

The Current Situation

IN CONTRAST TO its campaign of outright killing, imprisonment, and torture of Bahá'ís during the 1980s, the Iranian government has in recent years focused largely on economic and social efforts to drive Bahá'ís from Iran and destroy their cultural and community life.

Such measures include on-going efforts to prevent Bahá'ís from receiving higher education, to deny them the means of economic livelihood, and to deprive them of the inspiration provided by their sacred and historic sites.

The government has also used arbitrary arrests and detentions and the continued confiscation of personal property to keep the community off balance. As well, the threat of imprisonment and execution implicitly remains.

Above all else, the Bahá'í community remains without fundamental religious freedoms accorded to it in international human rights documents that Iran has signed. These include the right of Bahá'ís to freely assemble, to choose their leadership, and to openly manifest their religion “in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”

Denial of Access to Education

The government's efforts to deny Bahá'í youth access to higher education perhaps most clearly demonstrate the lengths to which the Iranian government is willing to go in its campaign of quiet strangulation.

Shortly after the 1979 Islamic revolution, large numbers of Bahá'í youth and children were expelled from school. The expulsions were not systematic, focusing mainly on children who were most strongly identified as Bahá'ís, but they ranged across the entire education system, from primary, through secondary, to the college-level,

where the ban was virtually total.

In the 1990s, partly in response to international pressure, primary and secondary schoolchildren were allowed to re-enroll. However, the government has maintained the ban on the entry of Bahá'í youth into public and private institutions of higher education.

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The government has used a very simple mechanism to exclude Bahá'ís from higher education: it has simply required that everyone who takes the national university entrance examination declare their religion. And applicants who indicate other than one of the four officially recognized religions in Iran — Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism — are excluded.

One young Iranian Bahá'í explained it this way: “In Iran, you have to apply for an examination to go to college. If you are successful at your exam, you can go to university. There is a place [on the examination form] which asks, ‘What is your religion?’ It has items just for Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism. And all of us [the Bahá'í students], we didn't write anything at that place. On the left side I just wrote ‘Bahá'í.’ So they don't let us take that

examination. They didn't give us the entrance card to go to the examination hall. So we can't even take the exam."

Being denied access to higher education for years has had a demoralizing effect on Bahá'í youth, and the erosion of the educational level of the community is clearly aimed at hastening its impoverishment. The Bahá'í Faith places a high value on education, and Bahá'ís have always been among the best-educated groups in Iran.

In the late 1980s, Bahá'í sought to mitigate the effects of the ban by establishing their own

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institution of higher education. Known as the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), the Institute offered classes in private homes throughout the country, augmented by a scattering of specialized classrooms, laboratories and libraries. At its peak, the Institute enrolled more than 900 students. [See *"The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education,"* page 19.]

The Institute, however, was in large part shut down in 1998 when agents of the government staged a series of raids, arresting at least 36 members of the BIHE's faculty and staff and confiscating much of its equipment and records.

The raids on the Institute, however, drew considerable international attention to the govern-

ment's oppressive policies. Human rights organs at the United Nations called for an end to religious discrimination against Bahá'í students, and various governments have pressed Iran to allow Bahá'ís back into university.

Apparently in response to this pressure, the government officially announced in late 2003 that it would drop the declaration of religious affiliation on the application for the national university entrance examination.

This, Bahá'í youth believed at the time, cleared the way for them to take the examination and to enroll in university in the fall of 2004.

The removal of the data field asking for religious affiliation was critical to Bahá'í youth who sought to enter university. The government had always said that if Bahá'ís simply declare themselves as Muslims, they would be allowed to enroll. But for Bahá'ís, who as a matter of religious principle refuse to lie or dissimulate about their belief, even pretending to be a Muslim for the sake of going to university was unthinkable.

False Promises

With the promise that religious affiliation would not matter, about 1,000 Bahá'ís accordingly signed up for and took university entrance examinations in 2004. And, indeed, no field declaring religion was on the papers.

Students were asked to take a religious subject examination, however. It came as part of the whole range of subject tests relating to mathematics, language, history, and so on. The religion tests were offered in four subjects, Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism, corresponding to the four recognized religions in Iran.

