

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 8th-9th 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 13th 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 order¹ 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.

¹ 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.

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.

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 6th August 2012, then on 20th 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.