

The following article, written by Lucy Provan, appeared in Daily News Egypt on October 14, 2012 at <http://dailynewsegypt.com/2012/10/14/bahais-in-egypt/>.

Baha's cheerful smiling face belies his family history. When Baha's father, a Quranic sheikh in a village in Upper Egypt, converted to the Baha'i faith, their neighbours accepted his choice and the small community lived in peace. This changed early one morning in 2001, when armed men in army fatigues took away his father, mother, two uncles' and one uncle's wife. His father was sent to Tora prison for nine months, his mother for seven.

After this event and his father's public admittal to being a Baha'i, "the village started to get a reputation for its Baha'is," Baha remembers. "People from the other districts would gossip and it hurt the pride of the people in the village." All this came to a head in 2009, when Baha's father and Baha'i activist, Basma Moussa, went on the TV show "Al-Haqiqa." Gamal Abdel Rahim, a journalist on the show, accused them of being apostates. "You are an infidel and should be killed," he told the two. "Go build a country in Israel."

Soon afterwards, the Baha'i homes in Baha's village were looted and torched. The Baha'is had to flee and have not returned since. Rahim, this year appointed editor-in-chief of Al-Gomhuria newspaper, congratulated the attackers.

Whether living accepted in communities around Egypt or being attacked for being Zionists spies, the fortunes of Egypt's estimated 2,000 Baha'is have fluctuated since their arrival in the 1860s. Today, the draft Egyptian constitution only recognises three state religions; Islam, Christianity and Judaism, meaning the Baha'is could be written out of Egypt's future. So who are the Baha'is and what are they going to do about it?

One Thursday night in Cairo, Baha is sitting on a large grey sofa, it is one of many gathered in a circle in the white apartment. Young men and women trickle in to the room, greeting each other warmly. In what seems an unwritten rule, no one questions each other's religion; attendees have come from all faiths. "We have come to discuss our similarities, not our differences," announces the host as the session starts. Slips of paper are handed out, printed with sayings from the Torah, Quran, Bible and other holy books. Sitting here you might not even

guess it is a Baha'i devotional meeting, save for the framed photograph standing in the corner; a portrait of a turbaned man with violet coloured eyes.

Origins

The violet coloured eyes belonged to a Persian named Abdul Baha. He was the son of Mirza Hussein Ali, or Baha'u'llah, prophet of the Baha'i religion. Hussein Ali claimed to be the latest in a line of prophets including Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, Christ and Muhammad. He believed humans were progressing towards a global society without conflict or prejudice. He promoted gender equality, universal education and the elimination of poverty. Baha'is believed in the independent seeking of truth, abrogation of the clergy, and election of Baha'i representatives. For these beliefs, Baha'u'llah was persecuted in his birthplace of Iran and imprisoned in Acre, modern-day Israel, where he died.

Abdul Baha toured the Middle East after his father's death, spreading word of the new religion. While in Lebanon he met a kindred spirit; the Egyptian Mohamed Abduh. Abdul Baha would go on to spread a faith which now has seven million followers and is the second most geographically widespread religion after Christianity. Abduh would become the father of the modern idea of an Islamic state and a great influence on Hasan Al-Bana, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Their friendship indicates Egypt's openness to Baha'is at the time.

"They discussed matters which concerned the east; how to progress and develop while protecting eastern and religious values and principles," says historian Suheil Bushrui. "It was not an issue that he [Abdul Baha] was not a Muslim; at that time in the culture of the Arab world, and especially Egypt, there was a great deal of discussion and especially dialogue opening up and investigating new ideas."

Early acceptance

By 1924, a Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly, the elected governing body of the Baha'i faith in Egypt, was established. It was the fourth in the world. Egypt became a hub for Baha'i pilgrims travelling to Acre. In 1925 in Beba, Upper Egypt, a Shari'a appellate court annulled the marriages of three Baha'i men who had married Muslim women. However, in so doing the judge legitimated the Baha'i faith, declaring it "a new religion, entirely independent with principles and

laws of its own." The Baha'i faith was officially recognised in 1934. By the late 1950s, there were approximately 5,000 Egyptian Baha'is, local Baha'i assemblies in 13 cities and towns and the community had purchased 17,000 square meters of land on the banks of the Nile for a Baha'i house of worship.

