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**IRAN: A Tehran court sentences 7 Christians to a total of 32 years in prison**

**A Tehran court sentences seven Christians, including a clergyman, to a total of 32 years in prison**

*Rev Joseph Shahbazian gets 10 years in prison, plus other penalties, including a ban on travelling abroad. Two converts get six years, while four other Christians can pay a fine to avoid jailtime. During the trial, the presiding judge, Iman Afshari, subjected the defendants to pressures, threats and*

## ***humiliation.***

AsiaNews (08.06.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3xiMCMZ> – An Iranian court has sentenced an Iranian-Armenian Christian clergyman to 10 years in prison. Along with him, two women converts from Islam were also given a six-year sentence for their role in house churches.

The court decision against Joseph Shahbazian and the two converts (*pictured*) came yesterday, this according to *Article18*, an advocacy group that documents religious oppression in Iran.

Four other Christians – Salar Eshraghi Moghadam, Farhad Khazaei, Somayeh (Sonya) Sadegh and her mother Masoumeh Ghasemi – were also given sentences ranging from one to four years but were also offered the option of paying fines ranging from US\$ 800 to US\$ 1,250 each in order to stay out of prison.

In total, the seven Christians were sentenced to 32 years in prison. However, the fate of Rev Joseph Shahbazian, 58, and the two converts – Mina Khajavi, 59 and Malihe Nazari, 48, is different. All three will have to go to prison following the sentence imposed on 29 May by Judge Iman Afshari, head of the 26th Branch of the Tehran Revolutionary Court.

The harshest sentence was imposed on Rev Shahbazian. In addition to his 10-year prison sentence, the Iranian-Armenian clergyman will serve two years of internal exile in a remote province in south-eastern Iran.

After his release, he faces a two-year ban on travelling abroad or membership in any political or social organisation, and must report to Iran's intelligence service for two years on an unspecified "seasonal basis".

In reading the verdict, Judge Afshari, who is building a reputation for convicting Christians, stressed that the clergyman "established a group to attract Muslims" and "under the cover of religious programmes for prayer has propagated Evangelical Christianity".

The judge accused the Christian pastor of engaging in "illegal activities and unfounded claims" and so "abused people's inner weaknesses and attracted some of them" to "his group".

Local sources report that, during a trial that lasted no more than four hours, Judge Afshari tried to put pressure on the two women defendants with the promise of a lighter sentence if they blamed Rev Joseph of cajoling them into converting.

Faced with their refusal, he threatened to increase their sentences. Using "harsh and sarcastic language", he tried to "humiliate them and denigrate their beliefs". When the defendants' lawyer objected, he replied that he was "only joking."

The crackdown against this group of Christians is but the latest in a long series. Last month, another court imposed a 10-year sentence on another Iranian-Armenian, **Anooshavan Avedian**, for "propaganda contrary to and offensive to the holy

religion of Islam”.

Experts and activists are increasingly worried about the escalating **violations of religious freedom**, which are also affecting Baha’is, Sufis, Sunnis and atheists.

Local sources report blatant violations of the right to defence, with insults against people and their religion during trials, as well as “confessions” extorted by force or deception during imprisonment.

In recent years, Iranian authorities have arrested thousands of Christians who worship in house churches with hundreds convicted on charges of “action against national security”.

All this refutes claims by the Iranian government and its diplomats that Christians enjoy religious freedom and the right to worship in their churches and dedicate themselves to their own activities.

**Further reading about FORB in Iran on HRWF website**

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