

## **Table of Contents**

- ***Iran must stop persecuting minority religions***
- ***Iranian authorities detain Sunday school children during church raid***
- ***Officials pressure pastor to convert***
- ***Iran attempts to convert Christian prisoners as crackdown on church intensifies***
- ***Iranian pastor refuses to reject religion, faces execution***
- ***Iranian Pastor Stands Firm in Faith, Faces Execution***
- ***Iranian Christian pays for faith with 105 days in Evin Prison***
- ***Iranian authorities free Christian after year in prison***
- ***Shock at "duplicity" as 20-year sentence for Iran's Baha'i leaders is reinstated***
- ***Threat of prosecution remains for some Christians freed in Iran***
- ***Religious minorities issues debated at the European Parliament***
- ***Anti-Christian speeches in Iran led to crackdown, sources say***
- ***Iran bans "tight jeans", tattoos at some universities***

---

## **Iran must stop persecuting minority religions**

Roxana Saberi

CNN (21.12.11) / HRWF (19.01.12) - In March 2009, when I was detained in Evin Prison in Iran, two evangelical Christians were arrested. I never met them but spotted them a few times through the barred window of my cell as they walked back and forth to the bathroom down the hall.

I would later learn that Maryam Rostampour and Marzieh Amirizadeh had converted from Islam to Christianity and faced charges of spreading propaganda against the Islamic Republic, insulting religious sanctities, and committing apostasy. They resisted severe pressure to renounce their faith, and in November 2009, after an international outcry, the two women went free.

News headlines are now highlighting the plight of another Iranian Christian accused of apostasy, or abandoning one's religion. When Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani was 19, he converted from Islam to Christianity. In 2010, a provincial court sentenced him to death. This year, Iran's Supreme Court ruled that the case should be reviewed and the sentence overturned if he recants his faith -- a step Nadarkhani, now 34, has so far refused to take.

Now, according to the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, Iran's judiciary has ordered the verdict to be delayed, possibly for one year. But Naderkhani's supporters hope sustained worldwide pressure will lead to his just and immediate release.

As international criticism has mounted, an Iranian official has alleged that Nadarkhani is being prosecuted not for his faith but for crimes including rape and extortion.

Nadarkhani's attorney, however, says the only charge the pastor has faced is apostasy, and court documents support this assertion.

Although Iran's penal code does not include a specific provision for apostasy, judges are given a fairly wide degree of latitude to issue rulings based on their own interpretation of Islamic law. In the past this has led to punishments ranging from imprisonment to death. The last person officially executed in Iran for apostasy was Hossein Soodmand, a Pentecostal minister who converted from Islam before Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution and was hanged in 1990.

Iranian officials often say their country's recognized religious minorities (Christians, Jews, and adherents of the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism) enjoy freedoms equal to their Muslim counterparts. Iran's constitution gives these three religious minorities certain rights, such as five seats in the 290-member parliament and the freedom to perform their religious rituals.

The constitution's articles, however, are all set within the boundaries of Islam, and Islamic codes grant superior legal status to male Muslims.

Many non-Shiites in Iran have also complained of limits on education, work, and exercising their faith. Critics accuse the Islamic regime of having monitored, harassed, abducted, detained, tortured, and killed citizens based upon their religion. Since 1999, the U.S. State Department has designated Iran a "country of particular concern" because of religious repression. The State Department has focused on the treatment of Sufi and Sunni Muslims, Protestant evangelical Christians, Jews, Shiites who don't share the government's official views, and Baha'is, whose faith is not recognized by Iran's regime. Christian leaders in Iran have usually blunted their criticism of the regime, in part to avoid tensions. When I attended Christmas Eve Mass in Iran four years ago, I saw a few dozen worshipers, but I also heard that they had to get government permission to hold the service and were not allowed to proselytize. They had a Christian school, but it had to have a Muslim principal. They could print Christian texts but only with the authorities' approval.

A number of Iranian Christians who recently left Iran have told me that since the country's 2009 disputed presidential election, pressure on their communities has intensified, prompting many more Christians to emigrate. In April, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom reported a rise in Iranian authorities raiding church services and harassing worshipers.

Evangelicals and other Protestants have been particularly targeted. Unlike Iran's traditionally recognized Christian minorities, such as Armenians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans, evangelical churches hold their services in the Farsi language. Iranian authorities accuse them of spreading Christian writings in Farsi to convert Muslims.

"They are tough on us because we educate others," a former pastor of an underground evangelical church in Iran told me on condition of anonymity. "They call it proselytizing, but we don't proselytize. We discuss the realities that Jesus Christ talks about in the Bible, and we never speak about the Islamic Republic."

Shortly after their release from prison, Maryam and Marzieh, the two Christian converts detained down the corridor from me, left Iran. If they stayed, they may have shared the tragic fate of the Rev. Mehdi Dibaj.

Dibaj, a Christian convert from Islam, was jailed for a decade and released in 1994 after international appeals. Soon afterward, he went missing. The authorities reported the discovery of his corpse in a wooded area west of Tehran. Iran's government blamed an anti-regime group for the murders.

If the Iranian regime wants to tout religious freedom, it should respect its citizens' right to decide one of life's most personal choices: their spiritual path. A regime that claims to observe human rights and base its actions on the peaceful nature of Islam should also explain how peace would be attained by executing a man whose only crime is his faith. By releasing Youcef Nadarkhani before Christmas, Tehran would take an important step toward respect for human rights and would give his wife and children an unforgettable gift.

---

## **Iranian authorities detain Sunday school children during church raid**

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (24.12.11) / HRWF (18.01.12) Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has been informed that earlier this week, Iranian authorities in the southern town of Ahwaz raided the Christmas celebrations of an Assemblies of God-affiliated church, detaining everyone in the building, including children attending Sunday School.

According to CSW's sources, the authorities herded the entire congregation, including children, into two buses that had been brought specifically for this purpose. The majority were interrogated, threatened and eventually released. However, the church's senior pastor, Pastor Farhad, remains in detention, along with his wife and some church leaders.

The church in Ahwaz is not a part of the house church movement, but is an official and long-established church whose membership largely consists of former followers of John the Baptist who converted to Christianity. Nevertheless, Pastor Farhad has been detained on several occasions in the past and warned not to allow Muslim converts into his church. This is also not the first time that Christmas celebrations in Iranian churches have been raided in this way. Similar raids and detentions during the Christmas season have occurred in Iran for the last three years.

In response to the arrests the Iranian Church in London is asking for cards of encouragement to be sent to the children, who may have been traumatised by their ordeal.

