

Iranian Christians Face 'Systematic Persecution and Prosecution'

Iran's treatment of its Christian minority has come under fresh scrutiny in recent months with some damaging verdicts on the country's human rights record.

Reports from the U.K.'s Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) and New York-based International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) cite evidence of "systematic persecution and prosecution" of Protestants and Christian converts, as part of a widespread violation of international laws.

As national elections draw near (voters go to the polls on June 14), Iran is under increasing international pressure to improve its human rights record or face continued sanctions—sanctions ICHRI says are impacting the welfare of the Iranian people.

In its April report, *A Growing Crisis: The Impact of Sanctions and Regime Policies on Iranians' Economic and Social Rights*, ICHRI says that, rather than damaging the Iranian regime, sanctions resulting from Iran's nuclear program have "brought about a severe deterioration in the ability of the Iranian people to pursue their economic and social rights."

'Systematic persecution'

The UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, noted in September that more than 300 Christians have been arrested and detained since 2010, while at least 41 were detained for periods ranging from one month to over a year, sometimes without official charges.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said in February that Iran "refuted" the UN's claim of an increase in discrimination

towards religious minorities, claiming “all people of Iran regardless of their religion or ethnicity enjoy equal citizenship rights.”

However, ICHRI’s January report, *The Cost of Faith: Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran*, based on interviews with 31 Iranian Christians between April 2011 and July 2012, claims that, “despite the Iranian government’s assertions that it respects the rights of its recognised religious minorities, the Christian community in Iran faces systematic state persecution and discrimination.”

This view is supported by Mansour Borji, advocacy officer for human rights initiative Article18.

“Sometimes the phrase ‘systematic persecution’ is used so loosely that it sounds like a cliché. However, in the case of Iran’s persecution of Christians, it fits the criteria,” Borji told World Watch Monitor.

“Arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, severe restrictions on worship services in Farsi language, a ban on the publication of Bibles and Christian literature in Farsi, threats and harassment of evangelical church leaders, and continued attempts to confiscate church properties—these are all pieces in the puzzle.

“In a nutshell, there is a systematic attempt to deprive churches of membership, literature, leadership training and development, communion with other Christians around the world, and the right to freedom of religion guaranteed by the international covenants that Iran is a signatory of.”

Christians in Iran

The Cost of Faith states that Iranian Protestants face the “most severe” restrictions on religious practice and association, through “arbitrary” arrests and detentions, state execution and extrajudicial killings.

The number of Christians in Iran was recorded by the World Christian Database in 2010 as fewer than 300,000 (percent of the population). "Ethnic Christians" from predominantly Armenian (100,940) or Assyrian (74,000) descent comprised the majority of this figure, while 25 percent (fewer than 70,000) were Protestants, the bulk of which are understood to be converts from Muslim backgrounds.

It is impossible to know the precise number of Christians in Iran due to the perils of professing a Christian faith (particularly for those from Muslim backgrounds), but the figure seems likely to be significantly larger than recorded. Some Christian organisations, such as Iranian Christians International, claim the number of converts alone could be as high as 500,000.

Many Christians in Iran attend underground house churches, which have grown in popularity since 2001. ICHRI attributes this to "growing repression."

"Theoretically, Protestants, along with Armenians and Assyrians, are among the Christians recognised in the Islamic Republic's constitution. In practice however, they have been persecuted and discriminated against, and have faced significantly more aggressive government restrictions and human rights abuses than ethnic Christian groups," states *The Cost of Faith*.

Freedom of religion

Iran fails to comply with a number of laws set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, according to ICHRI, including Article 18, which obligates all countries to safeguard freedom of religion.

In a speech to mark the launch of the U.K.'s FCO report in April, Foreign Secretary William Hague said that all citizens have certain "unalienable rights," which are "universal" and not an attempt to spread Western values. These rights, he

said, include freedom of religion.

The report states that this freedom is “broad” and “encompasses not only the freedom to hold a belief but also the freedom to share it.”

Iran’s appreciation of this freedom comes under serious scrutiny in both reports through a number of examples of Christians in Iran who have been arrested and detained, “often without fair trial or legal representation” (FCO).

Last September’s release of Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, who had been sentenced to death for apostasy in 2010, is hailed in the FCO report as a “rare positive outcome following sustained pressure from the international community.”

However, Alistair Burt, FCO Minister with responsibility for Iran, said the arrest “should not have taken place” and called on Iran to “respect the religious freedom of its citizens.”

Pastor Nadarkhani was re-arrested on Christmas Day, but released on Jan. 7. In March, photographs of a man being hanged were attributed as evidence of the pastor’s death, but these were later refuted.

A number of other Iranian Christians remain in what the U.K.’s FCO labels “harsh conditions” in prison, including Pastor Behnam Irani, who is said to be in ill health; Farshid Fathi, who after 15 months in detention was sentenced last year to six years in prison; and Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American pastor who in January was jailed for eight years.

After his incarceration, Abedini’s wife Naghmeh Shariat Panahi told World Watch Monitor that she feared she wouldn’t hear her husband’s voice for the duration of his imprisonment unless the international community fought for his release.

The Cost of Faith claims the bulk of arrests of Iranian Christians are “arbitrary” and political, rather than because

of any crime committed.

The most common charges, according to the report, include “propaganda against the regime,” “acting against national security,” “contact with a foreign enemy or anti-regime group” and “colluding with enemy foreigners”.

Iranian Law

Apostasy remains “uncodified” in the Iranian constitution, which according to the *The Cost of Faith* creates a loophole that could lead to the legal prosecution of Christian converts.

“The Iranian constitution explicitly instructs judges to utilize Islamic legal sources where crimes and punishments are not covered by the code, leaving the door open for the continued practice of relying on jurisprudence that holds apostasy to be a capital crime,” ICHRI stated.

In his latest report in March, the U.N. Special Rapporteur called on Iran to improve its human rights record by putting a stop to “continued widespread systemic and systematic violations of human rights”, including discrimination against Christians.

“Christians should not face sanctions for manifesting and practising their faith,” said Dr. Shaheed. “Christians are reportedly being arrested and prosecuted on vaguely worded national security crimes for exercising their beliefs, and the right of Iranians to choose their faith is increasingly at risk.

“Christian interviewees consistently report being targeted by authorities for promoting their faith, participating in informal house churches with majority convert congregations, allowing converts to join their church services and congregations, and/or converting from Islam. A majority of interviewees that identified themselves as converts reported that they were threatened with criminal charges for apostasy

while in custody, and a number of others reported that they were asked to sign documents pledging to cease their church activities in order to gain release."