

# **Freedom of Religion or Belief**

## **World Annual Report 2015**

### **Religious Minorities under Oppression**

*A report about religious or belief minorities under state oppression*

*along with a FoRB Prisoners List in 20 countries*

**Willy Fautré**

**Dr Mark Barwick**

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**Human Rights Without Frontiers International**  
**Avenue d'Auderghem 61/16, 1040 Brussels, Belgium**  
**Tel./ Fax: +32-2-3456145**  
**Website: <http://www.hrwf.eu>**  
**Email: [international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.eu](mailto:international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.eu)**

*With gratitude to those at HRWF Int'l who contributed to this report:*

**Nicholas Albano, Beatrice Basaldella, Lea Perekrests,  
Marzieh Shafiei, Alfiaz Vaiya and Elisa Van Ruiten**



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# Foreword

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is a universal human right guaranteed by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the UN International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

In 2013, the European Union adopted the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief for which *Human Rights Without Frontiers International (HRWF Int'l)* was pleased to be involved in the drafting process along with religious communities and other civil society organisations. The Guidelines are an important reference tool for use by EU institutions in third countries to identify FoRB violations and to assist citizens who have faced discrimination on the basis of their religion or beliefs. The Guidelines also set out actions and measures that the EU can take at multilateral-fora, regional and bi-lateral levels with regard to countries which fail to respect FoRB.

Our 2015 Annual Report on Freedom of Religion or Belief '**Religious Minorities Under Oppression**' covers 15 religious or belief minorities. As many of them are unknown to the general public and they are often mischaracterized by the oppressing powers, HRWF Int'l has presented each of them in the following way:

- General information about the minority
- Teachings of the minority
- Controversies: analysis of the roots of the political repression
- Information about the imprisonment of minority members country by country
- Conclusion

Our **2015 FoRB Prisoners List** is attached to this report and is also available on our website <http://hrwf.eu/forb-intro/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list>. It comprises about 1500 documented individual cases filed country by country and denomination by denomination.

Willy Fautré  
Executive Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l





# Introduction

Freedom of religion or belief is protected by Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which says:

(1): Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom [...] either individually or in community with others and in public or private to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

(2): No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

(3): Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.”

According to the 1981 UN Declaration of the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, Article 6, the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief includes, inter alia, the following freedoms:

- (a) To worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes;
- (b) To establish and maintain appropriate charitable or humanitarian institutions;
- (c) To make, acquire and use to an adequate extent the necessary articles and materials related to the rites or customs of a religion or belief;
- (d) To write, issue and disseminate relevant publications in these areas;
- (e) To teach a religion or belief in places suitable for these purposes;
- (f) To solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions from individuals and institutions;
- (g) To train, appoint, elect or designate by succession appropriate leaders called for by the requirements and standards of any religion or belief;
- (h) To observe days of rest and to celebrate holidays and ceremonies in accordance with the precepts of one's religion or belief;
- (i) To establish and maintain communications with individuals and communities in matters of religion and belief at the national and international levels.

## **State repression of legitimate activities of members of religious or belief groups**

Quite a number of UN Member States fail to abide by UN standards and even criminalise individual and collective rights related to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

The state repression 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.

The **death penalty** is a violation of the right to life and usually concerns the change of religion in a number of Muslim majority countries: **Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Maldives, Mauritania, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.**

**Physical punishments** such as lashing, flogging and caning are obviously torture as well as inhuman and degrading treatments. They are usually implemented in some Muslim majority countries in cases of change of religion or blasphemy or allegedly offensive statements related to FoRB issues.

**Imprisonment** is another form of state repression that is often used on the basis of laws criminalising

- the mere affiliation to or identification with a specific religious or belief group that may be banned or ostracised
- the public expression of atheism and agnosticism
- the questioning of official religious teachings
- the conversion to a minority religion or denomination
- proselytising by minority religious or belief groups
- worship and religious meetings by peaceful groups that are not allowed to operate because they are not state-sanctioned or have been arbitrarily denied state registration
- conscientious objection to military service<sup>1</sup>.

Victims of imprisonment are usually

- members and leaders of banned or unregistered religious or belief groups for any of their activities;
- members and leaders of registered religious or belief groups on the basis of laws restricting the individual freedom to change religion or belief and to carry out missionary activities as well as the collective freedoms of association, worship and assembly;
- people arrested and kept in detention without any charges or court decisions;
- people exercising their freedom of thought and conscience and accused of blasphemy;
- conscientious objectors to military service.

People sentenced to death because of abuse and misuse of blasphemy laws are kept on death row and their penalty is usually converted into prison for life.

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<sup>1</sup> In its General Comment 22, par. 11, the United Nations Human Rights Committee said in 1993 that the right to conscientious objection falls within the scope of Article 18:

‘(...) The Covenant does not explicitly refer to a right to conscientious objection, but the Committee believes that such a right can be derived from article 18, inasmuch as the obligation to use lethal force may seriously conflict with the freedom of conscience and the right to manifest one's religion or belief. When this right is recognized by law or practice, there shall be no differentiation among conscientious objectors on the basis of the nature of their particular beliefs; likewise, there shall be no discrimination against conscientious objectors because they have failed to perform military service. (...)’

See the full text of General Comment 22 at <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/gencomm/hrcom22.htm>.

## Targeted religious or belief minorities

People who are in prison for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief are members of religious or belief minorities. This report has identified a number of such minorities:

Ahmadis  
Atheists  
Baha'is  
Buddhists  
Catholics  
Coptic Orthodox  
Erfan-e Halghe followers  
Falung Gong practitioners  
Jehovah's Witnesses  
Protestants  
Said Nursi followers (Muslims)  
Shia Muslims  
Sufis (Muslims)  
Sunni Muslims  
Tablighi Jamaat Muslims

**Protestants** of various denominations (mainly Evangelical & Pentecostal) were in prison in 13 countries. Bhutan, China, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Laos, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Sudan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

**Jehovah's Witnesses** were in prison in 5 countries: Azerbaijan, Eritrea, Singapore, South Korea and Turkmenistan.

**Muslims** of various denominations were also in prison:

- **Sunnis** in 4 countries: Azerbaijan, China, Iran and Uzbekistan
- **Shias** in 3 countries: Egypt, Indonesia and Iran
- **Tablighi Jamaat** in 3 countries: Kazakhstan, Russia and Tajikistan
- **Said Nursi followers** in 3 countries: Azerbaijan, Russia and Uzbekistan

**Buddhists** were serving prison terms in China and in Vietnam.

**Catholics** were in jail in China and in Pakistan.

**Coptic Orthodox** were sentenced in Egypt and Eritrea.

Seven religious or belief minorities were deprived of their freedom in only one country.

In Iran: **Baha'is, Erfan-e Halghe, Sufis and Zoroastrians.**

In China: **Falun Gong practitioners.**

In Saudi Arabia: **Ahmadis.**

In Egypt: **Atheists.**

### **Most dangerous countries for religious minorities: Iran, China and North Korea**

Some countries imprison believers of a wide range of minority religions for the legitimate exercise of their right to freedom of religion or belief.

In **Iran**, seven denominations are victims of harsh repression: Baha'is, Erfan-e Halghe, Protestants, Shias, Sufis, Sunnis and Zoroastrians. The Baha'is, whose movement is considered a heresy of Islam, provide the highest number of prisoners. They are followed by the Sufis, Sunnis and indigenous Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, who extensively carry out missionary activities among their fellow citizens despite the risk of imprisonment, torture and execution. Shia dissidents, members of Erfan-e-Halghe and Zoroastrians are also repressed by the theocratic regime of Tehran.

In **China**, five religious denominations are particularly persecuted: (Tibetan) Buddhists, Roman Catholics, Falun Gong practitioners, Evangelical & Pentecostal Protestants and Uyghur Sunnis. Hundreds of Falun Gong practitioners, whose movement was banned in 1999, are massively imprisoned, while Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants belonging to the mushrooming network of underground house churches outside of state control also pay a heavy toll. A dozen Roman Catholic priests and bishops who were arrested by police many years ago for their faithfulness to the Pope and their failure to swear allegiance to the Communist Party remain missing. Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, systematically suspected of separatism and/or terrorism, are also particular targets of the regime.

In **Azerbaijan**, members of three religious denominations were behind bars. Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison because of their proselytising activities and as conscientious objectors to military service.

Nursi followers (Muslims) were persecuted, because the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi have been banned for allegedly inciting religious hatred and enmity.

Several Sunnis were in prison because they do not want their mosques to join the state-sanctioned and Shia-dominated Caucasian Muslim Board.

In **Eritrea**, three religious denominations have been repressed for many years. Abune Antonios, Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been under house arrest since January 2006 for repeatedly resisting government interference in religious affairs. As of October 2015, 54 Jehovah's Witnesses (46 men and 8 women) were imprisoned in harsh conditions. They were held in detention for conscientious objection, religious meetings in private houses or for undisclosed reasons. Some Pentecostals were arrested more than ten years ago because of their proselytising activities. Their whereabouts remain unknown.

In **Egypt**, three groups were victims of the misuse of the blasphemy legislation: Coptic Orthodox, Shias and perceived Atheists.

**North Korea** is also worth mentioning. This country remains a black spot on the map of religious persecution, as access to information about North Korean prisoners of conscience is impossible. According to the 400-page report of the UN Commission of Inquiry into human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea, 'Countless numbers of persons in **North Korea** who attempt to practice their religious beliefs have been severely punished, even unto death.'

### **Groups most targeted for prison sentences: Falun Gong practitioners, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is and Protestants**

The religious denominations that account for the highest numbers of prisoners are Falun Gong practitioners, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is and Protestants.

Innumerable **Falun Gong practitioners** are behind bars in China because of the ban on their movement. China is the sole country where they are perceived as a security threat by the state and persecuted. They are usually sentenced to three to seven years in prison but some have been sentenced up to 12 and even 17 years.

In 2015, 555 **Jehovah's Witnesses** were in prison in South Korea for refusing to perform military service. There were 54 more in Eritrea, 20 in Singapore and 15 in Turkmenistan for these and other reasons.

**Baha'is** in Iran were routinely arrested and sentenced to heavy prison terms because of the ban on their movement.

The most targeted Christian groups are **Evangelical and Pentecostal-minded Protestants**, mainly because of their proselytising activities in non-Christian cultures.

Members of banned or merely 'tolerated' Muslim groups (such as **Said Nursi followers** and **Tabligh Jamaat**) were detained for long periods in several post-Soviet states because they are perceived as a security threat.

**Tibetan Buddhists** and **Uyghur Muslims** in China were also arrested and sentenced to long prison terms because their religious and ethnic affiliation, different from the majority, is perceived as a threat to internal security.

Some **Sunni or Shia** Islamic clerics dissenting from the state-sanctioned theology were victims of some form of inquisition and occasionally arrested and imprisoned.

**Atheists and agnostics**, or individuals perceived as such, were particularly targeted in some Muslim majority countries.

Last but not least, the *juche* civil religion of the North Korean regime excludes the existence of any other competing religion or ideology.

Noteworthy is the fact that there were no FoRB prisoners among Jewish communities around the world and in mainline Christian Churches, such as the Orthodox Churches or the Anglican and Lutheran Churches.

In all the cases, the FoRB prisoners in 2015 belonged to a religious or belief minority in countries with a differing dominant religion.

## **Identifying FoRB prisoners**

### ***FoRB victims versus FoRB defenders***

Our report deals with FoRB prisoners belonging to minority religious groups who were victims of state repression for the legitimate exercise of their freedom of religion or belief.

Believers and clerics may organize petitions, exhibitions, demonstrations, hunger strikes, publish articles in all sorts of media, take interviews, etc., to denounce violations of their own personal rights, the rights of their religious or belief community and their members. Lawyers, journalists, bloggers... may also be FoRB defenders in some of their activities. However, if they get in trouble with the authorities, it is in their capacity as FoRB defenders and not as victims of violations of the rights protected by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration.

Believers and clerics may also be sent to prison for fighting for democracy, against autocratic leaders or corruption. If they are detained for such laudable activities, we consider them to be political prisoners and not FoRB prisoners.

### ***About the charges***

Another difficulty faced by the identification of FoRB prisoners is related to the official charges that are raised.

The reasons advanced by some states for various prison sentences can be divided into two categories:

- the breach of laws on religion unduly restricting the rights guaranteed by international instruments such as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration and the 1981 UN Declaration of the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief; and
- the misuse of other laws.

A number of official accusations clearly challenge the rights protected by Article 18: the right to change one's religion, the individual right to share one's beliefs in private and in public, the collective right to worship and assembly without state permission and so on. However, a wide range of other charges are motivated by the political will to stop the activities of some leaders and activists of minority religious or belief groups, to deter others and to reduce or eliminate minority religious or belief communities.

In **Iran**, Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants have for example been indicted for: Membership in organisations that aim to disrupt national security - Assembly and collusion against national security - Undermining national security - Propaganda against the system -

Organising a group to overthrow the regime - Enmity against God (Moharebeh) and other crimes.

Dervishes have been accused of violations of public order, involvement in a skirmish causing physical harm, carrying illegal weapons, participating in gatherings with the aim of overthrowing the Islamic Republic, enmity against God and corruption on earth.

Baha'is have been sentenced for: Organising an illegal group with the goal of aiding the Islamic Republic's enemies - Membership in an illegal and perverse sect with the goal of attracting Muslims and preaching against the Islamic Republic – Organising assemblies with the intention to disturb the national security - Use, possession and distribution of illegal compact discs containing appalling and offensive material - Using falsely obtained degrees, illegal counselling, running illegal classes, defrauding the public.

In **China**, Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants belonging to underground house churches have been put in prison for: Fraud and disruption of public order - Illegally occupying farmland and disturbing transportation order - Suspicion of inciting subversion of state power and leaking state secrets - Illegally operating business and so on.

Catholic clerics have been arrested for refusing to join the state-sanctioned *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association* and to swear allegiance to the Communist regime.

Tibetan Buddhists have been incarcerated for refusing to join the state-controlled *Chinese Buddhist Association* and to swear allegiance to the Communist regime, for defending their ethnic and cultural identity, for allegedly posing security problems and promoting secessionism.

Uyghur Muslims have been sentenced to life in prison or executed for alleged political and terrorist activities, for advocating separatism, for masterminding a bomb attempt, for illegal possession of firearms and ammunition.

The charges against Falun Gong practitioners usually concern membership in a forbidden cult, spreading lies about organ harvesting and trying to overthrow the regime, but are most of the time the charges are not publicized.

### ***About the access to information***

The compilation of the HRWF Int'l FoRB Prisoners List 2015, attached to this report,<sup>2</sup> faced the challenge of official charges that were abused and misused for the purpose of repressing religious or belief minorities, in particular for the Baha'is in Iran, the Tibetan Buddhists and Uyghur Muslims in China, the Hmong Christians in Laos and Vietnam in addition to certain Muslim denominations in Central Asia and Russia. Many names could not be included in the FoRB Prisoners List because of the lack of accurate or reliable information.

Another challenge to this report has been the over-reporting by Western media and Christian agencies on prisoners of Christian minorities in the world, even on minuscule religious groups,

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<sup>2</sup> See HRWF Int'l Prisoners List 2015 which comprises over 1500 documented individual cases which is available at <http://hrwf.eu/forb-intro/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

in comparison to the under-reporting of FoRB prisoners belonging to non-Christian minorities, which often go unreported or poorly represented in Western Europe and America.

A final challenge has been the lack of access to information about individual cases due to the secrecy of certain political regimes, such as in North Korea, and linguistic limitations, especially in the case of available data on ethno-religious minorities.

Violations of freedom of religion or belief are mainly a matter concerning minorities and their members living in a different majority culture. Their otherness may be perceived as a threat to the identity and the security of the majority.

When the freedom of religion or belief has been violated, we typically think of actions that have been taken against *individuals*. This is the lens through which people of Western cultures tend to view human rights, since individuals are normally regarded as the primary right-holders in society. It is also typically individuals that are held accountable for infractions of the law or for criminal offenses.

However, many people are in prison or are otherwise sanctioned not for something that they have personally done or for something they believe in, despite the charges that have been made against them. They are there because of their religious or belief *identity* and association with a group.

The freedom of association is a hallmark of any democratic system. And the freedom of religion or belief itself is understood to include the freedom to practice one's religion "either individually or in community with others," as it is stated in Article 18 of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights. It is this *community dimension* – that is present in most religions and that shapes profoundly religious identity – that can make governments and authorities uneasy. It can trigger actions to monitor, control, ban and even suppress that community by violent means, and consequently anyone who is *associated* with that community.

Religious identity can be viewed as dangerous. Much like ethnic or cultural or national identity, religious identity can shape one's worldview, one's ideas and ethics and even one's politics. Moreover, a religion or a belief is not always quiet and submissive. And this does not escape the notice of those who hold power.

Groups with a particular ethno-religious identity are even considered a more serious threat than purely religious minorities. They are indeed much more different from the majority and a number of their members may have a political agenda threatening the territorial integrity of the country.

Consequently, the repression of religion and belief groups is often as much about power as it is about any doctrine that is propagated by the group itself. Governments tend not to be overly concerned with religious doctrine; however, governments become quite concerned over any threat to their power or influence. Here is where religious identity and group politics become very important in understanding the restrictions that are placed on religion or belief groups. It is precisely because they are groups – and therefore perceived as potentially dangerous by various sorts of powers – that they can come under fire.



## **Religious or Belief Minorities**



# Ahmadis

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community, also known as Ahmadis, is a reformist movement within Islam that has at least 12 million adherents in more than 20 countries. It draws its name from its founder, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a Punjabi religious teacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who claimed to be the Mahdi, the promised Messiah who would come to establish universal peace.

Ahmad wanted to recover what he believed to be Islam's peaceful and tolerant origins. He also appealed for reason and critical thinking to be exercised when reading the Quran. In particular, he cautioned against irrational interpretations and the misapplication of Islamic law. Such pronouncements would evidently run into conflict with the established religious authority in many countries. Indeed, Ahmadiyya has been condemned as blasphemous and non-Muslim by many mainstream Muslims.

Six years after the death of Ahmad, the movement divided into two streams: the Lahore branch, which regards Ahmad as a reformer and not a prophet, and the Qadiani branch, which believes he was indeed a prophet from God. Today the Lahore Ahmadis are a small minority group within the Ahmadiyya community, meaning that the vast majority of Ahmadis would not consider the Prophet Muhammed to be the last prophet, a major point of contention in view of wider acceptance within the Muslim world.

Ahmadiyya is an international movement with large numbers in Pakistan, Indonesia, America, Britain, and Nigeria. There are also significant communities in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Tanzania, Niger, Cameroon, and Ghana.

## Teachings

Ahmad claimed to be God's appointed Prophet and Mahdi, appearing in the likeness of Jesus (Isa) in fulfilment of ancient prophecy. He declared that his was an Islamic movement, although his teachings differ from traditional Islamic doctrine on several key points.

The Ahmadiyya also have a distinctive narrative concerning the death of Jesus. Within Islam there are varying interpretations of Jesus' crucifixion. The mainstream view is that he did not die on a cross but was lifted bodily to heaven and will physically return before the end of time. In contrast, Ahmadis believe that Jesus escaped crucifixion and then later died a natural death. Now in the modern era, Ahmad has come in the likeness of Jesus to restore Islam's true and essential nature, to end all wars and to establish God's reign of justice and peace.

Ahmadis promote an overtly non-violent understanding of *jihad*. They underscore the Quranic principle that there must be no compulsion in religion, strongly rejecting the use of violence and terrorism in any form and for any reason. For the Ahmadiyya community, violent jihadism is an affront to the peaceful nature of Islam.

The group also endorses a clear separation of state and religion. In fact, Ahmad taught his followers to protect the sanctity of both religion and government by becoming 'righteous souls as well as loyal citizens.' Today, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is a strong advocate for

universal human rights and protections for all religions and other minority groups.

## Controversies

Ahmadis have faced stiff opposition in several predominantly Muslim countries, primarily for their reformist views on traditional Islam and the need for a more progressive interpretation of Islamic sources. They have been especially targeted in **Pakistan, Indonesia** and **Bangladesh**, where openly professing their religious identity could lead to threats to their personal security, and legal restrictions on their rights to basic freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and participation in public life.

In **Pakistan**, Ahmadiyya have been systematically repressed for decades. A 1974 amendment to the Pakistani Constitution declared that the Ahmadis cannot be considered Muslim. An ordinance passed in 1984 made it illegal for Ahmadis to 'pose' as Muslims, prohibiting them from using Islamic greetings in public places or calling their places of worship 'mosques.' To obtain a passport, Ahmadis must declare that their founder is a false prophet. The 1986 blasphemy law has likewise become a tool of repression of the Ahmadiyya community. Anyone convicted of defiling the name of Prophet Muhammed is subject to the death penalty. Life imprisonment can be imposed on anyone found guilty of insulting the Quran.

This legal framework, together with the strong influence of religious extremists within the political system, and a culture of intolerance towards religious diversity, creates a permissive environment for extremist attacks in Pakistan. While violence is generally perpetrated by non-state extremist groups, the police and judiciary are routinely accused of complicity in maintaining a system of discrimination and violence towards the Ahmadiyya community.

Ahmadis in **Indonesia** face similar legal and social hurdles, fuelled by ongoing resistance to Ahmadiyya's teachings from conservative Islamic groups. The repression of religious freedom for Ahmadis was institutionalised by the government's 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree, which explicitly bans Ahmadis from engaging in any activity that spreads or promulgates their teachings or doctrine. Violators are subject to imprisonment of up to five years. Regional and administrative strictures followed, further narrowing the scope of legal protections provided to Ahmadis in Indonesia.

In **Indonesia**, regional regulations and administrative decisions banning the activities of Ahmadiyah have not only increased in number since the introduction of the Joint Ministerial Decision 2008, but they have also grown in intensity and scope. Such regulations issued by regional authorities reflect the increasingly conservative positions of local governments on the issue of Ahmadiyah. In the absence of initiatives from the national government to protect the rights of Ahmadis, local governments are free to restrict religious freedom, leaving Ahmadis without the protection of the legal system.

