

Update on
the Situation of the
BAHÁ'ÍS
IN **IRAN**

Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, the approximately three hundred thousand members of Iran's Bahá'í community have been the targets of judicial and extrajudicial executions and of anti-Bahá'í propaganda, propagated by both the government and the clergy. They have endured severe restrictions on their work, education, cultural and religious activities, and travel. More than two hundred members of Iran's largest religious minority have been killed simply for being Bahá'ís; thousands more have been imprisoned and tortured. Bahá'ís are consistently denied pensions, visas, work permits, property rights, legal process, and the prospect of education beyond high school. In the light of last year's attempted closure of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education,¹ the authorities' execution of Mr. Ruhú'llah Rawhani, and the sentencing in February 2000 of three Bahá'ís to death, the situation of

¹ See *The Bahá'í World 1998–99*, pp. 151–54 and 287–93 for a complete report on the attack on the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). Despite the difficulties following the widespread confiscation of BIHE property and the detention and harassment of its workers by the authorities in Iran, the BIHE has resumed its activities for the new academic year.

the Bahá'ís remains bleak, in spite of the much-praised ascendance of certain “moderate” factions within the Iranian government.

The government's actions contrast sharply with the words of President Khatami during a November 1999 press conference in Paris, when he responded to a question about the Bahá'ís by saying that no one should be persecuted because of his or her beliefs, and that he would defend the civil rights of all Iranians regardless of their beliefs or religion.

Bahá'ís are regarded as “unprotected infidels” in Iran. The Iranian constitution does not recognize the Bahá'ís as a religious minority, and their rights can be ignored with impunity. Victims have repeatedly been offered relief from persecution if they recant their faith. The root policy of this sustained, carefully calculated persecution has been given formal expression in a 1991 secret government document on “the Bahá'í question,” which was acquired and published in 1993 by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Written and approved by Iran's most senior clerical and civil authorities, including the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mr. Ali Khamenei, and adopted by Iran's Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, it directs not only that the “progress and development” of the Bahá'ís within Iran's borders “shall be blocked” but also that “a plan shall be formulated to combat and destroy the cultural roots which this group has outside the country.” In the face of such an explicitly discriminatory policy, the worldwide Bahá'í community continues to labor to keep the case of its Iranian brothers and sisters in the consciousness—and conscience—of the governments and leaders of the world.

Recent changes in the situation

The most troubling recent development was the February 2000 reinstatement of death sentences on two Bahá'ís, Messrs. Sirus Dhabihī-Muqaddam and Hedayat Kashefī-Najafabadi, who had previously had their sentences quashed twice by the Supreme Court, and the sentencing to death of a third Bahá'í, Mr. Manuchehr Khulusi. Mr. Khulusi was arrested in the summer of 1999, and Messrs. Dhabihī-Muqaddam and Kashefī-Najafabadi were arrested in late 1997. All three were detained for their Bahá'í

activities and given only twenty days to appeal their sentences.²

The story of the reinstatement of the death sentences was widely reported in the media, with several major news organs around the world picking it up from the Associated Press news-wire.

International condemnation came quickly. France and Canada spoke out against the government's action, and in the United States White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said on 11 February, "In all three cases it is clear that the individuals were arrested, charged and sentenced to death solely because of their religious beliefs. Executing people for the practice of their religious faith is contrary to the most fundamental human rights principles." Lockhart further stated that President Clinton was "deeply troubled" by the sentences and "continues to hold the Iranian government responsible for the safety of the Bahá'í community of Iran."

At the same time that these death sentences were imposed, a ten-year prison sentence was confirmed against Mr. Ata'u'llah Hamid Nasirizadih, who was first arrested in 1997 for holding "family life" meetings—the same charge brought against Messrs. Dhabihī-Muqaddam and Kashefi-Najafabadi.

In other developments during this year, Bahá'í students are now able to attend the final, pre-university year of high school, although they are still barred from attending university itself. Mr. Farzad Khajeh, Dr. Sina Hakimian, and Mr. Habibullah Ferdosian, who were arrested in the autumn of 1998 and sentenced on charges connected with their participation in the activities of the Institute for Higher Bahá'í Studies, have been released. Nine other Bahá'ís remain imprisoned, two of whom are on death row, making a total of five Bahá'ís under sentence of death.

² The Iranian government, through judiciary spokesman Mir-Mohammad Sad-eqi, gave a somewhat convoluted denial of the death sentences, saying, "From the religious and legal point of view we believe that no one can be punished merely for their belief, let alone be given such a heavy sentence as death," but also that the case in question "dates back to eight months ago and no new ruling has been issued in recent months and the ruling in this case is not final. This case has gone through a long process. Death sentences were issued but the Supreme Court rejected them and ordered a new hearing."

Actions by Governments and the United Nations

The international community is continually engaged in attempts to persuade the Iranian government to respect its obligations as a signatory to, among other human rights conventions, the International Bill of Human Rights. These demonstrations of international concern have played a critical role in moderating the actions of the Iranian authorities and providing a measure of security to the Bahá'í community.

A positive development related to the registration of marriages may reflect the success of international pressure on the regime. In early 2000, registry offices throughout Iran were informed that any couple appearing before registry officials to acknowledge that they are husband and wife may be registered without having to state their religious affiliation. Couples whose unions have been validated in this way will now be able to legally register their children.

Every year since 1980, the United Nations has expressed its concern regarding Iran's treatment of its citizens. On 17 December 1999, sixty-one countries voted in favor of the United Nations General Assembly resolution concerning the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran; forty-seven voted against it, and fifty-one countries abstained. The resolution expresses the General Assembly's "serious concern at the continuing violations of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, as reported by the Special Representative." The General Assembly also "remains gravely concerned at the unabated pattern of persecution against the Bahá'ís, including death sentences, arrests and the closure of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education."

