Iran

Hassan Rouhani became President of Iran in June 2013 promising to release political prisoners and uphold the rights of religious minorities. There were some early signs of encouragement. Two Christian women, Maryam Jalili and Mitra Rahmati, were among at least 80 prisoners of conscience and political prisoners freed in September; while on 30 October, an appeals court overturned the ten-year jail term given to Mostafa Bordbar for his Christian activities.

Saeed Abedini was jailed for eight years for planting house churches in Iran
Image source: ACLJ

But the harassment and imprisonment of Christians, mainly converts from Islam, continues. On 20 October, four Christians were sentenced to 80 lashes each for drinking communion wine, and in a particularly high-profile case, Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini's eight-year jail term was upheld on appeal in August. On 3 November, he was transferred to one of the deadliest prisons in the world. Prisoners of conscience are said to be sent there to disappear; murders or unexplained deaths are a regular occurrence.

Church services continue to be raided, and even the historic Christian groups recognised under Iran's constitution face discrimination and harassment. A church in Tehran was closed in May over its refusal to stop holding services in Farsi, the Iranian national language spoken by the Muslim majority. The Iranian Church comprises historically Christian non-Persian groups, such as the Armenians and Assyrians, who have their own languages, plus a large number of recent converts from Islam and their children. The latter suffer the worst persecution.

Hundreds of Christians, mainly converts from Islam, have been arrested and detained throughout the country in the past few years. Some are subjected to intense interrogation and verbal and physical abuse. Some are eventually prosecuted on pretexts such as "threatening national security", while others have to pay exorbitant sums for bail.

The authorities' brutal anti-Christian campaign is an attempt to quash the revival that has seen large numbers of Iranians turning to Christ in recent years. Persecution against Christians has increased to a point not seen since the early days of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Although there is no official law against apostasy, leaving Islam, on the Iranian statute book, the constitution allows judges to draw on Islamic law and fatwas for their rulings in such cases, so a number of converts to Christianity have been charged with this offence. While sharia requires that an adult Muslim male apostate be put to death, the last time a Christian was officially sentenced and executed for apostasy was in 1990. However, several Christian converts from Islam who had been charged with apostasy were found murdered after their release.

Christianity began to spread in Iran (formerly Persia) shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection. By 642 AD, when Arab Muslims overran the country, 25% of the population were Christian. Today, the number is estimated at less than 1%. Shia Islam is the state religion.

Christians are treated as second-class citizens and are subject to discrimination in many areas, such as education and government jobs and services.

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