

Introduction

1. CSW (Christian Solidarity Worldwide) and CSW-Nigeria are a human rights organisations specialising in the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).
2. This submission seeks to draw attention to human rights violations in the Islamic Republic of Iran ahead of the state's fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

Legal Framework

3. During the third cycle of the UPR, Iran noted recommendations from Brazil and the Netherlands¹ to amend Article 13 of the constitution to ensure that all religious minorities are able to fully enjoy the right to FoRB.
4. Currently, Article 13 of Iran's constitution only recognises Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism as religious minorities, and while Article 14 states that 'the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights', and Article 23 forbids 'the investigation of individuals' beliefs', adding that 'no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief', severe violations of the right to FoRB persist.
5. Iran has signed and ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which stipulates the right of all people 'to freedom of thought, conscience and religion', including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice, and 'freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching'.²
6. Yet, following amendments to Articles 499 and 500 of the Islamic Penal Code, signed into law in February 2021, members of religious minority communities face prison sentences of up to five years on vague and expansive charges, such as 'engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam.' The first known case of Christians being charged under the amended articles occurred in May 2021.

7. Apostasy (in this instance, renouncing Islam) is not permitted under Islamic Law and is punishable by death; however, the legal position of converts from Islam remains unclear, as Iran has never codified apostasy as a crime. The Shi'a theocracy relies on charges such as blasphemy, or on broadly defined crime encompassing anything deemed undesirable by the state such as *mofsed-e-filarz* ('spreading corruption on earth') or *Moharebeh* (waging war against God). With no set penalty for these wide-ranging crimes, punishments can range from a few months in jail to execution. In addition to suppressing political dissent and calls for reform within the established tradition of Shi'a Islam, these charges are also used to persecute religious minorities, including Bahá'ís, Sunnis, Sufis, and Christians.
8. Iran remains one of the few countries to execute minors, homosexuals and women claiming self-defence against rapists. In 2024, the regime continues to grossly violate the right to life and to fair trial, amid a sharp spike in executions, including of protestors demanding reform in the wake of the death of Zina Mahsa Amini, a member of the Kurdish ethnic minority community, at the hands of Tehran's morality police in September 2022.
9. 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 minority ethnic and religious communities often face execution following conviction on drug-related charges. Many are executed after trials that fall short of international fair trial standards.
10. Iran did not support any recommendations relating to the abolition of the death penalty, the abolition of the death penalty for minors, or the introduction of a moratorium on the death penalty, during the previous UPR cycle.³

Commitments to FoRB during the third cycle of the UPR

11. During the third cycle of the UPR, Iran only supported four out of the 30 recommendations⁴ it received relating to the right to FoRB.

1 United Nations, Report of the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review: Islamic Republic of Iran Addendum, A/HRC/43/12/Add.1, 20 February 2020, Recommendations 26.306 and 26.317, respectively. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g20/044/46/pdf/g2004446.pdf?token=dNTz2aSBj2oSGdY4lb&fe=true>

2 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 18.1

3 United Nations, Report of the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review: Islamic Republic of Iran Addendum, A/HRC/43/12/Add.1, 20 February 2020, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g20/044/46/pdf/g2004446.pdf?token=dNTz2aSBj2oSGdY4lb&fe=true> Recommendations 26.98 (Switzerland), 26.99 (Poland), 26.100 (Portugal), 26.101 (Moldova), 26.102 (Ukraine), 26.103 (Belgium), 26.104 (Uruguay), 26.105 (Albania), 26.106 (Albania), 26.107 (Argentina), 26.108 (Australia), 26.109 (Austria), 26.110 (Brazil), 26.111 (Canada), 26.112 (Chile), 26.113 (Croatia), 26.114 (Cyprus), 26.115 (Czechia), 26.116 (Denmark), 26.117 (Estonia), 26.118 (Spain), 26.119 (France), 26.120 (Georgia), 26.121 (Germany), 26.122 (Greece), 26.123 (Iceland), 26.125 (Ireland), 26.126 (Israel), 26.127 (Italy), 26.128 (Latvia), 26.129 (Lithuania), 26.130 (Luxembourg), 26.131 (Malta), 26.132 (Mexico), 26.133 (Montenegro), 26.134 (Sweden), 26.135 (New Zealand), 26.136 (Macedonia FYR) and 26.137 (Norway).