This wave of arrest comes as Iranian media has been publicising a Christmas message sent to Pope Benedict from Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Ali Larijani, in which he congratulated his Christian counterparts on the "auspicious anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ", wished blessing, happiness and prosperity to the Pope and all Christians in the coming year, and stated that the world's ills were caused by ignoring ethics and justice.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Mr. Larijani's Christmas message may have been well intentioned, but it is entirely undermined by these arrests, which violate the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and Iran's own constitution. The Iranian authorities often insist that Christians are being arrested for indulging in actions that threaten public security, however, it is difficult to conceive how children attending Sunday school or, for that matter, legitimate Christmas celebrations fit into this category. It increasingly appears as if the Iranian regime has decided to deem every act of Christian worship a threat to national security. If this is indeed the case, then the right to freedom of religion or belief is gravely under threat in Iran."

---

## Officials pressure pastor to convert

Baptist Press (27/10/2011) / HRWF (07.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - A jailed Iranian pastor who could be put to death for his faith has been given Islamic literature and been asked to read it -- a move potentially meant to trap him into a blasphemy conviction.

The American Center for Law & Justice and Christian Solidarity Worldwide -- two groups that have monitored the case for months -- say that if pastor Yousef Nadarkhani reads the literature and says anything negative about Islam, he could be charged with blasphemy. Both groups say Nadarkhani has been advised not to read the literature.

"Any criticism of their contents would open the way to charges of blasphemy," Christian Solidarity Worldwide said in a statement on its website.

The case has grown muddled in recent weeks. Although Nadarkhani was charged with blasphemy after his 2009 arrest, Iranian officials in October denied that the charge was blasphemy and instead claimed the charge was of a security nature. They even said he had run a brothel -- a charge that outside groups said was false and was meant to distract the international community.

The ACLJ reported Oct. 26 that their contacts confirm Nadarkhani is still alive. He and his supporters are awaiting a decision on his fate by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

"International pressure against the Iranian regime continues to mount -- but it must be sustained until Pastor Youcef is released unconditionally," ACLJ said in a statement.

Nadarkhani was arrested in 2009 after complaining that his son was being taught Islam in school. He eventually was sentenced to death. Earlier this year the Iranian Supreme Court upheld the death sentence but ordered a lower court to examine whether Nadarkhani was ever a Muslim -- a fact essential to determine whether he left Islam for Christianity. But that lower court in Rasht, Iran, found that although Nadarkhani was never a practicing Muslim "he remains guilty of apostasy because he has Muslim ancestry," Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which monitors religious freedom, reported.

In late September of this year, he was given four chances to recant his faith in court and refused each time. His case then was referred to the ayatollah.

Nadarkhani's refusal to recant his faith has inspired Christians worldwide. The ACLJ reported one of his court exchanges.

"Repent means to return. What should I return to? To the blasphemy that I had before my faith in Christ?" he asked.

"To the religion of your ancestors, Islam," the judge reportedly replied.

"I cannot," Nadarkhani responded.

---

## **Iran attempts to convert Christian prisoners as crackdown on church intensifies**

CSW (26.10.2011) / HRWF (26.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has been informed that Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, who is currently in prison awaiting a final decision from the Supreme Leader of Iran regarding a death sentence for apostasy, was recently presented with Islamic literature, allegedly as part of an official campaign to convert Christian prisoners.

Local sources report that a renewed campaign of harassment of Iranian Christians is underway in Iran, and that several members of the Church of Iran denomination have recently been called in for questioning. Many have been threatened with charges of blasphemy, while one was informed he would be punished for engaging in "actions against the security of the state", a term increasingly adopted in reference to taking part in Christian meetings.

CSW was also informed that another Church of Iran member, Mehdi Furutan, was recently transferred from Shiraz prison to an underground cell in Adelabad security prison, where the torture of inmates regularly takes place. Mr Furutan has been incommunicado for a week and his current condition is unknown. He had just begun serving a one year prison sentence, after an earlier sentence for 'crimes against the order' was upheld at an appeal hearing. Whilst in the general prison in Shiraz Mr Furutan had also been presented with Islamic religious books, and sources fear that his transfer to Adelabad may have been prompted by responses he may have made when questioned about them.

CSW has also learned that Pastor Benham Irani of the Church of Iran, who led a church in Karaj, was informed on 18 October that he would immediately begin serving a five-year sentence for an earlier conviction for 'action against the security of the country', which had been suspended since the verdict was confirmed at an appeal hearing in February 2008. The pastor was due to complete a one-year prison sentence for Christian activities on 20 October. While a charge of apostasy was not brought against him, the verdict included text that defined Pastor Irani as an apostate and reiterated that apostates "can be killed".

CSW's Special Ambassador Stuart Windsor said, "CSW is deeply concerned at news of a further increase in the harassment of Iranian Christians, especially the wording of the verdict against Pastor Irani, which, according to local sources, opens the way for execution or even assassination. The condition and treatment of Mehdi Furutan and of all persons held in the Adelabad facility is another source of concern. There is an increasing tendency by Iranian courts and officials to characterize legitimate Christian activities as crimes against the state. In addition, reports that non-Muslim prisoners are being forced to comment on Islamic theological works in a manner that could possibly render them vulnerable to mistreatment, and even to charges of blasphemy, indicates that Iran is violating article 23 of its constitution, which forbids the investigation of an individual's beliefs. Iran is also in flagrant violation of its obligations under international law to allow all of its citizens to freely manifest their religious beliefs."

---

## **Iranian pastor refuses to reject religion, faces execution**

By Dan Merica

CNN (29.09.2011) / HRWF (03.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Washington DC, USA - Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, the head of a network of Christian house churches in Iran,

could be executed as soon as midnight Wednesday in Tehran for refusing to recant his religious beliefs and convert to Islam, said the chair of a commission that monitors religious freedom around the world.

A statement by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent advisory group appointed by the president and Congress, "expressed deep concern" for the man's fate.

After four days of an appeals trial for apostasy, Nadarkhani refused to recant his beliefs. Leonard Leo, chair of the commission, said the pastor "is being asked to recant a faith he has always had. Once again, the Iranian regime has demonstrated that it practices hypocritical barbarian practices."

Leo said that while the trial is closed to the press, the commission collects information from sources in Iran and around the world. A release by the group says their responsibility is to "review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally."

"I would be disappointed if at the end of this whole maelstrom, there was no statement by our government on this situation," Leo said. "At some point the United States has to stand up for the right of this pastor and for human rights more broadly and call countries to account for what they are doing."

The commission's statement also called the trial a sham and said Iran is violating the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a party.

Nadarkhani was first sentenced to execution in November 2010, the commission said, and in order to avoid the death penalty, he is being asked to recant his beliefs and convert to Islam. Leo said an apostasy trial is rare in Iran; the last occurred in 1990.

Iran's claim stems from the pastor's Muslim parents. According to Leo, the court needed to verify if Nadarkhani had ever been a Muslim. In order to be given what Iran looks at as the opportunity to recant his beliefs, Nadarkhani must have never been a Muslim before the age of 15, Leo said.

