

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 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. USCIRF recommends in 2011 that Iran again be designated as 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, members of minority religious communities have fled Iran in significant numbers for fear of persecution. The primacy of Islamic laws and institutions adversely 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 Islamic revolution. Security and paramilitary forces have used brutal force against the hundreds of thousands of Iranians who have demonstrated in the streets after the elections, as well as during the ongoing uprisings in the Arab world. The government continues to use its religious laws to silence reformers, including women’s rights activists, for exercising their internationally-protected rights to freedom of expression and religion or belief.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

Religious minorities, such as Baha’is, Christians, and Sufi Muslims, have suffered from increased physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment. Even the recognized non-Muslim religious minorities protected under Iran’s constitution – Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, and Zoroastrians – face increasing discrimination and repression. 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 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, many of whom have been tried on criminal charges of “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 practice, 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. Baha’is, who number at least 300,000, are viewed as “heretics” by Iranian authorities and may face repression on the grounds of apostasy. Since 1979, Iranian government authorities have killed or executed more than 200 Baha’i leaders in Iran, and more than 10,000 have been dismissed from government and university jobs. Nearly 400 Baha’is have been arbitrarily arrested since 2005, and, as of May 2011, at least 75 Baha’is remain in prison on account of their religious beliefs.

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. Iran’s President has called for an end to the development of Christianity within the country. Also, the government promotes an anti-Semitism campaign, with the Iranian government sponsoring a Holocaust denial conference, along with targeting members of the Jewish community on the basis of real or perceived “ties to Israel.” Furthermore, numerous programs broadcast on state-run television have advanced anti-Semitic messages.

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

Human Rights Activists: In addition, 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

Starting in early 2010, the U.S. government began more frequently expressing support for reformers in Iran and highlighted publicly the government's human rights and religious freedom abuses. In March 2011, President Obama delivered his third annual Persian new year message. For the first time he directed his message to the people of Iran, particularly the youth, and stated that the Baha'i community and Sufi Muslims are "punished for their faith." According to the State Department's 2010 *Advancing Freedom and Democracy Report*, the U.S. government seeks to increase Iranian citizens' access to information about international human rights standards and publicize the Iranian government's human rights abuses through Voice of America radio and television broadcasts, along with other media outlets.

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, and requires the president to submit the names of individuals who commit these abuses, bars their entry into the U.S., and freezes their assets. Subsequently, 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 and three more officials have since been added to that list. USCIRF specifically identified eight of the individuals named in the Executive Order. On May 13, 2011, Congressman Ros-Lehtinen introduced the Iran Threat Reduction Act (House Resolution 1905), a bipartisan bill that aims to strengthen current economic sanctions for the purposes of both nuclear deterrence and to prevent further human rights violations. In March 2011, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHCR) created a new Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Iran, whose purpose is to investigate and report on human rights abuses in the country, a long standing USCIRF recommendation. In addition to continuing to designate Iran as a CPC, the U.S. Government should:

- Continue to work closely with its European allies 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;
- At the highest levels continue to speak out publicly and frequently about the severe religious freedom abuses in Iran, and draw attention to the need for the international community to hold Iranian 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;
- Use appropriated Internet Freedom funds to provide secure email access for use in Iran, facilitate the provision of high-speed internet access via satellite, and support the development of new technologies that counter censorship in order to protect Iranian and other human rights activists from harassment and arrest by the Iranian government;
- Continue to identify Iranian government agencies and officials 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.

Please see USCIRF's 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Iran.