

IRAN

The government of Iran continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. Since 1999, the State Department has designated Iran as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF again recommends in 2012 that Iran be designated a CPC.

Background

Iran is a constitutional, theocratic republic that discriminates against its citizens on the basis of religion or belief, as all laws and regulations are based on Islamic criteria. Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, many members of minority religious communities have fled Iran for fear of persecution. The primacy of Islamic laws and institutions subjects non-Muslims to discrimination. Since the June 12, 2009 disputed elections, human rights and religious freedom conditions have regressed to a point not seen since the early days of the revolution. Killings, arrests, and physical abuse of detainees have increased, including for religious minorities and Muslims who dissent or express views perceived as threatening the government’s legitimacy. The government continues to use its religious laws to silence reformers, including women’s rights activists and journalists, for exercising their internationally-protected rights to freedom of expression and religion or belief.

Religious Freedom Conditions

During the past year, religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate, especially for religious minorities, most notably Baha’is, as well as Christians and Sufi Muslims, and physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment intensified. Even the recognized non-Muslim religious minorities protected under Iran’s constitution – Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, and Zoroastrians – face increasing discrimination and repression. The government continued to intimidate, harass, and detain dissenting Majority Shi’a and minority Sunni Muslims, including clerics. Dissidents and human rights defenders were increasingly subject to abuse and several were sentenced to death for the capital crime of “waging war against God.”

Muslims: Over the past few years, and especially after the contested June 2009 presidential election, the Iranian government has imposed harsh prison sentences on prominent reformers from the Shi’a majority community. Authorities charged many of these reformers with “insulting Islam,” criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that allegedly deviate from Islamic standards. The Sunni Muslim minority has reported widespread abuses and restrictions on their religious practices, including detentions and abuse of Sunni clerics, as well as bans on Sunni teachings in public schools and Sunni religious literature, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Sufi Muslims have faced growing government repression of their communities and religious practices, including increased harassment and imprisonment of prominent Sufi leaders by the intelligence and security services and destruction of prayer centers and *hussainiyas* (places of worship). There have been reports over the past few years that the government is considering a ban on Sufism.

Baha’is: The Baha’i community, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran, has long been subject to particularly severe religious freedom violations. The government views Baha’is, who number at least 300,000, as “heretics” and consequently, face repression on the grounds of apostasy. Since 1979, authorities have killed or executed more than 200 Baha’i leaders, and more than 10,000 have been dismissed from government and university jobs. Authorities arbitrarily have arrested more than 500 Baha’is since 2005, and, as of March 2012, nearly 100 remain in prison on account of their religious beliefs, including seven Baha’i leaders and six Baha’i educators.

Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians: The Constitution of Iran formally recognizes Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities. However, members of these groups are subject to legal and other forms of discrimination. Recently, the number of incidents of Iranian authorities raiding church services, threatening church members, and imprisoning worshipers and church leaders has increased significantly. Since June 2010, authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained about 300 Christians throughout the country. Iran’s President has called for an end to the development of Christianity within the country. Also, the government promotes anti-Semitism and has sponsored a Holocaust denial conference and targeted members of the Jewish community on the basis of real or perceived “ties to Israel.” Furthermore, numerous programs broadcast on state-run television advance anti-Semitic messages. In August 2011, a Zoroastrian man convicted of Zoroastrian faith propaganda began serving a four-and-a-half-year prison term.

Women's Rights: The Iranian government's enforcement of its official interpretation of Islam threatens women's human rights. The Iranian justice system does not grant women the same legal status as men. Regardless of their religious belief, Iranian women must be covered from head to foot in public. Iran's "morality police" are increasingly present in the streets and more frequently stop cars with young men and women inside to question their relationship.

Human Rights Activists: Iranian authorities regularly detain and harass journalists, bloggers, and human rights defenders who say or write anything critical of the Islamic revolution or the Iranian government.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Beginning in early 2010, and especially since the 2011 uprisings started in the Arab world, the U.S. government has expressed more frequent support for reformers in Iran and publicly highlighted the government's human rights and religious freedom abuses. Over the past year, in multilateral fora and through public statements, high-level U.S. officials have urged the Iranian government to respect its citizens' human rights, including the right to religious freedom. For example, in February 2012, both the White House and State Department released statements citing reports that Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani's execution order had been renewed and called for the lifting of the death sentence and his immediate release.

On July 1, 2010, President Obama signed into law CISADA, the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (P.L. 111-195), which highlights Iran's serious human rights violations, including suppression of religious freedom. Subsequently, under CISADA, on September 29, 2010, President Obama issued an Executive Order sanctioning eight Iranian officials for having committed serious human rights abuses after the 2009 elections. Since then, the President has added five more Iranian officials and three Iranian government entities to the list. USCIRF long had called for the U.S. government to identify Iranian officials and entities responsible for severe religious freedom violations and impose travel bans and asset freezes on those individuals, and had specifically identified seven of the officials named in the executive order and an eighth named in June 2011.

In addition to continuing to designate Iran as a CPC, the U.S. Government should:

- Continue to work closely with its European and other allies, in bilateral and multilateral fora, to apply pressure on the Iranian government through a combination of advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions with the aim of halting the government's human rights and religious freedom violations;
- Continue to speak out publicly and frequently at the highest levels about the severe religious freedom abuses in Iran, and highlight the need for the international community to hold authorities accountable in specific cases;
- Work within the current overall policy framework to ensure that violations of religious freedom and related human rights are part of all formal and informal multilateral or bilateral discussions, including the P5+1 talks, with representatives of the Iranian government;
- Continue to identify Iranian government agencies and officials – including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad – responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, freeze those individuals' assets, and bar their entry into the U.S.;
- Call on Iran to cooperate fully with the new UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Iran, including allowing the Special Rapporteur to visit, and continue to support an annual UN General Assembly resolution condemning severe violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in Iran, and call for officials responsible for such violations to be held accountable; and
- Use appropriated Internet freedom funds to develop free, secure email access for use in Iran; facilitate the provision of high-speed internet access via satellite; and distribute immediately proven and field-tested counter-censorship programs in order to prevent the arrest and harassment of religious freedom and human rights activists and help them maintain their freedom of expression and legitimate expectations of privacy.

Please see USCIRF's 2012 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Iran.