Because for the last four days in court he was given the opportunity, it is apparent that the Iranian court found he was never a Muslim and therefore Nadarkhani could have converted.

According to a source close to the situation within the Commission on International Religious Freedom, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, would have to sign off on the execution. Speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the subject's sensitivity, the source said these types of issues are always difficult with Iran because of the lack of transparency in how they make decisions on when and how to act.

The source also said that in the past, political prisoners have had their prison time and punishment reduced by the Iranian government. Though they did not say that was guaranteed in this situation, the source indicated it was a possibility.

The American Center for Law and Justice, a right-leaning organization founded by television evangelist Pat Robertson, reported Wednesday night that Nadarkhani's death sentence punishment had been overturned, meaning that the pastor would be receiving a lower punishment than death. They sourced the claim to someone in Iran.

Those reports could not be verified by CNN. The Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the United Nations failed to comment on the ruling.

Jordan Sekulow, executive director of the ACLJ, said the outcry from Christians in America has been loud and sustained.

"American Christian, like never before, are engaged in this," Sekulow said. "This is evidence that Christians in America over the past decade have done a better job engaging in the persecution issue."

Sekulow also said he hopes the White House or State Department will issue a statement on the issue.

---

## **Iranian Pastor Stands Firm in Faith, Faces Execution**

### ***Court to determine Yousef Nadarkhani's fate in the coming week***

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (28.09.2011) / HRWF (29.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani refused to recant his Christian faith today at the fourth and final court hearing in Iran to appeal his death sentence for apostasy (leaving Islam).

The court house in Rasht, 243 kilometers (151 miles) northwest of Tehran, has swarmed with security forces for four consecutive days since Sunday (Sept. 25), the first day of his four appeal hearings. Applying sharia (Islamic law), the court on Monday, Tuesday and today gave Nadarkhani, 35, three chances to recant Christianity and return to Islam in order for his life to be spared. In all instances, Nadarkhani refused to recant.

"I'm in contact with Iran," a source close to Nadarkhani's family said, "but the news isn't very good. We'll see. If they really want to they can kill him they can, because he hasn't renounced his faith. It finished today. We have left everything in the hands of God."

Authorities arrested Nadarkhani in his home city of Rasht in Oct. 2009 because he allegedly questioned obligatory religion classes in Iranian schools. In September 2010 the court of appeals in Rasht found him guilty of apostasy and in November issued a written confirmation of his charges and death sentence.

At an appeal hearing in June, the Supreme Court of Iran upheld Nadarkhani's sentence but asked the court in Rasht to determine if he was a practicing Muslim before his conversion. The Supreme Court also determined that his death sentence could be annulled if he recanted his faith.

On Sunday (Sept. 25) in the first two and a half hours of the court, the judges determined that Nadarkhani indeed was not a practicing Muslim before his conversion to Christianity. The source said that in this time period things looked more promising for Nadarkhani, and that the court might reverse the sentence based on the findings.

In the end, however, the court declared that although Nadarkhani was not a practicing Muslim before his conversion, he was still guilty of apostasy due to his Muslim ancestry, the source told Compass.

Secret service agents surrounded the court and maintained a presence there throughout the following days, and his wife, Tina, was not allowed in the courtroom. On Sunday (Sept. 25), she was allowed to stand at the doorway for a few minutes to see her husband, the source said.

A defense lawyer told Nadarkhani's family and friends there is a way to take the case back to the Supreme Court or extend Nadarkhani's prison sentence, but the source said the directives of the Supreme Court were clear and he didn't think there was much hope.

"Yousef is known as a hero, so if he is released it will seem like the government was defeated," he said, "but if they leave him in prison there could be more international pressure."

It is critical for foreign governments to negotiate and engage in diplomacy with Iranian authorities about Nadarkhani's case, the source said, adding that his predicament could be more hopeful if they intervened.

"They need to start negotiating," the source said. "It's the moment to negotiate, because if they do, the situation could be regulated."

The source and advocates in the international community fear that authorities may kill Nadarkhani as early as midnight tonight (Sept. 28) or any time in the coming week. The court said a verdict on Nadarkhani would be issued within the next week.

"They probably won't kill him today, but they can do it whenever they want," the source said. "They can hang him in the middle of the night or in 10 days. Sometimes in Iran they call the family and deliver the body with the verdict. They have gone outside the borders of law. This is not in the Iranian law, this is sharia. Sometimes they don't even give the body."

The final appeals hearing today lasted about an hour and a half, ending around 1 p.m. after Nadarkhani's defense lawyer, Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, gave his closing defense. Dadkhah also reportedly faces charges for "actions and propaganda against the Islamic regime," due to his human rights activities.

The hearings on Monday (Sept. 26) and yesterday lasted just 30 minutes, long enough for Nadarkhani to refuse to recant Christianity.

The source said Nadarkhani's 30-year-old wife is very apprehensive about what the courts might decide this week. They have two children: Joel, 7 and Daniel, 9.

"The wife is under depression and worried; we can say his wife is very worried," he said. "It is difficult for all his family, it is difficult for us."

Nadarkhani, whose first name is also spelled Youcef, belongs to the Church of Iran, a group that has been marginalized by other Christian Iranian groups over concerns that its doctrine on the Trinity is inadequate.

The Church of Iran's statement of faith on its website "revealed in the Scriptures as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16-17, 28:19)."

The church's statement of faith also affirms "...the Lordship of Jesus Christ, only Son of God, the Word manifested in flesh. We believe that He is from the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20) and He was born of a Virgin Mary (Matt. 1:23, Luke 1:34). We believe in His atoning death and redemption (Heb. 9:28), in His bodily resurrection (Luke 24:39), in His ascension (Acts 1:9-11), on His return in person to gather His Church (1 Thess. 4:17), followed by His coming in glory to judge the rebels and establish the reign of a thousand years (Rev. 1:7). "

The church also states that it believes the "baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5, 2:38) is the new birth (John 3:5-8). It introduces



the Christian in the Eternal Life of God and leads into all truth, to holiness in communion with Christ.”

---

## **Iranian Christian pays for faith with 105 days in Evin Prison**

### ***Convert from Islam reflects on the cost of following Christ***

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (06.09.2011) / HRWF (09.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – It was early in the morning the day after Christmas. It was cold. Mehdi Forootan sat in the back seat of an undercover police car in front of his house in Tehran, Iran. He was barely awake. An officer pointed a camcorder at him.

The officer had recorded the entire police raid on his house, where he and three other officers claiming to be from the anti-narcotics squad confiscated Forootan’s books, computers and other important documents.

