

Iran's secular shift: New survey reveals huge changes

– HRWF (17.09.2020) – In June 2020, the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN ([GAMAAN](#)), conducted an online survey with the collaboration of [Ladan Boroumand](#), co-founder of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran.

[The results verify](#) Iranian society's unprecedented secularisation.

“[Our results](#) reveal dramatic changes in Iranian religiosity, with an increase in secularisation and a diversity of faiths and beliefs,” GAMAAN says. “Compared with Iran's 99.5% census figure, we found that only 40% identified as Muslim.”

In contrast with [state propaganda that portrays](#) Iran as a Shia nation, only 32% explicitly identified as such, while 5% said they were Sunni Muslim and 3% Sufi Muslim. Another 9% said they were atheists, along with 7% who prefer the label of spirituality. Among the other selected religions, 8% said they were Zoroastrians – which can be interpreted as a reflection of [Persian nationalism](#) and a desire for an alternative to Islam, rather than strict adherence to the Zoroastrian faith – while 1.5% said they were Christian. Agnostics account for 5.8%, Humanists 2.7%, Baha'is 0.5%, Jews 0.1% and others 3.3%.

Read the full article in [The Conversation](#) (10 September): <https://bit.ly/35NQV6X>

RUSSIA: Special bimonthly FORB Digest (02-15.09.2020)

15.09.20 – Danish Jehovah's Witness returned to punishment cell

Link to full text in Russian:
www.zaprava.ru/svidetelya-iegovy-dennisa-kristensena-snova-otpravili-v-shizo-2/

The Jehovah's Witness (organization ruled to be extremist in R.F.) Dennis Christensen, who was convicted of extremism and is serving his punishment in the Lgov correctional penal colony No. 3 (Kursk oblast), was again put into the punishment cell (Shtrafnoi IZoliator–ShIZO).

[Continue reading...](#)

11.09.20 – In the city of Primorye, the trial of a 72-year-old believer is drawing to a conclusion. Being disabled, she commutes to court hearings using her crutches

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://jw-russia.org/news/2020/09/6.html>

Lyudmila Shut from Razdolnoye village (Primorye Territory) is being tried for her faith under the article on participation in the extremist organization's activities.

[Continue reading...](#)

10.09.20 – Court recommends excommunication of conservative Orthodox monk

Link to full text in Russian:
www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=dujour&div=447

The court of the Ekaterinburg diocese on Thursday adopted the

decision to send a recommendation concerning expulsion from the church of schema monk Sergius Romanov, who has been stripped of his clerical status, Archpriest Nikolai Maleta, chairman of the court, told journalists.

[Continue reading...](#)

10.09.20 – A believer from Beryozovsky, was handed a two and a half year suspended sentence for participating in meetings with fellow believers

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://jw-russia.org/news/2020/09/5.html>

On September 10, 2020, the Berezovsky City Court of Kemerovo region handed a guilty verdict to Hasan Kogut, a 37-year-old father of a minor child.

[Continue reading...](#)

09.09.20 – Controversy about takeover of movie house by Siberian protestants

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://www.kem.kp.ru/daily/author/816428/>

On social networks a stormy discussion is under way: what will be in the movie theatre “Sibir”? According to unofficial information, a church will be here.

[Continue reading...](#)

08.09.20 – Jehovah’s Witness jailed for fear he might mess up investigation

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://www.zaprava.ru/v-severske-vzyat-pod-strazhu-50-letnij-svidtel-iegovy/>

The Seversk city court of Tomsk oblast ordered to take into custody the fifty-year-old Jehovah’s Witness (the organization

is considered extremist in the R.F.) Evgeny Korotun. As the website of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia reports, the believer was taken into custody at yesterday's judicial session.

[Continue reading...](#)

07.09.20 – Attorneys mobilize to defend rights of religious groups

Link to full text in Russian:
http://www.sclj.ru/news/list.php?SECTION_ID=415

In late August 2020, lawyers and experts visited Krasnodar territory, which is the second region within the context of the Svoboda28 project organized by the Slavic Legal Center along with the Institute of the Rule of Law, with informational support of the publication Religia i Pravo and the SPEKTR News Bureau.