4 Ibid, Iran supported recommendations 26.52 (Armenia), 26.81 (Czechia), 26.152 (Ghana), 26.310 (Haiti) and 26.318 (New Zealand). It noted recommendations 26.149 (United States), 26.153 (Poland), 26.154 (Haiti), 26.179 (Lithuania), 26.296 (Switzerland), 26.297 (Peru), 26.298 (Republic of Korea), 26.299 (Saudi Arabia), 26.300 (Saudi Arabia), 26.301 (Ukraine), 26.302 (Seychelles), 26.303 (Albania), 26.304 (Austria), 26.305 (Bahrain), 26.306 (Brazil), 26.307 (Canada), 26.309 (France), 26.311 (Iceland), 26.312 (Israel), 26.313 (Italy), 26.315 (Kenya), 26.316 (Luxembourg), 26.317 (Netherlands), 26.319 (Macedonia FYR) and 26.320 (Norway)

12. Among the recommendations Iran did not support was one from Poland to 'Ensure, both in law and in practice, that all individuals or groups of individuals enjoy their right to freedom of religion or belief', and another from Italy urging it to 'Guarantee equal rights for all citizens, regardless of their religion.'
13. Among the recommendations Iran did support was one from New Zealand calling for 'measures to protect religious and ethnic minorities and ensure their full and equal participation in public and private life', and another from Haiti calling on the nation to 'Protect the rights of Christians and other minorities and promote interfaith dialogue between religious groups.'
14. Iran also supported recommendations from Cuba and Japan⁵ to promote and protect the rights of minorities, although neither recommendation specifically mentioned religious minorities or FoRB.
19. In June 2020 Pastor Nadarkhani and Deacon Fadaie had their sentences reduced to six years each on appeal, and Mr Omid received a sentence of 24 months.
20. Mr Omid was released on 18 August 2020, and was instructed to serve 21 months in internal exile in Borazjan in the south of the country, which he began in September 2020. In October 2020 he was given 80 lashes for an earlier conviction for drinking communion wine. Mr Fadaie was also lashed 80 times for the same conviction on 15 November 2020.
21. In August 2020 Mr Mossayebzadeh was granted furlough from prison due to fears of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Evin prison. Upon returning to prison he was one of twelve prisoners to test positive for COVID-19 and was subsequently released conditionally.
22. Pastor Nadarkhani was granted a five day furlough from prison on 13 April 2022, and was later released as part of a national amnesty issued by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei to commemorate the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution on 26 February 2023. Four months after his release, the pastor was summoned to appear in court on 8 July 2023 on fresh charges of undermining state security after he was accused by a couple from the Church of Iran denomination with whom he only has a vague acquaintance.

Recommendations

- 15. Amend Article 13 of the constitution to ensure that all religious minorities are recognised and able to fully enjoy the right to freedom of religion or belief.**
- 16. Ensure that Article 18 of the ICCPR is upheld in full, and amend national laws and practices that contravene it, including domestic legislation or practices that penalise apostasy or undermine the right to change one's belief.**