Forootan, 33, wasn’t afraid; he was not guilty of anything. He had heard of Christian friends being arrested and released, and he thought he could manage being in prison as they had. The officers said they wanted to ask him some questions and that they would return him home in a few hours. Forootan thought he might make it back in time for the Christmas sermon he had prepared for a group of Iranian believers who were going to meet in a home that evening. The camera was still on him.

“Do you know why you were arrested?” the officer behind the camcorder asked him calmly.

“No,” Forootan said dryly.

“I’ll ask you a second time,” said the officer with the camera. “Do you know why we took you?”

“No!” Forootan replied. “Why don’t you tell me why you are taking me?”

The officer turned off the camera and looked Forootan in the eyes.

“I can beat you until blood is coming out of your mouth and every part of you. The next time I turn on the camera, you tell me why we are taking you,” the officer said and turned the camera back on.

“Ok, I guess you arrested me for Christianity and my faith in Jesus Christ,” Forootan said.

The officer turned off the camera and asked: “Do you want to come back to Islam?”

“No,” Forootan said.

“We want to take you to a bad place,” the officer said. “Do you know anything about Evin?”

Forootan’s heart sank at the mention of the ill-famed prison, though he tried not to show it. “Yes, I know.”

On Dec. 26, 2010, authorities had arrested Forootan in a wave of persecution against Iran's underground church movement. It is estimated that Iranian authorities arrested over 120 Christians in a two-month period. Most of them were released within days, but Forootan was among a small group who were not. Without explanation, authorities freed him on April 9.

Farshid Fathi was arrested on the same day as Forootan and is still in prison. There has been no news on Noorollah Ghabitizadeh, who was arrested Dec. 24, 2010 in Khuzestan. Abraham Firouzi, arrested Jan. 8 in in Robat Karim, and Masoud Delijani, arrested March 17 in Kermanshah, were released in recent months. The condition and whereabouts of Mostafa Zangooyee, a university student who was arrested on June 30, are not known.

### **Solitary Confinement**

Forootan couldn't believe his ears – the car was headed to the harshest prison in Iran. There was no telling what could happen there, or when he could return home.

At Evin Prison, authorities ordered him to change into a blue uniform and took pictures of him from the front, left and right. Forootan felt like a murderer, he told Compass. Authorities took him down a long corridor of single occupancy cells and showed him his: two meters wide, three meters long.

There was no bed, no chair, no table – only a thin blanket, a small toilet and a metallic washing basin. There was a Quran and a Muslim prayer book on the windowsill.

"Settle in and relax," the prison guard told him. "You'll be here a long time."

Forootan spent the first of many nights sleeping on the bare, cold floor. In the morning a prison guard took him out of his cell and left him in the corridor for a few minutes.

"Pst, pst, Mehdi!" Forootan heard familiar voices behind him. Farshid Fathi, Rasool Abdolahi, Mohammad Zardouz and other Christian friends were in cells along his corridor. They had all been arrested the same morning as he was.

"Farshid, why are you here?" Forootan asked.

"In the early morning they arrested us," said Fathi. "Don't worry, in a week we'll be free!"

Of those arrested last Christmas, Fathi and one other are the only Christians still in prison. With the benefit of hindsight, Forootan chuckled ironically to think of how long he and his friends spent in one of Iran's most notorious prisons for the crime of being a Christian. There were dark circles under his eyes, and though being in prison with friends was a consolation, his time there made his voice break as he spoke.

He sat on a simple Turkish carpet in his rented house in southeastern Turkey where, like so many Iranian Christians, he had fled in hopes for a better future.

Forootan said Evin interrogation authorities brought him to a separate room to ask him endless questions. They blindfolded him. Who did he work for? Why did he visit Afghanistan, Turkey and Armenia? Was he a Christian? They accused him of being a spy, a mason and a friend of Israel.

"They told me that if I told them everything, I could be free in two to three weeks," Forootan said. "When I heard 'two to three weeks,' I understood this was a bad situation and we would be there for a long time."

His interrogators told him he was charged with threatening national security because of his evangelization activities and his work with a Christian ministry.

There were always two officers in his interrogations: One was rough and threatened to kill him or keep him in prison forever. The other was reassuring and promised him help if he told all. The interrogations would sometimes take place every three days. Sometimes they would leave him alone for 10 days without questions.

"They are playing with your mind," Forootan said. "It is a very bad situation when you are alone and you can never do anything. I would start praying, and after some time I would be really sad. 'God, please get me out of this situation, I want to speak to people.'"

In his solitary cell he once heard the sound of a soccer match playing on the guards' television down the hall. The commentator's voice shouted "Goal!" and Forootan got excited.

"I understood there was a football game going and I love football, so I started to listen to the game," he said.

Finally Forootan could no longer contain himself, and he pounded on his door to get the authorities' attention. A gruff prison guard appeared.

"What?" he barked.

"Could you please turn up the volume?" Forootan asked shyly, "because I want to hear the match!"

"Shut up!" the guard said, marched back to the TV and turned it off.

### **'We Can Do Anything We Want'**

One morning while he was in his cell, he heard someone call him. Forootan looked out the little window on his door and saw Fathi in handcuffs, blindfolded. He was on his way to an interrogation, but the guard had left him for a moment alone in the corridor.

"Mehdi, don't worry!" Fathi said, "We'll get out of here soon!"

Forootan responded and the two laughed together, then Forootan saw the guard angrily walking back to Fathi. The guard pushed Fathi and kicked him on the floor, telling him that he would shave his head as punishment.

A few days later, during visitation hours when prisoners can talk to relatives from behind a glass pane, Forootan saw Fathi in passing. Fathi's head was shaved. He looked tired.

"I think he was tired because he misses his children," said Forootan, "it's hard for him."

He said authorities probably kept Fathi incarcerated to make an example of him.

"They keep Farshid because they want the people to be afraid about this situation," Forootan said. "And they are really afraid of cell groups in Iran. They say, 'If you are Christian you can go to a [church] building,' so they can monitor what churches do."

Forootan didn't respond to his interrogators until three weeks into his imprisonment, when a police officer walked into the interrogation room with a stack of documents from a friend's laptop.

"If you continue to be silent, we can keep you in prison for two, three, four years," the officer said. "You won't have a lawyer. We can do anything we want."

That day Forootan wrote his first statement, one of many about his life as a Christian leader in Iran – trying to guess what his interrogators already suspected about him and his activities as a cell group leader in Iran.

Every time he wrote statements, he said he made sure to write from one edge of the paper to the next, careful not to leave any blank space. He scribbled in the blank spots of his paper so that authorities could not alter or add to his statement.

During one interrogation, an officer turned on a camcorder and pointed it toward him.

"Tell us about your crime!" he said, ordering Forootan to speak into the camera.

"I started to tell them how, when I was a teenager, I struggled with substance abuse and how when I was in university I found Jesus and He saved me, and I have been free ever since," Forootan said. "But he became angry and turned off the camera. He said: 'I asked you to tell about your crime, not evangelize us.'"

