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Iran

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution states that Islam is the official state religion, and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'afari (Twelver) Shiism. The constitution provides that "other Islamic denominations are to be accorded full respect," while the country's pre-Islamic religious groups -- Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews -- are recognized as "protected" religious minorities. The fourth article of the constitution states that all laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria an official interpretation of Sharia (Islamic Law). Laws and policies severely restrict freedom of religion and practice the government enforced restrictions severely restricting freedom of religion.

The government's level of respect for religious freedom in law and in practice declined during the reporting period. Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for Bahais, as well as Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, Jews, and Shia groups that do not share the government's official religious views. Reports of government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs continued during the reporting period. Bahai religious groups reported arbitrary arrest and prolonged detention, expulsions from universities, and confiscation of property. During the reporting period government-controlled broadcast and print media intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly the Bahais. All non-Shia religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Although the constitution gives Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians the status of "protected" religious minorities (as long as they do not proselytize), in practice non-Shia Muslims faced substantial societal discrimination, and government actions continued to support elements of society that created a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities.

The U.S. government makes clear its strong objections to the government's harsh and oppressive treatment of religious minorities through public statements, support for relevant United Nations (UN) and nongovernmental organization (NGO)

efforts, as well as diplomatic initiatives. On January 16, 2009, the U.S. Secretary of State re-designated the country a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act, for its particularly egregious violations of religious freedom. The United States has designated Iran a CPC since 1999.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 636,000 square miles and a population of 67 million. The population is 98 percent Muslim -- 89 percent Shia and 9 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen and Arabs, Baluchs, and Kurds living in the southwest, southeast, and northwest respectively). There were no official statistics available on the size of the Sufi Muslim population; however, some reports estimated between two and five million persons practice Sufism in the country.

Unofficial estimates from religious organizations claimed that Bahais, Jews, Christians, Sabean-Mandaeans, and Zoroastrians constitute 2 percent of the population. The largest non-Muslim minority is the Bahais, who number 300,000 to 350,000. Unofficial estimates of the Jewish community's size varied from 20,000 to 30,000.

According to UN figures, 300,000 Christians live in the country, the majority of whom are ethnic Armenians. Unofficial estimates for the Assyrian Christian population ranged between 10,000 and 20,000. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical religious groups. Christian groups outside the country estimated the size of the Protestant Christian community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestant Christians reportedly practice in secret. Sabean-Mandaeans number 5,000 to 10,000 persons. The government regarded the Sabean-Mandaeans as Christians, and they were included among the three recognized religious minorities; however, Sabean-Mandaeans do not consider themselves Christians. The government estimated there are 30,000 to 35,000 Zoroastrians, a primarily ethnic Persian minority; however, Zoroastrian groups claimed to have 60,000 adherents.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and policies severely restricted freedom of religion. The constitution declares the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'afari (Twelver) Shiism." All laws and regulations must be consistent with the official interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law). The constitution provides Sunni Muslims a degree of religious freedom; however, the government severely restricted overall religious freedom. The constitution states that "within the limits of the law," Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities guaranteed freedom to practice their religious beliefs; however, members of these recognized minority religious groups reported government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs.

The supreme leader of the Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, heads a three-branch structure of government (legislative, executive, and judicial branches). The supreme leader is not directly elected, but chosen by a group of 86 Islamic scholars (the Assembly of Experts), who are directly elected. All acts of the majles (parliament) must be reviewed for strict conformity with Islamic law and the constitution, and all candidates for any elected office must be vetted by the unelected Council of Guardians. The council is composed of six clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six Muslim jurists (legal scholars) nominated by the head of the judiciary and approved by the majles.

The government did not respect the right of Muslim citizens to change or renounce their religious faith. The government automatically considers a child born to a Muslim father to be a Muslim.

Non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression, persuasion, and conversion among Muslims, and there were restrictions on published religious material. Apostasy, specifically conversion from Islam, is punishable by death. At least two death sentences for apostasy or evangelism were issued under judicial interpretations of Sharia during the reporting period.

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Proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is illegal. Evangelical church leaders were subjected to pressure from authorities to sign pledges that they would not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services. Members of religious minorities, excluding Sunni Muslims, were prevented from serving in the judiciary and security services and from becoming public school principals.

