

Iranian Christians See Hope Stripped Away With Extreme Torture, Harassment on the Rise

There was hope among Iranian Christians that the mass protests earlier this year could effect change for them, but they continue to be harassed and imprisoned on spurious charges.

An Iranian convert to Christianity, Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh, who recently lost his appeal against a 10-year sentence for “missionary activities”, was reportedly moved to the infamous Evin Prison in Tehran two weeks ago—the same prison where two other Christians, Majidreza Souzanchi Kushani and Fatimeh Mohammadi (both members of the self-styled “Church of Iran”), have also been held since their arrest on Nov. 17 last year.

According to the advocacy group Middle East Concern, Kushani was charged with “disrupting national security” by being a member of an evangelical Christian group, for which he could receive a prison sentence of between two and ten years.

It remains unclear on what grounds Mohammadi is being held, in the women’s ward of the infamous prison referred to by two other Christian women who spent eight months there as the “the world’s most brutal prison”.

Maryam Rostampour and Marziyeh Amirizadeh, speaking in November, said they experienced relentless interrogation and physical threats during their time in the prison in 2009/10.

It has been eight years since their release, but Rostampour said: “When people experience living in Evin Prison they will never be the same again. The stress is too much. We can’t be

the same people. We can't be as happy as before. We don't enjoy activities like normal people because all the time we think of those who are still there."

'They broke my identity'

Another Christian who recently spent time in the prison was Saman.* A convert from Islam to Christianity, Saman was arrested in 2016 and imprisoned in Evin for 44 days because of activities related to his Christian faith.

He says the time following his release was also difficult, as the authorities kept an eye on him to ensure he wouldn't visit other Christians or attend a church meeting. He says he was traumatized but did not receive the support he needed.

A local partner of the Christian charity Open Doors recently organized trauma-care training for Christians like him, where they were offered counselling, art therapy and Bible studies. Saman says the training helped to restore his hope and faith.

Saman says of his time in Evin: "They tried to break me by telling me what a nobody I was; they broke my identity." He says he was afraid and felt hopeless, even doubting his faith: "I thought: 'Is this it? Have I wasted 13 years of believing in Him [God]? Does he even exist?'"

He says the interrogators also brought in some of his friends, blindfolded, and when asked whose fault it was that they were there, they would all say "Saman" and that they would be willing to testify against him in court.

Evin Prison was visited by a delegation of 11 Iranian MPs on 30 January to investigate alleged abuse, as Radio Farda reported. During their visit, the MPs spoke with four detainees while surrounded by intelligence officers, drawing criticism from the deputy head of parliament's Legal and Judicial Commission, Mohammad Kazemi, who said: "It would have been better if they'd stayed away, since we had to talk to the

detainees in private.”

‘We should trust the people’

Earlier this month, on the occasion of the 39th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, President Hassan Rouhani called for unity, saying: “We should trust the people. We must allow all inclinations to participate in elections ... Our revolution was victorious when we were all together ... All Iranian races, all Iranian religions, Shiites and Sunnis, Muslims, Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians—whoever believes in the constitution, that is our criteria. He is a revolutionary, and he must be respected.”

His comments followed weeks of social unrest and protests, revealing not just economic frustration but also disillusionment with the way the 39-year-old regime is perceived by some to “use Islam for their own ideology”, as Article 18’s Mansour Borji told World Watch Monitor in January.

But despite the pressures, Christianity is spreading in Iran. Official figures are hard to come by in a country where turning away from Islam is a crime, but based on observing several factors Christian charity Open Doors says there are approximately 800,000 Christians in Iran—roughly one per cent of its population of over 80 million. This is a conservative estimate, they add, as several reports show that the church is growing and that Christians from a Muslim background—and therefore unrecognized by the state—now outnumber the recognized Christian minorities of Armenian and Assyrian descent.

**Real name withheld for security reasons. {eo}*

This article originally appeared on World Watch Monitor.