

Collective persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, AUG 24 2010

Children weeping as the bulldozers come to demolish their homes turning them into twisted metal and concrete piles, adults standing watching their lives being crushed. Is this taking place in Gaza ? Or Harare ? No, this is in Lvel, in the north of Iran.

As international criticism increases over the violation of human rights, the Islamic Republic intensifies its collective persecution of thousands of Baha'is in Iran. There are about 300,000 Baha'is living in Iran, which is the birthplace of their faith. Although, the regime tolerates the so-called "People of the Book" – Jews and Christians – it is extremely antagonistic towards Baháism. The Baha'is are facing systematic discrimination by the state and most of their civil rights are denied. On a daily basis Baha'is are suffering challenges for their beliefs almost from every direction. They have no political and legal representation and they never can be employed by the state. They cannot participate in any major economic transactions and their financial lives are confined. Baha'is are prevented from going to university and their socio-cultural activities are restricted. In the early days of the Islamic State, all of their holy sites were demolished, some of their houses set on fire while hundreds faced execution and imprisonment.

Since President Ahmadinejad came to power in 2006, the situation has worsened for the Baha'i community in Iran. Recently, more shocking news surfaced about the demolition of Baha'i houses in the village of Lvel in the province of Mazandran in the north of Iran. But this was not an isolated event. In 2007, six Baha'i houses were set on fire and more recently, almost 50 houses have been demolished.

The Islamic Republic regards itself as the champion of "Islamic Justice" and a "model of democracy" in the region and lectures the world about the demolition of Palestinian houses by the state of Israel. Yet, in practice it does the same to its own citizens. A regime, which makes political capital out of the Palestinian plight persecutes its own people and deprives them from home and shelter only because of what they have chosen to believe.

More recently, seven Baha'i leaders who have been in custody since 2008 were sentenced for twenty years of imprisonment, accused of acting against Iran's "national security". Many international organizations and governments have questioned the verdict and criticize the lack of due process.

When it comes to Iranian politics, we hear much of the notion of "national security". However, no one seems to know what this means and where it is likely to be applied. Day after day, people with different religious or political orientations are persecuted in the name of "national security". In Iran, this abstract and yet familiar notion is becoming a standard mechanism for silencing any form of nonconformity. As I write this commentary, there are thousands of people from all walks of life in notorious Iranian political prisons accused of breaching "national security".

Of course, Iran is not the only country in the region to violate human rights using the same pretext. Authoritarian states may differ on many grounds such as ideology and power structures, but when it comes to the issue of "national security", suddenly they all have a lot in common. They all use it to homogenize their political landscape and as their justification for the monopoly of power. Nonetheless, these charges against the Baha'i community remain unsubstantiated.

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So why are they persecuted? The answer is quite simple. The Shiite clergy has been historically hostile towards the Baha'is because their belief questions the 'finality' of Islam. Baha'is believe that all previous religions including Islam are from the same source and are in essence successive chapters of one religion from God. Hence, they believe the Baha'i faith, which emerged in 19th century, is the 'latest' manifestation of 'the truth'. As Islam also claims to be the 'final truth', some clerical authorities have always been deeply hostile to the Baha'i community.

This incompatibility of narratives goes hand in hand with a deep suspicion of the Iranian clergy about outside forces. Even before the revolution, many clerics preached that the Baha'i faith is nothing more than a mere construction by "the old fox of imperialism", Britain. They alleged that the British Empire, which thrived on the notion of divide and rule created this religion to weaken the sense of unity in the Islamic Umma. After the revolution, this antagonistic view became an integral part of the state discourse.

Following that conspiratorial view of the Baha'i faith, the Islamic Republic believes that Baha'is continuously use the British media to undermine the Islamic authority in Iran. The regime is highly suspicious of the BBC and believes that it played a crucial role in mobilizing the protests against the regime which took place last year after the presidential election. They believe that the Persian BBC is designed to serve the Baha'i agenda. Hadad Adel a former speaker of the Majles and a close follower of the Supreme Leader, publicly dubbed the BBC the "Baha'i Broadcasting Company". These historical conspiracy theories continually overshadow the Baha'i community and the state actively promotes these ideas to demonize Baha'is and legitimize their collective persecution.

As if the British conspiracy theories were not enough, the regime also associates the Baha'i faith with the world of Zionism. The Islamic Republic makes this connection because the headquarters and many religious sites belonging to Baháism are located in Haifa and Acre. When the founder of the faith Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) was in exile, he happened to be jailed in Acre, which was then under Ottoman rule. However, after May 1948, when the state of Israel was established, all those sites became part of Israeli territory. Since many Baha'is travel to Israel for pilgrimage and to visit their religious sites, the Islamic Republic has persecuted many Iranian Baháís for "spying" for world Zionism.

It can be argued that political instability, economic hardship and external pressures have created political paranoia in the Islamic Republic, and that this has created a situation in which the ruling system is highly suspicious of any social entity which hesitates to conform. Evidently, the situation is unstable and so far the regime cannot offer anything but an iron fist to exert control. In a situation like this respect for human rights is their last concern. Accordingly, the violation of human rights has worsened over the last two years. Regardless of religious and political orientation many people have been victims of a new wave of crackdowns. Baha'is are not the only group persecuted by the state, but they are among the most vulnerable, since they have no internal legal protection and no political representation inside the country to voice their plight.

As external and internal tensions increasingly weigh on the Islamic Republic, more pressure is needed from the international community to stop this violation of human rights. If there is no serious protest from the outside world, the regime may freely continue its current crackdown.

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