Arbitrary detention of Christians

17. Despite its articulated commitment to protect the rights of Christians and other religious minorities, Iran has continued to target the former, and particularly converts to Christianity, with lengthy periods of arbitrary detention and imprisonment on unfounded charges typically related to 'national security', 'extremism' and 'propaganda'.
- Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, Deacon Saheb Fadaie, and members Mohammadreza Omid and Yasser Mossayebzadeh**
18. Several Christians sentenced prior to the previous UPR cycle remained detained for varying durations during the reporting period. Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, Deacon Saheb Fadaie, and church members Mohammadreza Omid and Yasser Mossayebzadeh – all from the Church of Iran denomination – were initially arrested in Rasht on 13 May 2016. They were subsequently found guilty of 'acting against national security' by 'promoting Zionist Christianity' and given ten-year sentences by head judge Ahmadzadeh, of the 26th Branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran. The four men were re-arrested whilst on bail in a series of raids from 22-25 July 2018 and taken to serve their prison sentences, which continued into the reporting period.
23. In addition, church leader Matthias Haghnejad and eight members⁶ of the Church of Iran denomination – all of whom were detained following a series of arrests in Rasht in early 2019 – were each sentenced to five years in prison for 'endangering state security' and 'promoting Zionist Christianity' following a brief trial on 23 September 2019. The sentence was upheld without a hearing on 25 February 2020, after Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei reportedly permitted the judge to bypass court procedures. The nine men were subsequently released on 30 December 2021 pending a review of their sentences, following a November 2021 Supreme Court ruling that 'merely preaching Christianity' should not be deemed a threat to national security. They were eventually acquitted by the 34th Court of Appeal of the Revolutionary Court on 28 February 2022.
24. Two other Christians who were also acquitted on 28 February 2022 – Behnam Akhlaghi and Babk Hosseinzadeh – were charged weeks later with 'propaganda against the state'. They are currently out on bail.
25. Prior to his acquittal of the above charges, Pastor Haghnejad was re-arrested on 15 January 2022 on separate charges of 'acting against the security of the country by forming a group and propagating Christianity

⁵ Ibid, Recommendations 26.308 and 26.314, respectively.

⁶ Shahrouz Eslamdoust, Babak Hosseinzadeh, Behnam Akhlaghi, Mehdi Khatibi, Mohammad Vafadar, Kamal Naamanian, Hossein Kadivar (Elisha) and Khalil Dehghanpour.

outside the church and in the house church, and giving information to the enemies of Islam'. The pastor had previously been acquitted of these charges in 2014, however, in a clear case of double jeopardy, they were reactivated on 25 November 2019, after the political police were granted permission by the late Ebrahim Raisi, who at that time was Iran's Chief Justice, for the Supreme Court decision in Pastor Haghnejad's favour to be overturned. The pastor was not informed of this at that juncture.

26. On 26 December 2022 Pastor Haghnejad was arrested again whilst on prison furlough along with Christians Amir Roshandal and Massoud Veis-Khani. On 3 January 2023 the pastor's wife, Anahita Khademi was also arrested. She was released on bail on 28 January after spending three weeks in Lakan prison in Rasht, Gilan Province. In July 2023, Pastor Haghnejad was transferred to a prison in Minab, Hormozgan, over 1,000 miles from his home, shortly after he was accused of undermining state security by a couple he has never met. In January 2024 he was informed he could visit his wife and daughter once a month, however, these visits were rescinded in April for reasons which remain unclear.

Ebrahim Firouzi

27. On 26 October 2019 Christian convert Ebrahim Firouzi was released into 'internal exile' and sentenced to serve two years in a remote part of the country. Mr Firouzi was initially arrested in March 2013 and sentenced to one year in prison for 'spreading propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran.' After serving his sentence in Evin prison in Tehran, Mr Firouzi was not released, but was instead sentenced to a further five years in prison on charges related to national security.
28. On 11 March 2020 Mr Firouzi's two-year sentence in internal exile was extended by 11 months on the grounds that he had failed to seek permission before traveling to his home to take care of family affairs related to his mother's death. On 8 February 2021 he was detained on fresh charges relating to blasphemy and national security after releasing a series of videos exposing the harassment he was experiencing from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). He was released on 27 February upon the posting of a bail amount of 50 million tomans. He is also reported to have gone on a hunger strike during detention.
29. In February 2020 four Christian converts were arrested in relation to their membership of a house church. On 14 May 2020 they were sent to Lakan Prison after failing to meet bail requirements of 500 million tomans. Kathrin Sajadpour, Moslem Rahimi and one other Christian were released on a reduced bail of 200 million tomans 20 May, and Ramin Hassanpour was released on 21 May.

