

The Historical Background to Bahá'í Persecutions in Iran

THE PRESENT DAY status of human rights and social reform in the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be adequately understood without taking into account the historical background of persecution against the Bahá'í community — a history that does much to explain the cultural crisis gripping Iranian society today as its leadership struggles to face the challenge of modernity.

The Bahá'í Faith has been persecuted in Iran since its founding there in the mid-1800s. Early followers faced violent opposition from both the Islamic religious authorities and succeed-

A Bahá'í father and son (at left) in chains after being arrested with fellow Bahá'ís, in a photograph taken around 1896. Both were subsequently executed.

The idea that there should be Messengers of God after Muhammad is viewed by many Muslims as heresy — and is one of the underlying theological reasons for the persecution of Bahá'ís.

ing dynasties. It has been estimated that some 20,000 persons perished in these pogroms during the nineteenth century.

The persecutions continued intermittently in the twentieth century, coinciding most often with the need of the government to shore up support with certain elements of Iran's Islamic





*Muna
Mahmudnizhad*



*Mabshid
Nirumand*



*Simin
Sabiri*



*Zarrin
Muqimi-Abyanib*



*Akhtar
Thabit*

Hanged for Teaching “Sunday School”

FEW INCIDENTS ARE more shocking — or revealing of the religious basis of the persecution against Bahá’ís and the courage with which they faced it — than the group hanging of ten Bahá’í women in Shiraz on 18 June 1983.

Their crime: teaching religious classes to Bahá’í youth — the equivalent of being “Sunday school” teachers in the West.

Ranging in age from 17 to 57, the ten Bahá’í women were led to the gallows in succession. Authorities apparently hoped that as each saw the others slowly strangle to death, they would renounce their own faith.

But according to eyewitness reports, the women went to their fate singing and chanting, as though they were enjoying a pleasant outing.

One of the men attending the gallows confided to a Bahá’í: “We tried saving their lives up to the last moment, but one by one, first the older ladies, then the young girls, were hanged while the others were forced to watch, it being hoped that this might induce them to recant their belief. We even urged them to say they were not Bahá’ís, but not one of them agreed; they preferred the execution.”

All of the women had been interrogated and tortured in the months leading up to their execution. Indeed, some had wounds still visible on their bodies as they lay in the morgue after their execution.

The youngest of these martyrs was Muna Mahmudnizhad, a 17-year-old schoolgirl who because of her youth and conspicuous innocence became, in a sense, a symbol of the group. In prison, she was lashed on the soles of her feet with a cable and forced to walk on bleeding feet.

leadership. And they have come regardless of the leaders’ political orientation.

Some of the outbreaks against Bahá’ís were directed by local or regional authorities. In 1903, for example, 101 Bahá’ís were killed in the city of Yazd after the populace was incited by hostile mullahs. At other times the oppression of Bahá’ís

was made a part of official national policy. During the early years of the Pahlavi Regime (1927 to 1979), the government formalized a policy of discrimination against the Bahá’ís as a concession to the clergy. Beginning in 1933, Bahá’í literature was banned, Bahá’í marriages were not recognized, and Bahá’ís in public service were



*Shabin (Shirin)
Dalvand*



*Ruya
Ishraqi*



*Izzat Ishraqi
(Janami)*



*Tabirib
Siyavushi*



*Nusrat
Yalda'i*

Yet she never wavered in her faith, even to the point of kissing the hands of her executioner, and then the rope, before putting it around her own throat.

Another young woman, Zarrin Muqimi-Abyanhi, 28, told the interrogators whose

***“Whether you accept it or not,
I am a Bahá’í. You cannot take
it away from me. I am a Bahá’í
with my whole being and my
whole heart.”***

chief goal was to have her disavow her faith: “Whether you accept it or not, I am a Bahá’í. You cannot take it away from me. I am a Bahá’í with my whole being and my whole heart.”

During the trial of another of the

women, Ruya Ishraqi, a 23-year-old veterinary student, the judge said: “You put yourselves through this agony only for one word: just say you are not a Bahá’í and I’ll see that...you are released...” Miss Ishraqi responded: “I will not exchange my faith for the whole world.”

The other women hanged on 18 June 1983 were Shabin Dalvand, 25, a sociologist; Izzat Janami Ishraqi, 57, a homemaker; Mahshid Nirumand, 28, who had qualified for a degree in physics but had it denied her because she was a Bahá’í; Simin Sabiri, 25; Tahirih Arjumandi Siyavushi, 30, a nurse; Akhtar Thabit, 25, also a nurse; Nusrat Ghufrani Yalda’i, 47, a mother and member of the local Bahá’í Spiritual Assembly.

All had seen it as their duty to teach Bahá’í religious classes — especially since the government had barred Bahá’í children from attending regular school.

demoted or fired. Eventually, Bahá’í schools were closed.