Basma Moussa, the Cairo University professor who appeared on television with Baha's father, sits in her garden looking through photos. In one, her mother peers excitedly from behind a large crowd inside the National Spiritual Assembly building in Cairo. She remembers her mother's stories of the assembly, "there were always people coming and going, visits from different countries and an equal number of men and women, which was quite unusual at the time. People in the area accepted the assembly as something normal."

Persecution

This acceptance was not to last. Forty years after Saad Zaghloul led a revolution under the slogan, "religion belongs to God and the homeland to all," Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser became concerned about the rise of Baha'is and their links to a nascent expansionist Israel on his borders. In 1960, he issued Decree 263, paragraph six of which proclaimed "all Baha'i assemblies and centres [are] hereby dissolved, and their activities suspended." Baha'is were allowed to practice in their homes, but all official Baha'i properties, funds and assets were confiscated. They have still not been returned.

Nasser's actions were driven by a desire to reinforce secularism, but subsequent administrations would target Baha'is for their perceived heresy. The 1971 constitution promised, "the state shall guarantee the freedom of belief and the freedom of practice of religious rites." Four years later, however, the Supreme Court upheld the legality of Decree 263 and ruled constitutional protections only extended to the three "heavenly" religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

From 1965 to 2001 there were 236 arrests of Baha'is, charged under Article 98(f) of the Penal Code which proscribes "disparaging contempt of any divinely-revealed religion or its adherents, or prejudicing national unity or social harmony." It was rare for these cases to be followed by prosecution; most were simply released after being detained. Albert-Ludwig University of Freiberg's Professor of Islamic Studies, Johanna Pink, has suggested the government was not so much concerned with the Baha'i being a real threat, but was attempting to "legitimise" its authority in the eyes of the people, presenting themselves as "defenders" of Egypt as an Islamic

state.

Public attitudes

The government's opportunistic discrimination against Baha'is was based on the fact public perception was generally negative and based on rumours. After the 1960s, "the tone of the press became much more negative and even polemical," wrote Pink in a 2005 paper on freedom of belief. She added that by 2005, a connection between the Baha'i faith and Zionism was taken for granted in the media. In 2008, the Andalus Institute for Tolerance and anti-Violence Studies noted many national newspapers' reports "imply[ed] direct incitement to hatred against Baha'i." Baha'is were also often seen as a security threat, and the

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

, cites claims made most frequently by conservative clerics such as Abdel Moneim Al-Shahat, a prominent Salafi leader, that "Baha'is deserve no rights in a new constitution and...should be tried for treason." From 1910 to 2010, 15 fatwas (Islamic religious rulings) labelled Baha'is heretics, based on the fact that Baha'is believed in a prophet after Muhammad.

All this affected the personal lives of the descendants of those converted by Baha'i Iranian traders years ago. Sumaya Mohamed Ramadan, winner of the Naguib Mafouz prize for literature, remembers her introduction to the Baha'i faith in England. "I saw a picture of this oriental man with a turban and I thought what is he doing in this living room in Brighton? I started to ask and I missed the train home that night." Coming back, Ramadan's conversion was accepted by her family, although occasionally her religion would cause others embarrassment. "One time we were talking about equality, everyone was agreeing with what I was saying and then I mentioned some of my ideas were based on the fact I was a Baha'i, and the whole room went silent," she recalls.

Moussa graduated in the top ten of her class in dental medicine and started working in Cairo University. When her colleagues questioned her different fasting patterns, she revealed her religion, "some started not to speak to me or eat with me." Some started to accuse her of missing work, she says. Moussa was continually overlooked for promotion and spent a long time fighting the administration of her university. "I lost five years of my life and career complaining about it and I had to do it alone," she says. "I couldn't mention the discrimination was because I was Baha'i."

