

Iran Tightens Grip on Christians as Unrest Roils

✖ Amid a violent crackdown on protestors and a purge of opponents within the Iranian government, more than 30 Christians were arrested in the last two weeks near Tehran and in the northern city of Rasht.

Two waves of arrests near Tehran happened within days of each other, and while most of those detained—all converts from Islam—were held just a day for questioning, a total of eight Christians still remain in prison.

On July 31 police raided a special Christian meeting 15 miles north of Tehran in the village of Amameh in the area of Fashan. A Compass source said about 24 Christians, all converts from Islam, had gathered in a private home. In the afternoon police squads in both plain clothes and uniform raided and arrested everyone present.

“Many people stormed the villa, and in the same day they took everything,” said the source, a Christian Iranian who requested anonymity.

All present were taken by private car to their residences, where police took all their passports, documents, cash, CDs, computers and mobile phones, and from there to the police station.

“There were many cars so they could take each person with a car to their house from the meeting,” said the source. “Think of how many cars were there to arrest them. And they took all their books, PCs, CDs mobile phones, everything.”

While most of them were released the same evening, seven of them – Shahnam Behjatollah, and six others identified only as

Shaheen, Maryam, Mobinaa, Mehdi, Ashraf and Nariman – all remain in detention in an unknown location. They have no contact with their family members.

Police have questioned each of their families and told them to prepare to pay bail. In the case of Behjatollah, for whom police had a warrant, authorities showed his family the official order for his arrest and told them they “knew all about him,” according to the source. Behjatollah is 34 years old, married and has a 6-year-old daughter.

The second wave of arrests of some of the same Christians near Tehran took place on Friday.

“They brought the released members for interrogation to the secret police again, to get more information about their movements,” said the source.

In Rasht, a total of eight Christians belonging to the same network were arrested on July 29 and 30 in two separate rounds of arrest. Seven were released, while one, a male, remains in the city’s prison. Compass sources were unable to comment on the conditions of their arrest.

Two Women Asked to Recant

On Sunday two Christian women appeared before a judge who asked them if they would deny their newfound faith and return to Islam.

Maryam Rostampour, 27, and Marzieh Amirizadeh Esmaeilabad, 30, have been held in the notorious Evin prison since March 5 accused of “acting against state security” and “taking part in illegal gatherings.” In a short court session, the judge asked them if they were going to deny their faith and return to Islam, reported the Farsi Christian News Network (FCNN).

As both women refused to recant their faith, the judge sent them back to their prison cells “to think about it,” according

to a source who spoke with family members.

"When they said, 'Think about it,' it means you are going back to jail," said the source. "This is something we say in Iran. It means: 'Since you're not sorry, you'll stay in jail for a long time, and maybe you'll change your mind.'"

The source said the first goal of judges in such cases is usually to make "apostates" deny their faith through threats or by sending them back to prison for a longer time.

"This is what they said to Mehdi Dibaj, who was in prison for 10 years and martyred in 1994," said the source about one of Iran's well-known Christian martyrs. "The charge against them is apostasy [leaving Islam]."

FCNN reported that in the last five months the women have been unwell and have lost much weight. Esmaeilabad suffers from spinal pain, an infected tooth and intense headaches and is in need of medical attention. None has been provided so far.

With a draft penal code that may include an article mandating death for apostates in accordance to shariah (Islamic law) expected to be reviewed once again this fall when the parliamentary session begins, experts on Iran fear things may get worse for the country's converts from Islam.

Dr. Wahied Wahdat-Hagh, a senior fellow with the European Foundation for Democracy, wrote in last month that false hopes have arisen from a statement by the chairman of the Majlis Legal Affairs Committee, Hojatoleslam Ali Schahroki, that a provision for mandatory death penalty for apostates had been stricken from the bill. The Council of Guardians and Iran's Supreme Leader, he wrote, have the final say on capital punishment for leaving Islam.

"Recent political events in Iran have ushered in a new phase in the emergence of a totalitarian dictatorship," he wrote. "Pressure on Iranian Christians is growing just as foreign

powers are being blamed for rioting that broke out due to the electoral fraud. The argument on the influence of foreign powers is well known to Iranian Christians.”

Fury

Public allegations that detainees have been tortured, abused, killed and most recently – according to a top opposition official – raped in custody have fueled fury in Iran and spurred powerful conservative Ali Larijani to comment that a parliament committee would investigate the reports, reported The Associated Press.

At least four senior Intelligence Ministry figures were fired in an effort to purge officials who are opposed to the crackdown on protestors and opposition following last month’s disputed presidential elections, the AP reported yesterday.

Iranian sources said that the long-standing rift in the government between liberal and conservative factions is widening and becoming more apparent, and the two sides are in a battle of words and ideas in mass media for the first time in Iran’s history.

“Everything is in the newspaper,” the Christian Iranian source told Compass. “We have never had such a thing ... the point is that now all these old problems that were inside the government between liberals and fundamentalists are coming out, and we can see them on TV, radio, newspaper, the public media in the country. It isn’t something we’re guessing anymore. It’s something you can see and read.”

The source said the crackdown on protestors and recent mass arrests are the sign of a weak government trying to show it is in control of a country roiled by discontent.

“Everyone now is saying is that the government is having problems inside so they have lost the control,” the source said. “So what they did in the last couple of weeks is that

they arrested people ... minority religions, Baha'i and Christians."

On July 31, a Christian man traveling overseas from the Tehran International airport was stopped for questioning because he was wearing a black shirt, a Compass source said. The colors black and green have become associated with opposition to the government, and those wearing them are suspected of ideologically agreeing with the protestors.

The authorities found his Bible after a questioning and searching. He was taken to a room where there were others waiting, all wearing green and black shirts. Authorities confiscated his passport and have opened a case against him for carrying the Bible, said the source.

Although there has been no mention of Christians being tortured in the most recent arrests, an increase in executions of persons under the commonly fabricated charges of drug abuse and trafficking bodes ill for the future of those in Iranian prisons. As detainees are allowed neither legal counsel nor communication with their families, their conditions are nearly unknown.

On Friday Amnesty International reported an average of two executions a day since the disputed presidential elections held on June 12.

"In just over 50 days, we recorded no less than 115 executions, that is an average of more than two each day," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International. "This represents a significant increase, even compared to the appallingly high rate of executions that has been so long a feature of the human rights scene in Iran."

The report described the government's attempt to suppress the mass "and largely peaceful" protests as brutal and also expressed concerns that those who were executed were likely to have been denied fair trials. Most of those executed are said

to have been convicted of drug-smuggling or related offences. Authorities have not released the names of 24 prisoners executed on Aug. 5 in the Rejai Shahr Prison in Karaj.