Indonesian law forbids the Ahmadiyya from giving deviant interpretations of Islamic teachings and proselytizing their beliefs, but it is often more widely interpreted such that Ahmadis can observe their religion only in their private houses but cannot hold religious gatherings and appear in public showing their beliefs.

Speeches held by mainstream Islamic religious leaders clearly denouncing Ahmadiyah and its teachings as deviant have fomented attacks against the group, frequent and well documented by NGOs. There are many cases in which Ahmadis victims of persecution were jailed, while the perpetrators were left unpunished.

Although the right to religious freedom in theory also applies to religious minorities, in Indonesia it is often used to justify the protection of the rights of the religious majority.

Ahmadis are also harshly persecuted in other countries such as **Bangladesh**, where the Ahmadiyya community is perceived as a conflicting identity with the majority Muslim population. Sporadic violence against them has taken place for some years; however, since 2004 anti-Ahmadiyya extremists have been publicly demanding that the government pass legislation to contain their activities and restrict their daily lives. For instance, doctors and healthcare providers have been pressured to not provide treatment to Ahmadis. Also, many Ahmadiyya families have lost their profession and livelihood due to their religious commitment.

The explanations for Ahmadiyya's persecution and discrimination are multifaceted although interrelated. Some are more related to 'religious unity,' others to 'political interests,' but the reasons converge and are used to gain legitimacy in political and religious discourse.

The Ahmadiyya community has been symbolically constructed by some mainstream Muslims to be not only heretical but also disloyal and traitorous, 'the enemy within' and a threat to the moral stability of the nation. The Ahmadis, even if a relatively small community, threaten the perceived unity of Islam and introduce values and teachings which distort the 'true' religion of Islam. The suppression of Ahmadiyya has therefore become for some Muslims justifiable, as it is done in defence of Islam itself.

In **Indonesia** the persecution of Ahmadis can be linked to the country's history of struggle for legitimacy by various political actors since 1998. The mass riots and subsequent regime change of 1998 opened the possibility for the democratisation of Indonesian society, including a strengthened role for Islam in the social and political affairs of the state. A number of radical Muslim movements have proliferated since this period and have grown in numbers and influence along with increased intolerance toward the Ahmadiyya community and even incidents of violence. The government response to such incidents has been tepid at best.

## **Ahmadis in Prison**

While the Ahmadis are mainly victims of social hostility, restrictions to their religious activities and discrimination in many Muslim countries, one country has imprisoned two Wahhabi Muslims who converted to Ahmadiyya: **Saudi Arabia**.

On 14<sup>th</sup> May 2012, **Sultan Hamid Maarzouk al-Anzi** and **Saudh Faleh Awad al-Anzi** were arrested for the sole reason that they had joined the Ahmadi community, which they considered a better understanding and practice of their faith as Muslims.

The men are residents of a small settlement of Ahrar near Al Azizya close to the northern border of Saudi Arabia. Both were handed over to clerics who repeatedly tried to persuade them to abandon their Ahmadiyya faith and return to 'true Islam.' They were told that they would be charged for apostasy and punished with death.

The two were then shuttled from one prison to another without charge and denied access to their families and legal advice. At the time of printing, their whereabouts and condition remain unknown.

## **Conclusions**

Ahmadis are an unwanted community in several countries. They have been stigmatised as defiled and infidels, not only by society at large but also by the state apparatus. Political interests are obviously at stake, bolstered by extreme religious conservatism and an overall culture of intolerance, all contributing to the creation of a toxic environment in which the majority of Ahmadis are forced to live.

Islamist forces especially target Ahmadiyya, as it is viewed as an offshoot religion, a reformist doctrine that challenges the official understanding of Islam in their countries. Particularly in Pakistan and Indonesia, radical Islamists have advocated for anti-Ahmadi policies. The institutionalisation of privilege granted by certain regimes to Islamist groups is linked to their need for political survival. Authorities have felt pressured to adopt policy demands to suppress Ahmadiyya activities just to stay in power.

Ahmadis have endured persecution for many years. Their mosques have been burned, their graves desecrated and their very existence criminalised. As a result, thousands of Ahmadis have fled their countries and sought asylum abroad.

At the same time, the persecution of Ahmadis is proving to be increasingly counter-productive, as the movement has garnered more and more support from the international community. Its growing reputation as a peace loving community in an increasingly hostile world, typified by stark polarisation in the Muslim world, is strong in many places. Governments that propagate or tolerate anti-Ahmadiyyism may find themselves increasingly isolated.

# Atheists

Atheism (from Greek ἄθεος, meaning ‘without God’) is the critique and denial of the existence of God or gods of any kind. The right *not* to believe is protected by international law as a fundamental right to freedom of thought and conscience. Therefore atheists have the right to express their beliefs and criticise religious doctrines and practices as much as those who profess a religion.

Atheism has existed in some form throughout the history of philosophy and religion. In European history, it has been particularly associated with humanist and anticlerical movements originating in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The rise of modern science has also been credited with the rise of atheism. The publication of Charles Darwin’s, *The Origin of Species*, in 1859 was a defining moment in this regard. It challenged religion-based assumptions about the beginning of the universe and established evolutionism as the foundation for modern biology. Moreover, it became more widely acceptable to conceive a world without God at its centre, or even a world without God at all.

The perception that atheism has triumphed in Europe and America has fuelled anti-Western sentiment in some countries that have a strong legacy of theistic religion. The consolidation of secular democracies, where freedom, equality, and reason have become primary values of society - as opposed to theocratic models - has also led to confrontations between conflicting worldviews.

Paradoxically, there has been a corresponding rise in the number of atheists and sceptics in these same countries, as rigid doctrines and religion-based violence have soured public opinion on religions and their institutions.

Since the early 2000s, a social movement known as New Atheism has grown considerably, although actual numbers are difficult to establish. New Atheism has been promoted by popular writers like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, who submit that any notion of God is inconsistent with the standard methods of science. Unlike earlier versions of atheism that were more tolerant of religion, proponents of New Atheism tend to view religion as having a dangerous effect on human societies.

## Teachings

One could be tempted to reduce all of atheism to a simple denial of the existence of God; in reality, there are many expressions of atheism and related belief systems, such as agnosticism, scepticism, rationalism, naturalism, positivism, and atheistic humanism. Even still, there are some common principles to which most atheists adhere. For instance, atheists tend to value free and critical thinking. They may regard scientific enquiry as the only vehicle for determining truth.

Atheists may also appeal to the apparent incompatibility between belief in an all-powerful and benevolent god and a world full of evil and suffering. In theology, the attempt to establish a framework which reconciles the existence of God with apparent evil is known as *theodicy*. However, many atheists argue that theodicy, indeed religion itself, has developed in response to a need for congruity and social order. Belief in God cannot be reached logically and is, therefore, to be rejected by all thinking people.

## Controversies

Atheists suffer a wide range of penalties and discrimination in several countries today. Restrictive laws can limit atheists from enjoying fundamental freedoms, such as the right to citizenship, the right to be married, the ability to access public education, or to hold public office. The public expression of atheistic views toward religion can also be criminalised. Laws on blasphemy and apostasy, even the crime of ‘offending religious feelings,’ can draw severe penalties, even prison or death.

The perverse effect of such laws is often manifested in the form of societal prejudice, stigmatisation, and discrimination against atheists. These practices are legitimised by the state's preference for a particular religion and the relegation of its non-religious citizens to ‘second-class’ status. For example, in **Egypt** the state only recognises Islam, Christianity, and Judaism as belief systems, and Islamic Sharia is constitutionally affirmed as ‘the principle source of legislation.’ Together with anti-blasphemy legislation, these laws have created a culture of discrimination against anyone who does not adhere to one of the three Abrahamic faiths. The non-religious are particularly marginalised and even targeted.

Similarly, **Indonesia**’s constitution stipulates that the state ‘shall be based upon the belief in the One and Only God’ (Article 29). As a consequence, the authorities do not recognise the existence of the non-religious. Indonesian identity cards must declare one’s affiliation to one of six officially recognised religions. Expressing support for atheism is effectively banned by the blasphemy law under the country's penal code, carrying a penalty of up to five years in prison.

Analogous restrictions on atheists exist in **Pakistan** and **Saudi Arabia**. Atheists can also face severe discrimination in **Eritrea, Iran, Tunisia, and several other countries**.

The reasons for such legal and social constraints on atheism are complex. Atheism has been associated with extremist ideology, terrorism, and its proliferation is seen as a threat to the state and society. This position is buttressed by legal structures which state authorities fear changing, even if they believe that reforms of the law are necessary. Any dissenting voice is quickly suppressed by conservative religious leaders and scholars. A complex and intertwining system of various interests has a fossilising effect on any motivation for change.

In terms of national security, an atheist may be viewed not only as an enemy of God but of the state as well. From this perspective, the linkage between politics and religion is particularly relevant for understanding the motivations behind the repression of atheism. In states where religion is leveraged as a source of legitimacy, the denial of religion can be seen as undermining the government’s right to exist.



Finally, atheism can be viewed by political leaders as a colonial and western intrusion which may have a negative impact on the fabric of their society and upcoming generations. This phenomenon has been compounded by the advent of newer communication technologies that provide easy access to information on western values and customs, introducing people to more free and open societies. Many countries are struggling not only with the freedom of religion and conscience but also with the concept of freedom in general. The culture of dialogue, tolerance, and debate is not universally understood or, at least, not understood in the same way. Therefore, atheists who express a non-traditional viewpoint on the religious heritage of their country become particularly vulnerable.

### **Atheists in Prison**

In the last few years, atheists (or perceived atheists) and agnostics have been jailed in a number of Muslim countries, such as **Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia**, for publicly professing their worldview. Keeping a low profile and avoiding manifestation of their beliefs is the only way they can avoid prison.

#### *Egypt*

After his arrest in November 2014 in a so-called ‘atheist café,’ **Karim Ashraf Mohammed Al-Banna**, a student, was kept in custody until his trial on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2015. The Idku District Misdemeanor Court (Delta governorate of Beheira) then handed down a three-year prison sentence for contempt of Islam and insulting the divine but allowed Al-Banna a bail of EGP 1,000 (USD 140) to suspend the prison time.

In December 2014, a wing of the justice ministry that issues religious edicts released a survey claiming that Egypt was home to 866 atheists.

From 2011 to 2013, Egyptian courts convicted 27 of 42 defendants on charges of contempt for religion.

In June 2014, an appeals court upheld a five-year sentence handed down in absentia to **Karam Saber** for his short story collection entitled “Where is God?”

In December 2012, a 27-year-old blogger, **Alber Saber**, was sentenced to three years in prison on charges of blasphemy for creating a web page called ‘Egyptian atheists.’

### **Conclusions**

The freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief – including the right not to believe – is at the core of any democratic society and is protected by international binding instruments. Even still, atheists face discrimination and repression in various spheres of civil, public and private life. Whatever one thinks of atheistic ideologies, any movement that promotes the peaceful exchange of ideas through dialogue and debate should be welcomed and defended. Such exchanges are a means to avoid the violence and social hostilities that can poison any society and impede its development.

Moreover, when religion is used as a tool to legitimise power and control, the result is often authoritarian rule that loses legitimacy and ultimately the support of its people. Obliging any people to adhere to prescribed national religions or ideologies without the possibility of putting them into question or expressing alternative views does not guarantee a nation's security. Societies that are not free are correspondingly not secure. And to rule through fear is the very antithesis of democracy.

It is clear that the freedom of belief and expression applies equally to people who profess no religion as it does to those who are religious. These are fundamental rights which must be defended and protected in real terms. This is true for domestic policies as well as external policies that impact relations with third countries.

## **Baha'is**

A history of the Baha'i movement often begins in **Iran** with the self-proclamation of Ali-Muhammad in 1844 to be the 'Báb,' the messianic figure that was anticipated by the Shaykhi School of Twelver Shi'ism. Many Shaykhis joined the new movement during this period, triggering conflict with the ruling Shi'a clerical government. The Báb and his followers were violently repressed from the outset, leading to his exile, and ultimately to his execution in 1850.

The Báb was succeeded by Baha'u'lláh, who declared himself in 1863 to be the Manifestation of God that was foreseen in the Báb's writings. Baha'u'lláh was in turn succeeded by his eldest son, 'Abdul'l-Bahá, followed by his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, in leading the movement. It was under their leadership that the Baha'i faith spread considerably and established itself as a global religion.

Today the Baha'i community is governed by the Universal House of Justice, a nine-member administrative body that is elected by the all national Baha'i assemblies every five years. The community numbers between five and seven million members worldwide. Although Baha'is do not currently make up the religious majority in any single country, they do represent large religious minorities in several countries. In **Iran**, there are currently about 300,000 Baha'is, mostly concentrated in Tehran and Semnan.

## **Teachings**

Baha'i religion bears the traces of its predecessor movements, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Shaykhism and Bábism, in its belief that there is one God, who has been revealed progressively through a series of Manifestations throughout history for the uplift of humanity and the advancement of civilisation. These have included the great teachers of religion, such as Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed, all pointing to the one and same world religion, originating from God. Therefore, the world religions represent subsequent chapters of the same religion, as opposed to separate irreconcilable belief systems.

Central to the teaching of Baha'i is the oneness of God, the inherent harmony of all religions and the unity of humankind. Consequently, Baha'i anthropology places strong emphasis on the equality of all humans, who are each made in the image of God and deserving of the same just and equal treatment. Individual conscience is respected, all forms of prejudice are rejected, the equality of women and men is upheld, and human diversity is valued.

Baha'u'lláh is especially revered by the Baha'i, who regard his teachings as foundational to the covenant that God has established through him. These teachings were subsequently passed down through the line of succession which followed him. Baha'u'lláh was a messenger from God, proclaiming a coming age when all of humanity would be united into a single global society. It was this message that drew heavy opposition from the Iranian authorities.

## **Controversies**

In 1848, eighty-one prominent Bábis met in the village of Badasht to discuss the nature of their community and the revelation they had received from the Báb. Did it constitute a new sect within

Islam? Or was the revelation something entirely new? The latter position was adopted. The beginning of a new Dispensation was announced, and the Baha'i faith was born.

Violence erupted almost immediately between the Bábís and the Qajar government. The Báb publicly claimed to be a Manifestation of God, a direct affront to official Islamic teaching as this represented a denial of the finality of Prophet Muhammad's mission. Baha'i adherents were therefore considered to be apostates and 'enemies of God.'

Aside from religious doctrine, the rapid growth of the early Baha'i movement was perceived to be a threat to clerical and governmental authority. From the beginning, the repression has been singularly cruel. Following a failed assassination attempt in 1852 of the Shah by a small group of Baha'i, several thousands of Baha'i were killed in retaliation.

The Qajar dynasty was replaced by the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, during which the repression of Baha'is became more institutionalised. The central government presided over a series of measures which would more firmly anchor discrimination against Baha'is as a matter of policy. Baha'i centres and schools were closed, Baha'i individuals were expelled from the military as well as governmental posts, and the printing of Baha'i literature was officially banned. The primary instrument of repression shifted from mobs to the courts. Many Baha'i served long jail sentences during this period for altogether mundane activities.

The last Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty was overthrown by the 1979 Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The persecution of Baha'is intensified early on and continues to this day.

Since 1979, more than 200 Baha'is have been executed. Others have been and remain in Iranian prisons for their faith, including all seven members of the former leadership team for the Baha'is in Iran arrested in 2008 and sentenced in 2010 to 20 years imprisonment.

The charges for which the Baha'is are typically convicted include 'disturbing national security,' 'spreading propaganda against the regime,' and 'engaging in espionage.' It is also typical that Baha'is are told before their conviction that if they deny their Baha'i faith all charges will be dropped and they will be set free. It is clear that the basis for the imprisonment of Baha'i in Iran is not criminal in nature but related to their religious conviction as Baha'i believers.

The post-Revolutionary government of Iran has been especially repressive toward the Baha'i and other religious minorities because their very existence poses a challenge to the legitimacy of the current regime, which is largely based on its interpretation of Twelver Shi'ism. Individuals who identify themselves with groups that fall outside this interpretation are considered a threat to the security of the state and are dealt with accordingly. This is particularly true for the Baha'i community, as it is the largest non-Muslim minority in the country and has historically shown potential for rapid growth within the population.

There were hopes that the 2013 election of President Hassan Rouhani would help to improve the treatment of the Baha'i and other religious minorities. He promised during the campaign to ease religious discrimination and develop a Citizens' Rights Charter that would establish equality for all citizens without discrimination based on religion, race, or sex. The Charter has now been published, but the final version has been disappointing. Moreover, the level of human rights violations has not diminished and by some accounts has even increased. For instance, one measurable increase has been the amount of anti-Baha'i propaganda that is disseminated by the

government. During the first six months of Rouhani's presidency, the instances of anti-Baha'i propaganda in government-run media grew exponentially.

Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, reported in 2015 that the persecutions and prosecutions against Baha'i 'appear to be mainly rooted in the unrecognized status of the faith, as well as a pervasive view held within the Government that Baha'is represent a heretical sect with ties to foreign enemies.'

This was illustrated by a statement in 2014 by a high-ranking cleric and former member of Supreme Judicial Council, Ayatollah Bojnourdi, that Baha'is have no right to education, as they 'don't even have citizenship rights.'<sup>3</sup> After negative reactions, he later backtracked, saying that Baha'is who cooperate with Israel or advocate against Islam are not entitled to certain citizenship rights, such as going to university in Iran.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of attempts by Iranian officials to position themselves in respect to the treatment of Baha'is in their country, it is clear that Baha'is continue to face discrimination, arrest and arbitrary detention in connection with their religion.

### **Baha'is in Prison**

**Iran** is the only country where Baha'is are sentenced to prison terms because of activities related to their faith and their community life.

The 2015 Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran published a list of **74 Baha'is in prison**,<sup>5</sup> all on false or fabricated charges.<sup>6</sup> The list includes the seven Baha'i leaders, who currently remain in prison, serving wrongful 20-year sentences for allegedly 'disturbing national security,' 'spreading propaganda against the regime' and 'engaging in espionage.' Their arrests in 2008 and sentencing in 2010 provoked an international outcry. Theirs are the longest sentences of any current prisoners of conscience in Iran.

It appears that Baha'is are almost exclusively prosecuted for participation in their community affairs, such as by facilitating educational services and publicly engaging in religious practices, including attendance at devotional gatherings.

Between September and December 2014, security forces in the cities of Isfahan, Tehran, Shiraz, Hamadan, Karaj and Semnan reportedly arrested at least 24 Baha'is, bringing then the total number of Baha'is in detention to 100.

<sup>3</sup>International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 18 December 2014, <http://persian.iranhumanrights.org/1393/09/bojnoordi-bahais/>

<sup>4</sup> Semi-official Tasnim News, 18 December 2014, <http://www.tasnimnews.com/Home/Single/592485>

<sup>5</sup> See [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran \(A/HRC/28/70\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> The official charges are usually: Forming an illegal cult - Acting against national security - Espionage - Propaganda against the regime - Posing a threat to the holy regime of the Islamic Republic by teaching Bahaist ideas through communication with the usurper country of Israel - Plotting overthrow - Membership in an anti-Islamic group - Membership in illegal groups and assemblies - Membership in the deviant sect of Baha'ism with the goal of taking action against the security of the country, in order to further the aims of the deviant sect and those of organisations outside the country.

In **April 2015**, 13 additional Baha'is were arrested in Hamadan. The arrests came over a period of two weeks, as intelligence agents raided and searched a number of Baha'i homes there. Owners and/or occupants were arrested on charges, such as 'engaging in propaganda against the regime.' Most were released within a day or so after posting large sums for bail, ranging from US\$8,000 to US\$20,000. One woman, however, was detained for nine days in solitary confinement.

On **11<sup>th</sup> October 2015**, Shahram Eshraqi, one of 20 Baha'is who were sentenced by the Revolutionary Court of Yazd in 2014, began his three-year sentence.

On **19<sup>th</sup> October 2015**, Tahereh Reza'i, another of the 20 Baha'is, was arrested and taken to Yazd prison to serve her sentence. Each of the twenty had received deferred sentences of one to four years. The sentences were upheld by the provincial Appeals Court on 16 April 2014.

On **21<sup>st</sup> September 2015**, the Baha'i International Community (BIC) delivered a statement to the UN Human Rights Council on the situation of the Baha'is in Iran, stressing that arbitrary arrests and detentions are continuing. Diane Ala'i, the representative of the BIC to the United Nations in Geneva, said that 'Baha'is in Iran are not only subject to arbitrary detention—since 2005, there have been over 820 of such arrests, which are in violation human rights norms—but throughout the judicial process they face an unjust treatment that clearly violates Iran's own Penal and Criminal Procedure codes.'

For more information about the persecution of Baha'is in Iran in 2015, see our website <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/> and for HRWF List of Baha'i Prisoners in Iran, see <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Iran-FBL-2015.pdf>.

## Conclusions

The broad support for Hassan Rouhani during the 2013 election could suggest that the people of Iran are ready for a more responsive and transparent government, including a greater openness toward addressing the state of human rights in their country. However, to date Rouhani's presidency has not made notable changes in this regard. More specifically, the Baha'is and other religious minorities continue to experience government repression and social discrimination on a wide scale.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to place all the blame for the lack of change at the feet of the Rouhani presidency. Indeed, Mr Rouhani is just one part of a much larger power structure, where the presidency does not carry the same influence and authority as it does in many Western countries. In addition, Mr Rouhani is sworn to safeguard the constitution of Iran, including Article 13, which delineates 'the only recognised religious minorities,' a list which does not include Baha'is.

Change comes slowly in Iran. This is especially true when a figure like Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, is at the wheel. In 2013, Khamenei issued a fatwa against the Baha'i, describing them as a 'deviant and misleading sect.'

