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/ Iran's persecution of Bahais

Increased persecution of members of the Bahai faith in Iran should concern all people of religious conscience. President Reagan in May issued an appeal to the Ayatollah Khomeini to stop the planned execution of a number of well-known Bahais. His appeal proved unavailing. Since then 17 Bahais have been executed, and the severe repression of the Bahai community, including mistreatment of Bahai children in the schools and even outright banning of school attendance by them, continues.

Ironically, the fundamentalist Shia Muslims of Iran do recognize other religions. Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity have a special place in Islam and enjoy the

protection of the law. The Bahais, however, are regarded as heretics and blasphemers because they emerged out of Islam, claiming that their founder was the twelfth Shia Imam whose return to earth is still awaited. The fact that the rites and rituals of the Bahai faith are secret and that the international movement is headquartered in Haifa, Israel, adds to the suspicion with which the Bahais are viewed.

Ironically, too, the Bahais — and there are some 300,000 in Iran — are good citizens. They tend to be well-educated and members of the professional class, serving as businessmen, teachers, middle-level government officials, and army officers. Yet, as so often happens with successful minorities, their very afflu-

ence and professional achievements have helped fuel prejudice and make them the scapegoats for the nation's ills.

If the theological and historical factors surrounding the Bahai issue were not complicated enough, another element now enters the picture. This is the rising influence in Iran of the Hodjatich faction within the fundamentalist Islamic movement. This anticommunist group favors free enterprise and a more secular government. But it is extremely conservative religiously, and opposes the Bahai faith.

The fundamentalist regime of Ayatollah Khomeini thus finds itself between a rock and a hard place. If it comes out against persecution of the Bahais — and this persecution

seems to be largely ordered and implemented at the local level — it risks being accused by the Hodjatich faction of diluting Islam and thus its religious legitimacy. If it does nothing, it feeds Iran's disgrace in the eyes of the world.

Everyone who cherishes religious freedom will hope that the international community brings all possible moral pressure to bear on the situation. The Islamic nations and Islamic leaders could be especially helpful to the Bahai community both by direct appeals to the government of Iran and by making clear what the ideals of Islam are. Surely these do not include intolerance and brutal repression of those who choose a different religious path.

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