

Briefing

Iran

Mass arrests of evangelical Christians

FOR PUBLIC CIRCULATION

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CHRISTIAN
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I. Executive Summary

In the last six months over 200 Iranian Christians have been detained, with arrests being recorded in 24 cities.

CSW has serious concerns for the wellbeing of all Christian detainees in Iran due to the passing of the first judicial death sentence since 1990 for apostasy against Pastor Nadarkhani in September 2010¹; recent high profile cases of extended periods of detention for religious detainees, including the detention of evangelical Christians Maryam Rostampour and Marzieh Esmailabad on charges of apostasy, crimes against the state and propagating religion in the Revolutionary Court,² and the ongoing trial of seven Bahá'í leaders accused of propaganda activities against the Islamic order, "corruption on earth" and other allegations.³

In addition, reports of extra-judicial killings of political dissidents in prisons across Iran, increased governmental and clerical rhetoric that has included public assertions of the arrest of religious minorities and targeting of their members, the ongoing use of solitary confinement, psychological torture and physical intimidation to threaten detainees and obtain written and verbal evidence against them, as well as a total absence of judicial process for those arbitrarily detained, engender grave concerns for all held.

While some Christians have been released, repeated cycles of arrest with escalating charges against all those detained, and against others on whom information is uncovered, provide no guarantee that further arrests will not occur.

2. Recommendations

CSW requests that cases be raised as a matter of urgency with the Iranian Government to obtain the release of detainees held on account of their faith, and that key members of the international community use their good offices to ensure:

- An investigation into the Iranian Government's use of the death penalty and charges of apostasy in cases of converts from Islam (such as Pastor Nadarkhani and others);
- Iran upholds obligations under its own constitutional provisions and penal code bill, which do not codify the death penalty for apostasy, and its obligations under international law, including religious freedom provisions contained within the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) to which Iran is a signatory;
- The informal use of execution and forms of intimidation as a means of curtailing religious freedom is investigated, including Iran's implementation of a new penal code and its application in varying regions, specifically in the city of Rasht in Gilan province, and in Mashad city in Khorasan province;
- That the rights of religious minorities are upheld in Iran in accordance with constitutional provisions for them, and address the rhetoric and constitutional discrimination employed against religious minorities.

¹ Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani was acquitted of apostasy in January 2007 before being rearrested and sentenced for apostasy in September 2010. For more about his case see Appendix I: Addendum of Cases at the end of this briefing.

² In March 2009, Maryam Rostampour and Marzieh Amirizadeh Esmailabad, were arrested and held without charge in Evin prison where they suffered psychological abuse and lacked sufficient medical care. They were tried for apostasy and propagating Christianity at the Revolutionary Court in October 2009. Anti-state charges against them were dropped and their case transferred to a general court to consider two other charges of propagating Christianity and apostasy. They were returned to Evin Prison to await a court date and subsequently released in November 2009. In April 2010 a general court trial date was announced. In May 2010 Maryam Rostampour and Marzieh Esmailabad were cleared of all charges following an international campaign for their release.

³ For more details on the Bahá'í leaders, see Appendix I: Addendum of Cases.

3. Background

Arrests appear to have intensified during the closing months of 2010. On Christmas Eve 2010, eleven Christians were detained in Dezfool and Andimeshk. One remains in prison, while the others were released after signing documents stating they would no longer attend church. Then in the early hours of Boxing Day 2010, 26 Christians from evangelical house churches were arrested in Tehran, and at least thirteen were seized in other parts of the country.⁴ The arrested Christians were interrogated and while some were detained, others were released on condition that they reappear for further questioning. Fourteen of the initial 26 arrested have been released, but twelve, including pastors and leaders, remain in prison awaiting charges.

Arrests of Christians have continued since Boxing Day. So far in January 2011, at least 35 are known to have been detained, with arrests taking place in Ahvaz, Mashad, Karaj, Robot Karim, Rasht, Shiraz, Isfahan and Khorasan Razavi. Homes have been ransacked, and although some of these Christians remain in detention, several were interrogated and released or ordered to report to security officers in Kermanshah and Sanandaj for questioning.

