

Iranian Pastor Freed Following 5-Year Prison Stint

An Iranian pastor has been released early from prison, just six months after he failed to appeal a sentence to an extra year in jail and 74 lashes for allegedly possessing two litres of alcohol in his prison cell.

Farshid Fathi was serving a six-year prison sentence – extended to seven years – for “action against the regime’s security, being in contact with foreign organisations, and religious propaganda”. Due to be released in Dec. 2017, he was then told by prison officials in early July that he would be released this year – at that time they said on 10 Dec.

He was originally arrested on 26 Dec. 2010 at the same time as around 60 other Christians, many belonging to house churches in Tehran and other cities. Most of those have now been released.

The governor of Tehran, Morteza Tamadon, on 4 January, 2011 described the detained Christians as “extremists” who “penetrate the body of Islam like corrupt and deviant people”. He added that they were trying to establish “an extreme form of Christianity like the Taliban and Wahhabis in Islam”.

Fathi, who is a 35-year-old father of two, was imprisoned without trial in Evin prison. After 15 months of uncertainty, he was tried in January 2012. Details of his court trial have not been published.

Iran’s Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei had made a speech in October 2010 saying that house churches should be “dealt with”. A new wave of surveillance and arrests against Christians followed soon after, with leaders of house church groups, such as Farshid Fathi, especially singled out for longer detentions. Born into a Muslim family, Fathi became a

Christian at the age of 17 and at the time of his arrest he was working full-time as a pastor and leader of house churches.

Fathi served his sentence alongside another man, Alireza Seyyadian, who was also imprisoned for six years. Seyyadian was arrested as he was trying to leave the country for a holiday at the time of Persian New Year in March 2012, and was also transferred with Fathi to Rajaei-Shahr prison.

Seyyadian is a member of a group known as Church of Iran, which holds a non-Trinitarian theology. He was sentenced to 90 lashes and six years' imprisonment for "acting against national security through collusion, gathering and propagating against the Islamic regime". However, he was released after three and a half years, in August 2015.

Estimates from evidence provided by the American Center for Law and Justice, Article 18 and Middle East Concern suggest that, in May 2015, there were 90 people detained in Iranian prisons on account of their Christian faith and practice.

According to the 2015 World Watch List by Open Doors International, a charity that supports Christians who face hostilities because of their faith, Iran ranks seventh in the top 10 countries where Christians are persecuted.

The main driver of persecution in Iran, it says, is "Islamic extremism"; Christians from an Islamic background are especially targeted. Increasing numbers of Farsi-speaking churches have been forced to close, some of which have been there for centuries. This is a development that has not been seen in the history of the Church in Iran, stated the World Watch List.

"Expectations were high when President Rouhani took office in 2013. However, his powers are limited and, in the short run, no concrete changes are expected for religious minorities," said Open Doors.

Mohabat News reports that even Sunni Muslims “cannot enjoy the least amount of freedom”. As with Christians and other religious minorities, Sunnis are not allowed to build a mosque of their own in Tehran, the capital.