### **Long Path to Freedom**

Forootan was tired of the questions, prison and solitary confinement. He missed his family and his fiancée's voice, he said.

That is when he remembered the biblical character David, and how in the book of Samuel he acted crazy to get out of a precarious situation.

"Because I was alone and I wanted to get out of the situation," said Forootan, "I started to act like a mad person. I said, 'I'm ill, I want to get out of here.'"

Forootan said he did not expect that authorities would prescribe him psychiatric medication for pretending to be ill. They gave him three pills that made him want to sleep, he said, and he told authorities that he was feeling better and didn't want to take the medication anymore. They force-fed the pills to him for the remainder of his detention.

After 38 days of solitary confinement, around the time he was prescribed the psychiatric medication, his prayer was answered to move from solitary confinement to a group cell, he said. Forootan later learned that his friend Fathi spent 50 days in solitary confinement.

For the next two months, Forootan shared a cell with about 30 other inmates. Some of them were Baha'i, some from Al Qaeda and some from political groups like the Green Movement that protested Iran's elections in 2009 and demanded President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad step down.

"When I said I'm a Christian and I came out of Islam, they were really angry," Forootan said of the Al Qaeda members in his prison cell. "A friend in prison told me be careful, 'These people want to kill you!' He was from the Green Movement. After a week I started to speak about the Bible with them. I asked them why they kill people with bombs and guns. Is this really Islam? They started to talk about Quran, and I started to talk about Bible, and we became friends after a week ... Because we all have one enemy in prison: the Islamic Republic of Iran."

On April 9, the heavy door of Evin Prison opened and Forootan stood inside, looking out the entrance. If they were releasing him, he did not know why. He squinted at the sun.

He had been in prison for 105 days. As he stood there, he thought that perhaps he might soon find himself back in his prison cell, as had happened to his friend Fathi. A few weeks prior, he had heard from a fellow inmate in his group cell that authorities had played a cruel joke on Fathi. As the rumor went, authorities told Fathi he could put his clothes on and took him to the prison door. They told him he was free. Then the guard stopped him and told him he had to take him back to his cell.

"This is a game, and after this Farshid [Fathi] was really crushed," Forootan said, having seen him in passing during the weekly visitations.

At the prison door, Forootan prayed as his head raced. He suspected it was a cruel ruse to break him, too. He waited at the door for three minutes expecting someone to call him back to his cell.

"I thought they were lying to me," he said. "When they pushed me out the door, and I saw the sun and the free space, I started to run."

Forootan ran for 30 minutes – to the nearest soccer stadium, where he bought a ticket for a match. He said the best thing for him was to be in a crowd. When the game was over, he called some friends, who picked him up and brought him home, "because for 105 days I hadn't walked, and my feet were weak," Forootan said.

For the next five days Forootan couldn't sleep. His body had developed a dependence on the medication authorities had given him, he said, and he was overcome by fear and paranoia. He thought authorities were listening to his phone, monitoring him through his computer.

"My eyes were wide open," he said. "I went to a Christian doctor, who told me that whatever they gave me in prison was like a drug, and I needed to be strong because it was a really hard situation."

In a few weeks, he said his body recovered from his experience in prison and the substances authorities forced him to take.

Forootan said his first month out of prison was one of the worst of his life. He couldn't speak to anyone of his prison experience for fear that authorities were watching and would re-arrest him. His parents had given the deed of their house to authorities as bail.

He and his fiancée decided it was best for him to leave Iran and go to Turkey as a refugee. For Forootan, this meant an illegal escape through the mountains, because authorities had confiscated his passport.

"I came out of Iran with 70 Afghans," Forootan said. "I went to the mountains and walked in the mountains for eight hours, and after eight hours I came to Turkey...That was really hard, because I really love Iran, and I'm really sad about this land. Maybe I can't see my country again."

When Forootan arrived in Turkey, he and his fiancée, also a convert to Christianity, got married. They found a house and were together for two months before she had to return to Norway, where she had been granted asylum.

In southeast Turkey for three months, Forootan said the only thing more difficult than leaving his parents in Iran was not knowing what his future held. He said he hopes he can join his wife in Norway one day and finally start a Christian family of his own in freedom. For now, as he seeks refugee status in Turkey, he said he feels stateless.

"I miss Iran," Forootan said. "I read in the Bible once about how the Jewish people were banished in Babylon; it says there that when my child is born in the banished land, then I will feel this is my land. When my child is born in Norway, I can say that is my land."

---

## **Iranian authorities free Christian after year in prison**

### ***Dual Dutch-Iranian citizen of Armenian descent worked with drug-addicted Muslims***

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (01.09.2011) / HRWF (05.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Iranian authorities on Monday (Aug. 29) released a Christian after 359 days of detainment on charges of spreading Christianity among Farsi-speaking Iranians and having ties with foreign Christian organizations, according to Mohabat News.

Authorities arrested Vahik Abrahamian, 45, a dual Iranian and Dutch citizen who belongs to Iran's Armenian community, and his wife on Sept. 4, 2010 in Hamadan, 337 kilometers (210 miles) west of Tehran, along with another Iranian Christian couple, Arash Kermanjani and Arezou Teimouri. On April 30 authorities released Abrahamian's wife, Sonia, along with Kermanjani and Teimouri, after they appeared in court, and Abrahamian was ultimately held in the Hamadan general prison ward.

The two couples spent 44 days in solitary confinement in the detention center of the Ministry of Information, Farsi Christian News Network (FCNN) reported.

Conditions in the prison were taxing on Abrahamian's health, and FCNN described the prison's hygiene conditions as "deplorable."

Abrahamian and his wife were previously arrested and held in Tehran's notorious Evin prison in February 2010. Authorities held them in solitary confinement for 53 days on charges of activities among the Muslim community, according to Mohabat News. They were released on bail.

The couple worked with drug addicts and other marginalized Iranians, according to FCNN. Abrahamian had become a Christian in the Netherlands, where he visited an Iranian church. At that time he found freedom from his own drug addiction, and in 2006 he returned to Iran to work with drug users.

Authorities were incensed that Abrahamian worked with marginalized Farsi-speaking Muslims, and even more that he had connections with foreign Christians, said an Iranian Christian pastor in the region on the condition of anonymity.

"The reason he was in prison for so long wasn't about his [faith and activities], but because he was connected with foreign Christians," the source said.

The pastor explained that typically authorities arrest and release Christians in the house group movement after a few days or weeks when they work independently and are not seen as plants from the West or having connections with ministries outside Iran.

The Iranian government seeks to create an atmosphere of fear for Christians, said the source.

"The government in Iran has two challenges," he said. "On the one hand they don't like Christianity growing in Iran, but on the other hand because of international pressure they don't want to make a big story out of them."

