

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 Psymatology, 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 4th May 2011 by officials linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guards and held incommunicado for nine months in Section 2A of Evin Prison. On 30th 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 6th 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 24th 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 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.'¹ 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 use to prevent or punish criticism of religious leaders or commentary on religious doctrine and tenets of faith.'

¹ <https://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/gencomm/hrc29.html>

On 14th 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.²

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.³

² <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>

³ http://eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_13685_en.htm