

IRAN

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2013 Annual Report

Bottom Line: Already poor religious freedom conditions in Iran continue to deteriorate, particularly for religious minorities, especially Baha'is, Christians, and Sufi Muslims, as well as for dissenting Shi'i and Sunni Muslims. Harassment, arrests, and imprisonment intensified a trend likely to worsen as the June 2013 presidential election approaches.

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 2013 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 for fear of persecution. Since the disputed 2009 elections, religious freedom conditions have regressed to a point not seen since the early days of the Islamic 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, already poor religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate, especially for religious minorities, in particular for Baha'is as well as Christians and Sufi Muslims. Physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment intensified. Even some of the recognized non-Muslim religious minorities protected under Iran's constitution – Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, and Zoroastrians – face harassment, intimidation, discrimination, arrests, and imprisonment. Majority Shi'a and minority Sunni Muslims, including clerics who dissent, were intimidated, harassed, and detained. Dissidents and human rights defenders were increasingly subject to abuse and several were sentenced to death and even executed for the capital crime of "waging war against God." Heightened anti-Semitism and repeated Holocaust denials by senior government officials and clerics continue to foster a climate of fear among Iran's Jewish community.

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, long has 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. More than 650 Baha'is have been arbitrarily arrested since 2005. As of February 2013, at least 110 Baha'is, twice the number held in early 2011, are being held in prison solely because of their religious beliefs, including seven Baha'i leaders and 10 Baha'i educators. In October 2012, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran referred to the Baha'i community as the "most persecuted religious minority in Iran."

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 has increased significantly of Iranian authorities raiding church services, threatening church members, and imprisoning worshipers and church leaders. 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. In January 2013, Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American pastor, was sentenced in a trial without due process to eight years in prison for "threatening the national security of Iran" for his activity in the Christian house church movement. Pastor Abedini had been in Iran since June 2012 to continue work to establish an orphanage and was arrested and imprisoned in September. He remains in prison and has spent several weeks in solitary confinement and has been physically and psychologically abused by authorities in Evin prison. The government also 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.

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

The U.S. government continued to highlight publicly the Iranian government's human rights and religious freedom abuses. During the reporting period (January 2012 – January 2013), high-level U.S. officials in multilateral fora and through public statements urged the Iranian government to respect its citizens' human rights, including the right to religious freedom. For example, in March 2013, Secretary of State Kerry issued a statement calling for the release of Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini. In January, spokespersons from both the White House and State Department had expressed concern and called for his 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 to the list three more Iranian officials and four Iranian government entities. 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. No previous Iran sanction measures included provisions dealing with human rights violations.

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, call for the release of all prisoners of conscience, and highlight the need for the international community to hold authorities accountable in specific cases;
- Ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are part of all formal and informal multilateral or bilateral discussions with 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 2013 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Iran.