

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 'Bàb,' 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 Bàb and his followers were violently repressed from the outset, leading to his exile, and ultimately to his execution in 1850.

The Bàb was succeeded by Baha'u'lláh, who declared himself in 1863 to be the Manifestation of God that was foreseen in the Bàb'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, 19th-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 Bábís 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.'¹ 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.² 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**,³ all on false or fabricated charges.⁴ The list includes the seven

¹International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 18 December 2014, <http://persian.iranhumanrights.org/1393/09/bojnourdi-bahais/>

² Semi-official Tasnim News, 18 December 2014, <http://www.tasnimnews.com/Home/Single/592485>

³ See [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran \(A/HRC/28/70\)](#)

⁴ 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

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.

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 **11th 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 **19th 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 21st 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>.

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.

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.