

# **A policy of intolerance**

## **Persecution of Baha'is is a litmus test for rights and Iran is failing**

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Under the shadow of the nuclear question, Iran's human-rights situation has steadily deteriorated. Hard-liners have exploited fears of conflict with the United States to brand reform as a foreign conspiracy against Islam. Last week's arrest of seven leaders from the peaceful Baha'i minority, long a scapegoat for the clerical regime, is an ominous development.

Canada swiftly condemned the arrests, consistent with its leadership on United Nations human-rights resolutions against Iran, in which mistreatment of Baha'is figures prominently. But the arrests have broader significance, because such persecution is a litmus test for tolerance under a theocratic constitution that conditions human rights on belonging to an approved religion.

The recent arrests raise the spectre of the systematic execution of Baha'i leaders on charges of heresy during the early years of the Islamic Republic in the 1980s. A 1985 UN report characterized this religious inquisition as genocidal. The victims included Muna Mahmudnizhad, a teenager whose "crime" was teaching Baha'i children who had been expelled from school for their religion.

Ottawa resident Naim Tavakoli, whose father is one of those arrested recently, knows nothing of his whereabouts and fears he may have been tortured. Judging by the Zahra Kazemi affair, which gave Canadians a glimpse of Tehran's notorious prisons, his fears are well-founded.

Under Article 13 of the constitution, Iran's 350,000 Baha'is are not recognized as a legitimate religious minority, unlike the country's Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians. According to the hard-line clerics, this reduces them to the status of "infidels" beyond the protection of the law.

This radical interpretation of sharia is clearly contrary to Iran's obligations under UN human-rights covenants to which Tehran is signatory. It is also contrary to the view of respected Islamic scholars that freedom of worship is a fundamental Koranic principle. Iran's policy of intolerance betrays a regime that has cynically manipulated Islam as an instrument of power and used hate-mongering to legitimize its authoritarian rule.

In contrast to reforms under Mohammed Khatami, the administration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has intensified hate propaganda against Baha'is in government-controlled media, where they are variously demonized as agents of Russian, British, and U.S. imperialism, not to mention Zionism and even Wahhabism.

A 2007 UN report by Pakistani human-rights expert Asma Jahangir revealed that the Ministry of Intelligence has been collecting detailed information about Baha'is across Iran. Death threats and attacks, desecration of cemeteries and places of worship, denial of pensions and university education, the harassment of Baha'i children in schools – all signs of a concerted campaign to strangle this community in the land of its birth.

Like the repression of Islamic reformists, human-rights advocates, intellectuals, student movements, women's groups, labour unions and others elements calling for a peaceful and open Iran, the persecution of Baha'is is above all a measure of the regime's own desperation. A government that enjoys legitimacy and contributes to the rights and well-being of its citizens does not need such extraordinary measures to eliminate minorities in its midst. And what is most tragic is the betrayal of a 2,500-year-old civilization that reached its height of prosperity because of its capacity to embrace pluralism and diversity.

There are signs of hope, however, as ordinary Iranians increasingly reject the lies they have been fed over the past 30 years by the clerical leadership. To give but one example, the recent expulsion of a Baha'i student from a high school resulted in spontaneous protests from Muslim students outraged that one of their classmates was being denied the right to education solely because of his beliefs. There are increasing calls from eminent human-rights advocates, such as Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, for a constitution in which all citizens enjoy the same rights, regardless of religious beliefs.

As ordinary Iranians contend with the woes of economic decline, corruption and repression amid the emergence of a postideological culture, many are questioning the depiction of Baha'is as the source of all evil. The Iranian leadership has a choice. Either it can release the arrested Baha'is and respect their fundamental human rights, or it can persist in cynically peddling an impotent medieval theology that will confirm its irrelevance and hasten its own demise.

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