Applicants for public sector employment were screened for their adherence to and knowledge of Islam, although members of religious minorities, with the exception of Bahais, could serve in lower ranks of government employment. Government workers who did not observe Islamic principles and rules were subject to penalties.

The constitution states that the army must be Islamic and must recruit individuals who are committed to the objectives of the Islamic Revolution. In practice, however, no religious minorities were exempt from military service. The law forbids non-Muslims from holding officer positions over Muslims in the armed forces. Members of religious minorities with a college education can serve as officers during their mandatory military service but cannot be career military officers.

By law, religious minorities are not allowed to be elected to a representative body or to hold senior government or military positions, with the exception that five of a total 290 seats in the majles are reserved for religious minorities. Two seats are reserved for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian Christians, one for Jews, and one for Zoroastrians. While Sunnis do not have reserved seats in the majles, they were allowed to serve in the body. Sunni majles deputies tended to be elected from among the larger Sunni communities. Members of religious minorities were allowed to vote; however, no member of a religious minority, including Sunni Muslims, is eligible to be president.

The legal system discriminates against religious minorities. Article 297 of the amended 1991 Islamic Punishments Act authorizes collection of equal diyeh (blood money) as restitution to families for the death of both Muslims and non-Muslims. According to law, Bahai blood is considered mobah, meaning it can be spilled with impunity.

Adherents of religious groups not recognized by the constitution, such as the Bahais, did not have freedom to practice their beliefs. The government prohibited Bahais from teaching and practicing their faith. Bahais were barred from all leadership positions in the government and military.

The government considered Bahais to be apostates and defined the Bahai faith as a political "sect." The Ministry of Justice stated that Bahais were permitted to enroll in schools only if they did not identify themselves as such, and Bahais preferably should be enrolled in schools with a strong and imposing religious ideology. There were reports that Bahai children in public schools faced attempts to convert them to Islam.

In 2008 the government reverted to its previous practice of requiring Bahai students to identify themselves as a religion other than Bahai to register for the entrance examination. The government had briefly rescinded this requirement in 2007. This action precluded Bahai enrollment in state-run universities, since a tenet of the Bahai faith is not to deny one's faith. The Ministry of Justice stated that Bahais must be excluded or expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, if their religious affiliation became known. University applicants were required to pass an examination in Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology, but there was no test for the Bahai theology.

Bahais were banned from the social pension system. In addition Bahais were regularly denied compensation for injury or criminal victimization and the right to inherit property. Bahai marriages and divorces were not officially recognized, although the government allowed a civil attestation of marriage to serve as a marriage certificate.

The government allowed recognized religious minorities to establish community centers and certain self-financed cultural, social, athletic, or charitable associations. However, the government prohibited the Bahai community from officially assembling or maintaining administrative institutions through the means of closing such institutions.

The government propagated a legal interpretation of Islam that effectively deprived women of many rights granted to men. Gender segregation was enforced generally throughout the country without regard to religious affiliation. Women of all religious groups were expected to adhere to Islamic dress in public. Although enforcement of rules for conservative Islamic dress eased at times, the government periodically repressed "un-Islamic dress." The government's 12-point contract model for marriage and divorce limited the rights accorded to women by custom and traditional interpretations of Islamic law.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Eid-e-Ghadir, Tassoua, Ashura, Arbaeen, the Demise of the Prophet Muhammad, Martyrdom of Imam Reza, Birthday of Imam Ali, Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad, Birthday of Imam Mahdi, Eid-e-Fitr, Martyrdom of Imam Ali, Martyrdom of Imam Jafar Sadegh, Eid-e-Ghorban, and the Islamic New Year.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government enforced harsh legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom. During the reporting period, respect for religious freedom in the country continued to deteriorate. Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for Bahais, as well as Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, Jews, and Shia groups who do not share the government's sanctioned religious views. Reports of government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs continued during the reporting period. Bahai religious groups reported arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention, expulsions from universities, and confiscation of property. Government-controlled broadcast and print media intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly the Bahais, during the reporting period. All non-Shia religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing.