[Continue reading...](#)

05.09.20 – Prosecutor frustrates hope for freedom for Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://kursk-izvestia.ru/news/160486/>

Materials of the criminal case have been sent for a new review in Lgov district court with a different composition. We recall that earlier the Zheleznodorozhny district court in the city of Orel found Dennis Christensen guilty of arranging the activity of the religious congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (activity forbidden in Russia).

[Continue reading...](#)

05.09.20 – Court in Kursk leaves Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen in penal colony.

Link to full text in Russian:

<https://vestivrn.ru/news/2020/09/04/zaderzhannykh-za-ekstremizm-svidetelei-iegovy-ostavili-v-voronezhskom-sizo-do-dekabrya/>

The Lenin district court extended the detention of eight Jehovah's Witnesses by three months; they were arrested in July on suspicion of extremism. Members of the organization, including leaders in the main, will remain in the SIZO [pretrial investigation cell] at least until 3 December. This was explained for a Vesti Voronezh correspondent in the press service of the court.

[Continue reading...](#)

04.09.20 – Long pretrial detention of Voronezh Jehovah's Witnesses

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4481721>

The Lenin district court of Voronezh extended the detention of eight local members of the Jehovah's Witnesses (an organization ruled to be extremist in the R.F.). As "De Facto Voronezh" reports, for two believers the measure of restriction was extended until 2 December and for six, until the third.

[Continue reading...](#)

04.09.20 – Novozybkov Court sentenced 4 Jehovah's Witnesses to jail, but released them because they have already served their time

Link to full text in Russian:
<https://jw-russia.org/news/2020/09/3.html>

On September 3, 2020, the [Novozybkov City Court sentenced](#) Vladimir Khokhlov and Eduard Zhinzhikov to 1 year and 3 months of imprisonment and 1 year of restraint, and Tatyana Shamsheva and Olga Silaeva to 1 year of imprisonment and 6 months of restraint.

[Continue reading...](#)

02.09.20 – Two Jehovah's Witnesses given four years prison time

Link to full text in Russian: <https://tayga.info/158978>

A court sentenced two Jehovah's Witnesses in Kuzbass to four years in a prison colony for participation in the activity of an extremist organization. One of the believers is an invalid, second class.

[Continue reading...](#)

CHINA: Special Weekly FoRB Newsletter (08-14.09.2020)

14.09.20 – Organ harvesting: A blind eye to mass atrocity

For the CCP, removing and selling organs from prisoners of conscience is a huge business. Democratic countries should stop looking the other way.

[Continue reading...](#)

13.09.20 – Prayer inscriptions on Hui Muslims' homes banned

Government officials across China expand Islam "sinicization" campaign by ordering to conceal traditional Islamic duas—prayers of supplication or request.

[Continue reading...](#)

12.09.20 – Faith-based nursing homes closed or demolished in Fujian

Disrupting the peaceful final days of numerous elderly believers, authorities harass senior care centers to block any promotion of religions.

[Continue reading...](#)

11.09.20 – So, you want to report on Xie Jiao and get money? The CCP publish a “manual of the informer”

In Inner Mongolia, those who want to denounce banned religious movements for a reward are told how they should be trained and become more skilled.

[Continue reading...](#)

10.09.20 – Christians coerced into removing crosses from churches

The CCP comes up with new pretexts to suppress people of faith. In Zhejiang Province, believers' businesses are threatened if they disobey government orders.

[Continue reading...](#)

08.09.20 – Police harass and beat believers protecting temples

Authorities in Anhui Province use force against people who try to prevent demolitions of their worship venues.

[Continue reading...](#)

08.09.20 – Minors detained and imprisoned for practicing their faith

Teenage members of The Church of Almighty God are given hefty sentences, tortured and indoctrinated, and deprived of visitation rights when in detention.

[Continue reading...](#)

ERITREA: Conditional release of 27 Christian prisoners

CSW has confirmed that 27 Eritrean Christians were released from Mai Serwa Prison near Eritrea's capital, Asmara, on 4 and 8 September, possibly in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic.

CSW (11.09.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2FxpM0> – According to CSW's sources, the group consisted of 19 men and eight women who had been detained without charge or trial for between two and 16 years, and who are thought to be the first of around 54 anticipated releases. However, the releases are reportedly conditional on the submission of property deeds ensuring their guarantors are held liable for their future actions.

