

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 protecting 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, tortured, imprisoned or generally harassed on account of their faith. The targeting of Muslim converts to Christianity has been escalating since 2009, often accompanied by anti-Christian rhetoric from senior officials. The officially unrecognised Baha'i community and the Dervishes have been increasingly targeted with hate speech. They face a raft of discriminatory and repressive policies, including with regard to access 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 promised reform and was hailed as a moderate. However, political opposition members, human rights activists and journalists continue to be arrested and jailed on spurious grounds, and the electoral promise of equal rights for women is yet to be realised. Religious minorities are also being targeted, with at least 545 people detained on account of their religion or belief.¹

There are currently 97 Baha'is in prison, all on false charges related to their faith.² Seven Baha'i national leaders whose arrests in 2008 and sentencing in 2010 for allegedly "disturbing national security," "spreading propaganda against the regime," and "engaging in espionage" provoked an international outcry have been released following completion of their sentences, which were reduced from 20 years to 10 years.

Any gathering of Christians, including social gatherings such as birthday or engagement parties, is treated as potential house church activity, and is subject to raids. Anti-Baha'i and anti-Semitic rhetoric is widely used by the clerical establishment, despite 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), later abrogated by the Trump administration.

Christians continue to experience arbitrary arrest. Church of Iran members Mr Babak Hosseinzadeh and Mr Behnam Akhlagh were arrested whilst attending a church service on Saturday 23 February 2019. Mr Mehdi Khatibi was arrested the same day, following a summons from the secret police. Earlier, Pastor Matthias Haghnejad of the Church of Iran was arrested after a church service on 10 February 2019. Two other Christians, Hossein Kadivar and Khalil Dehghanpour, were arrested in Rasht on 29 January.

Christians also continue to face excessive jail terms after being convicted on spurious national security-related charges. On 24 July 2018, Mohammadreza Omid and Saheb Fadaie from the Church of Iran denomination were arrested, along with Yasser Mossayebzadeh (a member of the same church) who was arrested on the following day, having been sentenced earlier to ten years in prison each for 'acting against national security'. During a final appeal hearing presiding judges asked Mr Fadaie to renounce his faith. The men's pastor, Yousef Nadarkhani, and Mr Omid were also each sentenced to two years of internal exile. On 22 July 2018 Pastor Nadarkhani was arrested and taken to serve his sentence following a violent raid on his home involving the use of electric batons.

These cases form part of a series of excessive sentences handed down to Christians by the notorious Judge Mashallah Ahmadzadeh of the 26th Branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran based on unfounded national security-related charges.

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.

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

² Baha'i International Community, 'Situation of Baha'is in Iran', February 2019 <https://www.bic.org/focus-areas/situation-iranian-bahais/current-situation>

Recent developments

Pastor Matthias Haghnejad

On 23 September 2019 Pastor Matthias Haghnejad and eight members of the Church of Iran denomination who were on trial with him were each sentenced to five years in prison following a short trial. During a court hearing for the nine men on 24 July Judge Mohammed Moghisheh, who is notorious for miscarriages of justice, attempted to coerce Pastor Haghnejad, Mr Eslamdoust, Mr Hosseinzadeh, Mr Akhlaghi and Mr Khatibi, who were being represented by Mr Moshgani Farahani, into accepting a court-appointed legal representative. The judge suspended the proceedings, remanding them in custody on significantly increased bail terms when they refused to do so. Judge Moghisheh subsequently resumed the trial of Mr Vafadar, Mr Naamanian, Mr Kadivar (Elisha) and Mr Dehghanpour, who were representing themselves, on 28 July, during which he asserted that the Bible was falsified and called the men “apostates.”

During the hearing on 23 September, the defendants’ lawyer was allowed to speak briefly. However, Judge Moghisheh is reported not to have responded to his statement. A source informed CSW that “it seemed as if the judge had already made his decision and allowed this process as a formality before pronouncing a pre-determined sentence.” On 25 February 2020, A five-year prison sentence delivered to Pastor Matthias Haghnejad was upheld without a hearing, after Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamanei reportedly permitted the judge to bypass court procedures.

Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani

On 23 September 2019 Pastor Nadarkhani’s 15 year-old son Yoel was informed he could not return to school because he had not completed the Islamic studies module. In addition, and despite a 2017 court ruling that had allowed him to continue school by attending Islamic studies classes in a non-participatory manner, the pastor’s older son Daniel, 17, was denied a report card which would enable him to enrol in higher education.

This action prompted Pastor Nadarkhani, who is currently serving a ten-year prison sentence in Evin prison in Tehran, to begin a three week hunger strike. Having garnered sufficient attention, the pastor ended his hunger strike, which had already had detrimental effects on his health, on 13 October.

Members of recognised religious minorities, including Christians, are normally exempt from attending Islamic studies classes. However, in a clear contravention of a

fatwa issued by Iran’s Supreme Leader in 2009 which stated that children born into a Christian family whose parents may be deemed apostate have the right to receive Christian religious education, these children are increasingly considered to be Muslims by the authorities.

Ebrahim Firouzi

On 26 October 2019 Iranian Christian Ebrahim Firouzi was released from prison in Karaj where he was serving a five-year prison sentence on charges related to national security. He was subsequently sent to Sarbaz in Baluchestan province, near the border with Pakistan, to serve an additional two years of ‘internal exile.’

Mr Firouzi was the breadwinner for his family, which comprised his sister and younger brother, who was caring for their mother, who died of cancer in December 2018. Mr Firouzi was not allowed to attend her funeral.

COVID-19 Releases

Amid concerns about the spread of Covid-19 in the prison system, the government released 54,000 prisoners in an attempt to contain the pandemic inside the country’s overcrowded prisons. Many of those released were granted temporary furlough, whilst others were granted a full release. Some sources report that up to 85,000 prisoners have been released.

Among those released are Fatemeh Bakhteri (Aylar), a Christian convert who was serving a one year sentence on charges of “spreading propaganda against the regime,” as well as two other Christians from the northern city of Karaj, Pastor Amin Khaki and Rokhsare Ghanbari (Mahrokh). However, Pastors Matthias Haghnejad and Yousef Nadarkhani, as well as many other religious minorities, remain imprisoned.

Recommendations

To the government of Iran:

- Ensure that the right to freedom of religion or belief is fully upheld and protected for all citizens, in line with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Iran is a party.
- Immediately and unconditionally release all individuals detained on account of their religion or belief or in relation to the defence of human rights.
- Refrain from targeting members of religious minorities with excessive national security related charges, and end the criminalisation of peaceful expression of minority faiths.

- Ensure due process in all cases involving religious minorities, and that judges found responsible for violations of human rights do not preside over trials, and are brought to justice accordingly.
- Bring an end to all forms of religious discrimination including harassment, torture and hate speech.
- Ensure that children from minority faith communities can access education without fear of discrimination, abuse, harassment or expulsion.