Particularly since the June 2009 elections, the government intensified its campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities.

The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) monitored religious activity closely. Members of recognized religious minorities were not required to register with the government; however, authorities closely monitored their communal, religious, and cultural events and organizations, including schools. Registration of Bahais was a police function during the reporting period. The government also required evangelical Christian groups to compile and submit membership lists of their congregations.

The government generally allowed recognized religious minority groups to conduct religious education for their adherents in separate schools, although it restricted this right considerably in some cases. The Ministry of Education, which imposed certain curriculum requirements, supervised these schools. With few exceptions, the directors of such private schools must be Muslim. Attendance at the schools was not mandatory for recognized religious minorities. The Ministry of Education must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. Recognized religious minorities could provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages, but such texts required approval by the authorities. This approval requirement sometimes imposed significant translation expenses on minority communities. Assyrian Christians reported

that their community was permitted to write its own textbooks which, following government authorization, were printed at the government's expense and distributed to the Assyrian community.

Christians of all denominations reported the presence of security cameras outside their churches allegedly to confirm that no non-Christians participate in services.

Broad restrictions on Bahais severely undermined their ability to practice their faith freely and function as a community. Bahai groups reported that the government often denied applications for new or renewed business and trade licenses to Bahais. The government repeatedly pressured Bahais to accept relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their religious beliefs. The government prevented many Bahais from leaving the country.

Bahais could not teach or practice their religious beliefs or maintain links with coreligionists abroad. Bahais were often officially charged with "espionage on behalf of Zionism," in part due to the fact that the Bahai world headquarters is located in Israel. These charges were more acute when Bahais were caught communicating with or sending monetary contributions to the Bahai headquarters.

Public and private universities continued to deny admittance to or expel Bahai students. Although the government maintained publicly that Bahais were free to attend university, reports indicated that the implicit policy of preventing Bahais from obtaining higher education remained in effect during the reporting period.

In a December 7 report, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran reported that at least seventeen Bahai were barred or expelled from universities in 2010 on political or religious grounds. Furthermore, during the past few years, young Bahai schoolchildren in primary and high schools increasingly have been vilified, pressured to convert to Islam, and in many cases expelled on account of their religion.

There were reports that the government compiled a list of Bahais and their trades and employment using information from the Association of Chambers of Commerce and related organizations, which are nominally independent and heavily influenced by the government.

In October 2010 Deputy Culture Minister Mohsen Parviz issued a statement stating there is "no place for the promotion of Sufism in Shia dominated Iran."

Many Sunnis claimed the government discriminated against them; however, it is difficult to distinguish whether the cause of discrimination was religious or ethnic, since most Sunnis are also members of ethnic minorities. Sunnis cited the absence of a Sunni mosque in Tehran, despite the presence of more than one million adherents in the city, as a prominent example. Sunni leaders reported bans on Sunni religious literature and teachings in public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Sunnis also noted the underrepresentation of Sunnis in government-appointed positions in the provinces where they form a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan Provinces, as well as their inability to obtain senior government positions.

While the government recognizes Judaism as an official religious minority, the Jewish community experienced official discrimination. The government continued to sanction anti-Semitic propaganda involving official statements, media outlets, publications, and books. The government's anti-Semitic rhetoric, along with a perception among radical Muslims that all Jewish citizens of the country support Zionism and the state of Israel, continued to create a hostile atmosphere for Jews. The rhetorical attacks also further blurred the line between Zionism, Judaism, and Israel and contributed to increased concerns about the future security of the Jewish community in the country.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continued a virulent anti-Semitic campaign. During the reporting period, the president publically called for the destruction of Israel.

President Ahmadinejad continued to regularly question the existence and the scope of the Holocaust, which created a more hostile environment for the Jewish community. In a September 2009 speech at the annual Al Quds Day rally in Tehran, the president stated the West created the myth of the Holocaust as a pretext for the creation of the "Zionist" regime.

The government promoted and condoned anti-Semitism in state media; however, with some exceptions, there was little government restriction of, or interference with, Jewish religious practice. The government reportedly allowed Hebrew instruction but limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly nonreligious texts, making it difficult to teach the language. Moreover, the government required that in conformity with the schedule of other schools, Jewish schools must remain open on Saturdays, which violated Jewish law.