Most Bahá'í students opted for the Islamic subject test since, as the majority religion, Islam is taught in all schools and most Bahá'ís accordingly have a solid familiarity with its teachings.

In August, however, when the examination results were mailed out, government authorities had printed the word "Islam" in a data field listing a prospective student's religion.

“This duplicity astounded the Bahá’í community,” the Bahá’í community of Iran wrote in a letter to Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, referring to the incident. “Alas, the joyful news that the question about the religion of the applicants had been omitted from the national university entrance examination...was quite short-lived.”

When confronted by Bahá’ís, officials cyni-

cally explained they did that on the assumption that choosing to take the subject test on Islam amounts to a de facto declaration of faith in Islam.

The government’s intentions were further revealed when a group of Bahá’í students complained to officials at the national Educational Measurement and Evaluation Organization

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Iran’s Secret Blueprint for Repression

“**T**HEY MUST BE expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá’ís.”

Iran’s efforts to deny Bahá’ís access to higher education must be seen in the context of an overall effort by the government to destroy the Bahá’í community as a cohesive entity.

This effort was outlined in a secret memorandum, written in 1991 and unearthed in 1993, that established a national policy aimed at the quiet strangulation of the Bahá’í community.

Its measures essentially dictate that Bahá’ís should be kept illiterate and uneducated, living only at a subsistence level, and fearful at every moment that even the tiniest infraction will bring the threat of imprisonment or worse.

The memorandum clearly seeks to shift tactics from overt persecution, such as killing, torture and imprisonment, to the kind of covert social, economic, and cultural restrictions that would be thought less likely to bring intense international scrutiny and condemnation.

The memorandum was drawn up by the Iranian Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council (ISRCC) at the request of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the then President of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Stamped “confidential,” it was signed by Hujjatu’l Islam Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani, Secretary of the Council, and approved by Mr. Khamenei, who added his signature to the document.

Its central focus is a call for Iran’s Bahá’ís to be treated in such a way “that their progress and development shall be blocked.”

To accomplish this, the memorandum specifies that Bahá’ís should be denied “positions of influence,” and instead only be allowed to “lead a modest life similar to that of the population in general”; and even that “employment shall be refused to persons identifying themselves as Bahá’ís.”

In terms of education, the memorandum states that Bahá’ís “must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá’ís.”

The memorandum further directs that Bahá’ís will be allowed to go to school only if they do not identify themselves as Bahá’ís, and that they should be sent to schools “with a strong religious ideology,” aiming clearly at wresting Bahá’í children from their faith.

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THE ISRCC DOCUMENT

[Translation from Persian]
[Text in square brackets added by translator]

In the Name of God!
The Islamic Republic of Iran
The Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council
Number: 1327/....
Date: 6/12/69 [25 February 1991]
Enclosure: None

CONFIDENTIAL

Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani
Head of the Office of the Esteemed Leader [Khamenei]

Greetings!

After greetings, with reference to the letter #1/783 dated 10/10/69 [31 December 1990], concerning the instructions of the Esteemed Leader which had been conveyed to the Respected President regarding the Bahá'í question, we inform you that, since the respected President and the Head of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council had referred this question to this Council for consideration and study, it was placed on the Council's agenda of session #128 on 16/11/69 [5 February 1991] and session #119 of 2/11/69 [22 January 1991]. In addition to the above, and further to the [results of the] discussions held in this regard in session #112 of 2/5/66 [24 July 1987] presided over by the Esteemed Leader (head and member of the Supreme Council), the recent views and directives given by the Esteemed Leader regarding the Bahá'í question were conveyed to the Supreme Council. In consideration of the contents of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as the religious and civil laws and general policies of the country, these matters were carefully studied and decisions pronounced.

In arriving at the decisions and proposing reasonable ways to counter the above question, due consideration was given to the wishes of the Esteemed Leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran [Khamenei], namely, that "in this regard a specific policy should be devised in such a way that everyone will understand what should or should not be done." Consequently, the following proposals and recommendations resulted from these discussions.