The source explained that authorities want to control the Christian movement, but because it is a network of underground churches that is spreading rapidly and secretly, they cannot. He said he expects persecution, which is on the rise, to continue in Iran.

"This is nothing new," he said. "We've been dealing with this for 20 years. We have persecution, and they will arrest even more people, but this is not new."

Last month an Iranian cleric, Ayatollah Hadi Jahangosha, decried Protestantism in Iran, calling it "distorted Christianity," according to a Mohabat News.

In the Aug. 24 report, Jahangosha said the effects of the Protestant Christian movement had more far-reaching effects than other religions and expressed his regret for the spread of Christianity among youth. He criticized Christian satellite channels, claiming they are trying to erode Iran's society and religious culture.

"Iran's capital is more exposed to damage in this issue, and some people here are attracted to Christianity due to financial reasons, and some other people due to being neglected by the society," Mohabat quoted Jahangosha as saying.

Recent inflammatory remarks by Iran's religious leaders have led to clampdowns on Christians in Iran, according to regional experts. In October 2010 Iran's Supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, made caustic remarks against converts to Christianity and the house church movement. In two waves of arrests in the following months, authorities arrested scores of Christians, most of whom were released within days.

On July 30, authorities raided the home of another Christian, Leila Mohammadi, and arrested her. Police confiscated all Christian materials in her home, according to Mohabat News. She is held in Evin prison on charges of spreading Christianity and evangelizing.

On July 15, in the northwestern city of Tabriz, authorities arrested two Azeri-speaking Christians, Vahid Rofegar and Reza Kahnamoeei, reported Mohabat News.

Iran's population is 75 million, including an estimated 450,000 Christians. Converts from Islam to Christianity are considered apostates with no legal protection in Iran, where courts apply sharia (Islamic law).

Abrahamian's family "is rejoicing and expressed their gratitude to God for His gracious protection and intervention, and secondly to the Christian family worldwide who have not ceased praying and advocating on their behalf," FCNN reported.

---

## **Shock at "duplicity" as 20-year sentence for Iran's Baha'i leaders is reinstated**

Baha'I International Community UN Office (01.04.2011) / HRWF (05.04.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Just six months after Iran's appeal court reduced to 10 years the jail terms handed down to seven Baha'i leaders, the prisoners have been told that their original 20-year sentences have been reinstated.

The Baha'i International Community has reacted with shock and dismay at the news.

"We can confirm that the seven have been told by prison authorities that the ruling of the appeal court has been rescinded," said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations.

"But nothing has been seen in writing by the prisoners or their attorneys, so we cannot know precisely on what grounds the reduced jail terms have now been set aside. It seems, however, that there was a challenge by the Prosecutor General who can appeal any court judgment he believes contradicts Shariah law," said Ms. Dugal.

Only last month, the international community was told that the 10-year prison terms were confirmed when the Iranian Embassy in Brussels presented a document to a European Parliament briefing, in which it is clearly stated that the court initially issued 20 year sentences for "espionage, acting against National Security and forming an illegal cult". However, the document then went on to say that the verdict was later reviewed and "decreased to 10 years' imprisonment."

Notwithstanding repeated requests, no one has ever received an official copy of the original verdict or the ruling on appeal, said Ms. Dugal.

"This has all the appearance of a ploy, calculated to enable the authorities to manipulate the outcome to suit their own ends. Any fair minded observer can see the duplicity, crass cynicism and vile motives of the Iranian authorities in their prosecution of this case.

"From the initial, illegal, 30-month detention of the seven – through the gross irregularities of their trial – to the judiciary's refusal to issue any official verdict to the defendants or their lawyers, the actions of the authorities have demonstrated at every turn that the decision to impose harsh sentences was predetermined," said Ms. Dugal.

The seven, who were all members of a national-level ad hoc group that attended to the needs of Iran's Baha'i community, were incarcerated in Gohardasht prison – about 50 kilometers west of Tehran – in August last year, following a brief trial after which they were each sentenced to 20 years in jail.

The seven are Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli and Vahid Tizfahm.

One month later, the appeal court revoked three charges that accused the seven of engaging in acts of espionage, collaboration with the State of Israel, and the provision of classified documents to foreign nationals with the intention of undermining state security.

"At the same time, the judiciary – determined to find the Baha'is guilty of something – said that their service to the Baha'i community was basically illegal and fixed their sentences at 10 years," said Ms. Dugal.

The refusal of the authorities to provide prison officials with the necessary documentation regarding the case has also precluded the prisoners from securing temporary leave on compassionate grounds or to obtain much needed medical attention and care, she added.

"The judiciary sanctimoniously claims to be serving the cause of justice while persistently trampling upon the rights of loyal, law-abiding citizens," she said.

The imprisonment of the Baha'i leaders has provoked a worldwide chorus of condemnation from governments – including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. The European Union and the President of the European Parliament have also expressed concern, along with numerous human rights organizations and other groups, religious leaders, and countless individuals.



"It seems that the wide-ranging international pressure did impel the Iranian judiciary to reduce the original prison sentences," said Ms. Dugal. "Now, however, they must have concluded that they can simply return to the original plan. But voices raised during this last month alone should tell them otherwise."

Last week, the UN Human Rights Council voted to appoint a special investigator to monitor Iran's compliance with international human rights standards. The resolution followed the release of a report by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, expressing concern about reports of the persecution of minorities in Iran, which specifically highlighted the case of its Baha'i community and the imprisonment of the seven Baha'i leaders.

---

## **Threat of prosecution remains for some Christians freed in Iran**

***Bail amounts can be high; half of those arrested in December-January still incarcerated***

By Damaris Kremida

Compass direct (23.02.2011) / HRWF (26.02.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Iranian authorities have released about half of the Christians arrested for their faith across the country in December and January, as well as one held in Shiraz since June, sources said.

In December and January authorities arrested up to 120 believers after Iranian religious and political figures acknowledged the existence of home fellowships and condemned them as a threat to the state. Sources estimate at least 62 of those arrested during late December and January have been released, some on bail. A typical bail amount in Iran can range between a few thousand dollars and the deed on a house.

Some of the Christians who were released reported they were subjected to solitary confinement and harsh interrogation, according to a statement by Elam Ministries on Feb. 4. The statement said some Christians held at Section 209 of Tehran's notorious Evin Prison suffered up to 34 days in solitary confinement.

"Ex-prisoners who have endured Section 209 testify it is the worst part of the whole grim experience of arrest and imprisonment," read the Elam statement. "They say the mental pressure is unbearable."

The exact number and condition of those who remain in prison is unknown, and on Feb. 13 Iranian authorities reportedly detained another 45 Christians for one night in several towns and cities, apparently as part of a policy of harassing non-Muslims, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

On Feb. 15 authorities released Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khandjani, detained in Shiraz since mid-June. Sadegh-Khandjani's family reportedly paid a large bail for his release.

