

Suppression and “Climate of fear” reign in Iran for religious minorities

By Kyle Wagner for Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (28.04.2015) - “Iranians must unite to liberate their country and the Middle East from this nightmare,” declared Dr Sanabargh Zahedi, an Islamic scholar and opposition leader in Iran. He was speaking of the repressive regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was established in 1979, following the revolution that deposed the Shah. Since that time, the human rights of Iranian citizens have been systematically violated and the activities of religious minorities severely curtailed.

Zahedi’s remarks were made at a conference at the European Parliament on religious freedom in Iran, which took place on 22nd April under the sponsorship of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). MEPs Andrew Lewer and Peter Van Dalen organised the event on behalf of the ECR’s internal working group on the freedom of religion. Christians, Baha’is and other minority religious and belief groups live daily in a “climate of fear,” said Lewer, despite hopes for reform after the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013. While world attention has been riveted on the outcome of nuclear negotiations with Iran, grave violations of human rights continue to be perpetrated against religious believers that are viewed by the regime as being fundamentally at odds with the state.

Harrowing testimony was presented by several speakers, many of whom remained anonymous in order to ensure their security in Iran. Chrissy Taylor of Elam Ministries told stories of Christians whose homes had been raided by security forces, who were beaten, arrested and sentenced to prison for their faith. Human Rights Without Frontiers has documented several of these cases in its 2014 world report on freedom of religion or belief.

Rachel Bayani, representative to the European Union for the Baha’i International Community, appealed for states and international organisations to view Iran’s treatment of the Baha’is as a litmus test to determine Iran’s sincerity in other international negotiations, including the ongoing nuclear negotiations. She noted that any mention of the Baha’is promptly ends all discussion with Iranian diplomats and officials. Despite this she feels that this is a conversation that must be had and cannot be allowed to die.

John O’Rourke of the European External Action Service (EEAS) offered a variant opinion, saying that the international community is limited in its ability to change the domestic policies of sovereign states. The best way to improve the standings of religious minorities in Iran, he said, is to continue open discussions without explicitly bringing the issue to bear on relations with Iran.

The use of “push” or “pull” factors for changing the situation of religion and belief minorities in Iran will be largely determined by EU and US decision makers; however, the clear consensus at the conference was that increased attention is urgently needed toward those in Iran who suffer discrimination and repression for reason of religion or belief.