

Bahá'í Persecutions Beyond Education

SINCE THE ESTABLISHMENT of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the government of Iran has waged a systematic campaign of persecution and oppression aimed at the Bahá'í community of Iran. Its reaches have extended far beyond exclusion from education.

This campaign, which has been based solely on religious prejudice and can be seen as nothing less than an attempt to eradicate the Bahá'í community from Iranian life, began with a series of measures that directly threatened the lives, freedom, and economic livelihood of Iran's Bahá'í community.

Between 1979 and 1998, more than 200 Bahá'ís were killed or executed, hundreds more were wrongfully imprisoned, and thousands were fired from government jobs, had businesses closed, and were denied pensions. Bahá'í holy places were destroyed, cemeteries were razed, and the freedom of Bahá'ís to assemble, choose their leadership, and worship as they chose was abrogated.

Even before the Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile to assume power in February of that

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year, an increase in attacks on Bahá'ís presaged the wholesale persecution that was to come. In 1978 at least seven Bahá'ís were killed, most as a result of mob violence.

When the Republic's new constitution was drawn up in April 1979, certain rights of the Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian minorities in Iran were specifically mentioned and protected. However, no mention whatsoever was made of the rights of the Bahá'í community, Iran's largest religious minority.



After the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian government sought to destroy the Bahá'í leadership. In August 1980, the entire membership of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran, shown here, “disappeared.” All are presumed to have been killed.

Under Iran's concept of an Islamic government, this exclusion has come to mean that Bahá'ís enjoy no rights of any sort, and that they can be attacked and persecuted with impunity. Courts in the Republic have denied Bahá'ís the right of redress or protection against assault, killings or other forms of persecution — and have ruled that Iranian citizens who kill or injure Bahá'ís are not liable for damages because their victims are “unprotected infidels.”

Without any claim to civil rights, the Bahá'í community saw rapid deterioration of its position within Iranian society. In March 1979, the House of the Báb, the holiest Bahá'í shrine in Iran, was turned over by the government to a Muslim cleric known for his anti-Bahá'í activities. In September, the House was destroyed by a mob led by mullahs and officials of the Department of Religious Affairs.

A November 1979 edict from the Ministry of Education required not only the dismissal of all Bahá'í teachers, but also held them responsible for the repayment of all salaries they had previously received.

At least seven Bahá'ís were killed in 1979. Two were executed by the government and one was hanged in prison. Others were beaten to death or killed in local incidents.

In 1980 at least 24 Bahá'ís were killed in Iran; 20 were executed by the government and the rest were stoned, assassinated or burned to death. In 1981, 48 Bahá'ís were killed or executed.

Significantly, the government targeted the members of elected Bahá'í leadership councils for execution or assassination during this period. Nearly half of the 200 Bahá'ís executed in Iran since 1979 have been members of national and local governing councils of the Bahá'í community, known as Spiritual Assemblies.

Executions continued apace through 1982, 1983 and 1984. At least 32 Bahá'ís were executed or killed in 1982, 29 were executed or killed in 1983, and 30 were executed or killed in 1984. And, again, the targets of these executions were often members of Bahá'í governing councils.

The torture of Bahá'ís in Iranian prisons — and particularly of those who had been members of Bahá'í governing councils — was routine and systematic. Again, according to Bahá'ís who survived, the purpose of the torture almost invariably was to make the Bahá'ís recant their Faith or confess to some treasonous activity.

Four members of the National Spiritual Assembly, which had once again been courageously re-established through fresh elections, were executed in 1984, although by then the institution had been disbanded in accordance with a government decree and the individuals held no official position in the Bahá'í community.

One of the most dramatic groups of executions came in June 1983, when ten Iranian Bahá'í women, including two teen-age girls, were hanged. The primary charge against them: teaching Bahá'í children's classes. [See “Hanged for teaching ‘Sunday School’” page 30]

The women were subjected to intense physical and mental abuse in an effort to coerce them to recant their Faith — an option that was almost always pressed upon Bahá'í prisoners. Yet, like nearly all Bahá'ís who have been arrested in Iran, they refused to deny their beliefs. Nevertheless, the fact that so many Bahá'ís were given the option of recanting, with the promise of release if they did so, is among the strongest proofs that the persecutions were based solely on religious beliefs.