During the previous five months Iranian authorities detained, interrogated and forced nearly 100 Christians in Hamadan, Arak, Bandar Abbas, Bandar Mahshahr, Mashad, Shiraz, Ardabil, Tabriz, Elam and Khoramabad to sign documents against their will that state that they will not engage in proselytism or church meetings. Previous to this, arrests were made in Gorgan, Kerman, Elam, Urumieh, Neishabur and Ghazvin.

4. Current Detainees

As well as the twelve Christians detained in Tehran since Boxing Day⁵, other Christians currently known to be detained in Iran include: Armenian Pastor Leonard Keshishian (Isfahan), detained since 31 December 2010; Mojtaba Keshavarz and Mrs Shahim (Hamadan), detained for over three months; Armenian-Iranian Pastor Vahik Abrahamian and his wife, Sonia Keshish Avanesian and Persian-speaking Muslim-background converts Mr Arash Kermanjani and his wife Arezo Teimouri (Hamadan), detained since 4 September 2010; Mojtaba Kashavarz and Shahin Rostami Azar-Kordi, (Arak), detained since late 2010; Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani (Lakan), reportedly sentenced to death and held in since 13 October 2009; Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani (Shiraz), detained since June 2010; Reza Estifan and Ehsan Behrouz (Mashad), detained since 8 July 2010.⁶

⁴ Source: *Elam Ministries*. There were also abortive attempts to arrest sixteen others in Tehran, Isfahan and Karaj, whose homes were ransacked when the security forces found them vacant.

⁵ For more on the Boxing Day Detainees, see Appendix I: Addendum of Cases.

⁶ For a list and details of known detainees, see Appendix I: Addendum of Cases.

4.1. Ten of thirteen Boxing Day detainees still held in solitary confinement



Javad & Anahita Zare



Leila Akhavan



Sara Akhavan



Mehdi Forootan



Ladan Nouri



Farshid Fathi



Mohammad Zardouz



Nasrin Hosseini Nia



Rasool Abdolahi

4.2. Stringent Conditions of Release and Additional Charges

Large bail postings (some in excess of US\$30,000) secure the release of individuals from detention, accompanied by illegal documents which religious detainees are forced to sign which demand an end to activities such as attendance of church services or religious assemblies, the renunciation of faith and compliance with further questioning when summoned. Laptops and mobile phones confiscated during raids on private homes and searches of individuals are used to obtain information on activities and the identities of other religious adherents.⁷ Torture is also used to pressure individuals to make confessions, to provide information on other faith members and religious activities and to recant their faith.

Fears that political charges such as espionage or crimes against the state could be used against religious minorities remain real, both in light of Maryam Rostampour and Marzieh Esmailabad's cases and those of the seven detained Bahá'í leaders. The alliance of religion and politics in Iran's theocratic governance necessarily engenders severe problems for Iran's religious minorities. The charge of apostasy, or the accusation of propagating faith among Iranian Muslims, can be referred to the Revolutionary Court as a matter of national security.

4.3. Context of Arrests

The recent arrests follow significant public speeches against evangelical Christians and other religious minorities in Iran. On 4 January 2011, Mr Morteza Tamadon, Governor of Tehran, made a speech in which he openly threatened further arrests of Christians and likened them to parasites: "just like the Taliban... who have inserted themselves into Islam like a parasite, [Iranian evangelicals] have crafted a movement with Britain's backing in the name of Christianity."⁸ The government has sought to identify evangelical Christians as part of foreign conspiracy against Iran rather than recognising their indigenous roots as Persian-

⁷ One Christian detainee was shown plans of her bedroom, including the positioning of her piano, under surveillance tactics used against her.