Arrested in 2006 with other members from the Church of Iran, Sadegh-Khandjani was in prison for 22 days. During that time government officials asked the church members to work as spies for them and threatened to charge them with apostasy (leaving Islam) and

to hang them, said a source close to Sadegh-Khandjani's family on condition of anonymity.

Reports from other Christians who were in prison confirm that this type of psychological pressure is not uncommon.

Between 2006 and 2010, authorities called Sadegh-Khandjani to the police station for interrogation twice a year, said the source. During the first months of his recent eight-month-long detainment in Shiraz, his family had no news of his whereabouts or condition. Authorities also arrested his wife, Mariam, and held her for two months last year. The Christian couple has a 4-year-old daughter.

Throughout this time, Sadegh-Khandjani endured severe prison conditions and harsh treatment, including solitary confinement, said the source. He was accused of apostasy, insulting Islam and having converted Muslims to Christianity.

The source said that when he called Sadegh-Khandjani, the released Christian chuckled and said "243 days," referring to the days he spent in detainment. The source said Sadegh-Khandjani had a pleasant disposition and a good sense of humor, despite his hardships.

"He is very kind and respects the spirit of people," said the source.

Iranian Christian news agency Mohabat News reported on Monday (Feb. 21) that authorities had released on bail a Christian couple in their 60s in Mashhad. Secret security police arrested Hassan Razavi Derakhshi and Parya Jamali on Dec. 27, 2010 and held them for 35 days. The couple was accused of converting to Christianity, holding Christian meetings in their home and organizing a Christmas celebration at their home, according to Mohabat.

### **Condemned for Apostasy**

More than 30 Christians remain in prison in different cities, including Tehran, Mashhad, Karaj, Shiraz, Ahvaz, Rasht, Hamedan and Arak, according to Middle East Concern. Most of these Christians come from a Muslim upbringing.

Among them is Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani in Rasht, who was handed the death sentence for apostasy on Nov. 13, 2010. His lawyer has filed an appeal with the Supreme Court, and Nadarkhani is awaiting a trial date. Arrested in October 2009 and serving time in Lakan prison, Nadarkhani is married and has two young children.

"Yousef isn't in a good situation," said the anonymous source, referring to the status of his case. "I asked about his morale. They said it is good, and that he is providing moral support to others."

Authorities have allegedly treated Nadarkhani harshly both physically and mentally.

"They told him he is a Christian and dirty, and he can't have contact with others," said the source. "He has suffered, been beaten and had bad conditions."

Nadarkhani's wife, Tina, also spent time in prison last year for four months.

Asked to evaluate the outlook for Nadarkhani, the source said authorities have secretly killed many people and will not hesitate to do the same with Nadarkhani if the international community stops advocating for him and other Christians.

"We think that if we stay silent, they will kill him, but if we keep talking about him, it will be difficult for them to make the decision to execute him," he said. "Silence is the worst thing about the situation of Christians in Iran. The Christians in Iran suffer from the silence of the international community."

---

## **Religious minorities issues debated at the European Parliament**

HRWF (14.02.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with Iran devoted its meeting on February 1, 2011 to the current situation of religious minorities in this Islamic state. The meeting was opened by announcements of the Chair of the Delegation, Ms Barbara Lochbihler MEP (Group of the Greens/EFA, Germany) who touched the issue of nuclear talks with Iran, drastic economic decisions by the Iranian government, the situation of Sakineh Ashtiani, executions and non-transparent trials in the Iranian state, and cooperation with US diplomats on the state of affairs in the sphere of human rights in Iran. The discussion was then opened to representatives of Iranian religious minorities.

Dr Seyed Mustafa Azmayesh, representative of the Neymatollahi Gonabadi Order, the expert on Gnosis and Sufism, stated that the number and frequency of human rights violations in Iran has increased. Hard labour camps are reported to be found in the country, and the number of executions by hanging amounts to 21 persons per week (Amnesty International statistics). He expressed the concern that Sufis are now in the front line of the regime's actions against religious minorities. There were cases when security forces broke into houses of Sufi Masters, treated them brutally and put them into prison. The Sufis were also attacked by the media. Dr Azmayesh reported that the Iranian national TV broadcast a series of programmes about "false mysticism", thus launching "a campaign of hate against the Sufi orders" and introducing them as "the marionettes of the western countries". There is an increase in the number of anti-Sufi weblogs and websites which are affiliated with Iranian state institutions. On the Internet site of Jahan news an interview with Mullah Madani was published in August 2010. He compared the Sufis with "house vermin" and accused them of being "slaves of foreign countries" and "related to Western secret societies". One month ago the Iranian vice minister of the ministry of guidance and education organized an exhibition called "Satanism". In one of the rooms photographs of notable persons from the Sufi orders were displayed. These people, groups and organizations were introduced to visitors as Satanists. Dr Azmayesh emphasized the fact that traces of the Sufic religion can be found even in the most distant corners of Iran, which is the evidence of the importance of the Sufi heritage for this country.

Ms Sarah Vader, the Baha'i representative to the United Nations, stated that the situation with the rights of religious minorities in Iran is not improving. On the example of Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, who was a member of the Committee on Baha'i Affairs in the Iranian state, she showed which obstacles the Baha'i community meets in this Islamic country. Members of this religious group are often denied access to universities and job opportunities. Article 14 of Iran's Constitution guarantees justice, equity and respect for the human rights to non-Muslims. However, in practice their rights are violated. A detailed report on this issue was produced by the UN Office of the Baha'i International Community. Ms Vader also mentioned that the Baha'i are relieved to feel international support. They love Iran and do not want to leave it for other countries, they want to contribute to the development of the state and the nation, said Ms Vader. To make that possible, it is necessary to continue to exert pressure on the Iranian government and advocate for human rights protection.

Mr. Andrew Johnston of Christian Solidarity Worldwide introduced the representative of the Iranian Christian Fellowship, Mr. Mansour Borji who spoke of the increase in the number of human rights abuses since 2005, arrests and confiscations of property being among those. Military officers burst into Christians' houses, detained their owners and interrogated them for hours. Arrests usually involved coercing Christians to stop attending churches and abandon the Christian religion. Often people in prison were kept in solitary confinement, and security services used such abusive measures as sleep deprivation, family threats, prolonged beatings and psychological torture.

