

Bahá'ís

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Profile

There are an estimated 300,000 Baha'is in Iran of an estimated 5 million worldwide. They have been persecuted intermittently in Iran since the foundation of the religion in the mid-nineteenth century and severely and consistently since the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The Baha'i religion claims to be the youngest of the world's independent religions. It was founded by Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), believes in one God, and holds that the principal challenge facing humanity today is of acceptance of humanity's oneness.

Historical context

The Bahá'í Faith has never been legally recognised in the land of its birth, Iran, and its followers have suffered intermittent persecution since the foundation of the twin Bábí and Bahá'í religions in 1844. This persecution was particularly intense in the early decades following the foundation of Bahá'í history and again since the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The persecution of the Bahá'ís came to be constitutionally embedded in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Whilst the Bahá'í community has long constituted the largest of Iran's non-Muslim religious communities, it was intentionally excluded from the Constitution's Article 13: 'Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.'

Since 1979, Bahá'ís have been largely excluded from university education, severely restricted in employment opportunities, thousands of individual and community properties remain confiscated (at least 640 of them, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, Mr Miloon Kothari, in a statement to the media on the occasion of the release of his report dated 29 June 2006), they suffer from the absence of legal equality, pensions remain unpaid and the functioning of the religious community remains prohibited. Their intimidation and persecution is overtly government-sanctioned and they remain excluded and repressed in all spheres of public life in an attempt to force them to convert to Islam.

One recent governmental attempt to tempt their youth to convert to Islam dates to 2004. In July 2004, for the first time since 1979, Bahá'ís were allowed to participate in university entrance examinations, as there was no longer the requirement to state one's religious affiliation in the application form. Successful examination results were subsequently communicated to around 1,000 Bahá'í applicants on pre-printed forms that assigned the religious affiliation 'Muslim' to them. When they tried to take up the university entrance offers while also getting their forms corrected to 'Bahá'í' for religious affiliation, this possibility

was refused them. Hence university entrance had once again been predicated on Bahá'ís accepting forcible conversion to Islam. A small number of Bahá'í youth were admitted to university in 2006, but the majority were expelled during the academic year apparently as part of a concerted government policy of exclusion.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's July 2002 report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child had claimed that the rights of ethnic and religious minorities were clearly protected. The Committee's March 2005 Concluding Observations did not accept Iran's claim of non-discrimination. It noted 'little progress' as 'members of unrecognized religions continue to be discriminated against and do not have the same rights as those of recognized religions', thus impacting on their access to social services, education for their children and even ill-treatment and imprisonment. It particularly noted that the Bahá'ís were subjected to 'harassment, intimidation and imprisonment on account of their religious beliefs' and denial of university admittance due to their religious beliefs.

Current issues

The situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran has suffered a sharp deterioration over the past few years. One recent governmental attempt to tempt their youth to convert to Islam dates to 2004. In July 2004, for the first time since 1979, Bahá'ís were allowed to participate in university entrance examinations, as there was no longer the requirement to state one's religious affiliation in the application form. Successful examination results were subsequently communicated to around 1,000 Bahá'í applicants on pre-printed forms that assigned the religious affiliation 'Muslim' to them. When they tried to take up the university entrance offers while also getting their forms corrected to 'Bahá'í' for religious affiliation, this possibility was refused them. Hence university entrance had once again been predicated on Bahá'ís accepting forcible conversion to Islam. A small number of Bahá'í youth were admitted to university in 2006, but the majority were expelled during the academic year apparently as part of a concerted government policy of exclusion.

There has been an increase in imprisonments imposed throughout the country purely on account of Bahá'í beliefs. The largest group arrest since the 1980s occurred on 18 May 2006 in Shiraz. The 54 were gradually released between then and 14 June 2006, most on payment of large bails, despite the absence of any formal charges against them. There have also been alarming revelations of an ominous official secret memorandum instructing the armed forces to single out and monitor every single Bahá'í in the country. This announcement was made by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ms Asma Jahangir, on 20 March 2006. Ms Jahangir expressed her concerns in a press release, on obtaining a copy of a confidential letter dated 29 October 2005 by the Chairman of the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces in Iran addressed to the Ministry of Information, the Revolutionary Guard and the Police Force. The letter states that the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, had instructed the identification of Bahá'ís and the monitoring of their activities, and that those agencies should collect this information in a highly confidential manner. The Bahá'í International Community reported the stepping up of this surveillance of Bahá'ís and their community activities in a press release dated 2 November 2006. This was reportedly contained in an instruction by the Iranian Ministry of Interior to provincial officials dated 19 August 2006 for them to cautiously and sensitively monitor and supervise all Bahá'í social activities. In September 2006, General Romeo Dellaire, former commander of the UN peacekeeping mission to Rwanda and genocide expert, issued a statement of deep concern regarding this "ugly step" of monitoring of the Bahá'ís in Iran in this way.

Baha'i rights organizations reported an increase in government harassment in 2007. This included police raids on Baha'i homes and businesses in Tehran in February, criminal prosecution of group members for promotion of an 'un-Islamic' organization, and government orders to 25 industries in April to deny business licences to Baha'i.

In May 2008, Iranian security services arrested six Baha'i leaders at their homes and held them incommunicado. The government denied that the six were arrested for their beliefs, with a spokesman explaining: 'The group is an organized establishment linked to foreigners, the Zionists in particular.' International Baha'i representatives countered that the effort to link Iranian Baha'is to foreign interests was part and parcel of long-standing Iranian government efforts to destroy the Baha'i community.

In October 2008, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon highlighted abuses against Baha'is in a report on human rights in Iran. The report touched on issues of violence, arbitrary detention, and rampant discrimination against members of the group.