

Iran (27)

**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:****Iran**

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IRAN*

The Government restricts freedom of religion. The Constitution declares that the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism." Members of Iran's religious minorities—including Baha'is, Jews, Christians, and Sufi Muslims—reported imprisonment, harassment, and intimidation based on their religious beliefs. At least 11 Baha'is were among those still imprisoned for reasons related to their faith, while 10 Jews remained in prison after being convicted for cooperating with a hostile government, belonging to an illegal organization, and recruiting members in an illegal organization.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Society is accustomed to the presence of Iran's pre-Islamic, non-Muslim communities. However, government actions create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities, especially Baha'is, Jews, and evangelical Christians. The Revolutionary Court's conduct in the trial of 13 Jews contributed to worsening societal attitudes toward the Jewish community.

The U.S. Government makes clear its objections to the Government's treatment of religious minorities in public statements, support for relevant U.N. and nongovernmental organization (NGO) efforts, and in diplomatic contacts with other countries.

In September 1999, the Secretary of State designated Iran a country of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion**Legal/Policy Framework**

The Government restricts freedom of religion. The Constitution declares that the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism." It also states that "other Islamic denominations are to be accorded full respect," and designates Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as the only "recognized religious minorities," which, "within the limits of the law," are permitted to perform their religious rites and ceremonies and "to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education."

Although the Constitution states that "the investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden" and that "no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief," the adherents of religions not specifically protected under the Constitution do not enjoy freedom of activity. This situation most directly affects members of the Baha'i Faith.

The central feature of the country's Islamic republican system is rule by a "religious jurisconsult." Its senior leadership, including the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, the President, the head of the judiciary, and the Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament), is composed principally of Shi'a clergymen.

Religious activity is monitored closely by the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance and by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). Adherents of recognized religious minorities are not required to register individually with the Government, although their community, religious, and cultural events and organizations, as well as schools, are monitored closely. Baha'is are not recognized by the Government as a legitimate religious group but are considered an outlawed political organization. Registration of Baha'i adherents is a police function. Evangelical Christian groups have been pressured by government authorities to compile and hand over membership lists for their congregations. Evangelicals have resisted this demand.

Religious Demography

The population is approximately 99 percent Muslim, of which 89 percent are Shi'a and 10 percent are Sunni (mostly Turkomen, Arabs, Baluchs, and Kurds living in the southwest, southeast, and northwest). Sufi Brotherhoods are popular, but there are no reliable figures available to judge their true size.

Baha'is, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews constitute less than 1 percent of the population. The largest non-Muslim minority is the Baha'i Faith, estimated at about 300,000 to 350,000 adherents throughout the country. Estimates on the size of the Jewish community vary from 25,000 to 30,000. These figures represent a substantial reduction from the estimated 75,000 to 80,000 Jews who resided in the country prior to the 1979 Revolution. The Christian community is estimated at approximately 117,000 persons, according to government figures. Of these the majority consists of ethnic Armenians and Assyro-Chaldeans. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical churches.

The Government figures reported by the United Nations in 1996 place the size of the Zoroastrian community at approximately 35,000 adherents. Zoroastrian groups cite a larger figure of approximately 60,000, according to the same United Nations report. Zoroastrians are mainly ethnic Persians concentrated in the cities of Tehran, Kerman, and Yazd. Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the pre-Islamic Sassanid Empire and thus has played a central role in Iranian history.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The U.N. Special Representative for Human Rights in Iran noted in his September 1998 report frequent assertions that religious minorities are, by law and practice, barred from being elected to a representative body (except to the seats in the Majles reserved for minorities, as provided for in the Constitution) and from holding senior government or military positions. Members of religious minorities are allowed to vote, but they may not run for president. All religious minorities suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing.

