

[PROVISIONAL TRANSLATION FROM PERSIAN]

[Translator's notes appear in square brackets.]

[Personal information has been **redacted**.]

[The excerpt below is from the section of the article that pertains to the Baha'i Faith]

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The Difficulties of Being a Baha'i in Iran

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Currently, 72 of the followers of the Baha'i Faith are in the Iranian prisons and dozens more have been released on bail or are awaiting trial.

According to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, "Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Iranians are the only religious minorities whose members are free to practice their religious rituals within the law, and can act in accordance with their personal status and religious teachings", and Baha'is are not covered by this law.

Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naimi, Saied Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Vahid Tizfahm and Mahvash Sabet are the former leaders of the Baha'i community in Iran, who have been imprisoned for more than eight years. Mahvash Sabet and the other six were arrested on 15 Esfand 1386 [5 March 2008] and 25 Ordibehesht 1387 [4 May 2008] respectively. Initially, they were sentenced to 20 years in prison under tazir law¹; however, the court of appeal overturned the original sentence, removing charges such as espionage and collaborating with the Israeli government, and sentenced them to 10 years in prison under tazir law, a sentence that the attorney general found to be against the law and again sentenced them to 20 years in prison.

Farhad Sabetan, a spokesman for the Baha'i community, said that with the implementation of Article 134 of the Islamic Penal Code last year, the sentences of former Baha'i community leaders were reduced to 10 years and they should be released from prison in another two years.

These seven were members of a group called the Yaran, in charge of leading the Baha'i community in Iran, and during the last eight years they had been denied leave. Fariba Kamalabadi is the only one who took a five-day leave, last week.

At the same time, Shahin Negari, Nasim Bagheri, Azita Rafizadeh, Keyvan Rahimian, Foad Moghaddam, Amanollah Mostaghim, Azizollah Samandari and Peyman Koushk-Baghi, eight Baha'is, are imprisoned for collaborating with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education. Azita Rafizadeh and

¹ [Tazir (discretionary punishment): Punishment with maximum and minimum limits determined by law and judge, respectively]

Peyman Koushk-Baghi, a married couple, who have taught at the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, are also incarcerated, but they are not the only couple in prison.

According to Farhad Sabetan, in addition to former leaders of the Baha'i community and colleagues of the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, 57 ordinary Baha'i citizens are imprisoned in various cities in Iran. Fariborz Baghi and Nategheh Naimi, as well as Iman Rashidi and Shabnam Mottahed, are Baha'i couples imprisoned in Yazd Prison. In Tehran, however, Elham Farahani is being held in Evin Prison and her husband Adel Naimi, along with their son Shamim Naimi, are being held in Rajaei-Shahr Prison.

Closing Shops During Baha'is Religious Holidays Puts Extra Pressure on Them.

Farhad Sabetan says, "The only reason for the arrest, interrogation and sentences of these citizens is their belief in the Baha'i Faith. Hundreds of legal documents issued in the courts fully prove this. For example, a student is expelled from university for believing in what they call the perverse Baha'i sect, or a Baha'i has been imprisoned, or his house has been confiscated, or his pension has been suspended; all these things have happened because of their belief in the Baha'i Faith. Of course, for years now, these documents have not been given to anyone, but from the first two decades of the revolution, there are hundreds and thousands of documents that show that whatever happens to Baha'is is simply because of their beliefs."

Heavy Sentences for Baha'i Citizens

Dozens of other Baha'is have been released on bail, but face heavy sentences. In Golestan Province, 32 people have been sentenced to a total of 238 years in prison. Vahid Meshkani-Farahani, a lawyer for these Baha'i citizens, said, "In some cities, such as Gorgan and Gonbad, my clients have been prosecuted because their 'behaviour is for the purpose of disturbing the national security.' They are accused of forming and managing a group to overthrow the regime, propaganda against the regime, and collaboration with hostile governments, specifically Israel."

Objecting to the rulings issued to his clients, he said, "It is reflected in the case file that they had a hierarchy within themselves, that is, within a group, and that at each time individuals had specific duties and responsibilities in relation to these charges. All the accusations in their files are related to the propaganda of the Baha'is and the attraction of Muslims to Baha'ism. But my clients maintain that none of their behaviour was organizational; it was often religious procedures and rituals of the Baha'i Faith that they had to perform, such as trips or prayer meetings or feasts. My clients say that these activities, which were merely feasts or trips or prayers, have been perceived as organizational action."

According to Mr. Meshkani-Farahani, "In the present-day geography, the holy centre of the Baha'i Faith is located in Israel, and therefore the Baha'is who practice their religious rites are perceived to be connected to Israel."

Farhad Sabetan explains, "We face such issues in different cities. If a Baha'i citizen has a [feast] or a prayer meeting or a meeting with the friends in his/her private home, and perhaps those who may be interested in learning about the Baha'i Faith come to this person's house; they are arrested and told that they are teaching Baha'i Faith, and in this way, disturbing national security. Even if someone propagandizes in Iran, propagating religion is not illegal. All international covenants and principles such as freedom of opinion and freedom of belief and teaching this belief, allow this, and none of the Iranian civil laws state that no one can talk about their religion and inform anyone. When Baha'is are asked what is the Baha'i Faith, they answer and explain, but the authorities of the Islamic Republic consider any talk about the Baha'i Faith to be a sin and a crime."

According to Mr. Sabetan, on the one hand, Baha'is go to prison, and on the other hand, they are released on bail. "Many are waiting for their trial. Those who have been released on bail are waiting to hear their court verdict."

Social and Economic Deprivations

The problem for Iranian Baha'is is not only imprisonment and harsh sentences. Deprivation of education is one of the most important deprivations of the Baha'is. Farhad Sabetan pointed to the sealing of Baha'i citizens' shops, due to the religious holidays. He said, "The [Baha'is] close their shops on Baha'i holidays, which are religious holidays, but officials say you should not follow your own religious rites, it is illegal to close your shops; and they come and seal them up."

The demolition of Baha'i cemeteries, the denial of permission to bury the dead, the confiscation of property, the denial of business licences, and the denial of employment for Baha'i citizens are other restrictions facing Baha'is in Iran.

The spokesman for the Baha'i community said, "The most important right that Baha'is are deprived of is the right to education, and the second right they are deprived of is the right to employment. From the beginning of the revolution, those who worked in government ministries were fired, and since then, anyone who is a Baha'i is not allowed to be employed in government ministries and state companies, at all. If the private companies come to know that the applicants are Baha'is, they do not hire them, or if they do, the authorities pressure those companies to fire them. The right to engage in economic activity, whether through employment or self-employment, is taken away from Baha'is."

Marriages of Baha'i citizens are not registered in Iran. Farhad Sabetan said, "The marriage of two Christians or two Zoroastrians is recognized according to their own religious rites, but the Baha'is are told that they either have to get married under Islamic law or they cannot get married. That means Baha'i marriage is not recognized in Iran; their marriages are considered illegitimate".