Jewish citizens were free to travel out of the country, and the government did not enforce the general restriction against travel by the country's citizens to Israel on Jews.

The Sabean-Mandaean religious community reportedly faced harassment and repression by authorities similar to that faced by other religious minorities. The government often denied members of the Sabean-Mandaean community access to higher education.

The government repressed Sufi communities and religious practices, including increased harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders by the intelligence and security services. Government restrictions on Sufi groups and husseiniya (houses of worship) became more pronounced in recent reporting periods. There were numerous reports of Shia clerics and prayer leaders denouncing Sufism and the activities of Sufis in the country in both sermons and public statements.

The government carefully monitored the statements and views of senior Shia religious leaders. The Special Clerical Courts, established to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics and which the supreme leader oversees directly, were not provided for in the constitution and so have operated outside the judiciary. In particular, critics alleged that the clerical courts were used to prosecute certain clerics for expressing controversial political ideas and for participating in nonreligious activities, including journalism.

Non-Shia religious leaders reported bans on Sunni teachings in public schools and Sunni religious literature. Residents of provinces with large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan-va-Baluchestan, reported discrimination and lack of resources, but it was difficult to determine if this discrimination was based on religion, ethnicity, or both.

Laws based on religious affiliation continued to be used to stifle freedom of expression. Independent newspapers and magazines have been closed, and leading publishers and journalists have been imprisoned on vague charges of "insulting Islam" or "calling into question the Islamic foundation of the Republic."

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country, including religious prisoners and detainees. Authorities regularly detained and harassed bloggers who wrote anything critical of the country's Islamic revolution. The government requires bloggers to register their Web sites with the Ministry of Art and Culture.

In early 2010 the government started convicting and executing reformers and peaceful protestors on the charge of being moharebeh (understood as enmity against God). Reportedly, more than 10 individuals have been charged, convicted, and sentenced to death as moharebeh. At least three are known to have been executed during the past year.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the government has killed more than 200 Bahais and regularly raids and confiscates their property. Bahai groups outside the country reported that government authorities increased their harassment and intimidation of the members of the Bahai community during the reporting period. Unknown assailants vandalized cemeteries and holy places, and school authorities denigrated and abused Bahai students in primary and secondary schools in at least 10 cities.

The government continued to imprison and detain Bahais based on their religious beliefs. The government arbitrarily arrested Bahais and charged them with violating Islamic penal code articles 500 and 698, relating to activities against the state and spreading falsehoods, respectively. Often the charges were not dropped upon release, and those with charges pending against them reportedly feared arrest at any time. Most were released only after paying large fines or posting high bails. For some, bail was in the form of deeds of property; others gained their release in exchange for personal guarantees or work licenses.

In January 2010 chief prosecutor of Tehran Abbas Jafari-Dolatabadi publicly stated that the Bahais arrested during the December 2009 demonstrations had played a role in organizing the Ashura riots, and that their arrest was due to sending pictures of the protest abroad. He also claimed that arms and ammunitions were discovered in, and confiscated from, some of their homes.

Since January 1, 2010, at least 50 Bahais have been arbitrarily arrested. At least 14 Bahais were arrested in March in several different cities throughout the country, including Marvdasht, Mashhad, Semnan, Isfahan, Shiraz, Kermanshah, Orumiyyeh, Ramsar, and Sari. Approximately 13 Bahais were detained in February 2010, several of whom remained in jail. According to human rights groups, between October 2009 and mid-February 2010, there were 47 new cases of arbitrary detention of Bahais.

At the end of the reporting period, at least 56 Bahais remained in detention because of their religious beliefs. The locations of 18 detainees were unknown, and no trials were scheduled for 13 of those in custody. Pouriya Habibi was arrested on January 27, 2008, but there has been no verdict in his case, and it is unknown whether there has been a trial. The government never formally charged many of the others but released them only after they posted bail.

