

After Pastor's Arrest, Iranian Authorities Threaten to Close Pentecostal Church

The future of the central Assemblies of God church in Tehran hangs in the balance, following the arrest of one of its pastors last week.

Iranian authorities continue to pressure churches of Armenian or Assyrian heritage to cancel all services in the Farsi language, or face permanent closure.

Pastor Robert Asseriyani was arrested on May 21, two days after the church refused to voluntarily terminate its Farsi services. He is being held in Tehran's notorious Evin prison.

Mohabat News, a website devoted to news about Christians in Iran, reported on May 28 that Asseriyani told his family by phone that he is in good health.

The congregation was to be told of the church's decision at a meeting at the church on May 26, but a sign was posted on the door of the church, which read: "This church is closed due to major repairs. Please do not return!"

Mansour Borji, an Iranian-born Kurdish Christian and advocacy officer for the human-rights group Article 18, says the situation is symptomatic of a wider problem in Iran, which threatens the existence of all churches in which Farsi is spoken.

"I am certain that the AOG church in Tehran will not be the last," he said in a May 28 email to supporters. "If the Iranian government manages to close this church, the few remaining churches that have Farsi-speaking services will follow."

In 2010 the number of Christians in Iran was recorded as 300,000 in the World Christian Database, although World Watch Monitor reported earlier this month that the figure is likely to be significantly higher due to the “systematic persecution and prosecution” facing Christians in the country.

Historically, the Iranian government has tolerated Christians of predominantly Armenian or Assyrian descent and their churches. However, churches which refuse to stop Farsi services face opposition.

The central AOG church in Tehran is the largest official church in Iran that still offers services in Farsi.

In 2009, the church was ordered to terminate its Friday services, while in 2012 its leaders were asked to provide the national identity numbers of all members.

It is unclear whether the church will attempt to continue services, but Borji says the government is using Asseriyan’s arrest, and the detention of other pastors, as a bargaining tool.

“Authorities have explicitly made their intentions clear: ‘Farsi services have to stop! We cannot allow this to go on. . . It is best if you close them yourselves so you can keep the building and continue to serve the Armenian congregation. It is only then that we can consider release of your pastors’,” he said.

Four leaders from AOG’s church in the southern city of Ahwaz are also in prison, having had one-year sentences upheld by the appeal court earlier this month.

To Borji, the future for the Church in Iran looks bleak.

“It was clear to most of us that an end to all manifestations of Christian worship in Farsi was the outcome Iranian authorities were pursuing all along,” he said. “I know some of

my fellow pastors will try to offer spiritual insights and comforting words about the nourishing effect of persecution. I however will do my part [to protect Christians'] right to worship freely."

Iran is No. 8 on the World Watch List of 50 countries where oppression of Christians is most severe. The list, published annually by Open Doors International, a ministry to Christians under pressure for their faith, says the Iranian authorities keep a close watch on Christian activities, especially those that reach out to Muslims, who face the death penalty for leaving Islam.