¹⁰ See:

http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/M/ML_IRAN_CHRISTIAN_CRACKDOWN?SITE=DCTMS&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT.

speaking, Muslim-background Christians who warrant the provisions allotted to protected minority religions in the Iranian constitution.⁹

Ayatollah Khamenei's speech in the city of Qom in October 2010 described house churches as part of 'heresies' and 'mystical movements'. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei addressed a large crowd as follows:

*"Because they (Iran's enemies) want to diminish the faith of people towards Islam and the sacred things of Islam by different means within the country they work to shake the foundation of the faith of people, especially the young generation with the spread of loose and shameless life styles, to the promotion of false mysticism - the fake type of real mysticism - to the spread of Baha'ism, to the spread of the network of house churches. This is what the enemies of Islam are up to with tact and calculation and careful study; their sole goal is to weaken the religion within the society."*¹⁰

Such language used in conjunction with the open accusation of collaboration with foreign interests and the threat of further arrests by the government (which have included published statistics of house church numbers in certain cities), sanctioned the crackdown on house churches.

5. Religious Demography

The population of Iran is thought to be 98% Muslim; the remaining two per cent is comprised of Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Sabeen-Mandaeans and Bahá'ís. The Bahá'ís are thought to be the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the country with approximately 300,000 – 350,000 adherents. Christians are the second largest group with around 200,000 members; the largest denomination is ethnic Armenian. The number of Protestants is virtually impossible to determine, as many are converts who practice in secret.

5.1. Christianity in Iran

UN figures record 300,000 Christians in Iran.¹¹ Church leaders from inside Iran estimate that there are one million Christians including convert house church members. No Christians may engage in public observance of religious rights or proselytising amongst Muslims. The government does not respect the right of Iranian Muslims to change their religion. It is estimated that Christianity now exists in 35 cities in Iran. Since Christmas 2010, house church members have been targeted in seventeen cities. Including the four months prior to this, house churches in a total of 24 cities have now been targeted.

5.2. Ancient or Ethnic Churches

Ancient or Ethnic churches are under pressure not to convert Persian-speaking Iranians. Their services remain tolerated as long as they comply with governmental demands. Recent cases of church services being closed in include those offering Farsi-speaking services for Iranian Christians.

⁹ Article 13 of the 1979 constitution recognises Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism as minority religions whilst article 64 guarantees five seats in parliament for minority religions.

¹⁰ Source: www.irna.ir 19 October 2010; BBC Persian website, 19 October 2010.

¹¹ See: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148819.htm>

6. Governance

After Iran's revolution in 1979, a highly centralised form of government was created in which a technical separation of the legislature, judiciary and executive was offset by the doctrine of *Velaya-e Faqih* or the rule of the supreme jurist. No matter where executive power lies and who is elected as president, the Supreme Leader of the country holds the religious and practical power of the country. He is relied upon to approve important decisions and appoints six of the twelve members of the Guardian Council, Iran's highest law-making body. These individuals may veto legislation passed by the parliament (*majlis*). The current president of Iran is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He was re-elected in June 2009 amid widespread protest at vote-rigging. Suppression of the 'green' revolution as it became known continues. The Supreme Leader is Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He succeeded the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, in June 1989 and is appointed for life. Ayatollah Khamenei served two consecutive terms as president in the 1980s.

6.1. Legal Context

Shari'a Law is the governing body of law in Iran and is written into the Iranian constitution. Executive and legislative decisions must be in line with 'Islamic principles', a loosely defined concept that meets practical problems at the implementation level. Discrimination against religious minorities results from the individual discretion employed by judges in cases that fall outside of the main body of law (Article 167 of the constitution). Article 170 mandates that judges do not execute judgments "in conflict with the laws and norms of Islam." Judges use the rulings of the Supreme Leader and authoritative Fatwas to form judgments in these cases.

6.2. The Iranian Constitution

Article 12 of the Iranian constitution recognises Twelver Jafari Islam as the country's official religion and accords special status to other Islamic faiths which enjoy full rights. Article 13 of the constitution recognises three religious minority groups which are accordingly protected: Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians. The Bahá'í, who number 350,000 members in Iran, inhabit a legal vacuum along with other unprotected religious minorities such as Buddhists.

