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Bahais say they face a decision like Christian martyrs 2,000 years ago — renounce their faith or die

Persecution could become genocide for Bahais in Iran

By Don Lattin

Examiner religion writer
Azam Yazdi looks back on the death of her husband, executed in Iran two years ago by an Islamic revolutionary firing squad, from two perspectives.

"As the wife of a Bahai martyr, I feel very proud," Azam said last week in her cousin's Pacific home.

"But as a wife who has lost her husband, it's a very different thing," Azam continued, with tears welling and her dignified expression melting into one of long-repressed agony.

Thousands of Bahais living in the United States, those who were here before the 1979 Islamic revolution and others who have fled the extreme fundamentalism of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, are concerned about family and friends in Iran.

More than 150 members of the Bahai faith — whose belief in the equality of women and "oneness" of all religions contradicts the Islamic law of the Iranian government — have been executed in the last four years.

Religious leaders here fear that the campaign against the 300,000 members of the Bahai minority in Iran will escalate into genocide.

On June 18, 10 Bahai women were hanged in the southern Iranian city of Shiraz. Six Bahai men were executed by firing squad there two days earlier.

Amnesty International, the inter-

national human rights group, has protested Iran's treatment of the Bahais, saying that "they are being persecuted solely for their religious beliefs."

Bahais here say members of their faith in Iran are faced with a decision tragically similar to that of the Christian martyrs nearly 2,000 years ago — renounce their faith or die.

Azam, who was allowed to visit her husband during his nine months in prison, said he endured seven lengthy interrogations and was told "if he recanted he would be set free."

"His grandfather was martyred for being a Bahai and he said he would never recant," said Azam, who asked that her real last name not be used out of fear for Bahai relatives still in Iran.

"If my husband had done something wrong, it would be different," she said. "But he died being true to his religion to the last minute."

There are 4,000 to 5,000 Bahais in the Bay Area. Among them are Vahid and Mahro Vafaei of Berkeley, who lost a third relative in the most recent government-sanctioned executions.

Their 59-year-old father, Rahmatollah Vafaei, was arrested last December and executed on March 12. He ran a small radio and appliance store in a southern Iran city, where he was a longtime member of the local Bahai spiritual assembly.

"The only charge was 'Zionism' and 'sending money to Israel,'" Vahid said. "If we send money to Israel, it's not for the Israeli people or the Israeli government, it's for our temple there



Examiner/Er Reed

Azam Yazdi, right, is proud to be wife of Bahai martyr, 'but as a wife who has lost her husband, it's a very different thing'

and for the Bahai central governing committee in Israel. It's just an excuse."

"People of the Bahai faith — like Jews, Christians and Moslems — have an important religious shrine in Israel. Their World Bahai Center was established there in the last century, shortly after the founder of their faith, Baha Allah, died in the Holy Land after being exiled from his native Iran."

Vahid's uncle, another Bahai active in one of the local spiritual assemblies in Iran, was executed last year.

His father's 22-year-old cousin was one of the 10 women hanged last month.

"She was very active," said Vahid's wife, Katia Vafaei. "All of the Bahai children have been kicked out of the schools, and she had been teaching them in her home."

Bahai children have been expelled from Iranian schools, religious leaders here say, because their parents' marriages are not recognized under Islamic law and the children are considered illegitimate or "unclean."

"It's not like all Muslims in Iran hate the Bahais," Vahid said. "But those who are in power today are the ones who hate Bahais."

"They (the mullahs who control the government) believe that Islam is the last religion in the world and that Mohammed was the last prophet."

Katia said. "If they recognize Baha Allah as a prophet, what happens to the things they have been saying all these years?"

Both Katia Vafaei and her husband, a student at San Francisco State University, came here before the shah's ouster in February 1979. Mahro Vafaei came to the United States shortly after the revolution and enrolled at Alameda Community College.

Azam, whose martyred husband was a prominent construction engineer and member of the spiritual assembly in Tehran, escaped from Iran last year. Her three sons are now living in Canada, where she plans to settle.

"They just threw me out of my house with nothing," she said, speak-

ing through an interpreter. "This has happened to many of the Bahais."

Her husband, whose family has been Bahai since the founding of the religion in the last century, was out of the country in 1979, but returned because he thought he had nothing to worry about.

During the shah's regime, she said, there had been relatively little government-sanctioned persecution of Bahais.

"We were not concerned," she said. "Khomeini had announced the Bahais would have freedom and many thought it would be even better than under the shah. And right after the revolution, the Ministry of Roads asked him (her husband) to be involved in a big project."

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