Fatemeh Bakhteri

30. On 15 March 2020 Christian convert Fatemeh Bakhteri was released from Evin prison, over six months after

the completion of a one-year sentence she had received on 22 September 2018 after being found guilty of 'spreading propaganda against the regime'. Local sources reported that the verdict against Ms Bakhteri claimed that discussions of Christian doctrine held in house churches were considered attacks on Islam. Ms Bakhteri was initially granted temporary release from prison following the outbreak of COVID-19 in the prison system, but was subsequently informed by the prison authorities on 12 April that she did not have to return, as she had been pardoned for Persian New Year.

Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz and his wife Shamiram Isavi

31. In August 2020 Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz and his wife Shamiram Isavi were informed that they had lost their final appeal against prison sentences of ten and five years respectively. Pastor Bet-Tamraz was charged with 'conducting evangelism' and 'illegal house church activities,' while his wife was charged with 'membership of a group with the purpose of disrupting national security' and 'gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security'. The couple subsequently fled the country.

Pastor Amin Khaki, Milad Goudarzi and Alireza Nourmohammadi

32. On 21 June 2021 Pastor Amin Khaki, Milad Goudarzi and Alireza Nourmohammadi – all Christian converts and members of the Church of Iran denomination – stood trial on charges of 'sectarian activities' under amendments to Article 500 of the Penal Code. The three men were initially summoned and interrogated by the 4th Branch of the Public and Revolutionary Prosecutor's Office of Ferdis city in May 2021, where they were accused of 'engaging in propaganda against the Islamic regime.' They were subsequently released on bail and instructed to report to the police every week. The trial on 21 June lasted less than an hour, and the presiding judge, Mehdi Zeinali, prevented the defendants' lawyer from attending the trial, despite the fact that he had fulfilled all necessary requirements to register as their lawyer ten days before the trial began.
33. On 26 June 2021 the three men were each sentenced to five years in prison and fined 40 million tomans by the Revolutionary Court in Karaj. On 10 November 2021 Pastor Amin Khaki was summoned by the authorities to begin serving his sentence. Pastor Khaki had previously been imprisoned from March 2014 to January 2015 as part of a group of eight Christians who were detained and interrogated after gathering for a picnic, from December 2017 to early 2018, and from July 2019 to March 2020 on charges of 'spreading propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran'.

Morteza Mashhoudkari, Ahmad Sarparast and Ayoub Pourrezade

34. On 5 September 2021 Morteza Mashhoudkari, Ahmad Sarparast and Ayoub Pourrezade – all leaders in the Church of Iran denomination – were arrested when

secret police (MOIS) agents raided the house where they were meeting. They were taken to and held at an unknown location. Mr Mashhoudkari and Mr Sarparast were released on bail of 400 million tomans on 21 September, and Mr Pourrezade was later released on bail on 6 October.

35. A collaborative report by CSW, Article Eighteen, Middle East Concern and Open Doors documented a rise in arrests of Christians from 134 in 2022⁷, to 166 in 2023.⁸

Recommendations

36. **Immediately and unconditionally release all individuals detained on account of their religion or belief, or in relation to the defence of human rights.**
37. **End the targeting of members of religious minority communities with excessive national security related charges, and the criminalisation of peaceful expression and practice of minority faiths and beliefs.**
38. **Ensure due process in all cases involving religious minorities, that they receive legal representation from a lawyer of their choice, and that judges responsible for egregious violations of human rights do not preside over trials, but are instead held accountable for miscarriages of justice.**

The Baha'i community

39. The Baha'i community, Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority, does not enjoy official recognition, and the government did not support any of six recommendations⁹ calling for their rights to be respected during the previous UPR cycle, all of which were among the aforementioned 30 recommendations relating to the right to FoRB.
40. Along with the Gonabadi Sufi Dervish community, Baha'is continue to be the targets of hate speech, and face a raft of discriminatory and repressive policies, including with regard to accessing education and burial sites.
41. In late 2020 two Iranian courts ruled that ancestral land belonging to Baha'i families in the village of Ivel in Mazandaran province could be confiscated because of the community's 'perverse ideology', which nullified the 'legitimacy in their ownership' of any property.
42. According to the Baha'i International Community (BIC), at least 70 Baha'is were either in detention or serving prison sentences as of January 2024, marking the highest number in the past six years.¹⁰ The BIC also reported that approximately 1,200 Baha'is are currently facing ongoing court proceedings, or have already been

sentenced and are awaiting summons to serve prison sentences.

