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Persecution of Christians in the World

Conference organised by the EPP Group at the European Parliament on 1st July 2015

Contribution on the persecution of Christians in China, Iran and North Korea

by Willy Fautré

1 July 2015

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By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

State religious persecution may include the **death penalty**, various forms of **physical punishment**, **prison terms** and **exorbitant fines**, sometimes of up to 100 times the minimum monthly salary.

In a number of Muslim majority countries, there are laws providing for the death penalty, in cases of conversion from Islam to another religion and of missionary activities. This is the case in **Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Maldives, Mauritania, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, United Arab Emirates** and **Yemen**.

Every year, we publish a list of people who were put in prison for changing religion, for carrying out missionary activities, for gathering for worship or any other religious activity in public or in private, for so-called blasphemy charges and for conscientious objection to military service. Last year, Christians were imprisoned for their religious activities in no less than 20 countries: communist countries, former communist countries, Muslim-majority and Hindu-majority countries. Three of them are particularly repressive in this regard: **North Korea, China and Iran**.

CHINA

Catholics

According to the Pew Research Center, there are about six million Catholics in China. Since the end of diplomatic relations between China and the Holy See in 1951, the Catholic Church has had two faces in China:

- the government-established Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association grouping together Catholic churches under the sole authority of the Chinese state
- the Roman Catholic churches loyal to the Pope.

The Chinese Government only recognises clerics who openly declare their independence from the Vatican and have sworn allegiance to the Communist regime. Roman Catholic clerics and churches rejecting their submission to the authority of the state were forced underground and declared illegal.

Despite this official policy, many bishops and priests were secretly ordained by the Vatican, and in many provinces the state-sanctioned clergy works in close collaboration with the unregistered Catholic clergy and congregations.

Quite a number of priests and bishops have been missing since they were arrested years ago for refusing to join the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association or for holding underground religious activities. The whereabouts of many of them are still unknown.

In our list of prisoners, we listed and documented 13 cases of priests and bishops who have been missing for years and have disappeared from the radar:¹

Fr. TIAN Dalong

Msgr. Cosma SHI Enxiang, underground bishop of Yixian (Hebei)

Fr. CUI Tai, underground priest of the diocese of Xuanhua (Hebei)

Fr. GAO Jiangping and another priest

Fr. LIU Honggen, underground priest of the diocese of Baoding (Hebei)

**Fr. Joseph LU GENJUN, vicar general of the underground diocese of Baoding (Hebei)
Thaddeus MA Daqin (Bishop of Shanghai)**

**Fr. MA Wuyong, underground priest of the diocese of Baoding (Hebei)
Fr. SONG Wanjun**

Fr. WANG Chengli, underground priest of the Diocese of Heze (Shandong)

Msgr. WU Qinjing, official bishop of the diocese of Zhouzhi (Shaanxi)

Fr. ZHANG Jianlin, underground priest of the diocese of Xuanhua (Hebei)

Msgr. James Su ZHIMIN, underground bishop of Baoding (Hebei)

One of them re-appeared this year on a specific occasion: the announcement of his death.

¹ See the details of their cases at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/FoRB-and-Blasphemy-Prisoners-list-2014.pdf> (Opp 21-25)

His name is Bishop Cosma Shi Enxiang.² He had disappeared in police custody after he had been arrested in April 2001 in the home of his niece in Beijing. Since then he had been kept in detention in an unknown location without trial or charge. In all these years family members regularly asked authorities for some news of their relative, but they never got any response. On 30th January of this year, an employee of the city of Baoding, questioned again by the family, let slip that the bishop had died. His family did not get his body back or an urn with his ashes. This is a usual practice when prisoners bear visible signs of beatings and torture that need to remain hidden.

Over the years, other underground bishops - not recognized by the government - have suffered a similar tragic fate.

In 2005, **Msgr. John Gao Kexian, Bishop of Yantai (Shandong) died after five years of detention in police custody.** The corpse of the bishop was immediately cremated and buried although family members had asked for an autopsy to know the cause of death. Rumors about the death of the bishop had circulated for months until they were confirmed by the authorities.

