

Iran Election May Be Turning Point for Christians

✖ For many Christians in the rapidly growing church in Iran, Friday's presidential election could be life-altering.

The underground Iranian church has experienced unprecedented growth in the last 10 years despite tremendous persecution under hard-line Muslim President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Believers are praying that new leadership would grant them religious freedom.

"The church is growing faster than ever in Iran," said Paul Estabrooks, minister-at-large for Open Doors International, which advocates for the persecuted church. "The down side, of course, is that they're under growing pressure. We aren't saying that one candidate is necessarily better, but obviously from a human analysis and perspective, a more moderate regime would obviously be beneficial to the church."

Estabrooks said many Christians disillusioned by the current government may support former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, who is being called the more moderate candidate. Mousavi has based his platform on being open-minded toward the West and promised to help revive the country's economy, which has declined under Ahmadinejad. Christians are hoping that Mousavi would also usher in a season of religious liberty.

"Last year has been one of the toughest years on the growing house-church movement in Iran," Estabrooks said. "More than 50 house-church leaders were arrested. There has been a strong crack down against the growing house church, and the reason of course is that the church is growing so fast."

In 2008 an apostasy law that would make conversion from Islam punishable by death in certain circumstances passed in Iran's Parliament. The law is currently awaiting review by a

Parliamentary council, but it could be enacted during the first few months of the next presidency.

If it is enacted, men who convert from Islam would receive the death penalty and women would receive life in prison. "If that happens you can only imagine what it will become for Christians-much worse," said Open Doors representative Lindsey Vessey.

Many Christians believe Friday's election comes at a crucial time for the underground church. Though persecution is great, the church is growing at an unprecedented rate. Estabrooks said the "official" number of Christians is more than 300,000, but the actual figure is several times higher.

Many of the believers say they converted from Islam after having dreams of Christ. Most of the new Christians are young adults who are evangelizing their peers at impressive rates and are hopeful about their future.

"The large growth of the church is predominantly among young people in Iran, and they have great hopes for a better future in their land-for believers and for the church," Estabrooks said