Iran's constitution includes the provisions to eradicate discrimination (Article 3.9). However, the predominance of loosely codified shari'a allows discrimination at varying levels of society and for a diverse number of groups (women, Kurds, Bahá'í, evangelical Christians).

7. Apostasy

Apostates or members of 'heretical' movements are deemed to be 'infidels' who have turned away from the true principles of Islam. The definition of apostasy can also be a political one on account of the theocratic governance of the state. The Bahá'í are considered apostates or heretics because their members comprise former Shiite Muslims who follow a revelation that came subsequent to the prophet Mohammed. Evangelical Christians in Iran are predominantly converts from Islam or the children of Muslim-background Christians who adhere to Christianity. They are considered heretics and arrested on account of their family heritage as Shiite Muslim families despite formal protections for the Christian faith in Iran's constitution.

Under the Iranian constitution and the Iranian penal code, apostasy is not punishable by death. However, under strict Shari'a Law, apostasy is punishable by death for a male convert, and life imprisonment for a female convert. The government does not respect the right of Iranian Muslims to change their religion and as a result, apostasy rulings depend on a judge's discretion. In 2008, Iran moved towards a formalised position on apostasy in a draft penal code bill, which was passed in the Iranian parliament (*majlis*) in September 2008, which sanctioned the death penalty for apostasy.

In June 2009, the head of the legal and judicial committee of Iran's parliament, Ali Shahrokhi, had told Iranian state news that articles relating to apostasy and stoning had been taken out of the draft penal code bill.¹² Since 2009, there have been no public announcements as to the status of the penal code bill. However, the case of a woman, Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani sentenced to death by stoning and reports that Pastor Nadarkhani has been sentenced to death for apostasy raise grave concern.

8. International legal Obligations

Iran signed the ICCPR without reservation and has also signed the UDHR. In 2000, delegates to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) asserted that Article 9 of the Iranian constitution stipulates the precedence of international law over domestic legislation. Provisions in international law such as Articles 18 and 19 of the ICCPR include the right to adopt a religion of choice, to manifest religious belief, to hold an opinion and to have freedom of expression. Articles 21 and 22 protect the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association. Article 24 protects the right of a child to non-discrimination based on faith.

Iran has ratified the CRC with the reservation "not to apply any provisions or articles of the Convention that are incompatible with Islamic Laws and the international legislation in effect." The implications of this reservation for the children of religious groups considered to be apostates, such as the Bahá'í and evangelical Christians, create unending cycles of discrimination and religious repression.

Iran has not signed or ratified the Convention Against the Use of Torture (CAT), and the treatment of Iran's detainees remains of grave concern with reports of rape, malnourishment, the use of solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, torture, threats to detainees' families and extra-judicial killings.

Iran prevents the propagation of minority faiths among Iranian Muslims and bars unrecognised religious groups from meeting together. No protestant church has been able to register a building since the Iranian revolution. Evangelical Christians meet in house churches, informal gatherings, which substitute the formal use of church buildings. These groups have been targeted by the government.

¹² See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2009/06/090623_rs_stoning_ban.shtml

Appendix I: Addendum of Cases

January 2011 Detainees

The following, who were arrested during January 2011, remain in jail: Mostafa Shokrollahi and Khalil Yar-Ali, arrested in Ahvaz; Arastoo Faroukh Samani, detained in Karaj, and Abraham Firouzi, held in Robat Karim;

Three other Christians are known to still be in jail in Mashad, two in Rasht and one in Khorasan Razavi.

Pastor Leonard Keshishian, Assemblies of God

The Reverend Leonard Keshishian, an ethnic Armenian and pastor of the Assemblies of God church in Isfahan, was arrested on 31 December 2010. No further information on his situation has been disclosed.

Boxing Day Detainees

The twelve Boxing Day detainees currently imprisoned in Tehran are Javad and Anahita Zare, Leila Akhavan, Sara Akhavan, Mehdi Forootan, Ladan Nouri, Farshid Fathi, Mohammad Zardouz, Nasrin Hosseini Nia, Rasool Abdolahi and his wife Maryam, and Davood Abdi.