Historically, it has been the vitality of the Baha'i movement itself that has provoked the sharpest reaction from Tehran. Whenever the government passes through a period of instability or transition, hard-liners have tended to exert their authority by doubling up pressure on perceived threats to power. In such times, the Baha'is become easy targets and scapegoats for the preservation of 'national security.' Iran's anti-Baha'i policies are largely driven by fear: the fear that the religion's popularity could outrun the regime's ability to maintain control.

In 2015, much international attention was directed toward talks that concluded a controversial deal with Iran, ending multilateral sanctions against the country in exchange for assurances that it will not pursue its nuclear weapons programme. During these talks, the concern for human rights violations in Iran was conspicuously absent from the negotiations, undoubtedly a tactical decision in the effort to secure an agreement.

Some have expressed hope that the nuclear deal could result over the long term in an improved human rights situation. However, Nasrin Sotoudeh, a lawyer and former political prisoner in Iran, was not optimistic. 'When a regime can no longer use the excuse of having foreign enemies, it can no longer imprison its own citizens as easily as it can when there is a foreign threat,' she said in an interview with al-Monitor. 'However, it is wishful thinking to imagine that this nuclear agreement will automatically result in better human rights policies in Iran.'

Regardless of the final outcome of this agreement, in its ongoing diplomatic exchanges with Iran the international community will do well to continue to raise the issue of the treatment of Baha'is. One possible avenue for engagement could be to pressure the government to no longer require its citizens to identify their religion when seeking to enter university or starting a business. The revelation that the applicant is a follower of Baha'i has been an obstacle to higher education or to full participation in Iran's economy.

Such discriminatory practices create an ongoing hostile environment for the Baha'is, who wish to live their faith freely in Iran and without legal consequences.





# Buddhists

Buddhism traces its roots to the life and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the ‘Awakened One’ (*Buddha*). Although it is difficult to construct a historical record of Siddhartha’s life by modern standards, it is likely that he lived in India between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE and that he renounced his noble standing in order to embrace an ascetic lifestyle in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Buddhists believe that Siddhartha achieved this state, and most believe that it is likewise achievable for all those determined to follow the same path toward buddhahood and liberation.

Various schools of Buddhism differ on the specific teachings and practices that lead to enlightenment. There are two major branches of Buddhism that are generally acknowledged by scholars: Theravada Buddhism (*School of the Elders*), which emphasises the foundational texts and teachings, and Mahayana Buddhism (*The Great Vehicle*), which places more importance upon the experience of being on the Buddhist path. The Mahayana tradition accounts for 53.2% of Buddhists today, mostly in East Asia, compared to 35.8% for Theravada, which is found primarily in Southeast Asia. Vajrayana Buddhism, which is sometimes referred to as the ‘third turning of the wheel of dharma’ and largely based upon ancient tantric teachings, comprises only 5.7%.

In total, there are approximately 488 million Buddhists worldwide, according to the Pew Research Center, about half of which are in China, where Tibetan Buddhists are particularly repressed. Hòa Hào Buddhists and members of the United Buddhist Sangha are also persecuted in Vietnam. In both China and Vietnam, Buddhists are in prison for exercising their freedom of religion.

## Teachings

Buddhist teachings elaborate the trainings and methods necessary to overcome ignorance, achieve enlightenment, and ensure favourable *samsara*, the endless cycle of rebirth that leads to a state of buddhahood.

The Four Noble Truths are regarded as central to the teachings of Buddhism and provide a conceptual framework for Buddhist thought. They explain the nature of *dukkha* (often translated as ‘suffering’), its causes, its relation to craving, and how *dukkha* is to be overcome by following the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path describes the interconnected practices and conditions which can lead to the cessation of *dukkha*. They are Right View (or Right Understanding), Right Intention (or Right Thought), Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. These elements are not to be understood as successive stages of Buddhist practice but rather essential qualities to be cultivated together on the path toward buddhahood.

## Controversies

While it is not possible to link Buddhism too closely to the modern Western concept of human rights, some scholars have referenced Buddhist attitudes of respect, human dignity, and freedom as common markers with human rights thought. These attitudes have fuelled opposition movements among Tibetan Buddhists in China and Buddhist groups in Vietnam, two countries that strictly control religious activity within their borders and view any political dissent as a threat to the stability of their governments.

The status of **Tibet** as an independent state or autonomous region has long been the subject of controversy and sometimes violent struggle. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Tibet was invaded, and Chinese socialism was harshly imposed. The Dalai Lama and more than 80,000 Tibetans went into exile, mostly in India and Nepal. Attempts to resolve the Tibetan issue have yet to reach a political solution.

It is the Dalai Lama's identification with the liberation struggle of Tibet that has led to the government's repression of Tibetan Buddhism. China tightened its control over monasteries under a campaign aimed at undermining the Dalai Lama's influence as a political and spiritual leader. Since 1949, the Chinese have destroyed over 6,000 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and shrines. By 1978 only eight monasteries and 970 monks and nuns remained in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Moreover, spiritual leaders have faced difficulties in re-establishing historical monasteries previously destroyed.

In 1995, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima was selected by the Dalai Lama to succeed him and become the eleventh Panchen Lama. He was six years old at that time. Three days later, he and his family disappeared and have not been seen in public since. Another child, Gyancaïn Norbu, was later named as the Panchen Lama by the People's Republic of China, a choice rejected by most Tibetan Buddhists. The spiritual void China created by the disappearance of the legitimate Panchen Lama remains a clear example of China's attempt to suppress Tibetan culture and identity.

**In Vietnam**, government restrictions have sharply limited all religious activities for both registered and non-registered groups. In 1981, all Buddhist organisations came under the government-controlled Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam. Those who refused the official sanction to operate as such instead organised as the United Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam. However, the group was subsequently banned and its activities suppressed.

## Buddhists in Prison

### *China*

The *US Congressional Executive Commission on China Political Prisoners Database* carries the documented cases of nearly 3900 Tibetan Buddhists and some 20 non-Tibetan Buddhists. In the long struggle for Tibetan self-determination, it is very difficult to distinguish between activities that are primarily motivated by religion or belief and those that are more rightly considered politically motivated. For this reason *Human Rights Without Frontiers* here documents only a limited number of cases that are more clearly related to the exercise of freedom of religion.<sup>7</sup>

**Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and his parents** are still detained in a secret location, despite sustained condemnation from the international community. On 17<sup>th</sup> May 1995, Gendun Choekyi Nyima was kidnapped with his parents by the Chinese authorities three days after he was announced to be the reincarnation of the 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama. They have not been seen in public since. Another Panchen Lama was chosen by the Chinese government, but he has not been approved by the Buddhist community faithful to the Dalai Lama.

**Jampa Choephel, Choedar Dargye, and Gedun Thogphel** were arrested in 2003 and sentenced to 12 years in prison for possessing photos of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama, conducting prayers for the Dalai Lama while he was ill and possessing a painting of the Tibetan flag.

**Runggye Adak** was arrested on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2007 at the Lithang Horse Racing Festival in Tibet. He was charged with provocation to subvert state power after addressing a crowd during a horse racing festival in Lithang. He said, 'If we cannot invite the Dalai Lama home, we will not have freedom of religion and happiness in Tibet' and called for the release of the Panchen Lama and Tenzin Delek Rinpoche. He was sentenced to eight years in prison.

**Tenzin Delek (Rinpoche)** was arrested on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2002. He was accused of masterminding and carrying out the bombing of Tianfu Square in Chengdu, 'suspicion of inciting secession' and 'illegal possession of firearms and ammunition.' He was first sentenced to death, but in 2005 his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

In 1983, Tenzin Delek had been designated as the reincarnation of Adengpengcuo, the Gexi Lama of Aotuo Temple of Yajiang County. A staunch supporter of the Dalai Lama, he is a monk of high reputation in the Tibetan region and the exiled Tibetan community in India. In December 2009, over 30,000 Tibetans signed and finger-printed a petition calling on the central government to retry his case. Tenzin Delek died in detention on 12th July 2015. He was cremated in prison despite family requests for the 15-day preservation of his body in accordance with Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

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<sup>7</sup> Others have been arrested and sentenced to long prison terms or to death for their involvement in political non-violent or violent activities, according to the Chinese authorities, or as human rights defenders but the lack of access to reliable information did not allow HRWF Int'l to check the nature of their activities and the veracity of the official accusations. It was also difficult to identify cases in which the victims were imprisoned for purely exercising their freedom of religion. A margin of error is not excluded. See the documented cases at <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

**Phurbu Tsering** was arrested in May 2008 during a nuns' demonstration in Ganzi in opposition to an official campaign to impose 'patriotic re-education' on their convents in which they were required to denounce the Dalai Lama. He was charged of illegal possession of ammunition and embezzlement. He denied the charges.

Phurbu Tsering Rinpoche was the first reincarnated lama to be charged with a serious crime since Tenzin Delek Rinpoche. He was heading the Pangri and Puruna Nunneries. On 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2009, he was sentenced to 8 years and 6 months in prison.

### *Vietnam*

A number of Hao Hoa Buddhists and members of the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam<sup>8</sup> have been arrested for exercising their rights related to freedom of religion or belief.

**Thich Quang Do**, the 87-year old leader of the banned United Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, has been held under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon since 1998, although he has not been formally convicted of any crime.

In 1982, he was sent into internal exile in northern Vietnam for protesting against the creation of a state-sponsored Buddhist Church. In 1995, he was charged with 'undermining national solidarity' and sentenced to 5 years imprisonment. After international pressure, he was released in 1998 but placed directly under house arrest without any formal charges or indictment. He has spent over 30 years of his life in detention for his advocacy for religious freedom, democracy, and human rights.

He was named the Fifth Supreme Patriarch of the Unified Church of Vietnam in November 2011.

**Mai Thi Dung** was sentenced to 11 years in prison in 2007 for allegedly 'disturbing public order.' She was released on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2015, sixteen months prior to the end of her prison term, because she was in very poor health.

**Nguyen Van Lia**, 71, was arrested in 2011 and sentenced to five years in prison for breaking away from the state-sponsored Buddhist Association. He was released on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2015.

**Bui Van Tham** was arrested for opposing the state in July 2012 and sentenced to two years and six months in prison. He was released on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2015.

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<sup>8</sup> Other Buddhists have been arrested and sentenced to prison terms as human rights defenders but the lack of access to reliable information did not allow *Human Rights Without Frontiers* to check the nature of their activities and the veracity of the official accusations. It was also difficult to identify cases in which the victims were imprisoned for purely exercising their freedom of religion. A margin of error is not excluded in the selected cases.

## Conclusions

**China's** suppression of the teachings and practices of Tibetan Buddhism aims to eliminate an integral part of Tibet's cultural and national identity. In this sense, the Tibetans' claim to self-determination and independence for their people is closely linked to the preservation of their cultural and religious identity. At the same time, China asserts that Tibet is a part of the People's Republic and that it rightfully maintains control over the region. In order to ensure this power, China considers it necessary to police all political and religious activities in Tibet. Any mass movement that could lead to Tibet's independence could ruin business and public relations between the two countries in the future.

Regardless of the political status of Tibet in respect to the Chinese government, it is clear that the freedom of religion is systematically curtailed by the Chinese authorities in the region today. The government actively promotes atheism in an attempt to undermine the Dalai Lama's influence. Severe controls are imposed on monasteries and nunneries. Religious pilgrimages are limited, and acquiring a religious education remains difficult. Freedom of speech, press, association, and religion are methodically obstructed and restricted.

Moreover, the discrimination faced by Tibetans in terms of education, employment, health care, and legal representation is a consequence of the concerted campaign to marginalise, isolate and assimilate Tibetans in ways that allow the Chinese authorities to control them politically. Even the Tibetan flag and national anthem are banned. Anyone found in possession of a picture of the Dalai Lama can be subjected to torture and imprisonment.

**Vietnam** has similar policies toward Buddhists whom authorities consider to be dissident influences in society. Thich Quang Do stresses that his situation is not unique for religious and civil society activists in Vietnam: *'All who dare to speak out for human rights face harassment, intimidation, surveillance or detention,'* he said. *'Plain-clothed security agents ruthlessly beat young men and women in order to frighten them and reduce them to silence.'* Any threat to power, real or perceived, is summarily suppressed.

Authorities sometimes raise the objection that states have a responsibility to ensure the stability of its government and the security of its citizens. However, whenever the state sacrifices fundamental freedoms in order to maintain power, it is a serious breach of democratic principles, at the expense of the people it professes to protect.



# **Erfan-e Halghe Followers**

Interuniversal mysticism (Erfan-e Halghe) is a spiritual movement that was developed more than thirty years ago in Iran by Mohammad Ali Taheri. The movement promotes awareness and methodologies for achieving Interuniversal consciousness, which, says Taheri, are consistent with the teachings of Islam. Even still, the Iranian government has sought to actively repress the spread of Erfan-e Halghe, claiming that Taheri is ‘acting against national security’ and guilty of ‘corruption on earth.’

Iran imposes its own interpretation of Islamic rules and teachings, leaving no room for divergent viewpoints on religion. Erfan-e Halghe teachings go beyond the formal and official practices of Shia Islam and seek to provide more depth and spiritual vitality to its followers. Taheri has known considerable success in propagating his ideas, even in the face of government opposition which perceives the movement as a threat to the stability and power of the state.

Erfan-e Halghe may have as many as 20,000 trainers worldwide. Millions of people have been exposed to the practical applications of Interuniversal mysticism. In 2006, Taheri established an art and culture institute in Tehran to more effectively transmit his teachings as well as to treat patients. However, the institute was forcibly closed in August 2010.

## **Teachings**

Part of Erfan-e Halghe’s appeal is its integrative approach that brings together both the theory and practice of mystical experience. It does not negate the importance of formal prayers but urges practitioners to go deeper into the meaning of the prayers beyond their mere recitation. In this way, the movement reveals the influence of Sufism. Its teachings are universal in scope and accessible to anyone, irrespective of race, nationality, education or religious beliefs.

Erfan-e Halghe features two complementary approaches to healing: Faradarmani, which focuses on the treatment of physical disease, and Psymtology, which uses holistic psychology to address psychiatric disorders. The final aim of Taheri’s teachings is to help people achieve *Kamal*: spiritual wholeness and collective awareness. *Kamal* is only achieved collectively, says Taheri; it cannot be pursued as just an individual affair. Each follower of Erfan-e Halghe must take care to tend the overall well-being of the community and society at large to reach the state of *Kamal*.

Taheri insists that his teachings correspond perfectly to the ideals and teachings of Islam. His writings are peppered with references to Islamic literature and verse, while offering a fresh and in-depth interpretation of what has always been part of Islamic tradition. His website declares that he is ready to defend his ideas to anyone who wishes to discuss them. However, the day following this post, Mohammad Ali Taheri was arrested.

## **Controversies**

Objections to Inter-universalism have been mainly of a theological character. The teachings of Mohammad Ali Taheri mount a challenge to many religious matters on which the Iranian

government has taken a position. In general, he has taught that Muslims should not be content to fulfil the outward requirements of religious practice but should also tend to the condition of their inner selves. Taheri has also placed himself at odds with the official Iranian interpretation of the application of Islamic criminal law, including apostasy and blasphemy.

The popularity and expansion of the Erfan-e Halghe movement has been perceived as a threat by the authorities. Taheri has tried to present a non-violent and peaceful image of Islam, frequently referring to God's mercy and love. Of course, Iranian clerics would not reject the idea of God's goodness or mercy, but they would also underscore the principle of divine judgement in their attempts to uphold Islamic rule.

Taheri's teachings have had particular appeal to youth, who perceive the official position on these matters to be violent and intrusive. Shortly after the forced closure of the offices of Erfan-e Halghe in 2010, Ayatollah Khamenei gave a speech where he stated that fake schools of mysticism are enemies and tools that undermine religion among youth in the society.

States-funded news agencies have described Taheri's movement as "*fergh-e zalle*" (false cult), and government websites have defamed Taheri and his followers in various ways. For example, Erfan-e Halghe followers have been accused of practicing exorcism and explaining disease and illness by the presence of a ghost in the body.



## Erfan-e Halghe Leader and Followers in Prison

**Mohammad Ali Taheri** was arrested on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2011 by officials linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guards and held incommunicado for nine months in Section 2A of Evin Prison. On 30<sup>th</sup> October 2011, Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran convicted him of 'insulting Islamic sanctities' and sentenced him to five years' imprisonment. In addition to his prison term, Taheri was sentenced to seventy-four lashes on the charge of 'committing a religiously forbidden act' by holding the hands of one of his female followers in the course of a healing session.

Article 513 of Iran's Islamic Penal Code provides that 'anyone who insults Islamic sanctities or any of the Great Prophets or [12] Shia Imams or the Holy Fatima shall be executed if the insult is considered *saab ul-nabi*; otherwise, they shall be sentenced to one to five years' imprisonment.' Such offences do not directly involve *saab ul-nabi* (deliberately denigrating Prophet Mohammad), a crime punishable by death under the Islamic Penal Code; however, the authorities have continued to threaten Taheri with death, apparently based on religious fatwas that order the killing of apostates.

According to Fars News Agency, forty followers of Erfan-e Halghe were arrested on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2015. Among them, sixteen instructors of movement were convicted of committing crimes. They were sentenced to a total of thirty-seven years in prison for insulting the sacred and to fines amounting to 130 million Toman for acquiring illicit wealth. According to HRANA News Agency, on 24<sup>th</sup> August 2015, a group of Erfan-e Halghe activists was also arrested in Qom after nine days of peaceful protest against the death sentence of Taheri.

Other Erfan-e Halghe followers have also been arrested at various different times and places: **Mohammadreza AFSHAR, Fahime A'RAFI, Saeed ARDESHIR, Ziba POUR-HABIB, Ardeshir SHAHNAVAZ, and Masoumeh ZIA.** These have been accused of insulting the sacred, corruption of earth, blasphemy, obtaining illicit wealth and interference in medical affairs. They were sentenced to prison terms from two to five years. For more details, see our Prisoners' List at <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>.

## Conclusions

Erfan-e Halghe is a new religious movement within Islam. It does not advocate violence or directly challenge the legitimacy of the ruling authorities. It represents no threat to the political and social order of Iranian society. However, in a theocratic political regime such as Iran's, any deviation from the official theology of the regime is subjected to harsh repression.

Because Iran is a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, it should respect its obligations under this document. According to article 18 of the ICCPR, States Parties are obliged to respect and protect the freedom of religion and belief of all citizens.

According to General Comment number 29, the principle of legality requires that 'both criminal liability and punishment being limited to clear and precise provisions in the law that were in

place and applicable at the time the act or omission took place.’<sup>9</sup> Iranian criminal law does not clearly define apostasy.

Moreover, according to paragraph 48 of General Comment 34 released by the Human Rights Committee, ‘prohibition of displays of lack of respect for a religion or other belief system, including blasphemy laws, are incompatible with the Covenant...’ also ‘it would be impermissible for any such laws to discriminate in favour of or against one or certain religions or belief systems, or their adherents over another, or religious believers over non-believers. Nor would it be permissible for such prohibitions to be used to prevent or punish criticism of religious leaders or commentary on religious doctrine and tenets of faith.’

On 14<sup>th</sup> October 2015, members of the International Organisation to Preserve Human Rights in Iran met with Members of the European Parliament and ask them to sign a petition demanding the Iranian government stop the illegal execution of Mr. Taheri.<sup>10</sup>

In its negotiations with Iran, the EU should raise the dire situation of human rights in Iran. Paragraph 53 of the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief provides that ‘the EU will ensure that EU institutions and Member States visiting third countries are fully briefed on the situation of freedom of religion or belief.’ According to paragraph 57 of this document EU Member States will consider the violations of freedom of religion or belief in their agreements with third countries. They can include suspension of cooperation as a measure under human rights clauses in the agreement.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/gencomm/hrc29.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://hriran.com/en/section-blog/58-meetings/6303-members-of-iophr-meet-meps-to-demand-release-of-dr-taheri-and-stop-human-rights-violations-in-iran.html>

<sup>11</sup> [http://eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article\\_13685\\_en.htm](http://eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_13685_en.htm)

# Falun Gong Practitioners

The Falun Gong movement (or *Falun Dafa*) began in 1992 in north-eastern China, where Master Li Hongzhi presented teachings on the healing and health benefits of the ancient Chinese practice of Qigong. Qigong incorporates various bodily movements and breathing techniques aimed at achieving physical and mental well-being. Master Li also appealed to the teachings of classical religious traditions – to Taoism and Buddhism in particular – to construct in Falun Gong a system of beliefs and practices which focus on the cultivation of compassion and virtue in pursuit of human wholeness.

At first, attendance at Falun Gong workshops grew steadily. By the late 1990s, it had spread to most Chinese cities and to overseas centres such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and the United States. Li Hongzhi left China in 1995, giving lectures to large crowds in several major cities around the world. He finally settled in New York, where the Falun Gong movement has established a global media presence through its newspaper and website *Epoch Times* and *New Tang Dynasty* Television.

As there are no formalised membership records maintained by Falun Gong, only rough estimates are available for the numbers of practitioners worldwide. At the peak of its popularity in China, there were an estimated seventy million adherents. Inside China today, some sources estimate that tens of millions continue to practice Falun Gong in spite of harsh persecution. Hundreds of thousands are estimated to practice it outside China in over 70 countries worldwide.

## Teachings

Falun Gong traces its roots to practices that reach far into Chinese antiquity. These techniques focus on the transformation of the individual through the cultivation of *qi*, the life force that permeates the universe. Master Li's teachings focus on letting go of negative attachments, cultivation of virtue, and countering of harmful karma. Through their own intentional effort and everyday experiences, practitioners increase in virtue and find spiritual resources for surmounting difficulties and positively influencing society.

Li teaches that the aim of the founders of world religions, such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity, sought not to establish religions per se but to 'guide cultivation techniques,' which Falun Gong continues and surpasses in depth. Master Li is presented as a Buddha figure that has come to guide humanity in this age of social degradation towards enlightenment and peace.