The respected President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as the Head of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, while approving these recommendations, instructed us to convey them to the Esteemed Leader [Khamenei] so that appropriate action may be taken according to his guidance.

SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS OF THE DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

- A. General status of the Bahá'ís within the country's system
1. They will not be expelled from the country without reason.
 2. They will not be arrested, imprisoned, or penalized without reason.
 3. The government's dealings with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked.
- B. Educational and cultural status
1. They can be enrolled in schools provided they have not identified themselves as Bahá'ís.
 2. Preferably, they should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing religious ideology.
 3. They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís.
 4. Their political (espionage) activities must be dealt with according to appropriate government laws and policies, and their religious and propaganda activities should be answered by giving them religious and cultural responses, as well as propaganda.
 5. Propaganda institutions (such as the Islamic Propaganda Organization) must establish an independent section to counter the propaganda and religious activities of the Bahá'ís.
 6. A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country.
- C. Legal and social status
1. Permit them a modest livelihood as is available to the general population.
 2. To the extent that it does not encourage them to be Bahá'ís, it is permissible to provide them the means for ordinary living in accordance with the general rights given to every Iranian citizen, such as ration booklets, passports, burial certificates, work permits, etc.
 3. Deny them employment if they identify themselves as Bahá'ís.
 4. Deny them any position of influence, such as in the educational sector, etc.

Wishing you divine confirmations,
Secretary of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council
Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani

[Signature]

[Note in the handwriting of Mr. Khamenei]

In the Name of God!

The decision of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council seems sufficient.
I thank you gentlemen for your attention and efforts.

(EMEO), asking if they could return the exam results with corrected information. A footnote in the letter conveying examination results said that incorrect names and addresses could and should be corrected and returned.

However, no mention was made about correcting religious information. Indeed, Bahá'ís were told by EMEO officials that “incorrect religion would not be corrected” on the forms since the Bahá'í Faith is not among the officially recognized religions in Iran.

Shortly after that meeting, Bahá'í students wrote a letter of protest to the EMEO. The students expressed, clearly, their objection to having been designated as Muslims after having been promised that they would not have to state their religion in order to take the entrance examination.

At first, EMEO officials seemed to sympathize with their problem, even allowing Bahá'ís to fill out revised registration forms with no religious affiliation.

“Another glimmer of hope was thus kindled in the hearts of the Bahá'í youth, who immediately proceeded to meet with the authorities in order to choose their fields of study,” wrote the Bahá'í community of Iran in its letter to President Khatami.

However, even though some 800 Bahá'í students who had passed their examinations also met the new deadline for submission of the revised forms, only ten names were published in an EMEO bulletin on 12 September 2004 announcing which students had been admitted to university.

It's worth noting also that many Bahá'ís received high scores on the examinations, and, in fact, many of them were passed over in the admission process, while many lower-scoring Muslim students were accepted.

In the end, out of solidarity with the rest of the 800 students who had been unfairly discriminated against, those ten Bahá'ís declined to register in the universities to which they had been

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accepted. And so, for the school year 2004–2005, Bahá'í young people were once again utterly deprived of access to higher education.

The Iranian government has continued to pursue its strange game for the 2005–2006 school year. By mid-August 2005, hundreds of Bahá'ís had received their university entrance examination results. And once again, the government had falsely printed the word “Islam” as the religious identification for the Bahá'í students.

For Bahá'ís, the entire process is cynically calculated to accomplish a number of government objectives. First, it apparently seeks to demoralize Iranian Bahá'í youth in an effort to induce them to leave the country. Second, it allowed Iranian authorities to identify by name those Bahá'ís with outstanding academic ability, who might at some point play a role in helping to revive the Bahá'í community's fortunes. Third, it allowed the Iranian government to say to international human rights monitors that they had given the Bahá'ís a chance to enroll — and that it was the Bahá'ís themselves who refused the opportunity.

Yet the government, of course, has long been aware that Bahá'ís cannot and will not as a matter of religious principle falsify or misrepresent their beliefs. Without doubt, then, Iran's actions amount to nothing less than government sponsored policy aimed at denying an entire generation of Bahá'ís their right to higher education.