Members of religious minorities generally are barred from becoming school principals. Applicants for public-sector employment are screened for their adherence to Islam. The law stipulates penalties for government workers who do not observe "Islam's principles and rules." Religious minorities may not serve in the army, the judiciary, or the security services. The Constitution states that "the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran must be an Islamic army, i.e., committed to an Islamic ideology and the people, and must recruit into its service individuals who have faith in the objectives of the Islamic Revolution and are devoted to the cause of achieving its goals." Baha'is are prohibited from government employment.

University applicants are required to pass an examination in Islamic theology, which limits the access of most religious minorities to higher education (despite the fact that public-school students receive instruction in Islam).

The Government allows recognized religious minorities to conduct the religious education of their adherents. This includes separate and privately funded Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian schools, but not Baha'i schools. The Ministry of Education, which imposes certain curriculum requirements, supervises these schools. With few exceptions, the directors of these private schools must be Muslim. Attendance at these schools is not mandatory for recognized religious minorities. All textbooks used in course work must be approved for use by the Ministry of Education, including religious texts. Religious texts in non-Persian languages require approval by the authorities for use. This requirement imposes sometimes significant translation expenses on minority communities.

Recognized religious minorities may provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages but often come under pressure from the authorities when conducting such instruction in Persian. In particular, evangelical Christian and Jewish communities suffer harassment and arrest by authorities for the printing of materials or delivery of sermons in Persian.

Recognized religious minorities are allowed by the Government to establish community centers and certain cultural, social, sports, or charitable associations that they finance themselves. This does not apply

to the Baha'i community, which since 1983 has been denied the right to assemble officially or to maintain administrative institutions. Because the Baha'i Faith has no clergy, the denial of the right to form such institutions and elect officers has threatened its existence.

Religious minorities suffer discrimination in the legal system, receiving lower awards in injury and death lawsuits, and incurring heavier punishments, than Muslims. Muslim men are free to marry non-Muslim women but marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men are not recognized.

The Government is highly suspicious of any proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims and can be harsh in its response, in particular against Baha'is and evangelical Christians. The Government regards the Baha'i community, whose faith originally derives from a strand of Islam, as a "misguided" or "wayward" sect. The Government fuels anti-Baha'i and anti-Jewish sentiment in the country for political purposes.

The Government does not ensure the right of citizens to change or renounce their religious faith. Apostasy, specifically conversion from Islam, can be punishable by death.

The Baha'i Faith originated in Iran during the 1840's as a reformist movement within Shi'a Islam. Initially it attracted a wide following among Shi'a clergy. The political and religious authorities of that time joined to suppress the movement, and since then the hostility of the Shi'a clergy to the Baha'i Faith has remained intense. Baha'is are considered apostates because of their claim to a valid religious revelation subsequent to that of Muhammad. The Baha'i Faith is defined by the Government as a political "sect" historically linked to the Shah's regime and, hence, as counterrevolutionary and characterized by its espionage activities for the benefit of foreign entities, particularly Israel. Historically at risk in the country, Baha'is often have suffered increased levels of harassment and abuse during times of political unrest.

Baha'is may not teach or practice their faith or maintain links with coreligionists abroad. The fact that the Baha'i world headquarters (established by the founder of the Baha'i Faith in the 19th century in what was then Ottoman-controlled Palestine) is situated in what is now the state of Israel, exposes Baha'is to government charges of "espionage on behalf of Zionism," in particular when caught communicating with or sending monetary contributions to the Baha'i Faith headquarters.

Broad restrictions on Baha'is appear to be geared to destroying them as a community. Baha'is repeatedly have been offered relief from oppression if they were prepared to recant their faith.

Baha'i cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, administrative centers and other assets were seized shortly after the 1979 revolution. None of the properties have been returned, and many have been destroyed. Baha'is are not allowed to bury and honor their dead in keeping with their religious tradition. They are permitted access only to areas of wasteland, designated by the Government for their use, and are not

allowed to mark the graves. Many historic Baha'i gravesites have been desecrated or destroyed. In October 1998, three Bahai's were arrested in Damavand, a city north of Tehran, on the grounds that they had buried their dead without government authorization.