A more positive wave of support followed a court case in 2009, when Baha'is won the right to

declare their religion on their ID card. Not declaring their religion would have removed their entitlement to a range of rights including education, housing and franchise. Their only other option was to commit fraud or lie about their religion. Many media outlets highlighted the case, helping create more public understanding. "The media was biased before... in 2009 there was a legitimate and neutral report," a reporter in Masry Al Youm told Daniel Perrell, author of a 2010 study on Baha'i rights. Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also got behind the case. Despite this, Pink says other "Egyptian human rights groups have been reluctant to take up the case of unpopular minority religious groups like the Baha'i Faith... fear[ing] that this might compromise their ability to speak out on other issues which they consider more important."

The revolution

The 25 January revolution gave everyone hope for change, and the Baha'i hope for acceptance. The Baha'is of Egypt released an open letter to the nation enthusing about the possibilities for the future.

Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly before 1950.

Basma Moussa / Daily News Egypt

"Media concentrates on the negative aspects to Baha'is... but we want to help build the country, all Egyptians together, and since the revolution we are more able to do that," says Baha'i NGO worker, Shady Samir.

Moussa noticed a great difference in her treatment since the revolution. "People started stopping me in the street and saying 'I'm not a Baha'i but I respect your struggle.' Before they were scared to speak about religious freedom, after the revolution everyone started to speak about his opinion." Her employer's attitude also changed, "last March they promoted me to professor... and I didn't have to push for it," she smiles.

Where to now? The constitutional question

The current debate about the new constitution raises many issues of concern for the Baha'i community. For example, the proposed Article 8 which states, "freedom of religion is absolute

and practices shall be conducted in accordance with public order. The state shall ensure freedom to establish places of worship for adherents of Abrahamic religions in accordance with the law.”

The clause would mean Baha'is would not be able to practice their religions in public or build places of worship. Nor does it suggest that the state would be involved in protecting freedom of religion.

Much depends on how the constitution is interpreted by the new legal system. “Anything written in a constitution is only as valuable as the enforcement of it,” says Perrell. “Constitutions have tremendous normative value and by listing only a few religions... they inhibit legitimate conversation about what constitutes a religion and validates those who would discriminate against any unlisted religion.”

Mohsen Kamal, deputy director of the Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti Violence Studies, suggests further implications. The 2009 ruling on ID cards could be nullified, he says. It could be even harder for Baha'is to go to the media and talk about their rights. “If they are talking about their religion they could be accused of insulting Islam.” The article of the new constitution implementing “the principles of Shari’a law,” could result in Baha'is being punished as apostates.

“In plain words,” wrote Baha'i blogger Bilo, “and according to the current rhetoric, promulgated by Islamists and many of those participating in drafting Egypt's new constitution, if you are a Baha'i in Egypt, you are not recognized or protected under the constitution or any laws that enforce equal rights because only adherents of the three religions are entitled to such protections.”

Mahmoud Ghozlan, spokesperson of the Muslim Brotherhood and a member of the new Egyptian National Council of Human Rights, defends the implementation of Article 8. “Baha'ism is not a religion,” he asserts, before describing how the constitution will not negatively affect Baha'is. “They will have the freedom to worship but they will not be recognised as a religion.”

This sentiment was echoed by a Constituent Assembly member, Farid Ismael, in a recent broadcast television programme, Akher Kalam. Ismael claimed this article should not cause

Baha'is to fear for their safety, stating the assembly did not condone attacking anyone because of their religion and if Baha'is were threatened then the government would protect them.

“There is something called the general order. We won't let a minority promote their religion, which would go against the general order, and jeopardise social peace,” justifies Ghozlan. This attitude was similarly recorded in a paper by academic Daniel Cantini in 2009, “the view of Egyptian jurisdiction is that public interest, even as vaguely defined ones [such] as Shari'a, respect of recognised religions, social peace or national unity, have priority over the individual right of freedom of belief.”

