

# BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION IN CONSULTATIVE STATUS WITH  
THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL OF THE UNITED NATIONS

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## SUMMARY REPORT OF PERSECUTION OF THE IRANIAN BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY DURING THE PAHLAVI REGIME (1921-1979)

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### Introduction

The letter and spirit of Iranian law and regulations has always been strongly antagonistic towards the followers of the Bahá'í Faith. Although, at times, certain Bahá'ís enjoyed some relief, this was simply a reflection of the degree to which the current laws were being enforced by less prejudiced government offices or officials, and was not the result of any deliberate protection extended by the law to members of the Bahá'í community.

The entire civil law system in Iran is based upon Islamic law, which recognizes and protects the civil rights of Muslims and of the followers of officially recognized minority religions. The refusal of successive governments in Iran to accord to the Bahá'í Faith official recognition as an independent religion, or as a religious minority, has thus deprived the Bahá'ís of many rights and privileges under the law, has rendered them second-class citizens, and has left the way open for continued persecution and discrimination in almost every area of their lives.

The disabilities afflicting the Bahá'ís in Iran date from the birth of the Bahá'í Faith in the middle of the 19th century, when religious discrimination on the part of both clergy and government led to the martyrdom of 20,000 early believers. Despite its rapid rise to become the largest minority religion in Iran, the Bahá'í Faith was denied recognition under the 1906 Constitution (which granted recognition to the Jewish, Zoroastrian and Christian minorities) and acts of persecution against the Bahá'í community continued.

Following the accession to power of Reza Shah, the persecution ceased to be sporadic and spontaneous, and the Bahá'ís and their institutions became the victims of official repression by the government. Reza Shah systematically introduced discriminatory measures and initiated a policy - continued by his son, Mohammed Reza Shah - which sought to remove Bahá'ís from the protection of the law. The numerous legal measures and discriminatory activities categorized in this document clearly demonstrate the intention of successive Pahlavi governments of isolating and identifying the Bahá'ís as a community of second-class citizens -

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a community which was then used by the government as a scapegoat to divert popular attention and provide a focus for public grievances during times of constitutional crisis.

Throughout the 58 years of Pahlavi rule, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran, the governing body of the Bahá'í community, made repeated appeals to the sovereign, to ministers of government and to the Iranian parliament, for amelioration of the repressive legislation, and for justice and fair treatment for the Bahá'í community. These appeals were never heeded. Moreover, on those occasions when violence erupted against the Bahá'í community, the authorities procrastinated or declined to intervene to protect Bahá'í lives and property, and few if any attempts were made to identify or punish the perpetrators. Nothing has ever been done to compensate for the extensive loss of life and property suffered by the Iranian Bahá'í community during the Pahlavi regime.

This document presents a summary of persecutions in five major areas - Personal Status, Education, Employment, Freedom of Religious Practice, Civil and Political Rights and Other Persecutions - to demonstrate our claim that, throughout the Pahlavi regime, the Bahá'ís of Iran were victims of official oppression.

## I. PERSONAL STATUS

### A. Marriage

There is no provision for civil marriage in Iran. In 1925, Islam was declared the state religion, and a new law was passed permitting marriage only according to Islamic, Judaic, Christian or Zoroastrian law. Consequently, the Bahá'í marriage ceremony was not recognized as legal. (During the period 1940-44, Bahá'ís who married according to the laws of their Faith were sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging from one to six months). Bahá'í marriages could not be registered by an official notary public, nor could Bahá'ís register their own marriages, since - unlike the officially recognized minorities - they were not allowed to have their own registrar.

The non-recognition of Bahá'í marriages imposed cruel hardships upon Bahá'í families: wives were regarded as mistresses, and the children were considered illegitimate.

### B. Inheritance

Since his marriage was not recognized, the testamentary dispositions made by a Bahá'í husband and father were disregarded and overruled if non-Bahá'í relatives or other interested parties contested the will. Because the Iranian civil law governing inheritance was based on Islamic religious law, the estate of a deceased Bahá'í was, in contested cases, divided according to the Islamic system. As a result, the Bahá'í widow was deprived of the inheritance bequeathed to her under Bahá'í law, and received only the purely nominal amount apportioned to Muslim wives - an amount which frequently proved inadequate to support her.

### C. Identity Card and Passport

Because the marriage of his parents was not registered, it was sometimes difficult for a Bahá'í to obtain an identity card. Since this card is the Iranian equivalent of a birth certificate, it is an essential document for every individual.

The issue of joint passports to Bahá'í married couples was prohibited, and a wife could not obtain a passport bearing the family name.

### D. Burial

Because the Bahá'í Faith was not officially recognized, some Bahá'ís were deprived of burial according to the laws and practices of their Faith, and non-Bahá'í relatives and others often forced, through legal means, the observance of an Islamic burial service.

### E. No Bahá'í Courts

The civil law system of Iran is based on Islamic law, and no secular courts exist. Unlike the officially recognized religious minorities, the Bahá'ís were not permitted to establish their own religious courts. They were obliged to use the court representing their religious ancestry - Muslim, Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian - and to submit themselves to its rulings.

## II. EDUCATION

### A. Deprivation of Educational Benefits

Bahá'ís were admitted to education under the public education system, but were discriminated against under that system. They were frequently deprived of the right to free board and, in most cases, were not eligible for scholarships, further education abroad, etc.

### B. Closing of Bahá'í Schools

Although the Bahá'ís were the first to establish primary and secondary schools all over the country, open to children of all religions, the government in 1934 closed all Bahá'í schools, ostensibly because they observed the Bahá'í holy days. Other religious minorities had the privilege of closing their schools on their holy days.