Baha'i group meetings and religious education, which often take place in private homes and offices, are curtailed severely. Public and private universities continue to deny admittance to Baha'i students, a particularly demoralizing blow to a community that traditionally has placed a high value on education. Denial of access to higher education appears aimed at the eventual impoverishment of the Baha'i community.

Baha'is regularly are denied compensation for injury or criminal victimization. Government authorities claim that only Muslim plaintiffs are eligible for compensation in these circumstances.

A 1993 law prohibits government workers from membership in groups that deny the "divine religions," terminology that the Government uses to label members of the Baha'i Faith. The law also stipulates penalties for government workers who do not observe "Islamic principles and rules."

In 1993 the U.N. Special Representative reported the existence of a government policy directive on the Baha'is. According to the directive, the Supreme Revolutionary Council instructed government agencies to block the progress and development of the Baha'i community, expel Baha'i students from universities, cut the Baha'is' links with groups outside the country, restrict the employment of Baha'is, and deny Baha'is "positions of influence," including those in education. The Government claims that the directive is a forgery. However, it appears to be an accurate reflection of current government practice.

While the Government eased some restrictions thereby enabling Baha'is to obtain food-ration booklets and send their children to public schools, the prohibition against the admission of Baha'is to universities remains. Thousands of Baha'is dismissed from government jobs in the early 1980's receive no unemployment benefits and have been required to repay the Government for salaries or pensions received from the first day of employment. Those unable to do so face prison sentences.

In his 1996 report to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Question of Religious Intolerance recommended "that the ban on the Baha'i organization should be lifted to enable it to organize itself freely through its administrative institutions, which are vital in the absence of a clergy, so that it can engage fully in its religious activities." In response to the Special Rapporteur's concerns with regard to the lack of official recognition of the Baha'i Faith, government officials stated that the Baha'is "are not a religious minority, but a political organization which was associated with the Shah's regime, is against the Iranian Revolution and engages in espionage activities." According to the Special Rapporteur, government officials stated nonetheless that, as individuals, all Baha'is were entitled to their beliefs and were protected under other articles of the

Constitution as citizens.

During the period covered by this report, the Government of Iran took some positive steps in recognizing the rights of Baha'is, as well as other religious minorities.

In November 1999, President Khatami publicly stated that no one in Iran should be persecuted because of his or her religious beliefs. He added that he would defend the civil rights of all citizens, regardless of their beliefs or religion. Subsequently, the Expediency Council approved the "Right of Citizenship" bill, affirming the social and political rights of all citizens and their equality before the law. In February 2000, following approval of the bill, the head of the judiciary issued a circular letter to all registry offices throughout the country, which permits any couple to be registered as husband and wife without being required to state their religious affiliation. This measure effectively permits the registration of Baha'i marriages in Iran. Previously, Baha'i marriages were not recognized by the Government, leaving Baha'i women open to charges of prostitution. Consequently, children of Baha'i marriages were not recognized as legitimate and, therefore, were denied inheritance rights. The impact of the new registration policy on the status of Baha'i families remains unclear.

Although Sunni Muslims are accorded full respect under the terms of the Constitution, some groups claim discrimination on the part of the Government. In particular, Sunnis cite the lack of a Sunni mosque in Tehran and claim that authorities refuse to authorize construction of a Sunni place of worship in the capital.

Governmental Abuses of Religious Freedom

The property rights of Baha'is generally are disregarded. Since 1979, large numbers of private and business properties belonging to Baha'is have been confiscated. During the period covered by this report, three Baha'i homes in Yazd and one in Arbakan were confiscated because their owners were members of the Baha'i community. In September and October 1998, government officers plundered more than 500 Baha'i homes throughout the country and seized personal household effects, such as furniture and appliances. Seizure of personal property, in addition to the denial of access to education and employment, is eroding the economic base of the Baha'i community.