It is not uncommon for Falun Gong practitioners to meet regularly for group exercises, the study of Master Li's teachings, and discussion of their experiences.

## Controversies

Chinese policy on religion is governed by the State Administration for Religious Affairs, which requires all religious groups and venues to affiliate with a government-approved association. The Qigong movement was considered distinct from religion and beneficial to society. The China Qigong Research Society (CQRS) was established, and Falun Gong was admitted as a sub-branch.

Despite this initial involvement, Master Li declined later requests to strengthen state ties through the formation of a Falun Gong patriotic organisation. Under mounting pressure to do so, Falun Gong withdrew from the CQRS in 1996.

The turn of the new century brought growing scepticism regarding Qigong and related practices in China, which the state media increasingly reported as superstitious and harmful to practitioners and society. Falun Gong adherents mobilised to peacefully petition for media sources to retract their criticism of the movement. Other practitioners of Qigong-related groups did likewise; however, the Falun Gong proved to be the most organised and frequently successful campaigners, making them particularly susceptible to government repression.

On 25<sup>th</sup> April 1999, the week after a demonstration was broken up by police, some 10,000 protesters sat quietly outside of the Chinese Communist Party headquarters in Beijing to call for an end to the harassment of Falun Gong and the release of Falun Gong detainees. Representatives of the group met with the Chinese Premier, Zhu Rongji, and demonstrators dispersed the following day.

Some months later on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1999, Falun Gong was banned in China as an ‘illegal organisation’ and an ‘evil cult.’

In the three months prior to the ban, the Central Committee had established the ‘6-10 Office’ with the sole mission of cracking down on the movement. Falun Gong was said to have overstepped the boundaries of religious freedom, and a plan was adopted for its dissolution and the ‘transformation’ of its followers. The appellation 6-10 made reference to the date of the agency’s creation.

The 6-10 Office was given powers well beyond what is authorised under the Chinese Constitution. Its authority reached to every administrative level in the Party and all other political and judicial systems. It also spread to all Chinese cities, villages, governmental agencies, institutions and schools. Its reach has since expanded to include other ‘heretical cult organisations.’

The office began ‘detoxifying’ party members that had become partial to Falun Gong, either practitioners themselves or merely sympathisers. Numerous arrests were made of suspected Falun Gong leaders. In the first month after the ban, an aggressive media campaign criticised the group in state-run newspapers and television.

Propaganda and other social pressures have continued.

In January 2000, several individuals attempted to commit suicide by self-immolation in Tiananmen Square, a practice that has been employed by Tibetan Buddhist to protest the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Two of them subsequently died. The state media reported that they were Falun Gong practitioners. Falun Gong spokespersons overseas denied that the protesters could be authentic members of their movement since their principles uphold the sanctity of life. Regardless, wide media reporting of this incident contributed to discredit the group in the minds of many Chinese citizens.

Practitioners are often confronted in their workplace and targeted in academic settings. School books denounce the movement, students can be expelled for practicing Falun Gong or for being related to someone who does, and questions regarding Falun Gong have reportedly appeared in college entrance examinations.

Since the ban, numerous followers have been imprisoned. Independent sources have confirmed tens of thousands of arrests, while acknowledging that the actual amount is likely to be much higher. Practitioners are often detained without any official charges, although when declared, they are usually brought under Article 300 of the criminal code, which prohibits the formation of 'superstitious sects, secret societies and weird religious organisations.' Sentences are between three and seven years imprisonment, even longer in 'especially serious' circumstances. It is not uncommon for Falun Gong practitioners to be sentenced with little to no legal representation. Many trials are held in secret.

Considerable alarm has risen over Falun Gong prisoners held in 'black jails' or confined in drug rehabilitation and 'brainwashing centres,' which fall directly under the authority of the 6-10 Office. The Falun Dafa Information Centre has documented over 63,000 cases in which re-education has included hard labour, physical beatings, sexual abuse, psychological trauma and psychiatric and physical torture.

Accusations have also been made against the government of China for systematically participating in the killing of prisoners for the purpose of selling their organs for high profit on the transplant market. In fact, the organ transplant trade has been booming in China since the beginning of the Falun Gong suppression in 1999.

In keeping with their basic practices, Falun Gong followers have responded to their repression by 'clarifying the truth,' engaging in an international propaganda war with the party, and becoming some of the most ardent critics of the Chinese government.

Some analysts have suggested that the persecution of Falun Gong is part ideological and part political. As a metaphysical system, Falun Gong is a direct affront to the communist-atheist ideology of the Chinese state. It is also political in that the movement, although posing no substantial threat to the Chinese government, lies nonetheless outside the control of the communist centralised system and is therefore suspect and perceived as dangerous.

## Falun Gong Practitioners in Prison

The Falun Gong movement is the world's most persecuted religious/ spiritual denomination by a single country: China. For years, their website [minghui.org](http://minghui.org)<sup>12</sup> has been documenting thousands of cases of arrest, imprisonment, disappearance, torture, killing and organ harvesting.

China is the only country where Falun Gong practitioners are perceived as a threat by the state, repressed and put in prison.

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* documents more than 220 cases of detained Falun Gong practitioners in our Prisoners' List (See <http://hrwf.eu/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>). The usual sentence is between three and seven years, but in certain circumstances individuals have received sentences as long as twelve or even seventeen years.

### *Ye Jianguo arrested five times and sentenced to more than 11 years in prison*

**Ye Jianguo** was sentenced to 11½ years in prison by the Jianyang District Court in 2013 because of his affiliation with Falun Gong. In Jiazhou Prison, the guards have tried to re-educate him by forcing him to listen to and read materials defaming Falun Gong. They ordered him to write statements denouncing his belief.

Since 1999, he had been arrested at least five times.

He was arrested by officers from the Longchang County 6-10 Office in May 2005. His legs and hands were shackled in detention for five months before being sentenced to forced labour for 5 years.

On 25 August 2009, officers from the Longchang Domestic Security Division and agents from the Dayanggou Community Committee ransacked his home. Ye Jianguo was also consigned to the Neijiang Brainwashing Centre for two months.

On 30<sup>th</sup> October 2010, he was arrested and taken to the Daziran Brainwashing Center in Neijing City. He managed to escape two weeks later.

On 4<sup>th</sup> July 2011, he was arrested by Jiangyou Domestic Security Division officers. He developed a serious heart condition as a result of his sufferings and transported to Jiangyou City People's Hospital.

He was arrested again in July 2012 and taken to the Erehu Brainwashing Center, where he suffered sleep deprivation, shackling and eventually died in custody.

### *Li Kai: Sentenced to 3 ½ years and harassed by the police*

**Li Kai** has been arrested several times in the last five years for practicing Falun Gong. In July 2015, he was watching TV at home when a group of police officers broke in and took him away.

<sup>12</sup> English version: <http://en.minghui.org/cc/10/>

Less than two months later, he was sentenced to three-and-half years in prison for refusing to give up his Falun Gong spiritual practice.

The police refused to disclose where Mr. Li was detained, despite repeated requests from his family. The court also did not notify the family of his two hearings in September.

### *Twin sisters arrested and imprisoned in Xinjiang*

Twin sisters Wang Wen and Wang Jing from Changji City in Xinjiang Autonomous Region were arrested on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2015 for practicing Falun Gong. The 51-year-old sisters are both accountants.

Wang Jing was tried on 13<sup>th</sup> October and Wang Wen on 6<sup>th</sup> November. The prosecutor alleged that Wang Jing had sent text messages promoting Falun Gong. She told the judge that practicing Falun Gong is not a crime. Her lawyer disputed the evidence against Wang Jing, because the prosecution could not provide a key piece of evidence: the SIM card that Ms. Wang Jing allegedly used to send the messages.

Wang Wen was detained in Liudaowan Detention Center in Urumqi City and Wang Jing in Changji Detention Center.

This has not been the first time the sisters have faced sanctions for their belief in Falun Gong. In 2003 officers from the Changji 6-10 Office sent them to re-education classes, where various torture methods are used to force practitioners into renouncing their beliefs. Wang Wen was also sentenced in 2010 to 15 days in detention after she talked to a security guard about Falun Gong.

The twins' elder sister, Gong Xiaojuan, a former mathematics teacher at Changji Teachers' University, was sentenced to five years in prison in 2015 for practicing Falun Gong.

## **Conclusions**

The severe repression of Falun Gong by the Chinese government has not shown signs of slowing. Indeed, the 2015 National Security Law has further tightened control on illegal 'cult organisations,' contributing to the troubling state of human rights overall in China. Movements like Falun Gong carry an enormous appeal for the millions of Chinese citizens who have grown weary of their country's limitations on basic freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This is precisely the fear that persists in Beijing's corridors of power.





# Jehovah's Witnesses

Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916) is regarded as the originator of the Bible Student movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States. Russell believed that traditional churches had abandoned the faith of the 'primitive church', and restoration of true Christianity could be achieved through a more literal reading of the Bible and a sincere devotion to following its teachings. The Bible Student movement spawned several independent student associations, including one which would later become the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses take their name from what was once believed to be the holy name of God referenced in the Hebrew Bible. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century 'Jehovah' was thought to be the pronunciation of YHWH or JHVH, an English transliteration of the divine name which appears frequently in the Old Testament. Joining this term with a passage from the prophet Isaiah, 'You are my witnesses that I am God' (43:12), the organisation would eventually be known as Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses are now present in 240 countries and territories, with a worldwide membership of more than 8.2 million active evangelists. In Europe, there are more than 16,000 congregations and 1.5 million active members.

Witnesses are especially known for their door-to-door evangelism and the wide distribution of the group's literature, notably *The Watchtower* magazine and *Awake!* Attendance at conventions can reach more than 15 million, and the denomination's annual [Memorial](#) attendance, observing Christ's death, nearly 20 million.

Jehovah's Witnesses are directed by its Governing Body, based in [Brooklyn, New York](#), which establishes all doctrines and interpretations of the [Bible](#). They prefer to use their own translation, the [New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures](#).

Since their beginnings, Jehovah's Witnesses have been repressed by several governments, notably:

- the Nazi regime in Germany and in countries under Nazi control between 1933 and 1945. They were sent to concentration camps and sentenced to death, sometimes by decapitation.
- Communist regimes between 1917 and 1989;
- the fascist regimes in Spain and Portugal until the 1970s;
- and the imperial regime of Japan and other dictatorships.

Jehovah's Witnesses are mostly imprisoned for their refusal to perform military service in countries where there is no alternative civilian service, for sharing their beliefs in the public space, and for proselytising.

Where they were victims of arrests, prison sentences and discrimination, Witnesses will actively litigate, thus helping to shape jurisprudence related to freedom of religion or belief in many countries throughout the world.

## Teachings

Consistent with its origins in the teachings of Charles Taze Russell, Jehovah's Witnesses claim to recover the truths of the 'primitive church.' They place particular emphasis on the Second Coming of Christ and the final judgement of those who reject his message. They believe that one day the earth will be destroyed and Paradise will be restored according to God's plan for creation.

The Jehovah's Witnesses adhere to several distinctive doctrines and practices which differ significantly from those of the majority of professing Christians. For example, they reject the orthodox Christian belief in the Trinity and refuse to observe traditionally Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, which they consider to be of pagan origins or otherwise incompatible with the Christian faith.

Witnesses are generally moderate in their lifestyle and refrain from smoking, the abuse of alcohol, and sexual relations outside of marriage. They strive to be good citizens, respectful toward authorities, and law-abiding, except in cases where the law conflicts with their conscience as Christians. They cooperate with government efforts to promote the general welfare of society.

## Controversies

A number of beliefs and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses have been perceived negatively by governments and societies and led to various types of hostility.

***Military service:*** Jehovah's Witnesses seek to remain politically neutral and conscientiously refuse to participate in military service. They refuse to kill and training on how to kill. However, they accept to perform alternative civilian service in hospitals, homes for elderly people, and other institutions serving society on the condition that it is not under the authority of the ministry of defence. They also refuse to salute national flags.

***Proselytising:*** Discussions about the Bible on doorsteps and public distribution of their religious publications are well-known activities of Jehovah's Witnesses. They develop missionary activities in their close social environment but also publicly and from house to house. To share their faith and values with others is an essential part of their commitment. This right is recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. The right to proselytise has been recognised by the European Court of Human Rights in the case *Kokkinakis v. Greece* (1993).

***Blood transfusion:*** Jehovah's Witnesses do not teach their members to refuse medical treatment, but they reject transfusions of another person's blood for religious reasons. They also claim that medical research currently encourages effective alternatives to blood transfusions. In the case of minors, medical doctors can ignore the opposition of the parents in the best interest of the child, with or without a court decision, according to the legislation of the country. There are no recent known cases of Jehovah's Witnesses who would have been sentenced by a court for non-assistance to a minor in such situations.

The basis for this position is a scriptural admonition to ‘abstain from blood.’ National branches of the movement have identified hospitals and medical staff that practice bloodless surgery to which their members can be referred in order to receive the healthcare corresponding to their beliefs. Jehovah’s Witnesses encourage and promote research about bloodless surgery and have been involved in the formulation of scientific, ethical, and legal documentation in this field. The European Court and domestic courts of EU member states recognise the right of adult patients to freely choose their medical treatment and not to be submitted to coercive medical treatment.

### **Jehovah’s Witnesses in Prison**

In 2015, most Jehovah’s Witnesses were in prison for refusing to perform military service, organising religious meetings in private homes, and sharing their beliefs with others.

In **Azerbaijan**, one conscientious objector to military service was serving a one-year prison term, and two women were in pre-trial detention for more than five months for distributing religious literature and proselytising in the public space.

As of October 2015, fifty-four Jehovah’s Witnesses (forty-six men and eight women) were imprisoned in harsh conditions in **Eritrea**. They were held in detention for conscientious objection, religious meetings in private houses or for undisclosed reasons.

In **Singapore**, twenty young Jehovah’s Witnesses were still serving prison sentences of thirty-nine months in the Armed Forces Detention Barracks for their conscientious objection to military service.

As of 31<sup>st</sup> July 2015, 555 young Jehovah’s Witnesses<sup>13</sup> in **South Korea** were serving 18-month prison terms for conscientious objection to military service. From the Korean War period to the present, South Korea has relentlessly prosecuted young Witness men who refuse military service and has not provided an alternative to resolve the issue. During this period, South Korea has sentenced more than 18,000 Witnesses to a combined total of around 35,000 years in prison for refusing to perform military service. No provision is made for alternative service.

In **Turkmenistan**, fifteen Jehovah’s Witnesses spent some time in prison in 2015, two of them for refusing to perform military service and thirteen others for distributing religious literature in the public space, proselytising or holding religious meetings in private houses. By the end of the 2015 only one Jehovah’s Witness was still in prison: Bahram Hemdemov, sentenced to four years.

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<sup>13</sup> See full list of prisoners here <http://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/south-korea/jehovahs-witnesses-in-prison/>

## **Conclusions**

Jehovah's Witnesses are not engaged politically and do not pose any security threat to society. Generally, they obey the law of the land and respect authorities. At the same time, like most religious traditions there are limits to that obedience. Jehovah's Witnesses will practice civil disobedience when laws conflict with their conscience. This has resulted in harassment, fines and imprisonment in some countries.

Authorities in countries where Jehovah's Witnesses are present would do well to review their legal framework for such groups within their borders. Non-violent dissenters have historically brought a much needed critique that can benefit the whole of society. When governments have tried to repress such dissent, out of fear or ignorance, they have often found themselves fighting against the tide of history. Whatever one might think of the doctrine or methods of Jehovah's Witnesses, respect and the freedom to practice their faith are clearly due them in accordance with international law and standards of human rights.

# Orthodox

The Orthodox Churches are among the oldest Christian bodies in the world. The Coptic Orthodox Church, which is the particular focus of this chapter, traces its origins to Saint Mark, one of Jesus' apostles in the first century CE. It is led by the Patriarch of Alexandria, also known as the Coptic Pope.

The Egyptian port city of Alexandria was an important intellectual and cultural centre for centuries. It was also a prominent Christian centre until the Arab conquest of the seventh century. Even the word 'Copt' is derived from the word for 'Egypt' in the ancient language of the Egyptians. The Copts are the indigenous Christian people of Egypt. With about twelve million adherents, it is the country's largest church, although today it comprises less than eight percent of the overall population.

There is also a sizable diaspora of Coptic Orthodox in several African and Middle Eastern countries. Worldwide the Church has nearly twenty million members.

Coptic Christians played a visible role in the 2011 Arab Spring revolt which demanded the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. They were frequently caught in the crossfire of the various political groups vying for power during that turbulent period.

When Pope Shenouda III died the following year, there was widespread speculation over the future of Muslim-Coptic relations, as tensions remained high at that time. In November 2012, the 118<sup>th</sup> Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Tawadros II, was chosen according to ancient tradition, his name picked by a blindfolded child from a glass bowl where the names of two other candidates had also been placed.

Relations between the Coptic Church and the majority Muslim population remain fragile, especially with the rise of extremist narratives in the region over the past few years. In February 2015, militants claiming loyalty to ISIS beheaded twenty-one Coptic Christians on a beachfront in Libya. They were Egyptian workers and are now considered saints and martyrs by the Church.

## Teachings

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, the Coptic Church took a different position over a fine point of Christology that led to its separation from the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, a schism which exists to this day. The precise nature of the conflict is still disputed by historians.

What is *not* under dispute is that the Coptic tradition has remained firmly rooted in the historic Orthodox Christian faith with an ardent devotion to its apostolic origins. It emphasises the foundational teachings of the Church Fathers, creeds, and early Church councils and the centrality of the Sacraments, holiness of life, and the importance of prayer. Monasticism is still a prominent dimension of Coptic faith. Like in other Orthodox traditions, priests are permitted to be married, and bishops are drawn from monastic communities and remain celibate.

Throughout its history, the Coptic Church has known great suffering for its beliefs. Under the Emperor Diocletian, nearly one million men, women, and children were killed. Other waves of persecution and mass killings were to follow. Notably, the Church has consistently refused any favoured relationship with successive governments of Egypt, upholding in principle the separation of religion and the state.

## **Controversies**

Coptic Orthodox Christians find themselves in an increasingly hostile religious environment. In **Egypt**, politico-religious convulsions in recent years are bound to produce unpleasant circumstances for religious minorities of any sort. The Coptic Orthodox Church is particularly vulnerable, however, not so much for its actual teachings as it is for its visibility as Egypt's most sizable religious group in an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim majority nation. The Copts' historic presence in Egypt provides scant protection against conservative Islamist violence and a failed judicial system that will not bring perpetrators to justice.

It is true that Copts are especially exposed to vaguely-worded criminal charges, such as blasphemy, insulting the Prophet or 'causing harm or damage to the public interest.' Accusations of this nature have led to angry reactions, massive riots, and pogroms against the Coptic community.

Even when no offense was intended, any hint of mockery toward Islam or discussions over the life of Prophet Muhammad can trigger an extreme response from people who are looking for places to vent their rage.

In **Eritrea**, the Orthodox Christians cannot be regarded as Coptic since the Coptic Pope granted autocephalous status to their church in 1994. Even still, the Eritrean Orthodox Church has been historically under the Patriarch of Alexandria. The Church has known severe restrictions since the current government in Eritrea took power following the war for independence from Ethiopia. After persistent objections to state interference in religious affairs, the government deposed Patriarch Abune Antonios in January 2006 and placed him under house arrest. Another patriarch, selected by the regime, has governed the Church since that time.

## Orthodox in Prison

### *Egypt*

In 2015, six Coptic Orthodox Christians were in prison on fabricated or false blasphemy charges.

**Kirollos Shawki ATALLAH** was arrested in 2014 and sentenced to three years in 2015 for posting photos on Facebook deemed defamatory to Islam.

**Bishoy Armia BOULOUS** (until his conversion Mohammed Hegazy) was arrested in 2013 and sentenced in 2014 to five years in prison for filming demonstrations against Christians. He was declared not guilty by an appellate judge on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2015. However, he remains in prison for charges of blasphemy filed against him in 2009.

**Makram DIAB** was arrested in 2012 and sentenced to six years in prison for telling a Salafi Muslim that Muhammad had more than four wives, resulting in an argument.

**Bishoy KAMEEL KAMEL GARAS** was sentenced in 2012 to six years in prison: three years for allegedly defaming Islam and the Prophet Mohammed, two years for insulting the president and one year for insulting Mohamed Safwat who made the allegations against him. The offenses were made on a Facebook page falsely posted in his name. A hearing for his acquittal was set for September 2015 then delayed until early 2016.

**Gamal Abdu MASSOUD** was sentenced to three years by a juvenile court (he was then sixteen years old) for posting cartoons mocking Islam and the Prophet Muhammad on Facebook in December 2011 and sharing them with other students. He was released in April 2015.

**Ishaq MEDHAT** was initially charged in August 2015 with ‘inciting sectarian strife’ and ‘harming national unity’ and later with ‘insulting religion.’ He was distributing Bibles on the street when he was arrested. There is no law that makes the act of attempting to convert illegal, but Article 98 of the penal code is often used to criminalise the use of religion for the purposes of ‘inciting sectarian strife and harming national unity and social peace.’ He was kept in pre-trial custody for at least two weeks. No further details are known of his case.

### *Eritrea*

Eritrea is a one-party state with the distinction of having the poorest human rights record after North Korea. All religious activities in Eritrea are strictly repressed.

**ABUNE ANTONIOS**, Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been under house arrest since January 2006 for resisting government interference in religious affairs. He is 87 years old and in bad health. In 2004, he had protested the secret imprisonment of three Orthodox priests. The following year church authorities removed his executive powers. On 27<sup>th</sup> May 2007, the government appointed a new Patriarch, Abuna Discoros I. The Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria does not recognize the state-appointed Patriarch of Eritrea and condemns the non-canonical disposition of Patriarch Abune Antonios.