Hostile rhetoric and anti-Christian actions on the side of the Iranian authorities are especially noticeable in the issue of house churches. Their number has risen (the fact, which is condemned by the Iranian government) due to multiple limitations on church construction. The authorities even claimed that the spread of Christian house churches is "the strategy used by the enemies of Islam". The governor-general of Tehran publicly declared Christians "parasites" and a "false, deviant, and corrupt sect" and compared them to terrorists. Such statements, believes Mr Borji, cannot be ignored. The Christians are a small peaceful minority, he says, that does not threaten anyone. They are supportive of Muslims, but still they are marginalized in the society. Mr Borji stressed that the focus on Iranian nuclear policy should not take attention away from human rights issue in Iran. He regretfully admitted that the Christian religious group faces a choice of being either Christian or Iranian. "We are proud to be both," concluded Mr Mansour Borji, pointing out that Iran should meet its international obligations and ensure respect for religious freedom.

Ms. Barbara Lochbihler MEP then opened discussion to questions from the floor. The next meeting of the Delegation for Relations with Iran is scheduled on March 14, 2011 in Brussels.

---

## **Anti-Christian speeches in Iran led to crackdown, sources say**

### ***As many as 120 Christians arrested as government tries to stop house church movement***

By Damaris Kremida

Compass direct (01.02.2011) / HRWF (02.02.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Speeches by Iranian religious and political figures between August and October who acknowledged the existence of home fellowships and condemned them as a threat to the state triggered Iran's crackdown on Christians in the past few months, analysts said.

In the past few weeks, Iranian authorities have arrested more than 70 Christians after previous round-ups near Christmas, according to a report last week by Elam Ministries. With the release of seven Christians last week after they spent a month in solitary confinement, at least 26 Christians remain incarcerated. Sources said that with the arrests across the country continuing, the number of Christians detained since Christmas could be as high as 120.

Though authorities have released most of the Christians after interrogations, many of them are still in prison, especially house group leaders. Many released in the last month had to sign statements saying they would not attend church again.

Iranian leaders have described house churches as the work of the "enemy," analysts said. On Oct. 19, in Qom, Iran's religious center, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

said that Iran's enemies want to shake the country's religious and societal values through the spread of Baha'ism and a network of Christian house churches. Khamenei's speech marked the fifth public statement from an Iranian leader condemning Iranian Christians in the three-month period.

"The public statements show that the government acknowledges the presence of the church and considers it a threat," a regional analyst who requested anonymity told Compass. "It's striking they have been talking about it publicly in a way they haven't previously."

Sources told Compass that Iranian Christians belonging to house churches knew it was a matter of time before the security forces acted on the supreme leader's condemnation and tightened their grip on house church members.

"When the supreme leader comes out with a clear statement accusatory towards the church, he sends a clear message to security forces and commanders," the analyst said. "It's plausible that this starts a larger crackdown."

The analyst noted that those who tend to remain detained are the leaders of the groups. While in prison, many Christians undergo harsh treatment that may include solitary confinement, prolonged interrogation, threats and verbal insults, pressure to recant and beatings, according to the Elam report.

While persecution against Christians has intensified, it is believed to be part of a wider government campaign to crack down on any group the government considers threatening. The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran reported on Jan. 16 that since the beginning of the year, the government had executed 47 people in a two-week period. Thousands have been sentenced to death since elections in 2009.

"Yes, the pressure against Christians has increased, but the human rights violations against all opposition groups are intensifying," the analyst said. "We have to acknowledge the context."

The Elam report confirmed that Iranian authorities have arrested more than 200 Christians in 24 cities since June 2010.

The Iranian government is suspicious of Christian activities, which officials see as aiming to convert Muslims and acting as "possible footholds for foreign influence," reported The Associated Press last month.

Yousef Nadarkhani, a pastor from Rasht, was handed the death sentence for apostasy (leaving Islam) on Nov. 13, 2010. His lawyer has filed an appeal with the Supreme Court, and Nadarkhani is awaiting a trial date. Arrested in October 2009 and serving time in Lakan prison, Nadarkhani is married and has two young children.

None of the other Christians arrested since Christmas has been officially charged, but the analyst said it was clear that with the exception of Nadarkhani's case, the other arrests were imbued with a "political" tint.

On Jan. 4, the governor of Tehran, Morteza Tamadon, announced the arrest of Christians and called the evangelical movement in Iran "deviant," according to Elam. On the same day, the president of the Security Council for the province of Tehran said more arrests would follow. Both leaders blamed unidentified organizations in Britain for spreading Christianity.

Mohabat News, a Christian news agency focusing on Iran, reported that official government news and propaganda sites have accused Iranian Christians of collaborating with "illegal" foreign Christian organizations.

"This accusation seems strange when the government judicial authorities are yet to release the name of any such foreign organization and present credible evidence to prove such accusations," the agency stated.

The news agency described the recent wave of arrests as an attempt to destroy the house group movement in Iran. Recent reports by pro-government media in Iran claimed there were more than 200 house churches in Mashad, northeast of Tehran, the birthplace of Supreme Leader Khamenei, according to Mohabat News.

"These media sources, loyal to the government, accuse these home churches in the city of Mashad of being instruments of foreign powers in weakening the beliefs of Iranian youth," Mohabat reported.

Last week the agency reported that a new Christian in Keykavar, southwest of Tehran, was arrested on Jan. 11. Authorities questioned Ebrahim Firouzi, 26, on Jan. 8 and 9, both times releasing him. Local court authorities have demanded a bail of US\$40,000. His whereabouts and condition are unknown, according to Mohabat.

On Jan. 16, Mohabat also reported that a couple arrested on Dec. 27, 2010 was still in prison. Hassan and Parya Razavi Derakhshan, in their early 60s, were arrested in Mashad because they hosted Christian meetings in their home, according to the Iranian news agency.

The Christians released last week included four women who were confined at Tehran's Evin Prison; Sara Akhavan, Ladan Nouri, Nasrin Hosseini-nia and one identified only as Anahita were freed on bail on Saturday (Jan. 29) and can still be prosecuted, according to Elam. In Isfahan, three others were released on bail last week – Rafi Nadipoor, Basir Amini and Yasaman Yar-Ahmadi.

---

## **Iran bans "tight jeans", tattoos at some universities**

Reuters (10.01.2011) / HRWF (11.01.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Iran has enforced a stricter Islamic dress code at a number of universities including a ban on female students wearing bright clothes and having long nails or tattoos, a local news agency reported yesterday.

The semi-official Fars news agency published a list of universities around Iran that were given a note outlining the code but did not say on what basis they were selected.

The new rules ban women from "wearing caps or hats without scarves, tight and short jeans, and body piercing", except earrings, Fars said.

It said tattoos, long nails, tooth gems, tight overcoats and bright clothes were also banned.

Iran has been waging a country-wide campaign against western cultural influences. Under Islamic law imposed after the 1979 revolution, women have to cover their hair in public and wear long, loose-fitting clothes.

The new code also bans male students from dying their hair, plucking eyebrows, wearing tight clothes, shirts with "very short sleeves" and jewellery, Fars said. – (Reuters)

---