Ruhollah Rowhani, a Baha'i, was executed in July 1998 after having served 9 months in solitary confinement on a charge of apostasy stemming from allegedly having converted a Muslim woman to the Baha'i Faith. The woman concerned asserted that her mother was a Baha'i and that she herself had been raised a Baha'i. Rowhani was not accorded a public trial or sentencing for his alleged crime, and no sentence was announced prior to his execution.

The Government of Iran continued to imprison and detain persons based on their religious beliefs. Manuchehr Khulusi was arrested in June 1999 while visiting fellow Baha'is in the town of Birjand, and was imprisoned

until his release in May 2000. During his imprisonment, Khulusi was interrogated, beaten, held in solitary confinement, and denied access to his lawyer. The charges brought against him are still unknown, but they were believed to be related to his faith. The Islamic Revolutionary Court in Mashhad held a 2-day trial in September 1999 and then sentenced him to death in February 2000. Despite Khulusi's release, it is unclear if the conviction and death sentence against him still stand.

Two Baha'is, Sirus Zabihi-Moghaddam and Hadayat Kashefi-Najafabadi, are currently in prison for apostasy. Their death sentences were reaffirmed in February 2000. They were tried for apostasy alongside Rowhani. Four Baha'is are currently on death row--two for "Zionist Baha'i activities" and two for apostasy.

During the period covered by this report, authorities in Khurasan intensified their efforts to intimidate and undermine Baha'i education. Two teachers in Mashhad were arrested and sentenced to 3 years' imprisonment. Their students were given suspended sentences, to be carried out if the young persons again participated in religious education classes. Three more Baha'is were arrested in Bujnurd in northern Khurasan for participating in religious education gatherings. After 6 days in prison, they were released with suspended sentences of 5 years. The use of suspended sentences appears to be a new tactic for the Government to discourage Baha'is from taking part in monthly religious gatherings.

In September 1998, authorities launched a nationwide operation to disrupt the activities of the Baha'i Institute of Higher Learning, also known as the "Open University," which was established by the Baha'i community shortly after the revolution to offer higher educational opportunities to Baha'i students who had been denied access to the country's high schools and universities. The Institute employed Baha'i faculty and professors, many of whom had been dismissed from teaching positions by the Government as a result of their faith, and conducted classes in homes or offices owned or rented by Baha'is. During the operation, which took place in at least 14 different cities, 36 faculty members were arrested and a variety of personal property, including books, papers, and furniture, either were destroyed or confiscated. Government interrogators sought to force the detained faculty members to sign statements acknowledging that the Open University was now defunct and pledging not to associate with it in the future. Baha'is outside the country report that none of the 36 detainees would sign the document. All but 4 of the 36 persons detained during the September 1998 raid on the Baha'i Institute were released by November 1998.

In March 1999, Dr. Sina Hakiman, Farzad Khajeh Sharifabadi, Habibullah Ferdosian Najafabadi, and Ziaullah Mirzapanah, the four remaining detainees from the September 1998 raid, were convicted under Article 498 of the Penal Code and sentenced to prison terms ranging from 3 to 10 years. In the court verdict, the four were accused of having established a "secret organization" engaged in "attracting youth, teaching against Islam, and teaching against the regime of the Islamic

Republic." According to Baha'i groups outside Iran, the four taught general science and Persian literature courses. In July 1999, Mirzapanah, who had been sentenced to 3 years in prison, became ill and was hospitalized. Prison authorities allowed him to return home upon his recovery on the understanding that they could find him whenever necessary. The other three were released in December 1999.

The Government appears to adhere to a practice of keeping a small number of Baha'is in arbitrary detention, some at risk of execution, at any given time. There were 11 Baha'is reported to be under arrest for the practice of their faith as of June 1999, 4 under sentence of death.