## **Conclusions**

Salafist influence in the Middle East and beyond has contributed to the fragmentation of Egyptian society, a society which has traditionally been associated with tolerance for religious diversity. The toxic environment of political rivalry, deep social hostility, restrictive government policies and abusive practices of police and security forces has made the country untenable for many Egyptians today and especially minority groups such as Coptic Orthodox Christians.

This has limited freedoms for Copts to practice their faith without fear of judicial or violent consequences. The current Egyptian government has a particular role to play in ensuring the freedom of religion or belief as guaranteed by its constitutional law. This can only be safeguarded by a judiciary that functions independently of any partisan or state influence. Judicial reform of this nature must become a greater priority of the el-Sisi government if it is to achieve the progress toward democracy to which it aspires.



# Protestants

The label 'Protestant' has been applied to a wide range of Christian groups. In Western countries it is popularly used for any Christian who is not Roman Catholic, in part because of the dominance of Roman Catholicism in the West, and also partly due to the complex array of non-Roman church bodies that have emerged in the modern world, precipitating a shorthand term for easy reference.

The word Protestant first came into use when referring to the 16<sup>th</sup> century movement in Europe that called for reforms in the Catholic Church. It was especially applied to Martin Luther, a German monk, who protested against corruption and abuses in the Church and publicly appealed for the reform of a number of beliefs and practices.

Other reform-minded theologians and Christian humanists preceded Luther, such as Erasmus, William Tyndale, and Jan Hus. These figures raised similar concerns from within the Church in the centuries leading up to the Protestant Reformation; however, it was specifically the reform movements of the 16th century which introduced the word 'Protestant' into the lexicon of Western religion.

Subsequently, the term has been used to reference any of the numerous Christian denominations in the West that do not accept the authority of Rome. They may call themselves Reformed, Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Evangelicals, Pentecostals or use some other appellation; however, most of these groups would self-identify as Protestant. The distinctions between them often reveal differences in theology, polity and practice.

For instance, John Calvin was a French humanist and doctor of law, who envisioned a system of church governance by elected office holders, pastors and elders (*presbyters*). This *presbyterian* structure was established in contrast to the traditional *episcopal* system of the Catholic Church where authority resided in a bishop (*episcopos*). Calvin's teachings had an enduring impact on Reformed theology, which became especially influential in Eastern Europe, Scotland and the Americas.

Another Reformed leader was Ulrich Zwingli of Switzerland, who pressed for even more radical changes to be made in church doctrine and practice. Zwingli supported the creation of a theocratic state, where the Bible would carry authority in civil as well as religious life.

The Protestant Reformation faced substantial opposition from the Roman Catholic Church and from European nobility that benefited from its favoured status with the Church. States and cities that sided with the Protestant movement became battlegrounds for increased religious and political autonomy, as some nobles perceived an opportunity for consolidating their influence in a time of rising nationalism while others supported the status quo.

After years of struggle and even civil war, many countries established state religions and afforded tolerance to minority religions. The Reformation period had produced a range of denominations, each emphasizing particular doctrines, practices, or church governance. The influence of Lutheranism and Calvinism had left their mark. Later, the Evangelical movement would also establish itself, emphasising the importance of personal conversion, preaching of the

Gospel, the centrality of the Bible and active evangelism. The Pentecostal wing of Evangelicals placed particular emphasis on the experience of faith as opposed to just an intellectual assent to certain doctrines.

Evangelical revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries spurred a lively commitment to missionary work in foreign lands, often facilitated by colonial interests. The growth of European and American missions to influence ideologies of populations around the globe in the 19th century allowed for the most expansive period of Protestantism.

Today Protestantism has a worldwide presence, accounting for approximately one-third of the world's 2.18 billion Christians. Protestants are highly concentrated in the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa, with significant numbers throughout Europe, Asia, and the Pacific. They also constitute small minorities in Northern Africa and the Middle East.

## Teachings

Protestant teachings, as shared by Christianity in general, centre on Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Redeemer of the world. The Reformation produced several defining characteristics of Protestant faith, including justification by faith (*sola fida*) through grace (*sola gratia*), the priesthood of all believers and the authority of the Bible over 'human' traditions.

Rejecting the authority of Rome, Protestants sought to establish the Bible as the ultimate source of authority. Many advocate the principle of *sola scriptura*, affirming the Bible's singular authority in all matters of faith and practice. Other Protestant traditions give the Bible priority as an authoritative source (*prima scriptura*), while acknowledging other influences that have shaped the interpretation of Christian beliefs. Prior to the Reformation, the Bible was available exclusively in Latin and therefore accessible only to an educated elite. Reformers worked to translate scriptural texts into the common vernacular and disseminate copies.

Tracing a middle way (*via media*) between Catholicism and Protestantism, the Anglican tradition has sought to forge a path that is authentically Catholic while adopting many of the changes brought about by the Reformation. Like Roman Catholics, Anglicans point to the visible and historic succession of the apostles as the source of authority. In regard to doctrines and liturgy, Anglicanism, in many aspects, more closely resembles Roman Catholicism than 'Protestant' denominations. The case is frequently made that Anglicanism is not adequately defined as a 'Protestant' faith.

Protestant liturgies vary widely by denomination. Lutheranism and Anglicanism have maintained liturgy most similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church. Along the spectrum of more Protestant-minded denominations there is a greater emphasis on preaching and a persistent reaction to Roman Catholic beliefs and practices.

## Controversies

Protestant Christians, mostly Evangelicals and Pentecostal groups, face a number of restrictions on their activities in many countries today. At the heart of the challenges they face are often their evangelistic activities. In many Muslim-majority countries, apostasy laws impose harsh penalties

on converts from Islam to other faiths. Strict prohibitions of proselytising are similarly forbidden by law. In **Iran**, for instance, those found guilty of such crimes can receive lashings, up to eight years imprisonment, or even the death penalty. In **Saudi Arabia**, where missionary activities and proselytising are forbidden, apostasy and blasphemy are likewise punishable by death.

In the **former Soviet republics of Eurasia**, religious practice can be systematically oppressed. Rigid conditions for the registration of religious activities have made it impossible for many churches to operate legally. The impact of functioning as a non-registered entity is more readily felt by smaller religious minorities. State-sponsored discrimination often parallels that of society, falling hardest on ‘new Christians’: predominantly Protestant groups, missionaries and converts whose evangelisation efforts are perceived as a threat.

The generally decentralised and simple church structure of Presbyterian and Congregationalist Protestant churches have contributed to their persistence – and even growth at times – in adverse environments. Such was the case for Baptist churches in the USSR. However, the same decentralisation can also place members of these churches in precarious situations.

In countries like **China** and **Vietnam**, where religious organisations are strictly regulated by the government, Evangelical and Pentecostal house churches can be forced to meet in secret or become subject to raids, arrests and detention. They are charged with dubious offenses such as disruption of public order, undermining state security, illegally operating a business or leaking state secrets. A Chinese government campaign to ‘expose and remove illegal structures’ led to the demolition or defacement of an estimated 1,700 churches.

In **Iran**, Evangelicals and Pentecostals have been indicted for membership in organisations that aim to disrupt national security, propaganda against the system, organising a group to overthrow the regime and even enmity against God.

In addition to official government-sanctioned repression, Evangelicals and Pentecostals have suffered persecution by non-state actors who are opposed to their missionary activities on various grounds. In some regions of **India**, discrimination and violence against Protestants have been on the rise, spurred by a wave of nationalist rhetoric calling for a return to an India unified in Hinduism. Those who belong to religious minorities have been misrepresented as having been converted forcibly. Coercive tactics have been increasingly employed to ‘reconvert’ Christians, along with members of other faiths. Anti-conversion laws, which are supposedly in place to protect religious minorities, have instead been applied against them in a discriminatory manner.

## Protestants in Prison

Very few believers belonging to the historic Protestant denominations are in prison. The main victims of state repression are believers and groups that are part of the Evangelical and Pentecostal families involved in missionary activities, such as in **Bhutan, China, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Laos, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.**

Concerning **China**, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented more than seventy individual cases and several mass arrests. The charges which are mainly related to freedom of worship and assembly are routinely phrased as follows:

- Organising a religious service in a private home (house church)
- Illegal assembly
- Participation in demonstrations and illegal assembly
- Engaging in illegal religious activity
- Disturbing public order
- Using religion to disturb social order
- Gathering a crowd to disturb public order

Sentences were typically ten to fifteen days of administrative detention.

In China people are also sentenced for printing and distributing religious material for the purpose of converting to Christianity.

In addition, legislation on 'evil cults' can be leveraged to put believers behind bars for several years. Accusations are usually phrased as follows:

- Belonging to a forbidden cult
- Organising cult activities
- Spreading cult teachings
- Using a cult organization to undermine law enforcement
- Organising and using a religious cult to break laws

Finally, security concerns are frequently cited in charges such as:

- Inciting subversion of state power and leaking state secrets
- Engaging in illegal religious infiltration, including preaching Christianity among the Uyghur ethnic group
- Gathering, stealing, buying or illegally providing state secrets and espionage

These are serious offences for which sentences up to fifteen years in prison were imposed.

Concerning **Iran**, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented approximately twenty-five individual cases and several mass arrests.

Leaders and members of Evangelical and Pentecostal communities as well as from the Church of Iran, a non-Trinitarian Christian movement, have been particularly targeted.

The usual charges for missionary activities are very serious and entail very heavy prison sentences (generally three to six years):

- Conspiring against the Islamic regime and evangelism
- Collusion against national security
- Undermining national security
- Membership in organisations that aim to disrupt national security
- Propaganda against the regime
- Organising a group to overthrow the regime
- Promoting Christianity
- Encouraging conversion from Islam to Christianity
- Evangelism
- Proselytising Farsi-speaking citizens
- Organising house church meetings

In **Bhutan**, evangelist **Tandin Wangyal**, was sentenced to four years in prison in 2014 for conducting a religious meeting without prior official approval and collecting ‘illegal funds.’ He was released on bail in January 2015.

In **Eritrea**, three Pentecostal pastors of the Full Gospel Church - **Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel**, **Haile Nayzgi** and **Kidane Weldou** - were arrested between 2004 and 2005 because of their evangelizing activities; as of 2015, more than ten years later, their whereabouts are still unknown.

In **Indonesia**, **Antonius Richmond Bawengan** was arrested in 2010 while distributing leaflets. He was accused of blasphemy and in February 2011 sentenced to five years in prison. Protesters demanded that he be handed over to the police, chanting ‘Kill, kill, kill’ outside the court as he was led away under heavy security. The angry mob then trashed the courtroom before targeting Christian sites, burning down a number of churches and schools.

In **Kazakhstan**, **Yklas Kabduakasov** was sentenced on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2015 to two years imprisonment in a labour camp. He had been arrested on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2015 while discussing his faith and offering Christian books. He was officially convicted of inciting religious hatred, a charge that he denies.

In **Laos**, several pastors - **Kaithong, Muk, Tiang, Puphet** and **Hasadee** – who had prayed for the healing of a convert, were held responsible for her death. In February 2015, a court found them guilty of illegal practice of medicine and sentenced them to nine months detention.

In **North Korea**, four foreign Christians (one Canadian and three South Korean pastors) were serving prison terms for attempting to carry out missionary activities in North Korea. In December 2015, **Hyeon Soo Lim** from Toronto was sentenced to life imprisonment for harming the dignity of the supreme leadership and trying to use religion to destroy the North Korean system. **Kim Jeong-Wook** was condemned to hard labour for life for attempting to overthrow

the government by spying and setting up underground churches. South Korean pastors **Kim Kuk Gi** and **Choe Chun Gil** were accused of espionage. According to the 400-page report of the UN Commission of Inquiry into Human Rights in North Korea, ‘Countless numbers of persons in North Korea who attempt to practice their religious beliefs have been severely punished, even unto death.’

In **Pakistan**, **Asia Bibi**, was arrested in 2009 for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad during an argument with some Muslim neighbours after she drank water from a well with an allegedly ‘unclean’ cup used by Muslim women. She was sentenced to death one year later. Three politicians took up her case to call for reform of the country’s rigid blasphemy code. Two of them were assassinated, and the third one is in hiding.

**Shafqat** and **Shagufta Emmanuel** (husband and wife) were arrested in July 2013 in the city of Gojra for allegedly sending a text message in English deemed insulting to the Prophet Mohammed to an imam. Shagufta told the police that her cell phone had been lost for a month and that she did not know who could have sent the messages. The couple are uneducated and do not speak English. On 4<sup>th</sup> April 2014, a court handed death sentence to the Christian couple. As Pakistan has a de facto moratorium on the death penalty, it is unlikely that they will be executed. They remain in prison throughout 2015.

**Muhammad Asghar**, a seventy-year-old British Protestant from Edinburgh, was sentenced to death in 2014 for allegedly writing letters to several people claiming to be a prophet. His lawyers claimed that he had a history of mental illness but the court did not accept UK medical reports.

Muslims, Christians and others have all been victimised by Pakistan’s blasphemy laws. Contravening these laws can result in death or life imprisonment as stipulated in Section 295-A, B, C and 298-A, B, C of the Penal Code. In practice people are sentenced to death are not put to death but incarcerated indefinitely.

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* has identified a series of cases concerning Christians who were sentenced to life imprisonment in blasphemy cases; however, the sources of information often fail to mention if they were Roman Catholic, Anglican or Protestant Christians. See details at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Pakistan-FBL-2015.pdf>

In **Sudan**, several pastors were arrested in 2015 in two different cases. **Hassan Abduraheem**, **Hafiz Mengisto**, **Talahon Nigosi Kassa Ratta** and **Kwa Shamal** were detained by National Intelligence and Security Service agents for obstructing them from destroying a part of their church building. **Pastors Peter Lein Reith** and **Yat Michael** faced six charges: undermining the constitutional system (article 50), espionage (article 53), promoting hatred among sects (article 64), breach of public peace (article 69) and offences relating to insulting religious beliefs (article 125). Pastor Reith was released on 5th August. Pastor Mengisto was released on 29th December 2015.

In **Uzbekistan**, **Doniyor Akhmedov** was sentenced to fifteen days in prison and a heavy fine (the equivalent of three years minimum wage) in 2015 for distributing religious leaflets to people on the street. **Tohar Haydarov**, a Muslim who converted to Christianity, was arrested in 2010 and sentenced to ten years in prison for ‘illegal production purchase, storage and other operations

with narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances.’ The charges are believed to have been fabricated and came after relatives asked local police to help them force Tohar to return to Islam.

In **Vietnam**, a number of members of the Montagnard ethnic group were sentenced to heavy prison terms on the grounds of undermining the unity policy: **Am Ilnh** (eight years in 2009), **Kpa Sinh** (eight years of house arrest in 2011) and **Ksor Y Du** (three years of house arrest also in 2011). In 2012, four members of the Hmongs ethnic group were arrested and sentenced to prison terms for alleged activities aimed at overthrowing the government: seven years for **Trang A Cho** and three years for **Giang A Long, LiA Di, and Hau A Giang**. The Vietnamese authorities perceive these ethnic groups, which were evangelized by Protestant missionaries, as a potential threat to the territorial integrity and the security of the country, in which the majority religion is Buddhism.

## Conclusions

It would be much too simplistic to relegate all repression of Evangelical-Pentecostal Protestants to government resistance to proselytising activities such as public preaching and the distribution of literature. Other elements are also present that have deeper roots in the culture, history and politics of the country. For instance, the fact that many of these groups hail from America and Europe makes it difficult to separate the message from the messenger.

It is not surprising that some governments resist the ‘foreign influence’ that comes with missionary activities that originate in countries that they consider to be corrupt or immoral. Especially in countries where there is already a prominent ethno-religious identity, evangelising activities from abroad can be perceived as invasive or disruptive to national unity. This is also the case for many Communist and post-Communist societies, where religion is sometimes considered divisive and retrograde.

Or if missionaries come from a former coloniser or from countries that promote policies in the receiving country that are deemed harmful, this too can provoke hostilities on the part of governments.

For these reasons and more, several States have decided to ban all foreign missionary activities altogether. Sometimes such policies reflect more paranoia than good sense. There is an enormous difference between distributing a religious tract and ‘conspiring to overthrow the regime.’ Even still, it is clear that governments are charged with looking after the general welfare of society and to protect their citizens from harmful influences. It is equally clear that not all religion is harmless in nature.

However, any resistance to proselytising must also be viewed within the framework of international norms of freedom of religion or belief. These norms include ‘the freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his [or her] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance’ (UDHR, Article 18). States must find ways to balance the need for societal stability with their commitment to ensure democratic freedoms for all its citizens.





# Roman Catholics

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest body of Christians with more than 1.2 billion members worldwide. The term ‘Catholic’ (from Greek καθολικισμός, meaning ‘throughout the whole’) applies broadly to the beliefs and practices of particular churches that claim continuity with the apostles. The term ‘Roman’ designates those Catholics who are in full communion with the Bishop of Rome, widely known as the Pope.

The Pope (Latin *papa* for ‘father’) is the jurisdictional head of the Catholic Church in Rome, an authority that the Church claims has been handed down in unbroken succession from apostolic times. The Gospel of Matthew (16:19) asserts that Jesus entrusted St Peter with ‘the keys of the kingdom of heaven,’ thereby designating him the chief apostle who would eventually become the first Bishop of Rome. Roman Catholics accept the supremacy of the Pope on all matters of faith and doctrine.

However, the doctrine of papal supremacy has been vigorously contested over the course of its history, leading to conflicts, schisms, and harsh measures to contain dissent. Not surprisingly, any claim to universal authority is bound to draw the ire of conflicting interests, whether in the religious sphere or the political. Historically, the papacy has fostered a climate that allowed the Church to amass considerable power and form unsavoury alliances with monarchs, tyrants and oppressive institutions. In effect, the Roman Catholic Church has perpetuated the culture of imperial Rome, from which it acquired its institutional character.

In modern times, the power that the Church once wielded has been sharply reduced. Even still, its image as a powerful and influential institution persists, whether real or perceived. In fact, the ‘Holy See’ (*Sancta Sedes* in Latin) functions as a sovereign state, maintains diplomatic relations with other states and is recognised as a sovereign entity under international law. This has been problematic for governments that host Roman Catholics in their countries and view loyalty to the Holy See as incompatible with loyalty to the state.

## Teachings

The principal teachings of the Roman Catholic Church are shared by other Catholic traditions, which are summarised in the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed. These include a belief in one God, the Holy Trinity, and the centrality of Christ, the Son of God and Redeemer of the world.

The Church also shares with other Catholic traditions a liturgical and sacramental approach to its common worship, allowing for wide variances in its cultural expression. The central celebration of all Catholics is the Holy Eucharist, the sacrament in which believers are said to share in the very life of Christ, who is present in the bread and the wine that is shared.

Catholic Social Teaching places great emphasis on works of mercy and justice, which finds lively and diverse expression in many countries throughout the world. The Roman Church is the largest non-governmental provider of education and medical services in the world.

However, the most clearly definable difference between Roman Catholicism and all other Christian traditions is one of authority. The Church maintains that Christ gave authority to his apostles and their successors to defend ‘the deposit of faith,’ which circumscribes matters of doctrine and practice for the faithful.

## **Controversies**

The Roman Catholic Church is one of the oldest religious institutions in the world and has played a prominent role in the history of Western civilisation. This alone has drawn suspicion of the Church being an agent of Western influence and, consequently, a target for suppression. Moreover, the Church acts as a sovereign state entity in the form of the Holy See, having a centralised government, keeping diplomatic relations with other states, and even having its own sovereign territory, officially known as the Vatican City State.

It is the Church’s position as a sovereign state in international affairs that has provoked friction with some other states in the modern era. Notably, the government in **China** established in 1957 the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), a group which seeks to place all Catholic Church structures under the sole authority of the Chinese state. The following year Pope Pius XII condemned the activities of the CCPA and declared that Roman Catholic bishops participating in the consecration of CCPA-appointed bishops would be excommunicated.

Religious associations in China must be registered with the government or else face the possibility of suppression. The Religious Affairs Bureau exercises supervision over the activities of the CCPA. All Catholic structures that remain loyal to Rome are under ‘foreign influence’ and, therefore, outlawed. The Chinese authorities only recognise those clerics who openly declare their independence from the Vatican and swear allegiance to the communist regime. As a result, all other Roman Catholic churches and clerics have been forced underground.

For instance, Bishop James Su Zhimin of Baoding was arrested in 1996 for refusing to join the CCPA. He has been marked as a ‘counterrevolutionary’ by the Chinese government. Bishop Su escaped detention in 1997 and has been in hiding ever since. He is now 82.

On 8<sup>th</sup> November 2015, the body of Father Pedro Yu Heping was found in the Fen River in Shanxi Province. The circumstances of his death remain a mystery. Father Yu was an underground priest who had once operated a popular Catholic website in China.

In **Pakistan**, Roman Catholics are also victims, alongside other Christians and Muslims, of the social abuse of the blasphemy laws.

## Roman Catholics in Prison

### *China*

In **China**, a dozen Roman Catholic clerics have been kept in detention or gone missing after their arrest for many years.

**Fr. CUI Tai**, an underground priest of the diocese of Xuanhua (Hebei), disappeared while in police custody on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2011 after members of the government's Religious Affairs Bureau dragged him away from home. Since that time there has been no information on his whereabouts.

**Msgr. James Su ZHIMIN** (age 84), an underground bishop of Baoding (Hebei), was arrested in Baoding (Hebei Province) in 1997. The charges remain unknown, but he was considered a 'counter-revolutionary.' Since the 1950s he has refused to join the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*. In all he has already spent 40 years in captivity. He was last seen by his relatives in 2003 in a hospital surrounded by police.

**Msg. Julius JIA Zhiguo** (age 80), bishop of Zhengding (Hebei), was arrested in May 2015 and detained for 12 days without any official charges. It is believed that he was jailed because he had ordained several priests without the approval of the state. The bishop has been detained countless times for refusing to join the state-sanctioned *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*.

**Fr. LIU Honggen**, an underground priest of the diocese of Baoding (Hebei), was arrested in December 2006 for refusing to join the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*. He was released in August 2015 after spending eight years in prison without trial. He was reportedly arrested again later on and has not been seen since.