In 2007, **Msgr. John Han Dingxian, Bishop of Yongnian (Hebei),** died after two years of isolation in the hands of the police. Again the family were denied an autopsy because a few hours after the announced death, the bishop was cremated and the ashes buried in a public cemetery, without any religious ceremony.

Protestants

The Pew Research Center estimates that there are 68 million Protestant Christians:

- 23 million are affiliated with the *Three-Self Patriotic Movement* (TSPM), the state-sanctioned umbrella organisation for all officially recognised Protestant churches
- 45 million belong to unregistered 'house churches.'

The members of unregistered churches are especially subject to discrimination, harassment and even prosecution. The usual charges are:

- Carrying out activities under the name of a social organisation without registration
- Participation in demonstrations and illegal assemblies
- Disruption of public order
- Engaging in illegal evangelism
- Organising activities of superstitious sects and secret societies to disrupt public order

² Msgr. Shi was born April 17, 1922 in Shizhuang (Hebei). On 14 August 1947 he was ordained a priest in the Apostolic Prefecture of Yixian, two years after Mao Zedong took power and began to implement a policy of control of the Church, emphasizing the urgent need for all Catholics to express their patriotism, becoming independent from the rest Church and breaking bonds with the pontiff. Fr. Shi, was arrested for the first time in 1954 because of his stubborn fidelity to the Pope. In 1957 he was sentenced to hard labor in the freezing region of Heilongjiang first, then in the coal mines in Shanxi. Released in 1980, he dedicated his life to evangelization and supporting the faithful in Hebei.

On 24 June 1982, Msgr. Zhou Fangji consecrated him bishop in secret and his clandestine episcopal ministry began. In 1987 he was arrested and placed under house arrest for two years.

In 1989, there were hopes for a new opening in society and in the Church in China. But the Tiananmen massacre in June dealt them a cruel blow. The underground bishops, who on 21 November of that year had formed a bishops' conference, were all arrested along with many priests. They included Msgr. Cosma Shi. Within a few weeks five bishops and 14 priests were swallowed up by the regime's prison system, released only in 1993, thanks to an international pressure campaign. On 13 April 2001, the bishop was arrested again and disappeared into thin air. Up until now when the news of his death spread like wildfire only to be later denied. Where he died, how and when will remain a mystery that only the Chinese Communist Party knows.

- Illegal business

We have documented about 20 individual cases of arrests and imprisonment in our **FoRB Prisoners List 2014**.

Despite the restrictions, harassment, arrests and government surveillance, the number of Protestants is on the increase in China, mainly among Evangelicals and Pentecostals. The government tolerates regular and public worship activities of unregistered religious groups; however, the level of tolerance can vary, depending on province or locality.

Documented cases

In January 2014, Li Mingbo, an employee at the Langzhong house church, was given 15 days of administrative detention for organising a Christmas gathering for church members.

On 24th January, in Tongzhou, the police raided the home of Pastor Xu Yonghai during a Bible study attended by 15 people. The group members were arrested for their alleged participation in an illegal assembly. The pastor and 11 members of the church were held for an undetermined period of time at Beijing Municipal First Detention Centre.

On 21st March, in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, police interrupted a training program at a nursing home and arrested four people. Three of them were placed on 15-day administrative detention, while an American pastor who attended the meeting was banned from the region and fined 800 yuan.

In July, Pastor Zhang Shaojie was sentenced to 12 years in prison and fined on charges of fraud and disturbing public order. He had been arrested in November 2013 while defending his congregation's property against government appropriation.

On 7th August, police in central China's Hunan province placed 10 house church leaders under criminal detention for allegedly organizing cults and using superstition to undermine law enforcement.

IRAN

99% percent of Iran's population of 78 million are Muslims. 90% are Shia and 9% are Sunni, mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchs and Kurds. Sufi Muslims in Iran are estimated to be between two and five million people.

There are also about 300,000 Christians in the country, although the government places the official number at 117,700.

The majority of Christians are ethnic Armenians concentrated in Tehran and Isfahan.

Unofficial estimates of the Assyrian Christian population range between 10'000 and 20'000.

There are also Protestant denominations, including Evangelical groups, often placed at about 10'000 but many Protestants reportedly practice in secret, making it difficult to obtain accurate statistics.