Noorollah Ghabitizadeh

According to *Mohabat News*,¹³ Noorollah Ghabitizadeh was detained on 24 December 2004 and, to date, remains in prison.

Isfahan Prisoners

At least three of the seven Christians thought to have been arrested on 29 December 2010 remain in prison in Isfahan: Yasaman Yar-Ahmadi, Basir Amini, Rafi Nadipoor.

Pastor Vahik Abrahamian: the Hamadan arrests

Armenian-Iranian Pastor Vahik Abrahamian, his wife, Sonia Keshish Avanesian, and Persian-speaking Muslim-background converts, Mr Arash Kermanjani and his wife Arezo Teimouri, have been detained since 4 September 2010.

Forty-five-year-old Pastor Abrahamian who has dual Iranian and Dutch citizenship, was previously arrested by security officials in Tehran on 20 February 2010. He spent two months in the notorious Evin prison, but was temporary released on bail of US\$10,000 on 24 April 2010, awaiting a trial date. On 4 September 2010, security forces entered The Abrahamian's home and arrested the pastor and eight others gathered there. The detainees remained in solitary confinement in an unknown location for forty days before being transferred to Hamadan Public Prison. The pastor's wife was pregnant at the time but is reported to have lost her baby while in prison.

On Friday 19 September 2010, a national TV news broadcast announced that the group had been arrested because they were attempting to destroy the Islamic Republic of Iran and called them "Zionist Christians".

¹³ Mohabat news, www.mohabatnews.com; 1 January 2011.

Mojtaba Keshavarz-Ahmadi and Shahin Rostami Azar-Kordi

Mojtaba Keshavarz Ahmadi, 43 years old, was arrested in Arak in September 2010 due to 'Christian activities', and has been charged with insulting Islam. He is currently being held at Arak's City central prison, Unit 1, Cell 7, awaiting his hearing on 20 February 2011 (court reference number: 890807, Arak's general court, branch number 106). His bail has been set at the equivalent of US\$32,000, and so far his family have been unable to meet this payment. Shahin Rostami Azar-Kordi, a diabetic, has also detained in Arak since September 2010.

Mashad Christians

On Thursday 8 July 2010, a group of fifteen Iranian Christians were arrested by state security and intelligence forces in Mashad as they were departing for a meeting with Christians from the city of Bojnourd. Their bus was swooped on by security forces in what is thought to have been a pre-informed strike. All fifteen individuals were reportedly transferred to the Ministry of Intelligence detention center in the Khorasan province of Mashad where they were subjected to interrogation.

A week later, thirteen of those detained were released after signing letters renouncing Christian activities. Two of those detained, Reza Estifan and Ehsan Behrouz, refused to sign documents recanting their faith and remain in the detention centre. During court proceedings in August 2010, court officials informed the families of the detainees that after more than 50 days of effort to re-convert these individuals to Islam through torture and solitary confinement, they remain unwilling to change their beliefs. Pressure was put on the families of those detained to try to persuade their loved ones to recant their faith during a supervised court visit. The judiciary officials threatened that if the detainees refuse to cooperate with the government, charges of apostasy will be upheld and they will be tried on these charges in the upcoming court session.¹⁴ Reverend Soodmand was the last known victim of apostasy in Mashad, a notoriously religious city. He was hanged on 3 December 1990.

Ehsan Behrouz is a student and member of a house church in Mashad. His birth certificate carries the title "Seyed", indicating he is a familial descendant of the Prophet of Islam. As a result, Behrouz's case is particularly sensitive, and an automatic charge of apostasy may be applied for his refusal to recant his Christian faith. Reza Estifan is married with two children.