**Thaddeus MA Daqin** (Bishop of Shanghai), former vice-chair of the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*, has been under house arrest at the Sheshan Regional Seminary in a Shanghai suburb since 7<sup>th</sup> July 2012 after resigning from the state-controlled institution.

**Msgr. Cosma SHI Enxiang** (age 84), an underground bishop of Yixian (Hebei), was arrested on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2001 in Beijing. On 30<sup>th</sup> January 2015, a city employee commented to family members about Msgr. Shi Enxiang's death. News spread quickly throughout the Catholic community, but authorities later denied any knowledge of the cleric's death. Msgr. Shi Enxiang has intermittently suffered long periods in prison and house arrest from 1957 until 1980.

**Fr. SONG Wanjun** was arrested on 7<sup>th</sup> August 2013 in Qiaodong District, Zhangjiakou City, (Hebei Province) and sentenced to three years. Official charges are unknown.

**Msgr. WU Qinjing** was arrested in November 2007 for being secretly ordained as a bishop of the Diocese of Zhouzhi without the permission of the local *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*. Since then he had been kept under house arrest in the minor seminary in Xian. In July 2015, his ordination was approved by the Chinese government and the CCPA. He has since been formally installed as bishop of Zhouzhi.

### *Pakistan*

Muslims, Christians and others have all been victimised by Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Contravening these laws can result in death or life imprisonment as stipulated in Section 295-A, B, C and 298-A, B, C of the Penal Code. In practice, people are sentenced to death are not put to death but incarcerated indefinitely.

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* has identified a series of cases concerning Christians who were sentenced to life imprisonment in blasphemy cases; however, the sources of information often fail to mention if they were Roman Catholic, Anglican or Protestant Christians. See details at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Pakistan-FBL-2015.pdf>

## **Conclusions**

Over the centuries Roman Catholics have had a long history of suffering and repression for multiple reasons. In our times it is especially in China that they are officially restricted in their activities. According to Chinese officials, these restrictions are necessary to contain the potential threat which Catholics who remain loyal to Rome pose to the ideology and authority of the state. It is extremely doubtful that the Vatican City State could mount a significant challenge to China; however, Chinese policy is sometimes more strongly shaped by political paranoia than it is by good sense. More than half century on from the hardening of government restrictions on religion, a review of China's position toward such groups is long overdue.

# Said Nursi Followers

Said Nursi was a religious scholar, opinion leader and activist concerned with the acute problems the society of his time. Throughout his life, he desperately attempted to conciliate religion, modernity and politics. His books inspired a faith movement that played a vital role in the revival of Islam in Turkey throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now has several millions of followers worldwide, including in Russia and other post-Soviet countries with a Muslim majority.

Said Nursi was born into a Kurdish family in Nurs, a small village in Eastern Anatolia, Turkey, in the 1870s. His parents were pious peasants who had been in close contact with local Sufi leaders. He received an unconventional educational training.

In the 1890s, the governor of the Turkish province of Bitlis, Ömer Pasha, gave him the opportunity to continue his studies and meet regional governors, bureaucrats and politicians who were eager to modernize the Ottoman Empire. Through these contacts, Nursi developed an interest in social, economic and political problems of the empire and also became familiar with modern ideologies that were more critical of a religious worldview. He studied modern sciences and philosophy, through which he became more cognizant of positivism and materialism. He realized that modern scepticism arising from Western scientific discoveries and technical developments was rapidly prevailing with the Ottoman intelligentsia and was alienating people from religion. He disapproved of such dichotomies as ‘reason v. revelation’ and ‘science v. spirituality’.

## Teachings & Controversies

### *Said Nursi’s educational and political commitments*

A fierce critic of both the outdated religious *medrese*, which ignores scientific achievements and the modernist educational system excluding religion, he conceptualized a new and holistic educational model attempting to reconcile the various opposing views by jointly teaching both religious and modern sciences under the same roof.

Despite the suspicions of Sultan Abdülhamid II about his teachings, he managed in a short time to get the attention of the intellectual elite. Because of his writings urging reform and his critique of the imperial regime, he was arrested, briefly imprisoned and then sent to a mental institution. He was later released by a medical report clearing him from any mental problem, although he remained under strict surveillance.

When the Second Constitutional Rule was declared in July 1908, Nursi delivered fervent public speeches and published articles supporting the new constitutional regime. In his opinion, real freedom could only flourish if the regime followed the ordinances and moral and conduct outlined by divine revelation. If freedom is abused, he maintained, it would be lost and end up in despotism.

Frustrated by his political experience in Istanbul, Nursi decided to go back to his native Anatolia in 1910. There he published a book on the principles of contemporary Quranic exegesis. In his public discussions he addressed more regional problems such as ignorance, fanaticism and the need for good relations with Armenians.

### ***First World War***

With approval from the central government, Nursi became the leader of a militia force during the First World War. The group was mainly comprised of his students from his former *medrese* in Van. From 1914 to 1916, he fought in the Special Organisation of the Ottoman Empire<sup>14</sup> against the Russian army. He was captured by the Russians on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1916 and sent to a camp in Kostroma, a city located at the confluence of the Volga and Kostroma rivers. He remained in captivity in Tsarist Russia during two years and took the advantage of the political chaos of the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917 to escape from the war camp.

### ***Said Nursi and Kemalism***

Said Nursi was welcomed as a hero in Istanbul. He was soon nominated to be a member of the Academy for Islamic Wisdom. Disappointed by the lack of success in his political and social involvement, he was also depressed by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, decline of Muslim communities and occupation of Istanbul by the British forces in March 1920. He issued defying statements against this occupation and supported the Ankara-based independence movement. When the Turks recovered their sovereignty in 1922, they abolished the Sultanate.

Nursi's political vision was of a new political entity based on the Quran and promoting religious understanding. However, the new governing body led by Mustafa Kemal had a totally different agenda: nationalism and anti-religious secularism. The Caliphate was abolished in 1924, and over the next decade traces of religious influence in the public sphere were dismantled. All *medrese* establishments and Sufi brotherhoods were outlawed, *shariah* courts were replaced by civil courts, the tombs of the saints were closed, Arabic was banned and replaced by Latin, and the Arabic call to prayer was forbidden. This was the beginning of Nursi's split from Kemalist ideology.

Alarmed by the growing popularity of his teachings, which had spread even among the intellectuals and the military officers, the government repeatedly arrested Nursi for allegedly exploiting religion for political ends, forming a clandestine political organisation, giving instruction in Sufism and opposing secular republican reforms. He was repeatedly harassed, placed under strict surveillance and sentenced to prison terms and internal exile. In 1956 he was cleared of all charges, although the authorities continued their campaign against him for many years afterwards.

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<sup>14</sup> Enver Pasha assumed the primary role in the direction of the Special Organization. Kemal Ataturk was one of its notable members. Most of its 30,000 members were drawn from trained specialists such as doctors, engineers, and journalists but the organisation also employed criminals released from prison in 1913 through an amnesty. Many members of this organisation who had played particular roles in the Armenian Genocide also participated in the Turkish national movement. The Special Organisation, assisted by government and army officials, deported all Greek men of military age to labour brigades beginning in summer 1914 and lasting through 1916.

### *From the Democrat Party rule to the junta regime*

In May 1950, the Democrat Party won the first free multi-party elections with an absolute majority in the Parliament. The new party supported more liberal and democratic governance, abolished the ban on Arabic and declared a general amnesty from which Said Nursi benefitted. The government supported a religion-friendly secularism and aimed to firmly fight against Communism; policies which aligned with Nursi's ideas of an alliance between Muslims and Christians to combat Communism. Nursi was in full support of the domestic and foreign policies of the new regime.

Said Nursi died in his eighties in Urfa, the legendary city of Abraham, on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1960. He was buried the next day with a great funeral ceremony; however, his body was not left in peace in his grave for long. Two months later, a coup d'état took place in Turkey and the junta regime overthrew the ruling Democratic Party. On 12<sup>th</sup> July 1960, Nursi's corpse was exhumed and buried in an unknown place in order to prevent popular veneration.

### *His works*

Said Nursi was a prolific preacher and writer. His major work is a collection of texts named *Risale-i Nur* ("Letters of Divine Light"), a body of Quranic commentary exceeding six thousand pages.

Despite constant surveillance by the authorities, he continued to contact people whilst in exile. Out of them emerged a small group of loyal followers who became the forerunners of the *Nur* movement, which would eventually become the most dynamic and influential community in modern Turkey. The first portions of *Risale-i Nur* were produced in the 1950s and were copied by hand. These first hand-copied editions were reported to have reached more than 600,000 copies throughout Anatolia. Nursi's works have been published in Latin script by publishing houses from 1956 on.

There are now followers of Said Nursi worldwide. They continue to be persecuted in a number of Muslim majority countries, even though they do not commit or advocate violence or terrorism. Nursi's works are banned in **Russia**, **Uzbekistan** and **Azerbaijan** for allegedly inciting hatred and enmity against non-believers. Nursi readers have been subjected in these countries to police raids, confiscation of literature and court sentences of fines and prison terms.

## Said Nursi Followers in Prison

### *Azerbaijan*

The 14-volume *Risale-i Nur* (Messages of Light) collection of writings by the Islamic theologian Said Nursi is on the list of banned religious literature in Azerbaijan. Possessing, using or distributing such books is illegal in Azerbaijan.

#### *Mass arrests in Nakhichevan*

In mid-November 2014, Nakhichevan's police and NSM secret police raided numerous private residences, detaining about 200 people. Within forty-eight hours, about half of those detained were reportedly freed. About sixty were freed when the authorities established that they were Sunni Muslims who were studying the works of Said Nursi. An unknown number appeared to be still in detention in 2015 and under investigation on charges of treason.

On 11<sup>th</sup> February 2015, three Nursi readers were released from prison, who had been detained following raids in Nakhichevan raids and Baku the previous month. All three had been held without any court approval. They were beaten in an effort to force them to confess to the 'crime' of distributing anti-government leaflets. Police had confiscated passports from all three to prevent them leaving the exclave. A fourth Nursi reader had fled to Turkey to evade possible arrest.

#### *Raid in Baku*

In December 2014, **Eldeniz Hajiyev, Ismayil Mammadov, Zakariyya Mammadov, Revan Sabzaliyev** and **Shahin Hasanov** were on criminal trial for attending a religious meeting in Hajiyev's Baku home when it was raided in April 2014. The men had been meeting to discuss their faith and Said Nursi's books without state permission. **Sabzaliyev** was among nine others who had been fined 1,500 Manats (about 1,400 Euros or 1,900 US Dollars) that same month for teaching religion illegally.

**Hajiyev, Mammadov** and **Sabzaliyev** spent up to five months in the NSM secret police's Baku investigation prison. A Baku court ordered the three men's release and transfer to house arrest on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2014. Following their release, the three lodged complaints against Azerbaijan to the ECtHR claiming illegal detention. (Applications No. 74567/14, 71584/14, and 73334/14.). As of July 2015, a criminal trial against the five was still in progress.

#### *Raid in Gadabay Region of western Azerbaijan*

In early June 2015, between ten and fifteen police officers raided **Sabuhi Mammadov's** home in Gadabay, western Azerbaijan, where approximately twenty-five Muslims were meeting to study Nursi's works. Mammadov was fined the maximum amount of 1,500 Manats (then about 1,290 Euros or 1,430 US Dollars) under Administrative Code Article 299.0.2 ('Violating legislation on holding religious meetings, marches, and other religious ceremonies'), and 13 other Muslims were fined fifty Manats (about 40 Euros or 50 US Dollars) under Administrative Code Article 296 ('Hooliganism').



## *Russia*

The followers of Said Nursi are especially repressed in Russia. The first significant ruling against Nursi readers came in May 2007 when a Moscow court declared Russian translations of portions of Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* to be extremist. This decision was based solely on linguistic textual analysis and ignored the counsel of Russia's Ombudsperson for Human Rights, Vladimir Lukin, and even Russia's most pro-Kremlin Muslim leader, Talgat Tadzhuddin. In 2001, Tadzhuddin had declared that *Risale-i Nur* was 'far from religious extremism and fanaticism.'

In April 2008, Russia's Supreme Court went on to ban Nurdzhular – a russification of the Turkish for 'Nursi followers' - as an extremist organisation, although Russian Nursi readers have repeatedly insisted that no such organisation exists.

In 2014, the Mufti of a Mosque in Saransk was fined 5,000 Roubles for possession of a copy of Said Nursi's 'Guidebook for Women,' during an inspection that was conducted without warrant.

On 9<sup>th</sup> April 2014, a court decision was issued to ban the Russian-language website for the study of Nursi's works, [www.nuru.com](http://www.nuru.com).

### *Court cases in Ulyanovsk*

On 25<sup>th</sup> February 2015, 31-year-old **Bagir Kazikhanov** was found guilty under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ('Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity') at Lenin District Court in Ulyanovsk. Judge Natalya Damayeva sentenced him to three and half years' imprisonment.

Kazikhanov's fellow defendants, 26-year-old **Stepan Kudryashov** and 25-year-old **Aleksandr Melentyev**, were convicted of the lesser offence under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 of participation in an association that has been banned due to extremist activity. They received suspended sentences of two years and one year and eight months respectively. A fourth man, **Farkhad Allakhverdiyev**, has been similarly charged but remains at large.

## *Uzbekistan*

Some forty Said Nursi readers were still awaiting trial in 2015 five years after their arrest in Bukhoro five years earlier. Twenty-five alleged Nursi followers were also arrested in the capital city, all serving in the army. Twelve will face a military tribunal.

Under a presidential amnesty, the authorities released in February 2015 **Rashid Sharipov**, **Akmal Abdullayev**, **Ahmad Rakhmonov**, **Ahmadjon Primkulov** and **Kudratullo** (last name unknown) after having served most of their prison term for holding meetings to study the works of Said Nursi. All of them were freed after they had repented and asked the President for forgiveness.

Other Nursi followers, **Ikrom Merajov** and **Botir Tukhtamurodov**, who were jailed in April 2009, for nine years and six years respectively, remain in prison. **Nutfullo Aminov** and **Ilkhom Rajabox**, who were jailed for six years each, and **Abdullo Rasulov**, who was jailed in 2010, also remain behind bars.

## Conclusions

Said Nursi followers are prosecuted for religious activities that do not pose any public danger. Nursi himself never advocated or incited violence, called for the overthrow of the regime or favoured the establishment of a caliphate. Nursi's teachings were moderate in character and appeal to Muslims wishing to reconcile Islamic teaching and modernity. Followers meet to discuss his works in private homes and do not pose any threat.

The reasons and the operations behind the campaign against Nursi followers in Russia are unclear. Official statements point to government paranoia that Nursi readers form a pan-Turkic 'fifth column' that seeks to realign Turkish Muslims among Russia's Turkic-speaking minorities, such as Tatars, Bashkirs, and Kumyks. Some state officials also insist paradoxically that Nursi's works are banned in Turkey. Interestingly, his works are prohibited in Russia – but not in Turkey – and Russia has banned the Nurdzhular movement – even though its very existence is highly questionable.

In Azerbaijan, a regional ally of Turkey, the repression of Said Nursi followers has markedly expanded since President Erdoğan issued a warrant for the arrest of Fetullah Gülen. Gülen is a disciple of Said Nursi who has millions of followers worldwide. He is perceived by Erdogan to be a potential political rival.

Gülen presently lives in self-imposed exile in the United States. Like Nursi, he is concerned with the education of Muslims and their integration into the modern world. Starting in January 1980, Turkey transitioned to a market economy, allowing all religious movements, including the Fethullahci, to freely pursue their religious, economic and educational interests. The Gülen movement has grown all over Turkey.

Uzbekistan is the country which has arrested and imprisoned the highest number of Said Nursi followers for allegedly participating in an extremist organisation. Even still, Nursi readers are not the only movement to be repressed. The government's religious legislation is particularly restrictive and affects several other Muslim movements, such as Hizb-ut Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

# Shias

Shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE, Islam split into two main branches, a division that persists to this day. A disagreement arose concerning the legitimate successor (*caliph*) of the Prophet. Some supported Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib as the caliph, and others Abu Bakr, the Prophet's father-in-law. Those who consider Ali to be the divinely-appointed first *Imam* after Muhammad and his descendants became known as the Shias (from the Arabic word for 'partisan'). The opposing group, who holds Abu Bakr as caliph, are known as Sunnis.

The chief difference between Shias (who number just about ten to thirteen percent of all Muslims globally) and the much larger majority of Sunni Muslims is therefore a matter of authority. This is expressed not only in the question of succession to the Prophet but also in the literary sources from which authority is derived and the manner in which Islamic law is interpreted.

Although they account for a small percentage globally, Shias represent majority populations in Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Iraq. Four countries – Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, and India – account for sixty-eight to eighty percent of Shias worldwide. There are altogether about 120 million Shias in the world.

There are many subgroups within Shia, the most prominent being the Twelvers, so called because of their belief in the Twelve Imams that have been chosen to bear the true message of Islam. For this group the last Imam is the promised *Mahdi*, who will appear one day to establish justice and peace on the earth.

## Teachings

All of Islam teaches that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the Prophet of God. Shia Muslims consider the *Imams* to be the rightful successors of the Prophet and therefore the authentic representatives of Islam. The Imams are exemplary individuals, free from sin and error, who interpret *sharia* and the hidden meaning of Quran correctly.

Some Shia clerics believe that the Imam should be not only a spiritual leader but should also assume the powers of government as Guardian of the Jurist (*Velayat-e-Faghih*). This notion provides a foundation for theocratic government; however, the extent of those powers is a matter of sharp debate among Muslim scholars.

In 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became the first Shia cleric to establish a government based on this Shia concept, *Velayat-e-Faghih*, in Iran.

Aside from the unique politico-religious beliefs of Shia, there are particular observances that are practiced. For example, Shia Islam includes pilgrimages to the shrines of the Twelve Imams and their relatives. Many towns and villages in Iran also maintain secondary shrines (*imamzadehs*), which commemorate those who have led especially saintly lives.

The holy day of Ashura, which marks the climax of the Remembrance of Muharram, is an occasion for great devotion and recommitment to the faith for Shia. Ashura commemorates the

death of Imam Husayn ibn Ali, the son of Ali and Fatima, and grandson of the Prophet. He was killed at Karbala in 680 CE, a decisive event in the historical divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

## Controversies

Shia Muslims are most often the victims of religious intolerance in countries where Sunni Muslims are an overwhelming majority. In Sunni dominated countries, the existence of Shia Islam can be seen as a threat to the central government, capable of challenging the political and economic power of the state.

For instance, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where Wahhabi Sunnis are the majority, the government exerts pressure on the small Shia population in an effort to strengthen its hegemony over the country's political and economic affairs. Shias in **Saudi Arabia** live mostly in the Eastern Province, a region known for its rich oil resources. The Shias are systematically marginalised and discriminated against in political, educational and vocational settings. When protests erupted in 2011 to address these inequalities, the government responded with mass arrests and even death sentences.

Even in Shiism dominant countries, such as **Iran**, the Shia population can face oppression, notably in regards to debates on theocratic models. When these political institutions are called into question on ideological bases, the government often regards these critiques as a threat to the central power and legitimacy of the state.

Other countries cite security concerns, claiming that the activities of certain religious groups must be restricted when state security has potentially come under threat. This is the reason cited by the government of **Malaysia** for the repression of Shia in that country. The sectarian conflicts in the Middle East have become justification for banning Shia for fear that similar conflicts may be imported from the region. The 1996 fatwa outlawing the Shia is currently enforced in eleven out of fourteen Malaysian states.

In **Indonesia**, violence perpetrated against Shia has escalated in recent years and generally goes unprosecuted due to the central government's preferential policies in favour of Sunni Muslims. In 2012, a mob attacked and burned Shiite homes in Sampang, forcing hundreds to relocate. In April 2014, the world's first convention of the 'Anti-Shia Alliance' was organized in the capital city of Jakarta. More than one thousand people attended the event which called for a *jihad* against Shia Muslims.

In **Pakistan**, Shias are similarly targeted for violent attacks. Prosecution of the individuals responsible for the attacks is rare.

In **Azerbaijan**, the authorities regularly target a number of Shia clerics who refuse to join the state-recognized Caucasus Muslim Board, who propagate views and practices of Iran or who actively promote the establishment of an Islamic Republic of Azerbaijan.

Finally, in **Bahrain**, where the majority population is Shia, the country is governed by a Sunnite royal family that opposes what it believes to be interference into its internal affairs by Iran.

Deeply rooted discrimination has provoked protests and demonstrations in recent years, which have often been met by government repression, arrests and torture.

## Shias in Prison

### *Iran*

In **Iran**, some Shias have been sentenced for professing unorthodox or dissenting views. Six cases are documented in the Prisoners' List of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*. A few examples:

In 2011, **Mohammad Ali Taheri**, who professes to be a Shia Muslim, was found guilty of 'acting against national security' and 'blasphemy' for promoting alternative medical therapies. In August 2015, he was sentenced to death by the Revolutionary Court for 'corruption on earth' (*fesad fel arz*).

**Ayatollah Mohammad Kazemeini Boroujerdi** is presently serving an eleven-year sentence on multiple charges, primarily related to his defending the separation of religion from the state. Such a declaration is a denial of the cornerstone doctrine of the Islamic republic (*velayat-e-faghih*). In addition to the imprisonment, the government banned him from practicing his clerical duties and confiscated his home and belongings.

In 2013, **Soheil Arabi** was indicted for insulting the Prophet Muhammad and the Supreme Leader on his Facebook page. For the first accusation he was sentenced to death, but this was later commuted in September 2015 to reading and summarizing thirteen books on theology and Islam, and studying theology for two years. During these forced studies, Arabi was serving a separate seven-and-a-half-year prison term for insulting the Supreme Leader.

