

Christians Still Hope for Freedom in Iran

✖ As protests of Iran's presidential election results went into their sixth day today, Christians in the nation remained hopeful that the election would bring greater freedom.

"[Christians are] watching what's going on and certainly they're hoping for freedom," said David Yeghnazar, U.S. director of Elam Ministries, which trains Iranian Christians to evangelize and disciple their nation.

Yeghnazar said Christians affiliated with his organization are praying for the political situation, neither endorsing candidates nor encouraging members to participate in protests. But Open Doors, a California-based ministry that advocates for the persecuted church, said many Iranian Christians, who spoke on condition of anonymity, don't accept the election results that declared incumbent President Mahmud Ahmadinejad the runaway winner of the June 12 election.

Some younger Christians even took to the streets this week, joining hundreds of thousands in supporting opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi, who has accused Ahmadinejad's government of fraud and called for new elections to be held.

"In the big cities young believers are involved in the street protests also and people from smaller villages have joined them," said Saeed (not his real name), noting that he did not know of any Christians who voted for Ahmadinejad, though some church leaders and middle-aged Christians chose not to vote at

all. "Young Christians have put very open reactions on Facebook and via other ways on the Internet."

Although neither candidate is perceived as a friend of the church, Christians in Iran say Mousavi may be more moderate in his approach to religious minorities. Goudarz (not his real name) told Open Doors he voted for Mousavi "because he is more open-minded and [democratic] than Ahmadinejad."

"Now we hope and pray that the situation will change soon or that we can have new elections," he said. "When the government orders new elections indeed, it will be the very first national victory in 30 years of dictatorship. The next government then owes to the people to give more freedom."

Observers said the massive protests, which openly defied orders from Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, recalled the unrest of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

"The predominately young demonstrators [call] Ahmadinejad a dictator and yell chants like 'Ma dolate zoor nemikhaim' meaning 'We don't want a government of force,'" Iranian Christian Daryush (not his real name) told Open Doors. "They also yell at the security forces and call them traitors and vote-stealers. A friend said that within the security forces are pro-Mousavi followers," saying, 'Beechareh shodim!' or, 'We are without hope.'"

Daryush said friends told him young men and women were being beaten, and that they heard screaming and gunfire near the university in the early-morning hours. On Monday, militia who support Ahmadinejad's regime shot and killed seven demonstrators, the Associated Press reported.

Observers said the recent election simply brought to light a long-held dissatisfaction with Iran's cleric-led government, which some say has for years trampled on the will of the people.

Yeghnazar said that disillusionment has helped fuel church growth. He estimates that at least 1 million Iranians have to come Christ in recent years and that there are at least 100,000 Muslim-background believers in the country.

"People are looking for freedom-really, the freedom to be able to function as Christians," Yeghnazar said of the Iranian church.

He said believers feel that they are constantly being watched. Their phones are tapped, evangelism is forbidden, and printing Bibles and other Christian materials is illegal.

"If you go against that you can pay a heavy price," Yeghnazar said. "There have been leaders who have been killed. ... It's the pressure of daily knowing at any time you can be arrested purely because you're a Christian and thrown in prison."

He said more than 50 Christians were arrested in 2008, and on March 5, two young women were arrested and jailed because of their Christian faith.

"The indications are that the church would face less pressure under Mousavi than Ahmadinejad," Yeghnazar said. "Ahmadinejad's policies would be more severe on the church."

Yeghnazar said the churches affiliated with Elam are not focused on changing their nation through politics. "The Iranian church basically sees its mission as the Great Commission-to win people and make disciples, and the political environment they leave that to the Lord to deal with," he said.

Elam Ministries is urging prayer for Iranian Christians, who will likely continue to face persecution regardless of the election outcome. The ministry operates a Web site, , that mobilizes Christians in prayer for Iran, and Elam will soon release *Iran 30*, a 30-day prayer guide for the nation.

On Tuesday, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, ordered an investigation into the fraud allegations, but it remains unclear whether he will allow a new election.

"Even if Ahmadinejad will stay president, we are not sure what will be the effect on the pressure on the church," Firouzeh (not her real name) told Open Doors. "It can be both extremes—more pressure to keep control or earn trust with the people by giving more liberty. We have to wait and see."