The seven leaders of the Bahai community -- Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Saeid Rezaie, Vahid Tizfahm, and Mahvash Sabet -- remained in detention since their arrests in spring 2008. In February 2009 the judiciary spokesman announced that the seven were accused of "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities, and propaganda against the Islamic Republic." In May 2009 state-run media reported the government also charged them with "spreading corruption on earth," a crime punishable by death. To date, none of the seven leaders has been allowed access to their attorney, Abdolfattah Soltani. On June 16, 2009, security agents arrested Soltani without a warrant and took him to an unknown location. On June 14, 2010, the trial concluded after four hearings, and on June 30 the court issued a 20-year prison sentence for each that was subsequently reduced in September 2010 to 10 years.

According to the Bahai International Community's United Nations Office, Intelligence Ministry officers raided the home of Fakhroddin Samimi on May 31. After searching his home and confiscating personal belongings, including his computer and material related to his religious beliefs, the officers arrested him. He was transferred to the prison in Sari the same day. On June 25, Mr. Samimi was released. No information was available regarding bail.

On December 8 Haleh Rouhi and Sasan Taqva were released from the temporary detention center where they had been held for the duration of their incarceration. Raha Sabet remained imprisoned at the end of the year. The three were among 51 Bahai arrested in 2006 during their involvement in projects in and around the city of Shiraz which focused on teaching literacy and social skills to children.

In January 2009 security forces in Tehran arrested five Bahais and took them to Evin prison. At least one Bahai, a woman from Shiraz named Negin Rezaei, was released from Evin prison by the end of the reporting period.

Pouriya Habibi and Simin Mokhtari, arrested in January 2008 and detained on charges of teaching the Bahai Faith, reportedly remained in Evin prison at the end of the reporting period.

In October 2009 MOIS officers searched the home of Bahai member Ali Bakhsh Bazrafkan, confiscated items linked to his faith, and arrested him. Bazrafkan was a member of the former Bahai administrative group (Khademin) in Yasouj. Bazrafkan received a 30-month prison sentence followed by five years in exile in a remote area in the province of Kohkiluyeh va Boyerahmad.

In October 2009 MOIS officers arrested Behnam Rouhanifard for producing and distributing Bahai music. Two days later authorities summoned his wife to appear at the local MOIS office, where authorities interrogated her for two hours. At the end of the reporting period, Rouhanifard's family had not heard from him since October 2009, when he was permitted to call home; his whereabouts remained unknown.

In September 2009 MOIS officers in Yazd searched the home of Soheil Rouhanifard, brother of Behnam Rouhanifard, and confiscated belongings and materials related to the Bahai faith. The next day Soheil Rouhanifard appeared at the local MOIS office in response to a summons. Authorities interrogated and released him. He was summoned again on October 19 and arrested without charge. At the end of the reporting period, he remained in prison and was not permitted family visits.

The property rights of Bahais were generally disregarded, and they suffered frequent government harassment and persecution. The government raided Bahai homes and businesses and confiscated large numbers of private and commercial properties, as well as religious materials, belonging to Bahais. The government reportedly seized numerous Bahai homes and transferred them to an agency of Supreme Leader Khamene'i. The government also seized private homes in which Bahai youth classes were held, despite the owners' having proper ownership documents. The Bahai community reported that the government's seizure of Bahai personal property and its denial of Bahai access to education and employment was eroding the economic base of the community and threatening its survival.

The government continued to hold many Bahai properties, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, and administrative centers, that were seized following the 1979 revolution. Many of the properties have been destroyed. Bahais were generally prevented from burying and honoring their dead in accordance with their religious tradition.

In the past year Bahai cemeteries in various parts of the country, including Tehran, Ghaemshahr, Marvdasht, Semnan, Sari, and Isfahan, were desecrated or defaced. In some cases entrance was blocked to the Bahai community.

In January 2009 municipality officials razed the Bahai cemetery of Ghaemshahr with a bulldozer at night according to witnesses. Observers also reported the official demolition of an entire section of the Tehran cemetery where the government had interred those executed in the early years of the Islamic revolution.

On October 25 and 27 unknown arsonists torched three household furniture repair shops, and on November 15 two household appliance repair shops were set on fire in Rafsanjan after the local newsletter published a section devoted to the economic activities of the Bahai.