**Hesameddin Farzizadeh** was sentenced to seven years of in prison and 74 lashes and death penalty (for apostasy) for writing a book titled "From Islam to Islam" in which he examines the history of Shia Islam and raises questions about certain facets of Shia beliefs.

### *Azerbaijan*

On 5<sup>th</sup> November 2015, Baku's Sabunchu District Police arrested **Sahib Habibov** and Imam **Elchin Qasimli** in the village of Mashtaga, where Qasimli leads prayers in the Hazrat Abbas Mosque. The police objected to a sermon Qasimli gave protesting police torture of Imam Bagirov on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November. Angered by his arrest, approximately sixty of Imam Qasimli's supporters gathered in front of the Sanbunchu District Police Station where he was being held. About twenty persons were arrested. On 6<sup>th</sup> November, the Sabunchu District Court sentenced ten of them – including Imam Qasimli – to up to thirty days' imprisonment. The names of those arrested and sentenced during this incident are unknown.

On 26<sup>th</sup> November 2015, in Baku/ Nardaran, fourteen people were arrested in a special police operation against the Muslim Unity Movement in Baku/ Nardaran: **Taleh Bagirzade, Abulfaz Bunyadov, Rasim Bunyadov, Abbas Tagizada, Abbas Quliyev, Jabbar Amiraslanoğlu, Rasim Jabrayilov, Karbalayi Etibar** (from the village of Bilgah), **Bahrüz Quliyev**, seventeen-

year-old **Jihad Balahuseynoglu** (who is injured), **Alibala Valiyev, Ibrahim** (surname unknown), **Shahin Abdulaliyev** (from the village of Mushfiqabad), and **Ali Nuriyev**. At a hearing on 28<sup>th</sup> November, a Baku court ordered the fourteen to be held in pre-trial imprisonment for four months.

On 26<sup>th</sup> November 2015, in Gyanja, six people allegedly linked to the Muslim Unity Movement were arrested: **Mubariz Ibrahimov, Ramiz Sariyev, Rovshan Asadov, Anar Sultanov, Fuzuli Abbasov, and Ramil Abbasov**.

The **thirty-one arrested Shia Muslims** (mentioned above) are being investigated under some or all of these Criminal Code Articles and possibly others, according to the 1<sup>st</sup> December joint statement: Article 120 (Murder), Article 214 (Terrorism), Article 220 (Mass disorder), Article 228 (Illegal purchase, transfer, selling, storage, transportation and carrying of firearms, accessories to firearms, ammunition and explosives), Article 233 (Organisation of actions promoting infringement of the social order or active participation in such actions), Article 278 (Violent attempts to seize power), Article 279 (Creation of illegal armed formations or groups), Article 281 (Public appeals for violence directed against the state), Article 283 (Inciting national, racial or religious hatred), and Article 315 (Application of violence, resistance with application of violence against a representative of authority in connection with performance of official duties by him, or application of violence not dangerous to life or health concerning his close relatives, as well as threat of application of such violence).

As of the end of December 2015, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* could not say if the arrested people had been detained on the grounds of freedom of religion or belief or for other reasons.

### *Egypt*

**Amr Abdullah** was sentenced in February 2014 to five years in prison for blasphemy and defamation of the Prophet Muhammad's companions. It was said that he was arrested for trying to introduce the Shia festival of Ashura in Al-Hussain Mosque the previous year.

### *Indonesia*

**Tajul Muluk**, a Shia cleric, was sentenced in 2012 to four years in prison for blasphemy, because he argued that the current version of Quran is not the original one, and he questioned the belief concerning the five pillars of Islam.

**Andreas Guntur** was sentenced to four years in prison for blasphemy in March 2012. He is the leader of Amanat Keagungan Ilahi against which the Indonesia Council of Ulemas issued a fatwah in 2009, claiming that the movement rejected conventional Islamic rituals.

## Conclusions

Sunni and Shia Muslims have lived peacefully side by side in many countries and for long periods of time. It was common for them to intermarry and even pray at the same mosques. However, Shias have increasingly been regarded as religious and political rivals, even in Sunni dominant regions. For this reason, Shias often find themselves in a vulnerable position; their very presence is a source of tension between the two main Islamic communities. The need for dialogue between Sunni and Shia clerics is urgently needed in our times to diffuse conflicts and counter violence.

National laws are playing a key role in protecting or violating the right to freedom of religion or belief in Muslim-majority countries. In some contexts, laws are written in a way that allows the discrimination of religious minorities. For instance, Article 98 W of the Egyptian criminal code prohibits ‘ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife.’ Egyptian officials often make reference to this article as a basis for the repression of religious groups. That is also true of Iran, where the majority of charges are rooted in very ambiguous concepts of Islamic criminal law such as ‘acting against national security,’ or ‘blasphemy,’ and ‘enmity against God.’ Similarly in Bahrain, peaceful demonstrations can be framed as ‘plots to overthrow the regime.’

In these countries there is no article stipulating that being Shia or other religious minority is a crime; however, vague language in the law allows for the possibility for it to be interpreted that way. Criminal punishments could restrict the religious freedom of individuals, and, in some countries, even result in their execution. Consequently, the penal code should be clear and precise to avoid any such infringement of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief. Any broad or vague concept should be made clear and carefully scrutinised by legislatures before the laws are adopted.





# Sufis

Sufism refers to the spiritual and esoteric dimension of Islam, asserting that union with God is the ultimate truth and goal of religion. The expression ‘Sufi’ is likely derived from the Arabic word for wool, *suf*, and indicates the coarse woollen garments that were historically worn by Muslim ascetics. The word ‘sufi’ as the common designation for Islamic mysticism is thought to have been used as early as the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.

Sufi orders (*tariqa*) were especially significant in the spread of Islam along trade routes in West Africa and later into Central Asia and China. *Tariqa* are typically formed around spiritual masters who trace their teachings back to the Prophet Muhammad and what they consider to have been the original intent of Islam. Some Sufi orders observe ecstatic practices, such as the physical exertions and whirling dance of dervishes in the Mevlevi Order.

Sufis have also made notable contributions to literature and poetry, in particular. Sufi poetry has left a significant legacy that has made Islamic philosophy and spirituality known to a readership well beyond the Muslim world. For instance, Jalaladdin Rumi, a Persian Sufi of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is one of the most widely read poets in the Western world.

The nature of Sufism makes it impossible to obtain reliable statistics of how many Muslims self-identify as Sufis in the world today. Sufis have had a deep and enduring influence on Islam across many countries and cultures for more than a millennium. However, relatively few Muslims would name themselves as Sufi *per se*.

## Teachings

Sufism places particular importance on the acquisition of spiritual truth through the cultivation of the inner life of the believer. The *murid* (student) engages in the pursuit of self-discovery and spiritual practices with the help of a guide. Sufi masters can teach different methods for pursuing this path, but the ultimate goal remains the same: finding divine truth at the heart of one’s being.

Classical Sufi teaching recommends the repetition of the names of God as a way to deepen prayer. Certain ascetic disciplines, such as fasting, were also encouraged for focusing one’s attention on God. Rituals, such as the hypnotic dance of dervishes, are intended to join body, mind, and spirit to arrive at a deeper state of consciousness and a passionate longing for the divine.

Sufi shrines are dedicated to various saints and poets across the Muslim world. Pilgrimages (*ziyarat*) to these holy sites and commemorations are also part of Sufi practice. This serves as a regular remembrance of the inevitability of death, leading *murids* to reassess their lives and guiding them to live more mindfully in this earthly existence.

Sufism is also associated with more progressive Islamic attitudes toward social and cultural development, human rights, and non-violence. As consciousness of God pervades one’s entire life, the desire for transformation occurs not only on a personal level but also for society and the world. For instance, Sufis have supported the right to education for women and women’s wider participation in society. Sufism is also regarded as a peaceful religious path which opposes the use of violence and any degrading treatment.

## Controversies

Sufism has met opposition in Muslim-majority countries that have strong public resistance to religious and cultural pluralism. Although Sufism originated within Islam, some Sufi teachers have argued that it cannot be limited to one single religious system. It is therefore conceivable that Christians, Hindus, and others could also follow the Sufi path toward union with God. For this reason, some Muslims consider Sufism to be outside the realm of Islam. Governments that seek to maintain power and national unity through the propagation of a single religio-political ideology respond to Sufism with repression.

In Iran, Sufi teachings have sometimes been interpreted as a method to question the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and advocate for a clear separation of religion and state. Dervishes of the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi order<sup>15</sup> have been particularly targeted by Iranian authorities, subjecting them to unfair trials, long prison terms, and excessive security surveillance. Iran remains the state which imprisons the most dervishes.

Other Iranian Sufis have faced arrest, intimidation, and the destruction of their houses of worship. As they are not specifically recognised by constitutional law, they are generally considered to be a ‘false cult’ (*Fergh-e Zale*), and, therefore, susceptible to persecution.

Numerous Shia and Sufi shrines have been destroyed in **Saudi Arabia** by Wahhabis, Salafists and other hardliners, who say the Sufi practice of building these shrines over gravesites is forbidden. In recent years, the destruction of such shrines has spread to other regions, such as Egypt and Pakistan. These regions had been traditionally tolerant toward those who revered the shrines as holy sites, but this is less and less the case.

Likewise, **Indonesia** has a growing anti-Sufi sentiment. In 2008, a religious opinion (*fatwa*) was issued by the Indonesian Ulama Council against a local Sufi organisation. The group was deemed a heretical sect, and its leaders were arrested, two of which were sentenced to three-year prison terms in West Sumatra for blasphemy. Sufis are also on the list of banned religious minorities in Aceh Province, where they have suffered an increasing number of attacks in recent years.

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<sup>15</sup> The order is named after its 14th century CE founder [Shah Nimatullah](#) (Nūr ad-Din Ni'matullāh *Wali*), who settled in and is buried in [Mahan, Kerman Province](#), Iran, where his tomb is still an important pilgrimage site. The number of Sufis was estimated to be between 50,000 and 350,000 before the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Due to the repression by the Islamic regime, many emigrated to Europe and the United States.

## Sufis in Prison in Iran

More than 50 cases of detained Sufis are documented in the Prisoners' List of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (See <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>). Most of them have been arrested and sentenced to several years in prison because of their affiliation to the Nematollahi Gonabadi order or their activities related to *Majzooban Noor*, a website that reports news and articles on Gonabadi Sufis.

**Bakhshali Mohammadi** was arrested in 2004 and was charged with enmity against God. He was initially sentenced to death, but in September 2007 the Supreme Court commuted his sentence to thirteen years in prison.

**Hamid-Reza Moradi Sarvestani** was arrested in 2011 and charged with: membership in a sect endangering national security; propaganda against the system (Clause 500 of the criminal code); insulting the Supreme Leader (Clause 514); disturbing the public consciousness (Clause 698) and disrupting public order (Clause 618). Hamid-Reza Moradi Sarvestani thinks his condemnation was politically motivated and due to his contribution to the Sufi website *Majzooban-e Noor*. Branch 15 of Tehran's Revolutionary Court sentenced him to ten and a half years in prison.

**Hamid-Reza Arayesh, Kazem Dehghan**, and others were arrested in 2011 and charged with: spreading corruption on the earth; membership of illegal group (affiliation with the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi Order); assembly and collusion with the intent to disrupt national security; causing physical harm and violation of public order; carrying illegal weapons and *Moharebeh* (enmity with God). They were sentenced to four years in prison in 2014.

**Omid Behrouzi** was arrested in 2011 and charged with: membership in a sect; endangering national security; propaganda against the state; insulting the Supreme Leader; establishing and membership in a deviant group; disrupting the public order. In fact, Omid Behrouzi was targeted for his contribution to the Sufi website *Majzooban-e Noor*. Branch 15 of Tehran's Revolutionary Court sentenced him to seven and a half years in prison.

**Absolghafour Ghalandarinejad** was arrested three times; for the first time on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2012, then on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2013 and for a third and final time in March 2014. In 2014, he was charged with acting against national security, propagating against the regime, cooperating with *Majzooban Noor* Website, being in contact with foreign media and being a member of an anti-regime group with the intent to disturb the national security. The accused denied all the charges. In May 2014, he was sentenced to two years in prison by the Bandar Abbas Revolutionary Court.

## Conclusions

In Iran, Sufis exercise their freedom of speech and religion by making critical remarks directed toward the regime. This is part of any functioning democracy and evidence of the crucial role that civil society plays in strengthening that democracy. International interlocutors with Iran should underscore the importance of the country's international obligations in regard to human rights standards. Iran's systematic abuse of its Sufi and dervish citizens is certainly cause for reflection and remedial action on the part of the country's authorities.

Despite the sporadic declarations of its clerical class, the Iranian government is hard-pressed to regard Sufis as non-Muslims. Sufis have contributed to the development of Persian culture for centuries and are today part of its social fabric. Article 14 of the Constitution declares that 'the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity and to respect their human rights.' Even if one regards Sufis as non-Muslims, respect and tolerance are required by the rule of law.

The Indonesian government must also exercise its authority and order the cessation of hostilities toward Sufis within the country. Especially reprehensible is the fact that regional and local authorities have disregarded Indonesia's publicly declared commitment to religious freedom for all of its citizens. When religious minorities, such as the Sufis, suffer violence and have no hope of recourse to the law, this commitment is deeply compromised.

## Sunnis

Of the 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide between eighty and ninety percent are followers of Sunni Islam. Sunnis comprise the majority in more than forty countries ranging geographically from Morocco to Indonesia.

The differences between Sunni and Shia Islam can be traced back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, when disagreements within the Muslim community (*Ummah*) arose following the death of Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis believe that Mohammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr, was elected by the community to succeed the Prophet and to lead the Islamic government (*Caliphate*), whereas the Shia maintain that the Prophet himself chose his cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib, to be his successor.

Sunni Islam subsequently split into four separate schools which draw from different sources to comprise the rules and conduct of Islam: the Maliki, Hanafi, Hanbali, and Shafi'i, each named for the teachings of its founders. Within the four schools there is little consensus on Islamic rules. The more liberal scholars emphasize an interpretation of Islamic rules based on particular situations and, therefore, reject any *Fatwa*, an edict issued by a religious figure. Some of the more fundamentalist movements within Sunni Islam, however, oppose any secular interpretation of Islam and endeavour to maintain what they consider to be traditional Muslim values. Moreover, Sunni Islam placed greater emphasis on the role of the *Sunna* (tradition of the prophet) and *Hadith* (Islamic oral law) than do the Shia.

## Teachings

Sunni Muslims profess to adhere to the six pillars of *Iman*, those components which are necessary to the faithful practice of Islam: belief in one true God, belief in angels, belief in the authority of the holy books, following God's prophets, belief in the resurrection and the day of judgement, and acceptance of the will of God in all things.

In contrast to Shiites, Sunni believers do not accept the concept of *Wilayat*, where an Islamic jurist is given custodial power over people. Instead, Sunnis entrust leadership to imams and base their authority solely on the Quran and traditions of Mohammed (*Sunna*). For this reason, Sunni religious figures exercise far less authority over their followers in comparison to their Shia counterparts.

As a result, Sunnis place more emphasis on the importance of selecting their local leaders and tend to be less hierarchical in their leadership structures than the Shiites, who have historically viewed Mohammad's choice of Ali as the governing principle of the faith community. This difference in attitude toward authority is exhibited in various ways throughout the Muslim world. For example, in some secular countries with a Muslim majority, such as Turkey, the opinion of religious figures are not considered to be binding and are instead regarded as moral guidelines.

## Controversies

Sunnis are repressed the most either in Muslim majority countries where they constitute a minority or in countries where a different branch of Islam is the state religion. Sunnis can also face oppression when it is the majority religion of a minority ethnic group. For

example, Muslims of the Uyghur ethnic group in China face are stigmatised and persecuted due to their aspiration for more autonomy and independence from the Chinese state.

In countries that are predominantly Shia, Sunni Islam can be regarded as a religious rival and not representative of true Islam. Sunnis can be seen as a security threat to the state and the central power, such as in Iran, where they are frequently targeted for harassment by the authorities and subjected to arbitrary arrests.

An important driving factor for rights violations is the competition for political, economic, and religious leadership in the Middle East. For instance, Saudi Arabia and Iran both exploit the sectarian conflicts in the region in pursuit of their national interests and use religion as an instrument of policy. As a result, Sunni Muslims in Iran are treated even worse than other religious minorities.

### **Azerbaijan**

In Azerbaijan, thirty-five percent of the population is Sunni and sixty-five percent Shia. The Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) is a state-sanctioned institution that oversees the activities of registered Islamic organisations, including the appointment of those who lead Islamic worship. The Board also periodically monitoring sermons and organises pilgrimages to Mecca. Muslim communities must receive an approval letter from the CMB before submitting a registration application to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations of Azerbaijan Republic (SCWRA). A religious organisation that fails to register with SCWRA may be outlawed and its activities declared illegal. For some years the authorities have targeted for closure many mosques, especially Sunni ones which refuse to join the CMB. In recent years, they have closed down Sunni mosques on various pretexts in Baku and in Gyanja. The Lezgin Mosque in Baku's Old City has repeatedly been threatened with closure. Five men of the congregation – including the imam – have been jailed.

### **Iran**

Ten percent of Iran's total population are Sunni Muslims that live in the far west and eastern regions of the country. Although Sunnis have the right to freely exercise their religion according to Article 12 of the Iranian constitution, they remain the target of much discrimination in the region. Complicating the situation further is the fact that most Sunni Muslims in Iran are also members of ethnic minorities, such as Kurds, Balouches or Arabs, in addition to being a religious minority.

Despite the supposed freedoms granted to Sunni Muslims in Iran, there is little opportunity for integration into the government, as Sunnis are almost entirely banned from high ranking positions. It took more than thirty-five years after the Islamic revolution in Iran for the first Sunni ambassador to be appointed.

Even now, more than three decades after the Islamic revolution, Sunnis are still banned from constructing mosques in the capital city of Tehran. On the 29<sup>th</sup> July 2015, a Sunni prayer hall in Tehran was destroyed, drawing outrage amongst Sunni leaders in Iran. One such leader, Mowlavi Abdulhamid, wrote to President Rouhani saying that 'intolerance towards even a single ordinary prayer hall and its destruction in a city that does not allow Sunnis to build a mosque ...

not only hurts the sentiments of Iran's Sunni community but also offends all Muslims of the world.' The Rouhani government has repeatedly dismissed any question of harsh treatment of Sunnis in Iran. Regarding the prohibition of Sunni mosques in the capital, the government says that this is a preventative measure against extremism and that Sunnis are free to participate in Shia mosques, if they wish.

## **China**

It is estimated that around twenty million Muslims live in China, with the majority of them belonging to the Hui ethnic group. Because they share a similar culture and language with the majority Han ethnic group, the Hui and Han have generally enjoyed good relations with one another. Another predominantly Muslim ethnic group, the Uyghurs, accounts for 6-8 million people of a Turkic descent.

Human rights groups have reported that Chinese authorities have inflicted arrests, arbitrary detention, torture and other grave restrictions to the Uyghurs' right to religious freedom, all of which are part the government's 'counter-terrorism' and 'anti-separatism' campaign against the Uyghurs. Like other religious groups, Uyghur youth are prohibited from attending public religious activities. In Uyghur regions, restaurants are ordered to remain open during Ramadan, and students are prohibited from fasting.

## **Uzbekistan**

In Uzbekistan, where ninety-three percent of the Muslim population are Sunnis of the Hanafi School, just one percent are Shia. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom released in 2013 a list of ninety-nine Muslims sentenced on the grounds of their religious activities or affiliations<sup>16</sup>:

- One prison term of eighteen years; six prison terms of twelve years; three prison terms of ten years; forty-six prison terms ranging from three years to eight and a half years.
- One was granted amnesty; one died in custody; three were sentenced to a fine; twelve suspended sentences; seven probation sentences; three fines; fifteen unknown sentence; one prison term of fifteen days.

Most of the prisoners were Sunnis who were accused of religious extremism or studying the works of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi, which are banned in the country.

### **Sunnis in Prison**

#### *Azerbaijan*

**Azad GAFAROV, Eyvaz MAMMADOV, Habibulla OMAROV, Imam Mubariz QARAYEV, and Salim QASIMOV**, who were connected with the Sunni Lezghi Mosque in Baku's Old City, were arrested and put in pre-trial detention in February 2015 for selling religious material without authorisation. They were accused of violating Article 167-2.1 of the

<sup>16</sup> Source: Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU)

Criminal Code which prohibits the production, sale and distribution of religious literature and materials without appropriate authorisation. In July 2015, they were sentenced to prison terms ranging from six to nine months.

**Zohrab SHIKHALIYEV** was arrested on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2014 in Sumgait for allegedly keeping illegal weapons and ammunition in his home. He said they had been planted to incriminate him, as the authorities were looking for a way to shut down the prayer room he operated from his home. On 18<sup>th</sup> February 2015, he was sentenced to six months in prison by Sumgait City Court.

### *Iran*

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran published<sup>17</sup> a list eighty-eight Sunni Muslims (thirteen Baluchis and seventy-five Kurds) who were in prison in 2014: thirty-one were sentenced to death and remain on death row; eight are serving prison terms ranging between ten and twenty years; twenty-five received prison terms from five to nine years and all others less than five years.

The official charges are typically: Enmity against God (Clauses 183, 186 & 187) – Assembly and collusion against national security (Clause 610) – Undermining national security (Clause 498) - Membership in organisations that aim to disrupt national security (Clause 499) – Espionage (Clause 501) – Involvement in Salafi and terrorist groups.