Sources confirmed that the releases did not include any detained church leaders. Moreover, the releases were preceded by the arrests of several Christians in Asmara, including around four church leaders, two weeks earlier.

Commenting on these events, a CSW source said: "It is a government strategy. They cannot detain everybody, so they keep you for some time, hoping that you will become weak or frightened. Then they put in other people. They release and put other people in prison at the same time."

The source put the number of Christians currently detained at a little over 300, including 39 children, “although these numbers fluctuate.”

Tens of thousands of Eritreans are currently held without charge or trial in life threatening conditions in more than 300 sites across the country. Among those incarcerated are prisoners of conscience, some of whom have been detained for well over a decade on account of their political views or religious beliefs. Conditions in these facilities are overcrowded, unsanitary and inadequate; detention facilities include shipping containers, underground cells, and the open air in the desert, and access to medical attention is insufficient and often withheld as punishment. Mai Serwa prison, where the former detainees were jailed, is infamous for utilising metal shipping containers as holding cells.

The spate of recent releases is being attributed to the spread of COVID-19 in the country’s overcrowded prison system. However, Eritrea is officially reporting just 341 cases, and claims that no one has died of the virus so far. There has been no independent verification of these assertions.

In an earlier development, reports emerged in August indicating that members of the Muslim community who were detained in 2018 in connection with protests following the death of respected Muslim elder Haji Musa Mohammed Nur had been released.

CSW’s Founder President Mervyn Thomas said: “While applauding

the fact that people who were deprived of their liberty have regained their freedom, it is also important to recall that they were detained arbitrarily and without due process for excessive periods simply on account of their religious beliefs. Moreover, these releases remain conditional, as they were secured by property deeds, leaving the guarantors vulnerable to losing their properties. The guarantors could also lose their freedom should a former detainee exercise the right to leave the country, a right articulated in Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Eritrea is party. Far more prisoners of conscience remain arbitrarily detained than have been released, and the fact that these releases were preceded by further arrests is indicative of an ongoing repression of the right to freedom of religion or belief. CSW therefore continues to call for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoners detained arbitrarily, particularly in view of a pandemic that poses a risk to life for those still held in inhumane conditions.”

Christian converts leave Iran, facing combined 35 years in prison

Article18 (10.09.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3ivUSk7> – Three Iranian Christian converts whose appeals against a combined 35 years in prison were recently rejected want to let their supporters know they are safe and well outside the country.

The cases against Kavian Fallah-Mohammadi, Hadi Asgari and Amin Afshar-Naderi were tied up with those against the Iranian-Assyrian pastor Victor-Bet Tamraz and his wife

Shamiram Issavi, whose appeals were also rejected.

Like Victor and Shamiram, the three converts are now safely outside Iran and told Article18 they wished to let everyone know they are OK, albeit still suffering with the scars of a years-long battle in the courts only because of their membership of a house-church.

Amin, who was given the stiffest sentence – of 15 years – told Article18 he had lived “six years of uncertainty” since his arrest in December 2014 at Victor and Shamiram’s home, as they celebrated Christmas together.

He said the pressure he had been placed under in the years since had left him with a nervous tic, for which he has been prescribed medication.

“I miss my country, Iran, very much,” he said. “Before prison, I had travelled to foreign countries many times, but I never decided to emigrate. Today, I am very sad that I have been forced to seek refuge in another country, no matter how much better the conditions may be there.”

Kavian said he decided to flee after the ramifications of his 10-year sentence started to become apparent.

“I had no idea that when you have a criminal record that it means you don’t have a work permit, you can’t get an official job, and you have no idea how long you’ll have to remain in this state of uncertainty,” he said.

“It took two years [after my arrest] in all before they summoned me for my last defence, when they made other serious accusations against me, which made my case even more severe.

“Then, finally, the following year, they sentenced me to the 10 years in prison, and the delay to the process puts huge psychological pressure on you. Of course we appealed the verdict, but, finally, after another three years, when no

official trials took place, the appeal court approved the verdict – very strangely without a face-to-face hearing that my lawyer could have attended.”

