

Assemblies of God Pastor Released From Iranian Prison

Iran has conditionally released pastor Robert Asseriyani from jail after 43 days in custody. The terms of his release have not been made clear, but Pastor Asseriyani has reportedly been instructed to remain silent about his imprisonment.

According to *Mohabat News*, it appears Asseriyani was temporarily released on bail on July 2. Among the conditions of his release was that he and his family remain silent about his arrest and any abuses he suffered while held in prison. This seems to be a strategy adopted by the Iranian regime to mask the actual situation in Iran.

“The condition ‘Silence for Freedom,’ shows that Iranian authorities want to portray actions such as releasing prisoners as Human Rights improvement in Iran and do not want prisoners to speak out in contradicting this,” *Mohabat* reports.

“International Christian Concern [ICC] rejoices at the release of Pastor Asseriyani from prison after his arrest for nothing more than exercising his basic rights of religious freedom. We continue to urge the government of Iran to protect the rights of all of its citizens,” says Todd Daniels, ICC regional manager for the Middle East. “We call on Iran to release the other Christians and minorities being arbitrarily held in Iranian prisons. ICC also calls on the international community to continue to pressure Iran to end its systematic and egregious violations of fundamental rights and its abuses of its citizens.”

Pastor Robert Asseriyani, a leader at the Central Assemblies of God church in Tehran, was arrested in the middle of a church service on May 21. He was immediately taken to an undisclosed

location, and it was later revealed he was held in Evin prison, says World Watch Monitor.

According to a statement released by George O. Wood, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, "Authorities raided Pastor Asseriyan's home, where they confiscated a computer and several books. Then they found Pastor Asseriyan at the church leading the prayer service, immediately arrested him and announced the church's imminent closure."

The Central Assemblies of God church is the largest Persian-speaking Pentecostal church in Iran and was reportedly shut down by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard following Pastor Asseriyan's arrest. A sign was hung on the door, saying, "This church is closed due to major repairs. Please do not return!"

While Iran has tolerated to some extent the presence of an ethnic Christian minority, it has sought to close down any Persian-speaking services. Pastor Asseriyan's church has been repeatedly harassed and threatened in an attempt to silence the church and its leaders and minimize any witness among the broader Persian-speaking Muslim community, Release International reports.

As Barnabas Aid documents, Hasan Rouhani was recently elected as president of Iran to replace Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had been president since 2005. The Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, however, remains in power as the leader of Iran, a country that is 99.4 percent Muslim. Though President Rouhani made promises of upholding justice and civil rights during his election campaign, many remain skeptical that the situation will improve for Iran's Christian community.

Iran is recognized as one of the most restrictive countries in the world for its persecution of Christians. Since 1999, the U.S. State Department has designated Iran as a country of particular concern for its systematic abuse of religious freedom. Since 2010, Iran has arbitrarily arrested at least

300 Christians according to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. A recent report by the UN Human Rights Council documented that 76 percent of those detained in Iran reported being tortured while being held and documented at least 13 Christians presently imprisoned in Iran.