There were reports of authorities forcing Bahai businesses to close, placing restrictions on their businesses, and asking managers of private companies to dismiss their Bahai employees.

Government officials reportedly offered Bahais relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their religious affiliation, and if incarcerated, recanting their religious affiliation as a precondition for releasing them.

Iranian Shiite Ayatollah Seyed Hossein Kazemeini Boroujerdi, along with 17 of his followers, have been imprisoned for espousing religious views that are incongruent with the official religious views of the government since 2006. He is serving an 11-year prison term and is reportedly in poor health. According to available reports, Boroujerdi is being denied hospitalization despite his serious health condition.

In May 2010 most of the 20 Sufi practitioners arrested in July 2009 in the northeastern city of Gonabad received sentences of flogging or imprisonment. They were among more than 200 Sufi dervishes who gathered to protest the arrest of Hossein Zareya, a local leader. Several dervishes were injured as riot police used force and tear gas to disperse the crowd.

Since July 2009 the government closed or took over several nursing homes, hospitals, and seven libraries administered by the Sufi Gonabadis.

In March 2009 a representative of the Gonabadi Sufi dervishes reported that authorities were holding 41 dervishes in Evin prison for practicing their religion. No updates were available at the end of the reporting period.

In February 2009 authorities razed the house of worship of Gonabadi dervishes at Takht-e-Foulad, in Isfahan, with bulldozers. All Sufis present were arrested and had their mobile phones confiscated. Sufi books and publications were destroyed.

In January 2009 Jamshid Lak, a Sufi of the Gonabadi Dervish order, was flogged 74 times.

In late December 2008, after the closure of a Sufi Muslim place of worship, authorities arrested without charge at least six members of the Gonabadi Dervishes on Kish Island and confiscated their books and computer equipment. Their status was unknown.

In November 2008 Amir Ali Mohammad Labaf of the Gonabadi Sufi order was sentenced to 74 lashes, five years in prison, and internal exile to the town of Babak for "spreading lies."

In October 2008 at least seven Sufi Muslims in Isfahan and five Sufis in Karaj were arrested because of their affiliation with the Gonabadi Sufi order.

Christians, particularly evangelicals, continued to be subject to harassment and close surveillance. During the reporting period, the government enforced its prohibition on proselytizing by closely monitoring the activities of evangelical Christians, discouraging Muslims from entering church premises, closing churches, and arresting Christian converts. Members of evangelical congregations were required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which must be provided to the authorities. Worshipers were subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside congregation centers. The government restricted meetings for evangelical services to Sundays, and church officials were ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before admitting new members. During the reporting period several members of the "protected" Christian groups, such as Armenian Apostolic and Assyrians, were also arrested.

On November 13 following his October 2009 arrest, Youcef Nadarkhani, a pastor of a house church in Gilan, reportedly received a death sentence for apostasy and evangelism. He was being held in Lakan prison, and the case was on appeal at the end of the year.

In June 2010 pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khandjani of a house church in Shiraz reportedly received a death sentence for apostasy following his arrest on an unknown date.

Between June 2008 and June 2010 over 115 Christians were reportedly arrested on charges of apostasy, illegal activities of evangelism, anti-government propaganda, and activities against Islam, among other charges. In a marked rise in the number of arrests from the previous reporting period, between July and December 2010, 161 additional arrests of Christians were reported. Of those arrested, 33 remain in jail or with an unknown status at the end of the year.

Many arrests took place during police raids on religious gatherings, during which religious property was also confiscated, during the reporting period.

In March 2009 according to domestic human rights groups, a revolutionary court closed the Pentecostal church of Shahr Ara in Tehran which belonged to Assyrian Christians. According to reports, the stated reason for the closure was the "illegal activities" of converting Muslims to Christianity and "accepting converts" to worship as members of the congregation.

On May 23 charges were dropped against two members of the Christian community, Maryam Rostampour and Marzieh Amirzadeh Esmailabad, who had been arrested in March 2009. The women have since left the country.

In 2008 plain clothes security officers raided the home of Isfahan Iranian Christians Abbas Amiri and his wife, Sakineh Rahnama, during a meeting. Both Amiri and Rahnama died of injuries suffered during the raid. Authorities denied permission for the local Christian community to hold a memorial service for the couple.

