

Over 140 Sufis/ Dervishes still in prison in Iran. The European Parliament should urge Tehran to release them

– HRWF (04.06.2020) – *Human Rights Without Frontiers* urges

- the Members of the European Parliament,
- the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief,
- the Sub-committee on Human Rights,
- . . . and other institutions of the European Union

to ask Tehran to release over 140 Sufis/ Dervishes who have been in prison since February 2018 for peacefully demonstrating against the authorities' intensified persecution of their community.

In March, Iran, which has been heavily hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, announced that it would “pardon” and release thousands of detainees. Unfortunately, very few non-violent prisoners of conscience have benefited from this “generosity”. This is especially the case for the Sufis/ Dervishes who were detained after mass arrests in February 2018. Every day, they are under threat of being infected by COVID-19.

The facts: Mass arrest of several hundred Sufis in February 2018

On the night of 19 February 2018, several hundred Dervishes,

both men and women, gathered outside the residence of their spiritual leader, Noor Ali Tabandeh, in an area of Tehran known as Golestan Haftom. The group met to protest against the authorities' intensified persecution of their community and to prevent the possible arrest of their leader.

The Iranian police and forces of the Revolutionary Guard's Basij faction disbanded the peaceful gathering, opened fire on them and arrested hundreds of protestors.

Afterwards, Tabandeh was placed under house arrest without any official charges or trial. In protest, Tabandeh began a hunger strike in November 2019 and was subsequently hospitalised. He was denied access to his doctors and advisors and, after severe instances of medical malpractice, he died in December. The spiritual leader had appointed Alireza Jazbi as his successor, but his own nephew, Mohammed Tabandeh, who is linked to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and has the assistance of an anti-Sufi cleric with close connections to senior Iranian government officials, contested Jazbi for leadership.[1]

While the exact number of arrested demonstrators cannot be confirmed, according to reports from the community, 382 Sufis were arrested, out of which 11 were women. Many of the detained were brutalised by the authorities and denied medical care, some were killed, and over 200 were sentenced to prison terms. One of the protestors, Mohammed Salas, was reportedly hanged for allegedly killing one of the policemen, which he had confessed to under torture.[2] Of those sentenced to jail, four are former administrators and collaborators of the Majzooban-e-noor Dervish news site.[3] The Sufi-operated website posts articles pertaining to the Gonabadi Order.[4]

The court ordered prison sentences ranging from two to 26 years. Additionally, some were sentenced to between 74 to 144 lashes, exile to a designated province in Iran, a ban on civic activities and/or travel, or a combination of these supplemental punishments. The victims argue that they were denied a fair trial.[5]

Sufis behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 April 2020, Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) documented 146 cases of detained Sufis in its Prisoners' Database. Many more were sentenced to heavy prison terms due to the incidents in February 2018, but a number of them have also either been released or sent to internal exile since.

Most of the Sufi prisoners detailed in HRWF's database were sentenced to between five to seven years in prison, in some cases to more than 10 years and, in one case, to 23 years. The majority of them were also sentenced to more than 70 lashes.

They were charged with:

- Propaganda against the system – § 500
- Disruption of public order – § 618
- Assembly and collusion against national security – § 610
- . . . Disobeying police orders – § 607

Advocacy initiatives at the European Parliament

On 7 March 2018, 24 Members of the European Parliament from different political groups, (EPP, S&D, ALDE and ECR) published a public appeal condemning the massive repression of the Gonabadi Dervishes and their 90-year-old spiritual leader Mr Noorali Tabandeh in Iran:[6]

The Members of the European Parliament, appeal to Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to immediately address this issue with the Iranian authorities and call for full respect of human rights and prisoners' rights, for the right of freedom of religion and belief, the right for freedom of assembly, the right for freedom of thought as set out in international conventions.

The MEPs further call on Hassan Rohani, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Sardar Rahimi, Chief of police in Tehran to immediately halt this systematic violence, imprisonments and intimidation against all Sufis in Iran, and more specifically the Gonabadi Sufi Order followers and sympathisers and demand the immediate release of detainees who have been imprisoned because of their beliefs.

In June 2018, when Mohammad Salas was executed for participating in the February demonstration, the office of MEP Gérard Deprez, Chair of the Friends of a Free Iran group in the European Parliament, issued a strong statement.[7] He called on the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and the European Parliament's President Antonio Tajani "to immediately condemn this brutal act of barbarity that has been carried out by the Iranian regime".

Advocacy initiatives by the U.S.

In its 2020 annual report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) stressed that most of the Sufis arrested in February 2018 and sentenced to heavy prison terms are still in detention. USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Government:

- redesignate Iran as a “country of particular concern”, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- impose targeted sanctions on Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- press for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience;
- and reauthorize and ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States.[9]

Sources

[1] <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/08/conviction-of-16-sufi-protesters-unprecedented-in-irans-judicial-history/>

2 USCIRF, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Iran_2.pdf

3 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/08/conviction-of-16-suf>

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4 <https://www.en-hrana.org/verdict-bulletin-on-202-gonabadi-dervishes>

5 <https://majzooban.org/fa/index.php/2016-01-06-22-22-54/18619-2019-03-12-14-18-51>

6 <https://iranhumanrights.org/2019/03/iran-appeals-court-upholds-lengthy-prison-sentences-lashings-against-23-dervishes/>

7 <https://preservehumanrights.org/2018/03/urgent-public-appeal-of-the-european-parliament-for-gonabadi-dervishes/>

8 <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/strong-condemnation-of-the-brutal-execution-of-mohammad-salas-by-iran-regime/>

9 USCIRF, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Iran_2.pdf