Imprisonment and Torture

Since 1979, nearly 1,000 Bahá'ís have been arrested and imprisoned. At one point in 1986, some 747 Bahá'ís were being held in prisons throughout



A woman from Kata, murdered by a mob in 1979, shown with her two younger sisters.

Iran. In most cases, they had no trials.

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Torture included sustained beating and flogging, the bastinado (whipping the soles of the feet), the pulling out of fingernails and teeth, and the deprivation of food and water for days at a time.

Bahá'ís were also subjected to psychological torture, including mock executions and being forced to witness the torture of family members and friends.

Thus an elderly Bahá'í woman, who was a member of a local Bahá'í council, was tortured in front of a dozen other Bahá'ís in an effort to persuade her and them to deny their Faith. The woman's jailer took her by her hair and continually banged her head against the wall. She was beaten about the head for a long time, until her body was covered with blood. After two years of imprisonment, she was summarily released, with no recourse against the abuse she had received.

At least 13 Bahá'ís who died in prison are believed to have been tortured to death. In these

cases, the bodies were buried by the authorities before the families could view them.

Social and Economic Intimidation

In addition to killings and imprisonment, the authorities have also conducted a campaign of economic, social and cultural intimidation against the Bahá'í community of Iran. The objective, it is clear, has been to deprive Bahá'ís of their rights to education, to jobs and to homes of their own — with the intention of forcing them to recant.

In 1979 the government started dismissing all Bahá'í civil servants without compensation. By July 1982, all Bahá'í public servants had been dismissed and the pensions of all retired Bahá'í civil servants had been terminated.

In late 1984, the Attorney General started issuing summonses demanding that all those Bahá'í civil servants who had been dismissed repay salaries they had received during their employment. They were threatened with imprisonment if they did not comply. Obviously, repayment of a lifetime's wages was beyond the means of most victims. Many were imprisoned as a result of failure to meet this absurd demand.

The government has also systematically sought to drive Bahá'ís in the private sector to economic ruin. In the early 1980s, the trading licenses of most Bahá'í businessmen were revoked, the assets of businesses run by Bahá'ís were confiscated, and bank accounts of most Bahá'í businessmen were frozen. In addition, the authorities intimidated private employers into dismissing many Bahá'í employees.

Almost every dismissal notice served on a Bahá'í employee, whether in the public or the private sector, stated that the reason for dismissal was membership in the Bahá'í Faith and that the individual's job would be restored if he or she would recant his or her faith.

Two recent court cases, for example, demonstrate the efforts of the authorities to impede Bahá'ís from conducting private business activities.

In the destruction of Bahá'í holy places, the Iranian government also demonstrates the lengths to which it will go to suffocate the Bahá'í community and to cleanse its culture from modern memory — even though it may mean destroying monuments and buildings of historic importance to the society at large.

In September 2003, Branch 13 of the Tribunal of Administrative Justice rejected an appeal by a Bahá'í businessman against an injunction that required him to cease his business operations. The court also rejected his petition to obtain a business license. The tribunal held that his appeal was “disqualified as irrelevant, as [it was] outside the scope of the applicable regulations”, citing the information the court had “about the plaintiff’s being associated with the perverse Bahá'í sect.”

In 2003, in a second, similar case, an administrative injunction was issued to impede a Bahá'í-owned company in Isfahan from doing business. The company is owned and directed by a Bahá'í engineer and employs some 120 staff — most of whom are Bahá'ís — manufacturing electrical and communication cables. In the injunction, the Director-General of the Central Office of Protection, which is under the Iranian Ministry of Post, Telegraph and Telephone, informed the company of an official memorandum issued in April 2003. The document concluded that “the link between the... company... and the perverse Bahá'í sect is established to be true; therefore it is advisable to adopt measures to prevent any collaboration with the above-mentioned company”.

In addition to depriving Bahá'ís of a livelihood, the government in the early 1980s sought to deprive arrested Bahá'ís of many of their pos-

sessions, including their homes. Over the years hundreds of Bahá'í properties have been confiscated, a practice that continues.

In October 2004, for example, the homes of six Bahá'í families in the village of Kata (in the Buyir-Ahmad region of Iran) were confiscated on the order of the prosecutor of the city of Shiraz, with the assistance of the local police.

In virtually every case, court judgments or documents have emerged that prove the properties were confiscated because the owners were Bahá'ís.

