

Christians

Profile

The figure for the total number of Christians in Iran (of all denominations) has been estimated at between 200,000 and 250,000. The Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans represent the more traditional religious groupings in Iran and they constitute over 90% of Iran's Christian population. They do not carry out any missionary activities and this stance has proven critical to their survival.

Iran's Christians may be categorised as 'ethnic Christians' and 'non-ethnic Christians', the former including Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans' and the latter primarily constituting Protestants and evangelicals.

Historical context

Armenians have lived in Iran for around four centuries. Several hundred thousand Armenians were brought to Iran from Armenia in the early seventeenth century by Shah Abbas for political and economic reasons, as merchants and artisans. Armenian Christians have their two representatives in the Iranian Parliament, in accordance with the Iranian Constitution. One seat is reserved for Armenians resident in Tehran and northern Iran, the other for Isfahan and southern Iran. The population of Armenians in Iran before the revolution was estimated at 300,000 and their population in the year 2000 at 150,000 by their own Archbishop Babian, though some quote the higher figure of 200,000). Many emigrated to Armenia after the revolution. Those that have remained have gone to some effort to insist on their good relations with the Iranian government, an example being the MP of the Armenians of northern Iran reportedly condemning UN censure of Iran for its treatment of religious minorities as being politically motivated, stating that the difficulties of religious minorities in Iran were less than those facing minorities in European countries and that domestic legal channels can be used to resolve any difficulties. Armenians run their own churches, schools, cultural associations and Armenian language publications including a newspaper.

The Assyro-Chaldeans or Assyrians are amongst the oldest settled peoples in Iran. Assyrian Christians have their own representative in the Iranian Parliament. According to the MP representing the Assyrians and Chaldeans, Shamshoon Maqsdpour, their population stood at 40,000 in 1999. They are allowed to have their own community and sports associations and they produce some publications. However, they face the difficulty of the continuance of Assyrian language and culture, since Assyrian schools had to teach children in Persian for all classes including those for religious education and even classes held for Assyrian children in the churches had to be examined in Persian.

The Protestants, and particularly evangelical groups, face the most difficulties from amongst the Christian communities in Iran. Human Rights Watch estimated their numbers at around 10,000-15,000 in 2002. Churches have been closed down, the use of Persian in sermons banned, the publishing of Bibles restricted and Muslims strictly prohibited from attending sermons, with previous converts from Islam being put under particular surveillance. A number of Christian leaders have been killed or found

murdered since the early 1990s: Assemblies of God Minister Bishop Haik Hovsepian Mehr was found stabbed to death in 1994; Reverend Mehdi Dibaj, pastor of the Church of the Assemblies of God and convert from Islam 41 years previously, released from prison in January 1994 but found dead by the authorities on 2 July 1994; Reverend Tateos Michaelian, found murdered in July 1994; pastor Mohammad Bagher Yusefi, disappeared and found dead in 1996 and pastor Ghorban Dordi Tourani found dead in 2005. The manner of their disappearances, and the consistency of the pattern of deaths, has made most observers suspect the Iranian governmental authorities themselves.

Between May and July 2004, several dozen Iranian evangelicals - including pastor Khosroo Yusefi - were imprisoned and then released in the province of Mazandaran. They were reportedly physically mistreated, heavily interrogated and ordered to stop worship and evangelizing. In September 2004, 85 participants in a Christian conference were imprisoned along with a lay preacher of the Assemblies of God Church (and Iranian army officer), Reverend Hamid Pourmand. The 85 were released but Pourmand was charged with having converted to Christianity without informing army officials of his conversion and with attempting to convert Muslims to Christianity. He was acquitted of the charges of apostasy and proselytism in May 2005, but not of deceiving the Iranian army about his being a Christian.

Current issues

A number of observers and Christian representatives have reported signs that the increase in pressure on non-ethnic Christians in Iran is at the greatest it has been since the mid-1990s. In late September-early October 2006 an Iranian Christian couple, Fereshteh Dibaj and Reza Montazami, were detained and held for questioning by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security. Mr Montazami led an independent church in Mashhad and converted to Christianity from Islam around 15 years ago. After a trip to Iran in September 2006, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Prague Vaclav Maly reportedly stated that many Christians were leaving Iran because of restrictions on them as Christians. He added that there was a danger that Christians would completely disappear from Iran.