Ehsan Behrouz and Reza Estifan's file has been sent to the 901st Branch of the Revolutionary Court located on Koohesangi Street. Neither has had access to a lawyer.¹⁵

Pastor Behnam Irani

Pastor Behnam Irani, the leader of a small church in Karaj, was arrested in April 2010 whilst conducting a church service. He was later released on bail, and was tried on 16 January, 2011 on charges of apostasy and 'action against the order' (government). He was found guilty of the latter charge and has been sentenced to one year in prison. He was given 20 days to appeal the ruling before beginning the sentence, but was allegedly kidnapped on 24 January after he left the tribunal. He has since been released.

¹⁴ http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2298:continued-pressure-and-intimidation-exerted-on-the-families-of-the-detained-christians-in-mashad&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593

¹⁵ Mohabat News, www.mohabatnews.com.

Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani and Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani: Jesus-Only Movement

Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani of the Jesus-Only Pentecostal Church was charged with apostasy and arrested on 13 October 2009, while attempting to register his church. He had earlier questioned the Muslim monopoly on the religious instruction of children in Iran. Pastor Nadarkhani was reportedly tried and informed orally in late September 2010 that he was to receive the death penalty, although the written sentence was not issued until 13 November. Pastor Nadarkhani's lawyer filed an appeal on 5 December; however, the date for the hearing has yet to be announced. Pastor Nadarkhani is currently held incommunicado in Lakan prison.¹⁶ His wife Fatemeh Passandieh was also charged with apostasy, but was released in October 2010 after four months in prison. Pastor Nadarkhani was previously imprisoned in December 2006 on charges of apostasy and evangelism, but was released two weeks later in January 2007.

Due to Pastor Nadarkhani's sentence there are fears that Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani, a second generation Christian from Tehran, may receive the same punishment. Pastor Sadegh-Khanjani, who is from the same denomination as Pastor Nadarkhani, is being held in a security prison in Shiraz where he has been since June 2010. He was initially charged with apostasy, blasphemy and action against national security, and in the period between his arrest and late November he was given access to his attorney only once and was held in solitary confinement for the entire period. One source indicates that Pastor Khandjani's health is suffering due to extremely unhygienic conditions and the infliction of deliberate harm. Pastor Sadegh-Khanjani is being held incommunicado.¹⁷ The charge of apostasy has now been dropped, but charges of blasphemy and action against the government remain, with the trial scheduled for 5 February 2011.

Harassment of Churches

In 2009 there were a number of examples of churches being closed or being pressured to cease conducting meetings in Farsi. On 7 February 2009, it was reported that an Assyrian church had ceased holding Farsi language meetings after it had received pressure from the authorities. The church had held meetings in Farsi for eight years but is now allowed to remain open only on the condition that all activities aimed at reaching non-Assyrians cease.

In April 2009 the Assyrian church in Kermanshah was informed that if non-Assyrians continued to attend then they would be arrested and the church would be closed down. The church was eventually closed down in the autumn of 2009, and the pastor arrested in February 2010.

The Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Urumieh was ordered to close in April 2009 because it was not meeting in an officially registered church building.

In October 2009, the Assemblies of God church in Tehran was threatened with closure if its Friday services continued. These services have now ceased.

Bahá'í Leaders

Seven Bahá'í leaders remain imprisoned for their faith. They include: Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mrs Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm. All have denied charges of espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic

¹⁶ See: <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=1073> ; although there is an unconfirmed report that he has been moved into a cell with hardened criminals.

¹⁷ Both their cases have been highlighted by the USCIRF, http://www.uscifr.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3435.

order, “corruption on earth” and other allegations. Mrs Sabet was arrested on 5 March 2008, while the other leaders were detained on 14 May 2008.

The defendants’ requests for an open trial were denied and, despite prosecutors being unable to present any credible evidence in support of charges against the leaders, they remain detained. There has been a complete absence of written communications relating to the prisoners’ cases, and the defendants have received less than an hour’s access to legal counsel throughout their trial. Their lawyer reportedly received an oral notice of sentencing in September 2010 in which charges related to espionage were dropped and their sentences reduced from twenty to ten years. The Bahá’í International Community only learnt of this sentencing in December 2010.