

Iranian Officials Heighten Control on Farsi-Speaking Church

Leaders of the Assemblies of God's (AG) Central Church of Tehran told its congregation on May 6 that authorities have demanded a list of names and identification numbers of church members, a major risk to converts from Islam.

Church leaders then asked members in attendance to volunteer their information. The AG church holds two Sunday services, both conducted in Farsi. It is the only church remaining in Tehran that offers Farsi-language worship on Sundays.

"This [government move] is basically to make sure the church is not taking in new members and to make it difficult and risky for non-Christians to attend," Monsour Borji, an Iranian Christian and advocacy officer for rights initiative Article 18, told Compass. "It is an effort to limit the church, basically."

Article 18 is a London-based initiative of the United Council of Iranian Churches (Hamgaam), which seeks to defend and promote religious freedoms in Iran. Hamgaam is composed of Iranian Christian churches in Europe.

The result of the most recent demand, according to Borji, is that as members of the Central AG church consider whether they are willing to turn over their names and identification numbers, some are faced with the ethical dilemma of whether they would be denying Christ by declining to reveal themselves in this way.

"It has created an ethical dilemma for some church members who are not sure what to do, because giving their information feels suicidal," Borji said.

The announcement indicates an intensification of government efforts to control official churches in Iran that meet in church buildings. The Central Church of Tehran was forced to shut down its Friday Farsi-speaking services in 2009. Since then the number of Christians at Sunday services has significantly increased, according to sources.

In February, authorities also forced the last two official churches offering Friday Farsi-speaking services, Emmanuel Protestant Church and St. Peter's Evangelical Church, to discontinue Friday services.

Sources told Compass that if authorities have a list of the members of the AG church, in essence they will be able to control and follow church members and also monitor if the church has been taking in new converts from Islam, which authorities have forbidden.

"For a long time there has been surveillance, but this new requirement is another sign that they are seeking to control and limit attendance of those who come from non-Christian backgrounds and to keep the Muslims away," said an expert on the region who requested anonymity.

Borji said that authorities have exercised aggressive pressure on the Central AG church, and their newest tactics aim also to limit the number of public meetings. Church leaders and their families are under constant watch, and occasionally members are summoned for interrogation. Authorities have also "cut the supply line" for church members by restricting the publication of Christian materials, including Bibles, Borji said.

The church is regularly monitored by authorities, who 20 years ago had also demanded a list of all Christians in regular attendance, though church leaders refused. There are no baptisms taking place at the Central AG church, nor at other official churches.

"It is a meticulous and organized effort to make sure nothing

in the church goes unnoticed,” Borji said. “The leaders are under a lot of pressure.”

As an Islamic republic, Iran views Christians and especially Christian converts as enemies of the state and pawns of the West out to undermine the government. Borji explained that the Iranian government has never come to accept the concept of “Farsi-speaking church,” and that authorities associate Christianity with some ethnic minorities in Iran—that is, Armenians and Assyrians—and the West.

“So accepting the notion of a church that worships in Farsi is a threat to a regime that demands religious monopoly,” Borji said.