

Religious Minorities Still Under Attack in Iran

Despite government rhetoric on religious freedom in Iran, it is extremely difficult to be anything but Shia Muslim in today's Iran. The country's religious minorities still face harsh repression, despite earlier hopes that Hassan Rouhani, elected to Iran's presidency in 2013, would bring much-needed reforms.

These were among the conclusions of a panel discussion in the European Parliament today, hosted by MEP László Tökés in collaboration with Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), an independent non-governmental organisation promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

The seminar also marked the release of HRWF's 2013 World Report on the Freedom of Religion or Belief. The report highlights several countries of particular concern, including Iran, and annexes a prisoners list which references hundreds of people who were detained in 2013 due to legal restrictions on their basic rights to freedom of religion or belief.

"Freedom of religion or belief is a human right guaranteed by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration," commented Willy Fautré, director of the Brussels-based organisation, "yet last year an increasing number of countries arrested, detained and sentenced believers and atheists to various prison terms for practising the religion or belief of their choice."

Iran has historically been home to various faith and cultural traditions; however, the space for free expression has closed significantly in recent years. "In Iran we witness the sadly paradoxical situation where an authoritarian regime exerts power over a largely tolerant society," said HRWF Policy Adviser Mark Barwick.

Mr Tökés called the human rights situation in Iran "very worrying," adding "regardless of the religion an individual follows, no one should be persecuted for their beliefs."

Majid Golpour, researcher and professor at Brussels' Free University, outlined the religious and ideological foundations of the power structures in Iran today. The current regime, established after the Shah was overthrown in 1979, has long lacked legitimacy, he said. Preserving and maintaining power continues to be its chief objective.

Rachel Bayani spoke on behalf of the Baha'i communities in Iran, the country's largest religious minority. In Iran, Baha'i faith is considered heretical to Islam and is systematically suppressed. Scores of Iranian Baha'is are serving extended prison sentences for dubious charges like "espionage" and "endangering national security." Christian Solidarity Worldwide also testified to the suppression of Christians, Sufis and others who are in prison for similar reasons.

"The challenge for the EU," stressed Fautré, "which last year adopted Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief, is now to put in place effective implementation mechanisms which prioritise countries that grossly violate these freedoms, including the freedom to change one's religion or the right to worship, even in private, and provide for prison terms and even the death penalty in such cases." It is clear that Mr Rouhani's Iran would figure prominently among these countries of priority.