Legal framework

In Iran, **Muslims cannot change their religion.**

In Iran, **proselytising of Muslims by non-Muslims is illegal and can be punishable by death.** The government enforces this prohibition by closely monitoring the activities of Evangelical Christians and discouraging Muslims from entering church premises.

Christians of all denominations report the presence of security cameras outside their churches. The purpose is to check that no non-Christians participate in services. Worshippers are also subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside places of worship.

Many converts from Islam to Christianity who courageously try to share their faith with other Muslims have been arrested, detained and prosecuted because of their evangelistic activities among Muslims. The authorities have a lot of imagination to formulate official charges: crimes against national security, propaganda against the regime, crimes against the Islamic order, insulting the Supreme Leader, enmity of God and so on.

The use of the Farsi language is banned during religious meetings to avoid missionary activities among Iranian Muslims. Christian Bibles are frequently confiscated and publishing houses are pressured by government officials to cease operations.

Documented cases

In January 2014, the Karaj Revolutionary Court sentenced the Christian convert **Hossein Saketi Aramsari** to one year of detention. Mr Saketi, arrested on 23rd July 2013, was previously granted bail on conditional release, but for unknown reasons judicial authorities prevented his family from posting the bail for his release.

On 13th January, Christian prisoner **Davoud Alijani** was released from Karoon Prison after 257 days of detention. He was arrested by security authorities during a raid on Christmas celebration together with other members of the Assembly of God Church of Ahwaz.

On 28th January, Mrs. Shahnaz Jayzan, Pastor Sabokrouh's wife, was conditionally released from detention three months before her prison term ended. She had been arrested together with other members of the Assembly of God Church in Ahwaz in a raid carried out by Iranian authorities on 23rd December 2011.

On 29th March, six members of a group of eight Christians from Shiraz who were sentenced to various terms had their prison sentences upheld on appeal. The Christians were charged with 'action against the national security' and 'propaganda against the order of the system':

- Mohammad Roghangir was sentenced to six years in prison,
- Massoud Rezai to five years,
- Mehdi Ameruni and Bijan Farokhpour Haghghi received three year sentences,
- Shahin Lahouti and Suroush Saraie received two and half years,
- Eskandar Rezai and Roxana Forghi each received a one-year sentence.

In April, the musician Shahin Lahouti, a convert to Christianity, was returned to prison after being released in December 2013. In October 2012, he was arrested during a raid on a prayer meeting and sentenced to two and a half years of detention. He was later released on bail on the condition that he took no further part in Christian activities, however his bail was revoked and he was returned to prison.

On 12th August, Iranian authorities raided a house church and arrested two converts, Mehdi Vaziri, 28, a graphic designer and Amir Kian, 27, a musician.

On 27th October, a Revolutionary Court in Karaj sentenced three members of the Church of Iran, Behnam Irani, Reza Rabani, and Abdolreza Ali, to 18 years in prison and exile. They were convicted of 'acting against national security and organising a group to overthrow the regime.'

On 3rd November, a Revolutionary Court in Karaj, capital of Alborz province, sentenced three members of the Church of Iran to long term imprisonment and exile: Behnam Irani, Reza Rabani and Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad.

On 26th December, sixty year-old former leader of the Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Iran, Victor Beth Tarmez was arrested by Iranian state security agents along with two other Christian converts at his home. He was holding a Christmas celebration that was deemed "unauthorized and illegal."

Another eight Christians were arrested on Christmas Day at a house church in Tehran province.

NORTH KOREA

North Korea has an estimated total population of 24.7 million. There are no reliable statistics available on religious adherence.

Roman Catholicism was introduced in the country in 1644 after members of the royal court had been baptised in China. By 1945, there were about 145,000 Roman Catholics and some 200,000 Protestants, the latter being the result of Protestant missionary activity beginning in the mid-19th century.

The post-war dismantling of religion in North Korea took place in two distinct stages. The first stage occurred between 1958 and 1960, when 'intensive guidance' was assigned to the operations by party headquarters. This guidance included a system of mutual surveillance among the country's residents. Any and all religious activity within North Korea could thereby be more easily monitored and rooted out.