Since his arrest in December 2009 for allegedly participating in Ashura protests, Heshmatollah Tabarzadi remains in solitary confinement in Evin prison. Tabarzadi faces four charges including propaganda against the state, gathering against national security, insulting the Supreme Leader and President, and insulting Islam.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Although the constitution gives Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians the status of "protected" religious minorities, in practice non-Shia Muslims faced substantial societal discrimination, and government actions continued to support elements of society who create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities.

After President Ahmadinejad took office in August 2005, conservative media intensified a campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities, and political and religious leaders issued a continual stream of inflammatory statements. The campaigns against non-Muslims contributed to a significantly worse situation for the non-Muslim community throughout the reporting period.

Sunni Muslims and Christians encountered societal and religious discrimination and harassment at the local, provincial, and national levels.

Bahai graveyards in Abadeh and other cities were desecrated, and the government did not seek to identify or punish the perpetrators.

Throughout 2010 Bahais in several cities across the country were targets of arson attacks; in all cases, police said nothing could be done to find the perpetrators.

Bahai groups outside the country reported vandalism of Bahai cemeteries, the desecration of a body exhumed from a Bahai grave in Abadeh, and attacks against a Bahai cemetery in Najafabad.

There were reported problems for Bahais in different trades around the country. Bahais experienced an escalation of personal harassment, including receiving threatening notes, compact discs, text messages, and tracts. There were reported cases of Bahai children being harassed in school and subjected to Islamic indoctrination. Bahai girls were especially targeted by students and educators, with the intention of creating tension between parents and children.

Assailants set fire to businesses of 9 Bahai storekeepers in Rafsanjan during the reporting period. On December 30 after setting fire, unknown assailants left a letter threatening the Bahai community in Rafsanjan if the Bahai refused to sign the enclosed treaty.

There was serious concern from several religious and human rights groups about the resurgence of the once banned Hojjatiyeh Society, a secretive religious-economic group that was founded in 1953 to rid the country of the Bahai Faith in order to hasten the return of the 12th Imam (the Mahdi). Although not a government organization, it was believed that many members of the administration were Hojjatiyeh members and used their offices to advance the society's goals; however, it was unknown what role, if any, the group played in the arrests of numerous Bahais during the reporting period. Many Bahai human rights groups and news agencies described the goals of the Hojjatiyeh Society as the eradication of the Bahais, not just the Bahai Faith. The group's anti-Bahai orientation reportedly widened to encompass anti-Sunni and anti-Sufi activities as well.

Many Jews sought to limit their contact with or support for the state of Israel out of fear of reprisal. Anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations included the denunciation of Jews, as opposed to the past practice of denouncing only "Israel" and "Zionism."

There were reports during the reporting period that members of the Sabean-Mandaean community experienced societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Iran was first designated a CPC in 1999 and was most recently redesignated on January 16, 2009. As the action under the IRF Act, the Secretary designated the existing ongoing restrictions on U.S. security assistance in accordance with section 40 of the Arms Export Control Act, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the act. The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran, and thus it does not raise directly with the government the restrictions that the government places on religious freedom and other abuses the government commits against adherents of minority religious groups.

The U.S. government makes its position clear in public statements and reports, support for relevant UN and NGO efforts, and diplomatic initiatives to press for an end to government abuses. The U.S. government calls on other countries that have bilateral relations with Iran to use those ties to press the government on religious freedom and human rights matters.

On numerous occasions the U.S. Department of State spokesman has addressed the situation of the Bahai and Jewish communities in the country. The U.S. government has publicly condemned the treatment of the Bahais in UN resolutions. The U.S. government encourages other governments to make similar statements.

On August 12 the Secretary of State condemned the sentencing of the seven Bahai leaders, emphasizing the lack of due process and sentencing as a violation of Iran's commitments as signatory of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights.

In December 2010 for the eighth year in a row, the U.S. government cosponsored and supported a successful UN General Assembly resolution -- which passed 78 to 45, with 59 abstentions --condemning Iran's ongoing and severe human rights abuses.

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