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Religious persecution in Iran

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The Islamic Republic of Iran is often in the news for its nuclear activities. Tehran also has a deteriorating human rights record.

The Islamic state is a particularly inhospitable home to religious minorities. The problem is getting worse as the presidential election approaches.

In February the U.N. released a highly critical 79-page assessment: "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran." The Special Rapporteur, Ahmed Shaheed, concluded "that there continues to be widespread systemic and systematic violations of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran."

Naturally, the government refused to cooperate. And the Special Rapporteur learned of intimidation and reprisals, when witnesses were tortured and threatened with death for reporting Tehran's abuses.

Explained the Special Rapporteur: "adherents of recognized and unrecognized religions face discrimination in law and/or in practice. This includes various levels of intimidation, arrest and detention. A number of interviewees maintained that they were repeatedly interrogated about their religious beliefs, and a majority of interviewees reported being charged with national security crimes and/or propaganda against the state for religious activities. Several interviewees reported that they were psychologically and physically tortured."

Iran's abuses go back to the 1979 Islamic revolution. Last year the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom noted that Iran was "a constitutional, theocratic republic that discriminates against its citizens on the basis of religion." The State Department's last International Religious Freedom Report, published in 2011, noted simply that "The constitution and other laws and policies do not protect religious freedom and in practice, the government severely restricted religious freedom."

Increasing political opposition to the regime has intensified religious persecution. Noted the USCIRF: "Since the disputed 2009 elections, religious freedom conditions in Iran 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 to dissent or express views perceived as threatening the legitimacy of the government."

Several religious minorities have been targeted by the regime. Baha's are not recognized by the Koran and are seen as apostates. Special Rapporteur Shaheed said "Baha's are the most persecuted religious minority in Iran."

Christians also are high on the regime's enemies list. Barnabas Aid reported that "Persecution against Christians has increased in Iran in recent years to a point not seen since the early days of the Islamic revolution." According to the Hudson Institute's Nina Shea, "over the past two years more than 300 Christians have been arrested and detained arbitrarily in Iran."

Two Christian ministers have become cause célèbre. Convert Youcef Nadarkhani was arrested in 2009, threatened with execution if he didn't recant his faith, and then sentenced to death. He was ultimately retried and acquitted, released, rearrested, and then again released earlier this year.

Rev. Saeed Abedini, a convert from Islam who became an American citizen in 2010, was arrested in 2005 for his work with underground evangelical congregations but released. Last year he returned to Iran to visit family and help build an orphanage and was arrested again. In January he was sentenced to eight years imprisonment – to be served at Evin Prison, noted for its brutal conditions – for threatening Iran's national security.

Iran's small Jewish community suffers through a public environment dominated by anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial. Zoroastrianism is Iran's oldest religion, but that has not insulated it from Islamic radicals. Although based on Shia Islam, Sufism, a more spiritual interpretation, also has come under great pressure from the Shia Islamic government. Sunni Muslims have been prevented from building their own mosque in Tehran and have been forcibly prevented from gathering for prayer in rented facilities.

The regime even targets lawyers who defend religious minorities. Last October human rights lawyer Mohammad Ali Dadkhah began serving a nine-year sentence in Evin prison.

The leverage of other nations over Iran is minimal. However, individuals, groups, and activists, especially those which have not been at the forefront of the campaign to sanction and even bomb Iran, should press the Iranian government and other entities, from media to business, and protest the manifold violations of human rights.

Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur, confirmed that public pressure works. In March he noted that "At least a dozen lives were saved because of the intervention of international opinion."

Iranians suffered under the Shah's rule for a quarter century before being liberated by the Iranian revolution. This, sadly, imposed an even more oppressive tyranny. The Iranian people are overdue for a revolution which truly liberates.

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