However, in recent years, underground religious activities have been increasing in North Korea. Religious teachings have been secretly propagated inside the country by foreign missionaries with the unofficial support of South Korean and American churches and by North Korean defectors who were trained in churches of ethnic Koreans in China before they were forcefully repatriated to their country of origin. This has led to the arrest of foreign citizens and sentences to prison terms in North Korea.

North Korean Christians have also been arrested and sent to labour camps for being members of an underground church, and for praying or distributing Bibles. In 2009, a woman named Ryi Hyuk Ok was executed for distributing Bibles.

The political-philosophical foundation of North Korea is a quasi-religious ideology which merges the *Juche*³ and the *Kimilsungism*⁴. All North Korean citizens are to adhere to the *Juche* philosophy and no other view is tolerated. Any religion is perceived as a challenge to the personality cult of the Kim family and a foreign threat to national security.

Some Documented Cases of Arrests, Short Period Detentions and Sentences to Prison Terms

It is common knowledge that **North Korea** is by far the country which is keeping the highest number of believers (mainly Christians) in prisons and labor camps although access to information concerning individual cases is practically impossible. In 2014, four foreign Christians (American, Australian and South Korea) were detained for attempting to introduce copies of the Bible and religious books into the country. In the aftermath of the arrest of the South Korean missionary sentenced to life imprisonment in a labor camp, 33 North Koreans were arrested for helping him and could be executed. Thanks to the diplomatic efforts of the United States and Australia, their citizens could be released by the end of the year. These cases are only the tip of the tip of the iceberg.

³ The three fundamental principles of *Juche*, first formulated in 1955, are political independence, economic self-sustenance and self-reliance in defense.

⁴ *Kimilsungism* was first mentioned by Kim Jong-il in the 1970s and was introduced alongside the "Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic Ideological System". *Kimilsungism* refers to thoughts of Kim Il-sung. It is interchangeable with the *Juche* idea.

On 16th February 2014, John Short, a 75-year-old Australian missionary living in Hong Kong for 50 years, travelled to North Korea as part of a tour group. During the visit of a Buddhist temple, he left behind some pamphlets promoting Christianity. The local tour guide reported the 'crime' to the police. Short was arrested and kept in custody for 13 days before being released.

In March, 33 North Koreans⁵ were charged with allegedly attempting to overthrow the regime by setting up a network of underground churches. They were accused of collaborating with Kim Jung-wook, a South Korean missionary arrested in 2013. It is not known if all of them were Christians. According to the South Korean newspaper Chosun Ibo, they might face execution by the State Security Department in a secret location.

On 30th May, Kim Jung-Wook, a 50-year old South Korean Baptist missionary, who had been arrested on 7th October 2013, was sentenced to hard labour for life. He was convicted of espionage and setting up underground churches.

On 21st October, Jeffrey Edward Fowle (age 56), an American citizen, who had been arrested in Pyongyang in May for leaving a Bible in a night-club, was released thanks to the intervention of his government and repatriated to his country.

On 8th November, Kenneth Bae, a 46-year old Korean-American Evangelical, who had been arrested in November 2012 for his missionary activities and sentenced to 15 years hard labour on 30th April 2013 was released thanks to the intervention of his government and repatriated to his country. He had officially been charged with:

- working with the Evangelical organisation Youth With a Mission (YWM);
- setting up bases in China for the purpose of toppling the Democratic People's Republic of Korea;
- encouraging North Korean citizens to bring down the government;
- conducting a malignant smear campaign.

⁵ See Mail Online, 5 March 2014
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2573621/Kim-Jong-Un-orders-33-people-executed-contact-Christian-missionary-say-South-Korean-press.html>

Recommendations

Our recommendations as a non-religious human rights NGO is that the EU should:

- fully mainstreams FoRB in its relations with states which persecute believers and non-believers or fail to protect their citizens against religious persecution and religious cleansing;
- campaign against the death penalty and physical punishments;
- constantly asks for the release of Christians, other believers and atheists whose only crime has often been to merely exercise their to freedom of religion or belief as guaranteed by international standards.