The authorities have become particularly vigilant in recent years in curbing what is perceived as increasing proselytizing activities by evangelical Christians whose services are conducted in Persian. Government officials have reacted to this perceived activity by closing evangelical churches and arresting converts. Members of evangelical congregations have been required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which must be provided to the authorities. Worshipers are subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside congregation centers. Meetings for evangelical services have been restricted by the authorities to Sundays, and church officials have been ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before admitting new members to their congregations.

As conversion of a Muslim to a non-Muslim religion may be considered apostasy under traditional Shari'a practices enforced in the country, non-Muslims may not proselytize Muslims without putting their own lives at risk. Evangelical church leaders are subject to pressure from authorities to sign pledges that they would not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services.

One U.S.-based organization reported 8 deaths of evangelical Christians at the hands of authorities in the past 11 years and between 15 and 23 disappearances in the year between November 1997 and November 1998.

Oppression of evangelical Christians continued during the period covered by this report. Christian groups recently reported instances of government harassment of churchgoers in Tehran, in particular against worshipers at the Assembly of God congregation in the capital. Instances of harassment cited included conspicuous monitoring outside Christian premises by Revolutionary Guards to discourage Muslims or converts from entering church premises and demands for presentation of identity papers of worshipers inside. Iranian Christians International (ICI) detailed the cases of Alireza and Mahboobeh Mahmoudian, converts to Christianity and lay leaders of the Saint Simon the Zealot Osgofi Church in Shiraz, who were forced to leave the country permanently in June 1998 after continued harassment by authorities. ICI reported that Alireza Mahmoudian had lost his job because of his conversion and had been beaten repeatedly by Basijis (paramilitary forces) and Ansar-e Hizbollah (gangs of thugs often aligned with specific members of the leadership) on orders of government officials

from the Ministry of Islamic Guidance. His wife, Mahboobeh, also had been the subject of intimidation, principally through frequent and aggressive interrogation by government officials.

While Jews are a recognized religious minority, allegations of official discrimination are frequent. The Government's anti-Israel policies, coupled with a perception among radicalized Muslim elements that Jewish citizens support Zionism and the State of Israel, create a threatening atmosphere for the small Jewish community. Jewish leaders reportedly are reluctant to draw attention to official mistreatment of their community due to fear of government reprisal.

Some Jewish groups outside Iran cite an increase in anti-Semitic propaganda in the official and semiofficial media as adding to the pressure felt by the Jewish community. One example cited is the periodic publication of the anti-Semitic and fictitious Protocols of the Elders of Zion, both by the Government and by periodicals associated with hardline elements of the regime. In 1986 the Iranian Embassy in London was reported to have published and distributed the Protocols in English. The Protocols also were published in serial form in the country in 1994 and again in January 1999. On the latter occasion they were published in Sobh, a conservative monthly publication reportedly aligned with the security services.

There appears to be little restriction or interference with their religious practice or education; however, Jews were eased out of the Government after 1979. Jews are permitted to obtain passports and to travel outside the country but, with the exception of certain business travelers, are required by the authorities to obtain clearance (and pay additional fees) before each trip abroad. The Government appears concerned about the emigration of Jews and permission generally is not granted for all members of a Jewish family to travel outside the country at the same time.

In March 1999, 13 Jews were arrested in the cities of Shiraz and Isfahan and purportedly accused of espionage. Neither the defendants nor their legal counsel were informed of the formal charges facing the group until the trial began in April 2000. Among the group were several prominent rabbis, teachers of Hebrew, and their students, including a 16-year-old boy. Governments and human rights groups around the world criticized the arrests and the lack of due process accorded to the defendants. They also called for the safe treatment of the detainees, who were allowed only limited contact with defense counsel, sporadic family visits, and deliveries of kosher food. On July 1, 2000, the Revolutionary Court in Shiraz convicted 10 of the accused on charges of cooperating with a hostile government, membership in an illegal organization, and recruiting members in an illegal organization, and sentenced them to between 4 and 13 years in prison. Three of the original 13 were acquitted.