A report submitted on 18 January 2000 by the Special Representative of the UN Commission on Human Rights devoted a subsection and a separate appendix to the situation of Iran's Bahá'ís, took note of the "prolonged imprisonment, confiscation of holy places, and denial of the right to assemble" which the community endures, and urged the government to "cease discrimination against Bahá'ís in all spheres of public life and services."

In its 10 April 2000 resolution, the UN Commission on Human Rights expressed its concern at "the unabated pattern of

persecution against the Bahá'ís, including death sentences and arrests,” and called upon the Iranian government to “implement fully the conclusions and recommendations of the Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance relating to the Bahá'ís and other minority religious groups until they are completely emancipated.”

The United States government has been forceful in its defense of the Iranian Bahá'ís. The US secretary of state's Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad, in its annual report for 1999, notes that “Although the [Iranian] 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 the 300,000 to 350,000 followers of the Bahá'í Faith in the country... Historically at risk in the country, Bahá'ís often have suffered increased levels of persecution during times of political ferment... Broad restrictions on Bahá'ís appear to be geared to destroying them as a community.” The Committee, composed of twenty prominent religious leaders and academics, calls attention to problems of religious persecution around the world and issues advice on how to address them. US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, in a landmark address to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights on 23 March 2000, mentioned her government's “ongoing concern about religious discrimination in Iran against the Bahá'í[s].”

A 26 August 1999 Voice of America editorial, broadcast in Iran, called upon “Iran's rulers to respect the right to worship of all the people of Iran, including Bahá'ís” and further stated that the US government has “long protested” the “twenty years of unrelenting persecution of Iranian Bahá'ís by the government of Iran.”

On 3 April 2000, thirty-eight members of the US Congress and US senate wrote a letter to the chairman of the UN Commission on Human Rights expressing “deep concern over the continuing denial of internationally recognized religious and civil rights to religious minorities in Iran, including the Bahá'í, Jewish, and Christian communities.” Three paragraphs of the letter dealt

with the specific kinds of persecution enforced by the Iranian government against the country's Bahá'í community, and the letter concluded: "We ask that you share our concerns about the repression of religious minorities in Iran with member delegations to the Commission and urge the Commission to take the actions necessary to promote the emancipation of the Bahá'í community in Iran, the release of Iranian Jews currently in prison and the protection of Iranian Christians."

In the United Kingdom in August 1999, British parliamentarians formally established the "All Party Friends of the Bahá'ís" group "in response to the continuing problems of persecution faced by members of the Bahá'í community in Iran and other states." The first meeting of the group was held in December to decide on its constitution and plan its official launch, which was held on 21 March. Thirty-nine parliamentarians have joined the group so far. Membership is open to members of Parliament, peers, and members of the European Parliament.

Types of persecution

The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy. Throughout the world, its community organization and governance revolve around democratically elected administrative councils. Since 1983, when the Iranian government outlawed these bodies, the Bahá'í community in that country has been denied the right to organize and function as a viable religious community. While its members have developed makeshift arrangements to worship in small groups, to conduct classes for children, and to take care of other community needs, authorities disrupt meetings and sometimes arrest teachers of the children's or "family life" classes.

Numerous other restrictions have also been imposed. Bahá'ís are consistently denied inheritance rights on the basis of their faith. Many Bahá'ís have been summoned to security offices on various specious pretexts, only to be insulted and belittled in the hope of creating fear in their families and inducing them to recant their faith. Travel outside and even inside Iran is often impeded or denied by authorities. Iranian Bahá'ís outside Iran often face similar treatment at Iranian embassies when attempting to renew their

passports or secure visas, except in countries where applicants are not required to state religious affiliation on their forms.

The practice of arresting Bahá'ís on the basis that they do not have work permits is another example of the ways in which selective discriminatory treatment adversely affects the Iranian Bahá'í community. Requests by Bahá'ís for work permits are almost always denied. While the law states that anyone who works or is self-employed must have a work permit, it is rarely enforced owing to the high unemployment rate.

Since the early years of the Islamic Revolution, Bahá'í youth have been barred from the regular institutions of higher learning. Prior to the revolution, Bahá'ís had been among the best educated groups in Iran, and the erosion of the educational level of the community, as outlined in the secret document on "the Bahá'í question," is obviously designed to lead to both its intellectual and material impoverishment.

Properties held by the Bahá'í community, including cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, administrative centers, and other assets, were seized by the authorities shortly after the 1979 revolution and, to date, none has been returned. In fact, many have been destroyed. Particularly distressing has been the seizure of Bahá'í cemeteries throughout the country. In 1993, for example, some fifteen thousand graves were desecrated when the Bahá'í cemetery in Tehran was confiscated to make way for a municipal cultural center. Bahá'ís have been reduced to using areas of wasteland for the burial of their dead and are not permitted to identify gravesites.

Conclusion

For twenty-one years Iran's Bahá'í community has suffered repression under the Islamic revolutionary government. While official executions have abated under the glare of the international spotlight, the government's recent actions demonstrate that Bahá'ís are still being sentenced to death purely for their beliefs, that the arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of Bahá'ís is sanctioned, that their property may be seized with impunity, and their civil rights likewise disregarded. It is not the actions of the Bahá'ís but the

circumstances of Iranian history that have conspired to make the “Bahá’í case” a litmus test of sincerity for Iranian public figures who represent themselves as voices of reform and progress.