

HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN

Baha'i

In Iran, repression of the Bahá'í community is official government policy. Some 300,000 Bahá'ís live throughout Iran, making the Bahá'í Faith the country's largest minority religion. The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy, and community affairs are coordinated by democratically elected governing councils called Spiritual Assemblies. More than 200 Bahá'ís were killed in Iran between 1978 and 1998, the majority by execution, and thousands more were imprisoned. Today the Iranian government regards Bahá'ís as apostates and “unprotected infidels.” Bahá'ís in Iran have no legal rights, and they are not permitted to elect leaders of their community. Bahá'ís in Iran are systematically denied jobs, pensions and the right to inherit property. More than 10,000 Bahá'ís have been dismissed from government and university posts since Iran's 1979 revolution. Bahá'ís have been barred from institutions of higher education since 1980. All Bahá'í cemeteries, holy places and community properties were seized soon after the 1979 revolution. None have been returned, and many sites of the greatest historical significance to Bahá'ís have been destroyed.

The Iranian Student News Agency (ISNA) announced on February 11, 2009, that charges had been laid against the seven imprisoned members of the national-level committee that coordinates the activities for the Iranian Bahá'í community. The report quoted deputy Tehran prosecutor Hassan Haddad as having said that these Bahá'ís are accused of “espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic republic.” The Bahá'í leaders have been held for over a year in Evin prison and denied access to their attorney, the Nobel Laureate, Shirin Ebadi. Their trial date has recently been set for July 11, 2009.

Women

Women's rights advocates have been beaten, harassed and persecuted for exercising their right to assembly, association and expression: for peaceful demonstrations; for collecting signatures for a petition to remove legal discrimination against women in Iran's legal codes and system; for writing and publishing articles; for convening meetings; and for traveling for the purpose of having contact with their peers abroad. Court procedures in their cases have been universally unfair and in violation of Iranian law. Bail amounts have been excessive, forcing many defendants to remain in detention. Persecuted women's rights advocates have generally been charged with “acts against national security” and other vague and/or unreasonable offenses. Many have been convicted and sentenced to jail terms and suspended sentences apparently aimed to keep them in a state of isolation and fear, and thus to suppress and repress further human rights activity.

The women's rights movement is one of the most vivid and well-organized widespread human rights campaigns in Iran. Under the government of former President Mohammed Khatami, civil society was encouraged and supported. Over 600 nongovernmental organizations were established to promote and encourage respect for and implementation of women's rights. These groups found common cause advocating for changes in a legal system in which discrimination against women is deeply embedded. They began to campaign for equal rights between women and men in marriage; equal compensation for injuries and accidental death; equal inheritance rights; for prosecuting perpetrators of honor killings; for equal access to and treatment in courts of law; and against death sentences by stoning in cases of adultery.

With the government of President Ahmadinejad, the status of Iranian women has deteriorated precipitously. A “Program for Social Safety” allows the authorities arbitrarily to harass women for not wearing “appropriate Islamic dress.” A “Family Protection Act” has been promulgated that would harm the welfare and rights of women further, by legitimizing polygamy, allowing temporary marriages, marriage at the age of only 13, and other measures. Furthermore, a system of quotas has been introduced giving males an unfair advantage in obtaining admission to the system of higher education.

Worker's Rights

The government routinely arrests and prosecutes workers demanding their most basic rights, such as demands for wages unpaid, sometimes for periods as long as 36 months. Security forces often attack peaceful gatherings by workers, harass their families, and even kill them, as happened during a gathering by copper miners in Shahr Babak, near the city of Kerman, in 2004.

Two leading trade unionists, Mansour Osanloo and Mahmoud Salehi, are currently in prison. Another one, Majid Hamidi, recently the target of an assassination attempt, is hospitalized. In addition to being imprisoned and fined, eleven other workers were flogged in February 2008 for the crime of participating in a peaceful gathering to commemorate International Labor Day, May 1st.

Although Iran's constitution (Articles 26 and 27) recognizes freedom of association and assembly and Iran's civil law requires ratified international treaties to be recognized equivalent to domestic laws, Iran's Labor Law explicitly contradicts these legal obligations. Section 6 of the law addresses workers organizations in such vague terms that for nearly twenty years since its adoption, Iranian workers have not been able to freely associate with independent organizations.

According to the Labor Law, workers may only participate in three types of organizations: Islamic Labor Councils, Trade Associations, and Workers Representative for workplaces with less than 35 workers). The law explicitly encourages workers to associate with Islamic Councils, which are effectively controlled by management in workplaces. It also stipulates that only one of the above organizations may exist in a given workplace. These legal restrictions on membership and pre-definition of the allowable types of workers organizations are in direct breach of international standards and the Iranian constitution.

Academic Freedom

The freedom to teach academic texts and choose one's area of research, which are fundamentals of academic freedom, have been threatened, particularly in social science, humanities, and law departments. A wave of firings and forced retirements of faculty began in 2006, after a speech by President Ahmadinejad who called for the purging of universities of secular and liberal professors.

In June 2006, a number of well-known professors, mostly from political science and law departments, were forced into retirement; a number of faculty have also been fired because of the content of their teachings.

Incitement of Genocide

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has consistently denied the Holocaust, called for the destruction of Israel and led Iranians in 'death to America' and 'death to Israel' chants. According to Canadian Member of Parliament and international human rights scholar Irwin Cotler, there is significant factual evidence of state-sanctioned incitement to genocide (as defined by the Genocide Conventions) in Ahmadinejad's Iran.

The incitement to genocide is part of an effort to return to the original themes of the 1979 Islamic revolution, which has disturbing Messianic elements. The Iranian ayatollahs speak often of the re-emergence of the "Twelfth" or "Hidden Imam," sometimes referred to as the "Mahdi." According to their beliefs, after a stormy period of apocalyptic wars, the clouds will part, and the "sun" (the Mahdi) will be revealed. They believe that when he is released from his imprisonment, the entire world will submit to Islam.



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