Jewish groups outside Iran noted that the March 1999 arrest of the 13 Jewish individuals coincided with an increase in anti-Semitic propaganda in newspapers and journals associated with hardline

elements of the Government. Since the trial began in April 2000, Jewish businesses in Tehran and Shiraz have been targets of vandalism and boycotts, and Jews reportedly suffered personal harassment and intimidation.

Human Rights Watch reported the death in May 1998 of Jewish businessman Ruhollah Kakhodah-Zadeh, who was hanged in prison without a public charge or legal proceeding. Reports indicate that Kakhodah-Zadeh may have been killed for assisting Jews to emigrate. As an accountant, Kakhoda-Zadeh provided power-of-attorney services for Jews departing the country.

The Government restricts the movement of several senior religious leaders, some of whom have been under house arrest for years, and often charges members of religious minorities with crimes such as drug offenses, "confronting the regime," and apostasy.

Human Rights Watch reported in 1998 the killing of Sunni prayer leader Molavi Imam Bakhsh Narouie in the province of Sistan va-Baluchistan in the southeast. This led to protests from the local community, which believed that government authorities were involved in the murder.

Majdhub Alishahi, an adherent of the Sufi tradition, reportedly was executed on charges of adultery and homosexuality after a coerced confession in 1996. Sufi organizations outside the country remain concerned about repression by the authorities of Sufi religious practices.

There were no reports of government harassment of the Zoroastrian community during the period covered by this report.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States. However, according to the tenets of Islam, a child born to a Muslim father is automatically considered a Muslim.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

The continuous activity of Iran's pre-Islamic, non-Muslim communities, such as Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, has accustomed the population to the presence of non-Muslims in society. However, government actions create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities.

The Jewish community has been reduced to more than one-half its prerevolutionary size. Some of this emigration is connected with the larger, general waves of departures following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, but some also stems from perceived anti-Semitism on

the part of the Government and within society.

The Government's anti-Israel policies and the trial of the 13 Jews, coupled with the perception among some of the country's radicalized elements that Iranian Jews support Zionism and the State of Israel, create a threatening atmosphere for the Jewish community (see Section I). Many Jews have sought to limit their contact with or support for the State of Israel out of fear of reprisal.

Sunni Muslims encounter religious discrimination at the local level, and reports of discrimination against practitioners of the Sufi tradition surfaced during the period covered by this report.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran and thus cannot raise directly with the Government the restrictions the Government places on religious freedom and other abuses that it commits against adherents of minority religions. The U.S. Government makes its position clear in public statements, support for relevant United Nations and NGO efforts, and in diplomatic contacts with other countries.

The President has made a number of statements regarding the treatment of religious minorities in Iran, including a June 1998 statement criticizing the execution of Ruhollah Rowhani, a member of the Baha'i Faith, and statements in June 1999 and July 2000 calling on the Government to exonerate the imprisoned members of Iran's Jewish community. The Secretary of State also called on Iran to release and drop charges against the 13 Jews, 10 of whom were convicted and remained in prison at the end of the period covered by this report.

The U.S. Government has cosponsored each year since 1982 a resolution regarding the human rights situation in Iran offered by the European Union at the annual meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. The United States has supported a similar resolution offered each year during the United Nations General Assembly. The U.S. Government has supported strongly the work of the U.N. Special Representative on Human Rights for Iran and called on the Iranian Government to grant him admission and allow him to conduct his research (he has been denied entry visas since 1996).

The U.S. State Department spokesman on numerous occasions has addressed the situation of the Baha'i and Jewish communities, notably following the Secretary's March 17, 2000 speech on Iran, the execution of Ruhollah Rowhani in June 1998, the Government's actions against the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education in September 1998, and repeatedly after the arrest of 13 members of the Iranian Jewish community in March 1999. The U.S. Government has encouraged other governments to make similar statements and has pressed those governments to raise the issue of religious freedom in discussions with the Iranian Government.

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