In June and July 2009, thirty-three Sunnis were arrested for preaching Sunni Islam and sentenced to death. The following were executed on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2015: **Hamed AHMADI, Jahangir DEHGHANI, Hadi HOSSEINI, Kamal MOLAEI, and Pouria MOHAMMADI.**

The others are still detained and on death row: **Shahram AHMADI, Alam BARMASHTI, Jamshid DEHGHANI, Seyed Shaho EBRAHIMI, Varia GHADERIFARD, Mohammad GHARIBI, Seyed ABDOL, Farzad HONARJO, Mohammad Keyvan KARIMI, Taleb MALEKI, Keyvan MOMENIFARD, Sedigh MOHAMMADI, Seyed Jamal MOUSAVI, Teymour NADERIZADEH, Farshid NASERI, Ahmad NASIRI, Borzan NASROLLAHZADEH, Idris NEMATI, Omid PEYVAND, Bahman RAHIMI, Mokhtar RAHIMI, Mohammadyavar RAHIMI, Abdorahman SANGANI, Amjad SALEHI, Behrouz SHAHNAZARI, Arash SHARIFI, Kaveh SHARIFI, Farzad SHAHNAZARI, and Kaveh VEYSI.**

Others were arrested in the same year and still have not be officially indicted: **Davud ABDULLAHI, Khosro BESHARAT, Kamran SHEIKHA, Mamousta (Sheikh) Farhad SALIMI, Ghasem ABESTE, Ayub KARIMI, and Anvar KHEZRI.**

Those who have been indicted for preaching Sunni Islam: **Edrees NEMATI**, arrested in 2011 and sentenced to death; **Malek Mohammad ABADIAN**, arrested the following year and likewise sentenced to death; and **Tohid GHOREISHI-HAFEZ** and **Naser PIRI**, both arrested in 2014 and sentenced to ten and five years in prison respectively.

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<sup>17</sup> See <http://shaheedoniran.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/A-HRC-25-61-updated.pdf>



## *China*

Numerous Muslims belonging to the Uyghur ethnic group in China have been arrested and imprisoned for their religious and/or other non-violent protest activities<sup>18</sup>. However, HRWF has been able to document only a limited number of cases related to the exercise of freedom of religion, as detailed information is usually not available.

In 2006, **Ablikim ABDUREHIM** was accused of engaging in secessionist activities and in 2007 sentenced to nine years in prison. He is the son of Rebiya Kadeer, a prominent Uyghur activist, whose family has been targeted by the authorities since she was detained as a prisoner of conscience in 1999. This grew worse after she was released on medical leave in 2005 and left China for the USA. On 27 November 2006, the day after Rebiya Kadeer was elected president of the World Uyghur Congress, a court sentenced her two sons who had been arrested in 2006, apparently in retaliation for her human rights activism.

In 2008, **Abdujilil ABDUGHUPUR, Mewlanjan AHMET, Seydehmet AWUT, Erkin EMET, Dolkun ERKIN, Omerjan MEHMET, Mutelip ROZI, and Kurbanjan SEMET** (Alias Kurbanjan Abdusemet) were arrested for teaching Islam and in 2009 sentenced to ten years in prison for ‘attempting to split the state.’

In 2009, **Armetjan EMET** was sentenced to fifteen years in prison under the same charges.

In 2012, **Sadike KU'ERBAN** was sentenced to a prison term of fifteen years for organising ‘illegal’ religious schools or religious instruction (illegal for not being registered under the state-controlled *Chinese Islamic Patriotic Association*). More specifically, Sadike Ku'erban was accused of ‘extremist religious thought and inciting others to wage a holy war.’ For more than ten years, Sadike Ku'erban had been running a network of home schools for children and teenagers in four different parts of Xinjiang.

## *Uzbekistan*

Charges in Uzbekistan are usually based on the following four articles of the Criminal Code:

Article 159: ‘Attempts to change the constitutional order of Uzbekistan’

Article 216: ‘Illegal establishment or reactivation of illegal public associations or religious organisations, as well as active participation in their activities’

Article 244-1

Part 1: ‘Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations’

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<sup>18</sup> Others have been arrested and sentenced to long prison terms or to death for their involvement in separatist non-violent or violent activities, according to the Chinese authorities, but the lack of access to reliable information did not allow Human Rights Without Frontiers to check the veracity of the accusations. It was also difficult to identify cases in which the victims were imprisoned for purely exercising their freedom of religion.

Part 3: (a) ‘Production and dissemination of materials containing a threat to public security and public order’

Article 244-2: Part 1 (‘Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations’)

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented the cases of more than twenty Sunni Muslims, including over a dozen Said Nursi followers, in its Prisoners’ List<sup>19</sup>: **Olmosbek ERKABOYEV, Furkat ABDULLAYEV, Nodyr BARNAYEV, Mehrinisso HAMDAMOVA, Zulhumor HAMDAMOVA, Abdugani KAMOLOV, Zukhriddin KAMOLOV, Rakhmatillo KHAMDAMOV, Shakirzhon KHAMDAMOV, Bobur KHATAMOV, Gayrat KHUSANOV, Rakhmatilla MAKHMUDOV, Zoirjon MIRZAYEV, Ulugbek OTAKUZIYEV, Ravshan RAHMATULLAYEV, Shahlo RAKHMANOVA, Mukhmadin SOTIVOLDIYEV, Avazbek TURAYEV, Rakhmonzhon TURABAYEV, Khayrullo TURSUNOV, Ravshanbek UMARBAYEV, and Shuhrat YUNUSOV.**

The Said Nursi followers were usually accused of participation in an extremist organisation and sentenced to six years of detention or more: **Akmal ABDULLAYEV, Nutfullo AMINOV, Mukhtar HOTAMOV, Umidjon JUMAYEV, Ikrom MERAJOV, Kamal ODILOV, Ahmadjon PRIMKULOV, Ahmad RAKHMONOV, Ilkhom RAJABOV, Rashid SHARIPOV, Tukhtakul SHODIYEV, Botir TUKHTAMURODOV, Iskandar UBAYDOV, and Anvar ZARIPOV.**

## Conclusions

The dominant role that Sunni clerics can play in the consolidation of peace and the respect for human dignity cannot be overestimated in today’s world. Media projections of extremist violence have become part of the narrative that Islamic faith – or any sort – has lost legitimacy in the minds of many as a vehicle for promoting these values. This is true not only in the West but also in the Arab world. Clearly, an alternative narrative is sorely needed at this time.

Increasing inter-Muslim tolerance and cooperation are also welcome signs of a more peaceable future for the Islamic world. For instance, Iraq’s senior Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Sistani, took a bold step in issuing a 2013 *fatwa* forbidding attacks on Sunni holy places. Clerics can play a much needed role in promoting religious tolerance and respect for ideological differences in their societies.

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<sup>19</sup> See <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Uzbekistan-FBL-2015.pdf>

# Tablighi Jamaat

Tablighi Jamaat is a revivalist missionary movement within Islam, founded in India in the early twentieth century. The term means ‘those who preach’ and is sometimes called the ‘Society for Spreading Faith.’ The Tablighi Jamaat movement seeks to revitalise Muslims in their faith and encourage them to follow Islamic religious practices more vigorously.

Tablighi Jamaat originated in the Deobandi School of Sunni Islam<sup>20</sup> in Uttar Pradesh in north India. Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi, an Islamic scholar and Sufi teacher, is credited as its founder. The movement has grown significantly over time to include millions worldwide and is now present in some form or another throughout the Muslim world. It is particularly prevalent in South and Central Asia.

Annual gatherings (called *ijtima*) are held in various countries and attract large crowds. The largest ones occur in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The annual World Gathering in Tongi, Bangladesh, (called *Bishwa Ijima*) is the most popular Tablighi Jamaat pilgrimage in the world with approximately five million people attending each year, significantly larger than the traditional *Hajj* to Mecca.

The world headquarters for Tablighi Jamaat is located in the New Delhi suburb of Basti Nizamuddin. There are some 50,000 active Tablighi Jamaat members in the UK, and in France an estimated 100,000 followers.

## Teachings

Tablighi Jamaat’s doctrine is based on six principles, commonly referred to as the *Six Points*.

They are:

- Faith in the oneness of Allah (the *Kalima*)
- The offering of the five prayers daily (*Salat*)
- The knowledge and the remembrance of Allah (‘*Ilm & Dhikr*)
- Respect for every Muslim (*Ikram al Muslim*)
- Sincerity of intention (*Ekhlas*)
- Time set aside for this work (*Dawah & Tabligh*)

Tablighi Jamaat members try to imitate the life of Prophet Muhammad and adopt a lifestyle of personal piety and austerity. Members are expected to proselytize at least three times per month (approximately 130 days per year) as well as study at Tablighi Jamaat’s central mosque in Pakistan for a month.

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<sup>20</sup> Zacharias Pieri, ‘Tablighi Jamaat – Handy Books on Religion in World Affairs’ (*Lapidomedia*, 2012)

<[http://www.lapidomedia.com/sites/default/files/resources/Tablighi\\_Jamaat\\_Introduction.pdf](http://www.lapidomedia.com/sites/default/files/resources/Tablighi_Jamaat_Introduction.pdf)>

accessed

30.01.2015, 9.

Tablighi Jamaat claims to be apolitical and asserts that Muslims should only participate in politics and carry political power ‘once all Muslims have corrected their ways, accepted the *Sharia* as a complete system of life and abandoned their attachments to worldly gains.’

## Controversies

Tablighi Jamaat aims to revive and strengthen the faith of Muslims worldwide. Although it has no formal membership, adherents spend significant periods of time travelling and preaching in mosques to spread their message. Women are encouraged to share their Islamic beliefs with other women and are required to practice complete seclusion and segregation in everyday life. Tablighi Jamaat's loose internal structure means that people associated with it have diverse views in different parts of the world. In some countries, people associated with it peacefully exercise their freedom of religion or belief, yet in other countries people associated with Tablighi Jamaat have been linked to violent acts.

For some Tablighi Jamaat appears to be rather innocuous; however, it has not been without controversy and has been banned in a number of countries.

### *Bans on Tablighi Jamaat*

The movement is prohibited in **Iran**, **Uzbekistan** (2004), **Tajikistan** (2006), **Turkmenistan**, **Russia** (2009) and **Kazakhstan** (2013).

In **Russia**, on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2009, the Constitutional Court held that Tablighi Jamaat is an extremist organisation and prohibited it from operating on Russian territory. The ban was justified with claims that its associates in Russia ‘have called [in sermons] for the violent seizure of power and [made] statements aimed at inciting national, racial and religious hatred.’

Similarly, in **Kazakhstan**, on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2013, a court in Astana banned Tablighi Jamaat as an ‘extremist’ organisation, although the court did not specify which of the movement’s teachings were considered extremist. Similar vague judgements have led to Tablighi Jamaat’s banning in Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

In both **Uzbekistan** and **Tajikistan**, anyone found to be practicing Tablighi Jamaat teachings can face criminal prosecution. In 2009, in **Tajikistan**, 124 people were arrested in a mass raid on a mosque in Dushanbe, but only four suspected Tablighi Jamaat members went to trial for allegedly inciting religious, national, and ethnic hatred.

Although the movement is banned in **Kazakhstan**, it is still said to be active and popular.

In recent years, there has been debate in **Kyrgyzstan**, where there are an estimated 10,000 Tablighi Jamaat adherents, on whether the movement should be banned. The State Commission on Religious Affairs has frequently referred to Tablighi Jamaat as an ‘extremist organisation’; however, the head of the Spiritual Directorate for Muslims has declared that it is not a militant movement and should be accepted with more tolerance. Similarly, Kadyr Malikov, the director of the independent Kyrgyz think-tank *Religion, Law and Politics*, stated that Tablighi Jamaat ‘is neither extremist nor terrorist or political.’

Even still, there are some in Kyrgyzstan who oppose the movement, objecting to Tablighi Jamaat's missionary approach and noting its appeal to poorly educated youth at risk of joining Islamist organisations. Tablighi Jamaat proponents argue that the movement does not force anyone to join their ranks but is merely laying out an alternative to mainstream Islam.

In **Russia**, Tablighi Jamaat has been active in the Orenburg since 2010, despite the government ban on its operations. In September 2012, more than 500 Tablighi Jamaat members were arrested in the Sol-Iletsk district of Orenburg, close to the border with Kazakhstan. A police search of private homes uncovered 500 copies of religious books containing so-called extremist content.

### ***Alleged Links with Terrorism***

Tablighi Jamaat portrays itself as a peaceful and non-political movement.<sup>21</sup> Even still, Tablighi Jamaat has drawn criticism from some quarters for certain individuals that have been associated with Tablighi Jamaat and have also been linked to Al-Qaeda and terrorist actions.

For example, on 19<sup>th</sup> January 2008 Spain arrested fourteen Pakistani and Indian citizens, all Tablighi Jamaat members, who were plotting to carry out suicide bombings in Barcelona and other European cities.

Other potential links between Tablighi Jamaat and terrorist acts include:

- Abdullah Ahmed Ali, the leader of the 2006 transatlantic aircraft plot,<sup>22</sup> was known to frequent the Tablighi Jamaat -related Masjid-e-Umer mosque in East London;
- Zacarias Moussaoui, known as the 'twentieth hijacker' in the 9/11 attacks, is said to have routinely worshipped at a Parisian Tablighi Jamaat mosque;
- Shoe-bomber Richard Reid and Taliban partisan John Walker Lindh,<sup>23</sup> were recruited by Al Qaeda while they worshipped at Tablighi Jamaat mosques.

Despite the movement's claims to being politically neutral, it has not explicitly distanced itself from Islamist leaders that have promoted *jihad bi as-saif* (jihad through the sword) over *jihad bi an-nafs* (jihad through conscience), the ideology more commonly accepted by Tablighi Jamaat. The movement has therefore sometimes been regarded as a fertile recruiting ground for terrorist groups and violent activities.

Tablighi Jamaat has also been strongly criticised for promoting *purdah*, or seclusion, where women cover themselves entirely in public with a *burka* and face veil. Women must also always

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<sup>21</sup> Political scientist Mumtaz Ahmad has written: 'In fact, the Tablighi Jamaat detests politics and does not involve itself in any issues of socio-political importance.'

<sup>22</sup> The 2006 transatlantic aircraft was a terrorist plot in which liquid explosives carried on board as many as 10 airliners travelling from the UK to the US and Canada should have been detonated. The plot, however, was thwarted by British police.

<sup>23</sup> Lindh was an American who travelled with Tablighi preachers to Pakistan in 1998 to expand on his Islamic studies but then joined the Taliban and was sentenced for aiding the Taliban in Afghanistan.

be accompanied by a male relative. This social tradition, prevalent in some Afghani and Pakistani Muslim communities and perpetuated in Tablighi Jamaat communities, has been an obstacle for Tablighi women to integrate into general society.

## **Tablighi Jamaat Muslims in Prison**

### *Kazakhstan*

Sixteen cases of Tablighi Jamaat Muslims arrested and detained are documented in the **Prisoners' List** of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (See <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>).

Trials of people alleged to be part of Tablighi Jamaat have been surrounded in secrecy. Such trials in South Kazakhstan Region ended in December 2014 with a three-year prison sentence being imposed. In Taldykorgan [Taldyqorgha] in Almaty Region five prison terms of between eighteen and twenty months were imposed. More alleged member of Tablighi Jamaat were prosecuted in 2015.

### *Arrests of five members of Tablighi Jamaat*

On 14<sup>th</sup> February 2015, five persons suspected of being members of Tablighi Jamaat were sentenced to prison terms by Taldykorgan City Court in Almaty Region of south-eastern Kazakhstan. Four of them – **Bakyt Nurmanbetov**, **Ay Khan Kurmangaliyev**, **Sagyndyk Tatubayev**, and **Kairat Esmukhambetov** – were sentenced each to twenty months imprisonment. The fifth – **Ruslan Kairanov** – received an eighteen-month term.

The defendants were prosecuted under the old Criminal Code Article 337-1, Part 2 (replaced by an almost identical Article 405 in the new Criminal Code), which makes it illegal to participate in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation that has been banned by a court in connection with extremism or terrorism. The trial has mostly been held in secret.

### *The Case of Sken Tulbayev*

On 11<sup>th</sup> February 2015, police raided the four-room flat in Almaty's Bostandyk District which **Saken Tulbayev**, a Tablighi Jamaat Muslim, shares with his eight-two-year-old mother his wife, Rumina Fakhurdinova, two of his three children, his system Feruza Tulbayev, and her child. During their three-hour search, officers confiscated notes and booklets. On leaving the flat, they also claimed to have found forty-three copies of a leaflet which Tulbayev said they had planted.

After a court ordered he be held in pre-trial detention, he was transferred to Almaty's Investigation Prison. He was charged under Criminal Code Article 174, Part 1 ('incitement of social, national, clan, racial, or religious hatred or antagonism' with imprisonment of two to seven years) and Criminal Code Article 405, Part 2 ('participating in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation after a court decision banning their activity or their liquidation in connection with extremism or terrorism they have carried out' with a fine or up to two years' imprisonment). Like most of the new Criminal Code these articles came into force on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2015, **Saken Tulbayev** was sentenced to a four-year and eight-month term in a labour camp. Upon his scheduled release in December 2019, he is banned from exercising his right to freedom of religion or belief until December 2022.

### *Russia*

In May 2015, up to 20 Muslims in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk were tried for involvement in the banned 'extremist' organisation. Only one of the arrested is known by name: **Kamoliddin Rakhmanov**. In 2012, the law enforcement agencies of the Novosibirsk Region reported that the regional FSB opened a criminal case under Parts 1 and 2 of Article 282.2 (organisation of an extremist group or participation in it) against five residents of the region. He was expelled from Russia for involvement in Tablighi Jamaat and banned from returning for five years. He later returned to Russia with a fake passport. Most likely, he will also be prosecuted under Part 2 of the Criminal Code Article 322 (illegal crossing of the state border). The investigators consider he is the leader of local Tablighi Jamaat cells.

### *Tajikistan*

On 18<sup>th</sup> May 2010, thirty-seven suspected members of Tablighi Jamaat were sentenced to prison terms of between three to six years and heavy fines for being members of a banned religious organisation:

**Erkin ABDUHALILOV, Talabsho ABDUSAMADOV, Khudaydod ALNAZAROV, Mahkamjon AZIZOV, Umarjon AZIZOV, Mahmadjon BAKIYEV, Faridun BOBOYEV, Jamshed BOYAKOV, Rustam BOYMUHAMEDOV, Amirali and Murodali DAVLATOVS (brothers), IGBOLSHO, Abdujabbor IZZATULLAYEV, Saynurdin KALUGSHOYEV, Saidkomil KHALOV, Doniyor KHASHIMOV, Nasrullo KHISOMOV, Mahmadali KURBONOV Churakhon MIRZOYEV, Abduvali MURODOV, JALOLIDDIN, Ismoil MAHMUDOVI, NASRULLAYEV, Muhibullo RAHMONOV, Nosir RAKHIMOV, Bashir SAIDOV, Azizhudja SALIMOV, Habibullo SHARIPOV, Churabek SAIDZODA, Toirjon SAMADOV, Nemat SANGINOV, Abdukahor SATTOROV, Abdumanon SATTOROV, Raufjon SHEROV, Rahmonazi TALIBOV, Suhrob TEMIROV, and Ahmad VALIYEV**

They were sentenced on the basis of Criminal Code's article 307-3 (organisation of banned extremist religious organisations). Part 1 specifies prison terms of between five and seven years for leaders of such organisations. Part 2 of the same article specifies fines of between 1,000 and 2,000 times the 'minimum calculation index' - 25 Somonis before 1 July 2009 and from this date 35 Somonis - or prison terms of between three and five years for those participating in such organisations.

Their whereabouts and further details about the situation of each of them are unknown.

## Conclusions

Some analysts claim that certain tendencies within Tablighi Jamaat reveal a ‘violent potential’ within the movement. With origins in a particularly exclusionary and restrictive form of Sunni Islam, Tablighi Jamaat has been hastily linked to Islamic terrorism. French sociologist of religion Marc Gaborieau contends that Tablighi Jamaat’s aim to conquer the world for Islam would not preclude violent jihad to achieve that goal. Others have pointed to the fact that Tablighi Jamaat-sponsored trips to Pakistan have served to put young Muslims in touch with fundamentalist groups. However, secondary links of this sort are insufficient to make a direct connection to violent jihadism.

Tablighi Jamaat cannot entirely prevent some of its members from becoming disillusioned with the movement’s officially neutral position and being lured by Islamist extremist groups, such as Al Qaeda or the Taliban. Members of Tablighi Jamaat are vulnerable to exploitation by militant or terrorist organisations just like many other groups. Unfortunately, this has led to media and government authorities moving to ban Tablighi Jamaat, portraying it as a breeding ground for extremism and not viewing the movement as a whole.

Opinions differ on whether Tablighi Jamaat actually encourages terrorist activities through its teachings and preaching. Tablighi Jamaat’s claim to be apolitical would suggest that the movement itself cannot be blamed for inspiring some of its members to engage in terrorist activities. That Tablighi Jamaat ‘harboured terrorists does not necessarily mean that Tablighi Jamaat is therefore a hotbed of terrorism,’ commented Jenny Taylor of the Centre for Religious Literacy in World Affairs.<sup>24</sup>

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* and *Sova-Center* (Moscow) view the ban of the religious association Tablighi Jamaat inappropriate, since the organisation was engaged in promotion of Islam and was never implicated in incitements to violence. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* and *Sova-Center* (Moscow) consider the repression of the Tablighi Jamaat members to be unjustified.

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<sup>24</sup> Jenny Taylor ‘What is the Tablighi Jamaat?’ *The Guardian* (September 2009) <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/sep/08/religion-islam-tablighi-jamaat>> accessed 29 January 2015.



## Afterward

People who were in prison in 2015 for exercising their right to freedom of conscience and thought as well as freedom of religion or belief mostly belonged to minority groups although in a few cases, they were dissenters of the majority religion.

The mere identification with a specific ethnic minority or membership to a ‘heretical’ group was sufficient in some countries to be perceived as a threat by the authorities and to justify their repression policies towards all the members of the minority without any distinction.

This report makes the distinction between activities related to the exercise of freedom of religion or belief and other unrelated political activities of other members of the group to which the FoRB victims belong.

The FoRB prisoners listed and validated by *Human Rights Without Frontiers* did not use or advocate violence and did not threaten the public security, the state sovereignty or the legitimacy of those in power.

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