Kavian was recently summoned to begin his sentence, but has no intention to do so now that he is safely outside the country.

Neither Amin, nor Hadi have yet received any official summons.

Amin told Article18: “I say with tears that, according to the teachings of the Bible, we tried to be good citizens in Iran and not to act against the law, but the government inflicted serious injuries upon us with an iron fist and such cruelty.

“But we pray for the rulers, for those who harassed us, insulted and slandered us, humiliated and ridiculed us, tortured and destroyed us, harmed us and our families, confiscated our property. We pray for them and forgive them.”

Article18 will soon publish video interviews with all three of the converts, as well as Victor and Shamiram.

ERITREA: 27 Christian prisoners released

There are reports from Eritrea that the government has released 27 Christians

Christian prisoners of faith, and hopes are rising that more could follow.

A trusted contact of Release International says the government has just set free 27 prisoners, most of whom have been behind

bars for more than ten years. They have yet to be named. There are believed to be 19 men and eight women, who were jailed at Mai Serwa prison, close to the capital Asmara. They were released on Thursday September 3 and September 8.

There are indications that other Christian prisoners at the jail have been informed they could soon be set free.

This follows the release of 22 Methodist prisoners in July from another prison, mainly women and children.

Prisoners of faith

There are believed to be around 500 Christian prisoners of faith in Eritrea, many imprisoned indefinitely under appalling conditions.

In August, Eritrea announced it was releasing some Pentecostal Christians, among others, in a move to prevent the spread of coronavirus in its overcrowded jails. The 27 just released are believed to be the first to be allowed to leave.

According to the Eritrean media, Adi Abeto prison, designed to hold 800, had 2,500 inmates, and 500 prisoners were forced to share only 20 toilets at Mai Serwa maximum-security prison.

'We are encouraged by the news of this release of Christian prisoners,' says Paul Robinson, the Chief Executive of Release International, a British-based charity which supports persecuted Christians. 'And we hope others will follow.

'Our prayers are that this may signal a change of heart in a regime which outlawed many churches in 2002 and has been persecuting and imprisoning Christians ever since. The time has come to let these people go.

'Institutionalised'

'As for the 27 Christians who have been set free from jail, they are still not free to leave Eritrea. Some have been

behind bars for so long that they have become completely institutionalised. They will need help and support.'

A Release contact described his reaction to the news as bittersweet: 'All those wasted years! They have been kept like wild animals in a cage.'

Eritrea, which is ruled by a military dictatorship, has been described as the North Korea of Africa. Some 12 per cent of the population have fled the country, according to UNHCR. Tens of thousands have risked death from drowning to escape to Italy.

Eritrea keeps a tight control over religion. In 2002, Eritrea outlawed every religion except Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholicism and the Lutheran Church.

The authorities shut down many Evangelical and Pentecostal churches and have kept the patriarch of the Orthodox Church under house arrest since January 2007.

Enemies of the state

Registered churches come under tight government control. And Christians who worship in unregistered churches are regarded as enemies of the state.

Estimates of the number of Christian prisoners of faith in the country range from 3,000 down to 300. Release contacts put the figure at close to 500. Many Christian prisoners have been detained for decades.

Some Christian prisoners are kept in shipping containers, where they are exposed to the searing desert heat by day and cold by night. Some are beaten and tortured to try to force them to renounce their faith.

Most Christian prisoners are believed to be Pentecostal or Evangelical. Many have been held for more than a decade. The prison authorities ban praying aloud, singing, preaching or

reading religious books.

Eritrea's constitution declares: 'No person may be discriminated against on account of... religion.' But a UN human rights commission noted attacks on Protestants and Pentecostals were 'part of a diligently planned policy of the government'.

'Full religious freedom'

Release International has repeatedly called on Eritrea to free its Christian prisoners and permit full religious freedom. In 2006, Release International and others submitted a petition to this effect signed by more than 110,000 people.

Says Paul Robinson: 'Release is once again calling on Eritrea to set free every Christian prisoner and permit freedom of faith once again in their country.'

Through its international network of missions, Release International is active in some 25 countries around the world, supporting pastors, Christian prisoners and their families; supplying Christian literature and Bibles, and working for justice.