Another round of persecutions commenced in 1955, when the Pahlavi regime allowed the nationwide broadcast of a series of incendiary sermons against the Bahá’ís by a leading Shia preacher in Tehran — apparently hoping to make the Bahá’ís

a scapegoat to deflect attention from unpopular government policies. Both the national and army radio stations were put at the disposal of the responsible cleric, Sheikh Muhammad Taqi Falsafi, who joined the Shah’s Minister of Defense, General Batmangelich, in demolishing the dome of Bahá’í national headquarters with pickaxes. A

wave of anti-Bahá'í violence swept the country. Murders, rapes and robberies were reported in many areas, while the government assured the Majlis that it had ordered the suppression of all activities of "the Bahá'í sect."

Bahá'ís understand that this pattern of persecution is a manifestation of the misunderstanding and fear that often occur when a new religion emerges from the matrix of a well-established orthodoxy. The pattern has been repeated through the ages; virtually all of the world's great religions have faced intense persecution at their birth.

In the case of the Bahá'í Faith, the teachings of its two Founders, especially when viewed through the lens of traditional Islam, are as challenging to the religious orthodoxy as those of any Prophet in ancient times.

The initial wave of persecution came in response to the claims of a young Iranian

merchant, known to history as the Báb, who announced in Shiraz in May 1844 that He was the bearer of a new revelation from God. His primary mission, the Báb said, was to prepare humanity for the advent of "Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest," the universal divine Messenger anticipated in the scriptures of all the major religions.

The teachings of the Báb called for the spiritual and moral reformation of Persian society, and for the upliftment of the station of women and the poor. His promotion of education and the useful sciences was also revolutionary. Such progressive and idealistic teachings, which made a clear break with the Islamic frame of reference, were rapidly embraced by thousands of followers and were seen by both secular and religious authorities as a threat to their power. Widespread persecutions followed, and, as noted above, several thousand followers, who were known as

The House of the Báb in Shiraz, one of the most holy sites in the Bahá'í world, was destroyed by Revolutionary Guardsman in 1979 and later razed by the government.





Destruction of the National Bahá'í Center in Tehran, Iran, circa 1955.

Bábís, paid with their lives. The Báb Himself was executed by the government in 1850.

Among the followers of the Báb was an Iranian nobleman named Bahá'u'lláh. In 1863 He announced that He was the Messenger the Báb had heralded, founding the Bahá'í Faith. The central theme of Bahá'u'lláh's message is that humanity is a single race and that the day has come for unification into one global society. "The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens," wrote Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh taught that there is only one God, and that all of the world's religions are expressions of a single, unfolding divine plan, "the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future."

Bahá'ís believe that God progressively reveals religious truth to humanity through a series of divine Messengers, each of Whom has founded a great religion. These Messengers have included Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha,

Jesus and Muhammad; the most recent are the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Others will follow in ages to come.

The idea that there should be Messengers of God after Muhammad is viewed by many Muslims as heresy. In the Qur'an, Muhammad referred to Himself as the "Seal of the Prophets," and most Muslim scholars interpret this to mean that He would be the last Messenger of God.

Bahá'ís, however, believe that the coming of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh poses no contradiction to Islamic teachings or those of any of the other revealed religions. Bahá'ís understand that Muhammad ended or "sealed" the prophetic cycle. Then, with the advent of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, a new era of religious fulfillment began. Bahá'u'lláh referred to this new period in human history as the "stage of maturity." Bahá'ís believe that this is all in accordance with the prophecies of Islam and the world's other major religions.

The persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran is not related to any underlying issue of ethnicity or political agenda. Only their religious beliefs distinguish them from their fellow countrymen — beliefs which the Bahá'í teachings forbid them from imposing on others.

Other aspects of the Bahá'í teachings also arouse opposition among some followers of Islam. In outlining His vision for a new world civilization, Bahá'u'lláh advocated a series of highly progressive social principles. These include the elimination of all forms of prejudice; equality between the sexes; recognition of the essential oneness of the world's great religions; the elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth; universal education; the harmony of science and religion; a sustainable balance between human society and the natural world; and the establishment of a world federal system, based on collective security and the oneness of humanity.

Some fundamentalist Muslims view the progressive nature of these teachings, such as the equality of women and the absence of religious clergy, as especially antithetical to the traditions

of Islam. To Iran's Shia establishment, especially — indeed to many among their Sunni Muslim counterparts — the emergence of an independent religion that postdates the Qur'an by almost thirteen centuries is not only theologically abhorrent but threatens the system of patronage, endowments, political influence, and social perquisites to which they lay claim. The effect has been to arouse in the Shia establishment a determination to extinguish the new faith and suppress its followers.

The persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran is not related to any underlying issue of ethnicity or political agenda. The overwhelming majority of Iranian Bahá'ís come from the same diverse ethnic stocks as the rest of the population, and they represent a cross section of Iran's social classes.

Only their religious beliefs distinguish them from their fellow countrymen — beliefs which the Bahá'í teachings forbid them from imposing on others. Paradoxically, because of the control exercised by the Islamic clergy over the communications media, the nature of Bahá'í beliefs remains virtually unknown to a public that has been systematically taught to fear and hate them.

The Iranian Bahá'í community has itself consistently been denied the use of any means of mass communication, including radio, television, newspapers, films, the distribution of literature and public lectures. The result has been widespread, unreasoning prejudice.