43. In addition, reports have emerged that Farzaneh Qarahassanlou, a Gonabadi Sufi detained since November at Vakil Abad prison in Mashhad for participating in protests, had been denied urgent medical care after losing sensation on the left side of her body, and had gone on hunger strike.¹¹

Recommendations

44. **End to all forms of religious discrimination including harassment, torture and hate speech, and respect the rights of religious minority communities.**
45. **Return land and property seized from the Baha'i community, facilitating the community's right to education, overturning unjust prison sentences and releasing all Baha'i prisoners of conscience.**
46. **Release Farzaneh Qarahassanlou and all others detained for exercising the right to protest peacefully, ensuring adequate and timely access to medical attention for all detainees, and that the rights of all persons deprived of their liberty are protected in accordance with the UN Minimal Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.**

Attacks on places of worship

47. In May 2020 three sites belonging to religious minority communities were set on fire within days of each other.
48. On 14 May the Tomb of Esther and Mordechai, a Jewish holy site in the city of Hamdan, was set ablaze overnight. Information subsequently emerged that an individual had been seen throwing an object at the site. The attack coincided with the date of the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and there were allegedly subsequent unconfirmed threats to demolish the building and convert it into a Palestinian mission.
49. On 16 May footage emerged of Bot Goran, a Hindu temple in the port city of Bandar Abbas, suffering extensive damage in a fire. Iranian officials reportedly attributed the blaze to 'religious artefacts catching alight'.
50. On 17 May a Christian cemetery in Eslamshahr was set ablaze. The governor of Eslamshahr subsequently attributed the fire to a guard who was burning grass.

Recommendations

51. **Respect and ensure protection for places of worship and other sites of importance to non-majoritarian religious and belief communities.**

7 Article Eighteen, '2023 Annual Report: Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran', 19 February 2023 <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/12622/>

8 Article Eighteen, 'Faceless Victims: Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran', February 2024 <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/14516/>

9 United Nations, Report of the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review: Islamic Republic of Iran Addendum, A/HRC/43/12/Add.1, 20 February 2020, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g20/044/46/pdf/g2004446.pdf?token=dNTz2aSBj2oSgdY4lb&fe=true> Recommendations 26.179 (Lithuania), 26.305 (Bahrain), 26.311 (Iceland), 26.316 (Luxembourg), 26.317 (Netherlands) and 26.320 (Norway).

10 Baha'i International Community, 'Overview of Persecution of Iranian Baha'is', 12 January 2024 <https://www.bic.org/focus-areas/situation-iranian-bahais/persecution-bahais-in-iran-updates-reports>

11 Iran News, 'Political Prisoner Starts Hunger Strike Due to Denial of Medical Care' 9 June 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202406091185>

Conclusion

52. In the wake of the rejection of many of the recommendations made to the government of Iran during the previous UPR cycle, including with regard to the rights of religious minorities, Christians, Baha'is and other minorities continue to be targeted.
53. Churches from recognised denominations which were closed on public health grounds during the pandemic have not been reopened; arbitrary detention on spurious charges, harassment, surveillance, and excessive prison sentences delivered following legal processes devoid of due process continue, while unrecognised religious minorities such as the Baha'i community, are subjected to hate speech, and discrimination in law and in practice.
54. It is essential that Iran engages with the UPR more constructively, and not only accepts but also enacts recommendations calling for the nation to honour its international human rights obligations, and to bring its laws and practices into line with humanitarian standards.