The importance of the Baha'i case for Egypt rests on what it tells us about the attitude of Ghozlan and other decision makers. Their fate indicates how much fundamental change Egyptian institutions have undergone since the revolution.

“Why do we point to what has happened to the Baha'is?” asked Faraj Fuda, a renowned secularist, before his assassination by Islamists in 1994. “What happens to the Baha'is today may happen to others tomorrow and that the chain [of events] that starts with the Baha'is will inevitably end with enlightened Muslims.”

The future

The Constitution remains in draft and much debated. What can Baha'is do to influence its provisions?

Fundamentally, the problem Baha'is have always faced is ignorance and prejudice in a society in which religion is often a crucial aspect of identity. Legal changes are essential, but the importance is in the implementation, and this is grounded in the attitude of the people. As recorded in an interview with the former UN secretary general, Boutros Boutros Ghali in 2010, “there is still a lot of work to be done socially...according to Boutros Boutros-Ghali, there is still limited success, ‘when the small administrator may consider the Baha'i the devil.’”

Baha reflects three years on from when his family's houses were torched. “Even the people

who attacked [my family] were usually nice people” he says, “friends of friends, I think people did not know about the religion. They believed rumours... if there has been a misunderstanding, as a Baha'i it's my fault. I need to clear that misunderstanding.”

Shady Samir is the grandson of one of the Baha'i men whose marriage was annulled in the Beba case in 1925. He works for an NGO which helps young people learn how to use information technology. It is a job he has chosen, he says, as part of the “service” all Baha'is must perform in order to promote unity and peace. Samir says Baha'is should not just focus on their rights, but wider issues, such as the position of women. By demonstrating their positive contribution to society inclusive of all Egyptians, Baha'is might gain the trust and change attitudes of those around them. “When I was growing up, the community was more afraid and enclosed,” he says, “more of a minority mentality. Now especially we are being more open.”

Running youth groups, volunteering in their community, helping their neighbours are all ways in which Baha'i are encouraged to foster understanding and acceptance of their faith.

Ramadan suggests, “evolution can be a revolution. Plant a seed and it will cost you, but with work and perseverance and faith there will be fruit. There is no point revolting to try to make the tree grow in a second. The revolution is a learning process for everyone, just because it has aspects that don't suit me doesn't mean it is not a good thing... you choose to be grateful and work with what there is.”

The Baha'is appear determined to keep on preparing for the time of unity predicted by their holy books. At the end we have to “grin and bear it” says Ramadan. She intends to “build little circles of influence and big circles of concern... so you can influence your circle and change society.”

Back in Zamalek at the inter-faith meeting, the slips have been read out and people gather in groups to discuss the subject of “peace.”

What is peace, we are encouraged to ask ourselves. How could we achieve it? Some think that you should understand yourself, others reject this. “Just being at peace with yourself is selfish. We need to think about world problems.” Some quote Martin Luther King Junior, others religious texts. “What's so great about peace anyway?” grumbles one participant, initiating a

string of refutations and strong admonitions from the Martin Luther King fan.

Afterwards, I ask people what the session means for them. One attendee tells me it helps him to think about his life. He goes back to the people at work, his family and talks about the other perspectives he's heard. "Many people here come to learn about others and have the freedom to express ideas," notes the organiser. "It might be the first time they read the Bible for example," and certainly the first time to gain an understanding of Baha'i texts.

In 2009, Baha's father was being accused on television of being an infidel and threatened with death. His words then reflect a hope which continues with Baha'is today. "I would like to tell the nation, [quoting from the Quran] 'if a wicked person brings any news to you, you shall first investigate, lest you commit an injustice towards some people out of ignorance and become sorry and remorseful for what you have done,'" he said. "I ask the Muslims and Egyptians to seek the truth."

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