## III. EMPLOYMENT

### A. Denial of Employment

Bahá'ís were generally denied employment in the civil service, the army and other government agencies. In 1922, following the accession to power of Reza Shah, a law (the Civil Service Code) was passed detailing specific conditions of employment which excluded Bahá'ís. Applicants for government positions had to state their religion, and any applicant listing his religion as Bahá'í was automatically denied consideration for such employment. A few were hired because they had special technical expertise or were on contract.

Towards the latter part of the Pahlavi regime, one of the responsibilities of SAVAK was to ensure that no Bahá'í could be hired by any government agency.

### B. Demotion or deprivation of Promotion

Some Bahá'ís were demoted, or were deprived of promotion, simply because they were Bahá'ís.

### C. Deprivation of Training

In certain instances, Bahá'ís were deprived of the benefits of in-service training because of their religion, and were frequently deprived of vocational training which would lead automatically to employment by the government.

### D. Dismissal from Employment

Often, Bahá'ís were dismissed from their jobs because of their Faith. Sometimes, a Bahá'í who had received vocational education or specialized training while employed was forced, upon his dismissal, to repay the cost of the education or training.

### E. Deprivation of Pension

Bahá'ís were sometimes deprived of their pensions. In one historic case\*,

for example, over one hundred Bahá'ís were deprived of their pensions from the State Railway Administration - creating a problem for these Bahá'ís and their families over a number of years.

\*(The Civil Service Code of Iran indicates that receiving one's pension is a right which cannot be denied, even in such severe instances as conviction for crimes).

#### IV. FREEDOM OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

##### A. Spiritual and Moral Training of Children and Youth

The closure of Bahá'í primary and secondary schools, and the forced closure of Bahá'í summer schools at certain times during the Pahlavi regime, placed severe restrictions upon educational activities for the spiritual and moral training and development of Bahá'í children and youth.

##### B. Prohibition of open meetings

Bahá'ís were not allowed to meet openly in public places, but were restricted to meeting in small numbers in private homes. Such meetings were often terminated by the police.

##### C. Prohibition of Free Expression of Faith

Bahá'ís were forbidden to inform others publicly of their beliefs or to discuss openly the teachings of their Faith.

##### D. Places of Worship

The Bahá'ís were not allowed to maintain properties as places of worship, and were not allowed to erect houses of worship.

##### E. Administrative Centres and Meeting Places

Bahá'ís were not allowed to have official administrative centres or meeting places.

##### F. Publication of Bahá'í Materials

Hundreds of books and thousands of articles against the Bahá'í Faith were published without restriction, while publication of the Bahá'í scriptures and other materials was forbidden.

##### G. Importation and Exportation of Bahá'í Materials

The import and export of Bahá'í books, publications, photographs, etc. was forbidden. Occasionally, Bahá'í travellers carrying Bahá'í materials for their private use had these materials confiscated and burned.

V. CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

A. Voting

Voting was based on recognized religious affiliation, and thus Bahá'ís could not vote, since they would have had to do so as declared members of another religion.

B. Holding Property

Properties belonging to the Bahá'í community could neither be held under the name of the Bahá'í community nor registered for religious purposes. Such properties had to be registered under the names of individual Bahá'ís, and thus became subject to property and inheritance taxes. In some provinces, this applied even to Bahá'í burial grounds.

C. Restrictions on Military Service

While Bahá'ís were required to do military service, they could not opt to serve in the Education Corps, which played a major part in Mohammed Reza Shah's campaign to eliminate illiteracy.

D. Non-recognition of Bahá'ís as a Community

Humanitarian and welfare contributions and services could not be rendered in the name of the Bahá'í community, which was not recognized for such purposes. Such contributions could be made only in the names of individual Bahá'ís.

VI. PERSECUTIONS

A. Harassment

The Bahá'ís were constantly subjected to harassment: e.g. raids on Bahá'í homes, looting, destruction and confiscation of Bahá'í property. Bahá'ís were killed or forced to recant their Faith.

B. Economic Pressures

Bahá'í-owned businesses were subjected to many economic pressures and, in some cases, were taken over by the government.

C. Inheritance and Property Taxes on Religious Sites

Because of the restrictions mentioned under section V (B) above, many Bahá'í properties were registered in the name of Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. After he passed away in 1957, an inheritance tax totalling approximately six million dollars was levied upon most of these properties. Subsequently, the same properties were transferred to a non-profit-making company formed by the Bahá'ís for the purpose of holding them. This transfer was carried out according to Iranian law. A supplementary assessment was then made, and a further tax of twenty million dollars was demanded, on the grounds that the holding company had received the properties by deed of gift, and had not given adequate commercial consideration.

D. Desecration of Holy Places

Bahá'í holy places were repeatedly desecrated and, in some cases, wholly or partially demolished. Among the most important of these were the house in which the Báb (the Forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith) was born and the house of the Báb in Bushihr, both of which were demolished; the house in which the Báb declared His mission, which was partially demolished; and the House of Bahá'u'lláh in Takur, which was damaged.

E. Attacks in 1955 against the Bahá'ís

In 1955, following attacks on the Faith broadcast nationwide by government radio, and an announcement in the Iranian parliament that the government had ordered the suppression of the Bahá'í "sect", there erupted an orgy of rape, murder, pillage and destruction. Young girls were raped; families were murdered; young women were abducted and forced to marry Muslims; children were mocked, reviled, beaten and expelled from schools; bodies of Bahá'ís were disinterred and mutilated; private homes were looted and damaged; government employees were dismissed; Bahá'í properties were demolished (as detailed above); and violent pressure was brought to bear upon Bahá'ís to recant their Faith.

F. Attacks in 1978 against Bahá'ís

In 1978, in many provinces of Iran, mobs attacked, injured and killed Bahá'ís; desecrated their holy places; burned their houses, business premises and livestock; caused them to flee their homes; and tried to force them to recant their Faith.