Destruction of Holy Places

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In June 2004, authorities demolished an historic house in Tehran that had been designed and owned by Mirza Abbas Nuri, the father of Bahá'u'lláh. The house was not only significant to Bahá'ís but was also considered to be a sterling example of period architecture of historic importance to Iranian culture.

Mirza Abbas Nuri himself was widely regarded as one of Iran’s greatest calligraphers and statesmen. In July 2004, the Iranian newspaper *Hamshabri* published a lengthy article about his life and the architecture of his house.

“As he had good taste for the arts and for beauty, he designed his own house in such a style that it became known as one of the most beautiful houses of that period,” wrote Iman Mihdizadieh in *Hamshabri* on 13 July 2004. “The plasterwork and the tile-work in the rooms as well as the verdant veranda, the courtyard with its central pool, and the trees planted in the flowerbeds, all created a tranquil atmosphere in this house.”

The destruction of the house of Mirza Abbas Nuri followed the razing in April 2004 of



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In June 2004, the house of Bahá'u'lláh's father, Mirza Abbas Nuri, was likewise destroyed, despite being a treasured example of Islamic-Iranian architecture.

Over the years, as well, in Tehran and other cities throughout Iran, Bahá'í buildings have been looted and burned, Bahá'í cemeteries have been bulldozed and Bahá'í graves have been broken open. In the Tehran area, the Bahá'ís were forced to bury their dead in a barren stretch of land reserved by the authorities for "infidels." Having access to their own cemeteries is especially important to Bahá'ís because, as might be expected, they are not allowed to bury their dead in Muslim cemeteries.

another historic Bahá'í property, the gravesite of Quddus, an historic figure of the Bahá'í Faith. The action came after demolition work started in February that year and then halted temporarily in the face of protest at the local, national, and international levels.

The house-like structure marked the resting place of Mullah Muhammad-Ali Barfurushi, known as Quddus (The Most Holy). Quddus was the foremost disciple of the Báb, the Prophet-Herald of the Bahá'í Faith.

The destruction of two such important holy sites in 2004 was not without precedent. As noted, the House of the Báb, the holiest Bahá'í shrine in Iran, was destroyed in 1979. The House of Bahá'u'lláh in Takur, where the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith spent His childhood, was also demolished shortly after the Islamic revolution and the site was offered for sale to the public.

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Arbitrary Arrests and Harassment

Beyond such specific efforts at cultural cleansing, the government has in recent years continued its policy of keeping the Bahá'í community off balance through various measures, including arbitrary arrests, short term detention, persistent harassment, and other forms of intimidation and discrimination. Indeed, there has been a recent wave of arbitrary arrests and detentions, raising concerns that the government may be preparing overall for a new round of persecutions.

In March, April and May of 2005 some 35 Bahá'ís in cities and towns across Iran were arrested and held for short periods, ranging from a week to nearly three months. One remains in prison. Those arrested included not only prominent members of the community in Tehran, but also six Bahá'ís in Shiraz, nine in the city of Semnan, and nine Bahá'í farmers whose homes and land had previously been confiscated in the village of Kata.

Most were arbitrarily detained without any charge being filed against them. Some of the prisoners were held incommunicado, in unknown locations, while their families desperately searched for them. Most were released only after having posted significant amounts of money, property deeds, or business licenses as bail.

Moreover, government agents conducted prolonged searches of many of the homes of those

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who were arrested, confiscating documents, books, computers, copiers, and other belongings.

Also recently in the city of Yazd, long a center of anti-Bahá'í activities, it appears that the police chief orchestrated a series of incidents against Bahá'ís. In late 2004 and early 2005, a number of Bahá'ís were arrested, detained, and interrogated; several were beaten in their homes; at least one Bahá'í-owned business was set afire; and the Bahá'í graveyard was desecrated.

Such incidents are hardly isolated. In 2003, for example, 23 Bahá'ís in 18 different localities in Iran were subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention for short periods of time. In all cases, Iranian authorities summoned these people because they were Bahá'ís, questioned them about their beliefs, and then released them.

In 2002, 17 Bahá'í youth who were participating in a camp were arrested and detained for questioning. Reports about this incident in the Iranian press carried a negative slant, referring to the young Bahá'ís in a derogatory and vulgar manner.