

Iranian Authorities Release Assyrian Pastor on Bail

✖ An Assyrian pastor the Iranian government accused of “converting Muslims” has been released from prison on bail and is awaiting trial.

The Rev. Wilson

Issavi, whose church is affiliated with the Assemblies of God, was released from Dastgard prison in Isfahan last week. Conflicting

reports indicated Issavi, 65, was released sometime between March 28 and the morning of March 30.

On Feb. 2, State

Security Investigations (SSI) agents arrested Issavi shortly after he finished a

house meeting at a friend’s home in Isfahan. Along with the accusation of

“converting Muslims,” the pastor is charged with not co-operating with police,

presumably for continuing to hold such house meetings after police sealed the

Evangelical Church of Kermanshah and ordered him not to reopen it.

After his

arrest, Issavi was held at an unmarked prison facility in Isfahan and apparently

tortured, according to a Christian woman who fled Iran and knows Issavi and his

family. The Christian woman, who requested anonymity for security reasons, said

Issavi’s wife, Medline Nazanin, visited the pastor at the

unmarked facility.

Nazanin said it was obvious Issavi had been tortured, the Christian told Compass.

Issavi's confinement cells were so filthy he contracted a life-threatening infection, Nazanin told the Christian woman.

"They took him to the hospital and then returned him back to the prison," the woman said.

Friends of Issavi added that he is still dealing with the lingering effects of the infection.

During Issavi's imprisonment, authorities threatened to execute him, sources close to the case said. The joy of Issavi's family at his release was tinged with fear as they waited in agony for the possibility of him being killed by Islamic extremists, as is common in Iran when Christians are detained for religious reasons and then released.

"Sometimes they release you just to kill you," the Christian source said.

Issavi has not been informed of his trial date.

Issavi's friend said that low-key ethnic Christians, such as the Assyrians,

are largely
unbothered for long periods of time. Active Christians are
treated differently.

“When you start
evangelizing, then you are in real trouble,” she said.

Iranian
authorities have set up a video camera outside Issavi’s church
to monitor anyone
going in or out of the building, according to the pastor’s
friend.

Issavi was one
of a few Christians in leadership positions arrested in
Isfahan in February
during what some Middle Eastern experts described as a
crackdown on area church
leadership.

Isfahan, a city
of more than 1.5 million people located 208 miles south of
Tehran, has been the site of other anti-Christian persecution.
In an incident in
July 2008, two Christians died as a result of injuries
received from police who
were breaking up a house meeting.

On Feb. 28,
Isfahan resident Hamid Shafiee and his wife Reyhaneh Aghajary,
both converts
from Islam and house church leaders, were arrested at their
home.

Police
handcuffed, beat and pepper-sprayed Aghajary and then took her
to prison. Her
husband Shafiee, who was away from the house when police
arrived, was arrested

an hour later when he returned to the house. Approximately 20 police officers raided the home, seizing Bibles, CDs, photographs, computers, telephones, personal items and other literature.

The couple is still being held. Other details about their detainment are unknown.

Three Christians
Released

Elsewhere,
three Christians arrested on Dec. 24, 2009, have been released, according to Farsi Christian News Network (FCNN).

Maryam
Jalili, Mitra Zahmati, and Farzan Matin were initially arrested along with 12 other Christians at a home in Varamin. Eventually they were transferred to Tehran's notorious Evin Prison, though the other 12 prisoners were conditionally released on Jan. 4.

Jalili,
Zahmati and Matin were freed on March 17, though terms of their release were unclear. Jalili is married and has two children.

Iran has a longstanding history of religious repression. Shia Islam is the official state religion and is ensconced as such in Iran's constitution. Every year since 1999, the U.S. Secretary of State has designated Iran as a "Country of Particular

Concern" for its persecution of Christians and other religious minorities.

According to the
2009 International Religious Freedom Report issued by the U.S.
Department of
State, persecution of Christians and other religious
minorities in Iran
continued to get significantly worse.

"Christians,
particularly evangelicals, continued to be subject to
harassment and close
surveillance," the report states. "The government vigilantly
enforced its
prohibition on proselytizing by closely monitoring the
activities of evangelical
Christians, discouraging Muslims from entering church
premises, closing
churches, and arresting Christian converts."