2017, was initially hailed as a moderate who promised reform.

However, political opposition members, human rights activists and journalists continue to be arrested and sentenced on spurious grounds, and the electoral promise of equal rights for women is yet to be realised. Religious minorities are still being targeted, with at least 746 people detained on account of their religion or belief, 317 of whom are Baha'i.¹ Seven Baha'i leaders remain in prison, each of whom is serving a 20-year sentence.

Any gathering of Christians, including social gatherings such as birthday or engagement parties, is perceived as potential house church activity and deemed a threat to national security. Anti-Baha'i and anti-Semitic rhetoric is widely used by the clerical establishment, although there was a decline in the use of anti-Semitic narratives by government officials following the 2014 nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 countries (China, France, Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany), now abrogated by the Trump administration.

Christians continue to face excessive jail terms after being convicted on spurious national-security-related charges. On 24 June 2017 Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, Mohammadreza Omid, Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Saheb Fadaie from the Church of Iran denomination were sentenced to ten years in prison each for 'acting against national security'. Pastor

Nadarkhani and Mr Omid were also each sentenced to two years of internal exile. The men had been arrested on 13 May 2017 during a series of raids by security service (VEVAK) agents on Christian homes in Rasht.

These were just some of a series of excessive sentences passed against Christians by a notorious judge, Mashallah Ahmadzadeh, based on unfounded national security-related charges.

For example, on 3 July 2018 Judge Ahmadzadeh sentenced Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz, Mr Hadi Asgari and Mr Kaviyan Fallah-Mohammadi to ten years in prison each, while Amin Afshar-Naderi was given a 15-year sentence, and all were banned from travelling for two years. All are appealing the sentences. Mr Afshar-Naderi and Mr Fallah-Mohammadi were among several Christians arrested on 26 December 2014 at a Christmas celebration at the pastor's home in Tehran. Mr Afshar-Naderi was also among five Christians arrested on 26 August 2016 when VEVAK agents broke up a picnic in a private garden in Firouzkooch, an area 90 miles east of Tehran.

In June 2017 Shamiran Issavi, wife of Pastor Bet-Tamraz, was charged with 'acting against national security' for participating in Christian seminars abroad as a church member. On 6 January 2018 she was given a five-year prison sentence by Judge Ahmadzadeh of the 26th Branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran. The judge found her guilty of 'acting against national security' and 'acting against the regime' by organising small groups, attending a seminary abroad and allegedly training church leaders and pastors to act as spies. During an appeal hearing on 9 May, Shamiran Issavi was reportedly treated extremely disrespectfully by the presiding judge, who accused her entire family of committing crimes against the regime. Neither she nor her lawyer was permitted to refute these accusations.

Ramil Bet-Tamraz, the son of Shamiran Issavi and Pastor Bet-Tamraz, is also facing trial on charges of 'acting against national security', 'organising and conducting house churches,' and other charges relating to his father's church activities. Ramil Bet-Tamraz, Hadi Asgari and Amin Afshar-Naderi were among the five Christians arrested on 26 August 2016 during the picnic in Firouzkooch (see above); they were released on bail in November 2016. On 18 June Ramil and Amir were charged with 'spreading Christian propaganda' and sentenced to four months in prison on 11 July. Amnesty International issued an appeal in August 2018 asking for urgent action regarding the case of Pastor Bet-Tamraz and his family and friends.

1 Iran Prison Atlas <https://ipa.united4iran.org/en/prisoner/>

On 28 December 2017 Suroush Saraie and Eskandar Rezaie, both members of the Church of Iran denomination, each received seven-year sentences for ‘creating a group that works against national security’, and one additional year for ‘propaganda against the state.’ Both men are appealing the verdict, which was handed down by the 4th Chamber of the Revolutionary Court in Shiraz. During the same court hearing a Christian woman named Zahra Norouzi Kashkouli was sentenced to one year in prison for ‘being a member of a group working against the system.’ She too is appealing the sentence.

Executions

Iran remains one of the few countries to execute minors, homosexuals, and women claiming self-defence against rapists. Most victims are hanged, often in public. A large proportion of those executed are members of minority religious or ethnic groups, particularly Sunni Muslims and Kurds. Political opponents are often accused of being foreign agents or spies, while many from ethnic and religious minority communities face trial on drug-related charges. Many are executed after trials that fall short of international fair trial standards.

Recommendations

- Urge the government of Iran to respect the right to freedom of religion or belief in line with international and constitutional obligations.
- Encourage the government of Iran to uphold the rule of law by ensuring free and fair trials for all citizens, regardless of religion or belief.
- Urge the government of Iran to end the practice of sentencing members of minority faith communities to excessive sentences based on national security charges.
- Urge the government of Iran to end the harassment and imprisonment of human rights activists, journalists and opposition politicians.
- Call on the government of Iran to bring an end to all forms of religious discrimination including harassment, torture and hate speech.
- Urge the Iranian government to prohibit the execution of juveniles and to consider commuting all capital sentences for those currently facing a death sentence.
- Encourage the government of Iran to ensure respect for fair trial and due process to all detainees, as stipulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).
- Urge the government of Iran to uphold the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in accordance with constitutional and international provisions, including the right to life.

As Christians, we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.