

RELIGION



- Muslims: 98,8%
- Others: 1,2%



AREA	POPULATION
1,628,750km ²	80.043.000

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Iran is a republic based on a theocratic constitution adopted after the Islamic Revolution that toppled the Shah in 1979. Article 12 of the constitution states that the Islamic school of Ja'fari Shiism is the official religion of the country. That said, article 13 recognises Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities with the right to worship freely and form religious societies.¹ Two seats in the Iranian parliament (Majlis) are reserved for Armenian Christians – the country's largest Christian minority (300,000), and one each for Assyrian Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians.²

The state comes under the authority of the Shia clergy, who rule through the Rahbar, the religious leader nominated for life by the Assembly of Experts – 86 theologians elected by the people for a term of eight years.³ The Rahbar presides over the Guardian Council of the constitution, a 12-member body (six appointed by the leader and six by the judiciary).⁴ The council exercises control over the laws and governing bodies of the state, including the presidency, whose office holder is elected by direct vote for a four-year term, renewable once.⁵

The primacy of Islam affects every sector of society. Non-Muslims are excluded from senior political and military positions. In addition, they may not serve in the judiciary, security services or as state-school principals. In Iran, one of the principal obstacles to full religious freedom is "apostasy". Conversion from Islam to another religion is not explicitly banned in the constitution but it is difficult because of the country's powerful Islamic traditions and the legal system founded on Islamic law. For all cases not mentioned explicitly in the Constitution, judges have the option, under article 167, to refer to "authoritative Islamic sources or authentic fatawa [fatwas]". In cases of apostasy sentences are based on Shari'a and fatwas and can be punished with the death penalty.⁶

The government enforces gender segregation throughout the country. Women of all religious groups are expected to respect the Islamic dress code in public, including covering their hair.⁷

Incidents

The Bahai community, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran, is officially considered a heretical and “deviant sect” whose members are de facto apostates. Bahais are therefore the most severely persecuted religious minority in Iran. Not recognised by the state, they are denied political, economic, cultural, and religious rights.

Although ending religious discrimination was one of current President Rouhani’s campaign promises in the 2013 election, the amount of anti-Bahai propaganda in state media has increased. It is estimated that since 2014, around 26,000 anti-Bahai stories have appeared on official or semi-official media channels.⁸ In April 2017, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention stated that the imprisonment of 24 Iranian Bahais the previous year because their religious beliefs (“propaganda in favour of the Baha’i faith and against the Islamic Republic by being members of an illegal organisation”) constituted a “violation of their right as a religious minority.”⁹

On the 200th anniversary of the birth of the founder of the Bahai faith, in October 2017, almost 20 Bahais were arrested and 25 homes raided.¹⁰ Some reports indicate that over 90 Bahais are still held in prison because of their religious beliefs, including one of the seven Bahai leaders, collectively known as the “Friends of Iran” or Yaran, who oversaw the country’s community.¹¹ Three of them – Mahvash Sabet, Fariba Kamalabadi, and Behrouz Tavakkoli – were released in September, October, and December 2017 respectively after serving their 10-year sentences, following convictions based on false charges of espionage and spreading propaganda.¹² They were originally sentenced to 20 years in jail, but their sentences were reduced when the New Islamic Penal code was introduced in November 2015. Three others were released in early 2018. In February, Saeid Rezaie was set free, followed by the youngest and oldest of the leaders within a few days of each other in March: Vahid Tizfahm, 44, and Jamaloddin Khanjani, 85. This only left Afif Naeimi in prison at the end of the reporting period.¹³

While two Bahai instructors imprisoned for their work with the outlawed Bahai Institute for Higher Education were released from prison in 2017 after completing their 25-year sentence, five other instructors remain in prison. In November and December 2017, two more began prison sentences.¹⁴

Economic pressure has increased considerably on Iran’s Bahais. Over 600 shops have been closed since 2014.¹⁵ In several cases, the reason given was that they had ostensibly closed in observance of a Bahai religious holiday. Between April and October 2017, Iranian authorities closed down dozens of businesses for observing holy days. While some closures were temporary, many shops remain closed despite legal appeals. The president’s Special Assistant for Citizens’ Rights Shahindokht Molaverdi stated in November 2017 that the Rouhani administration would “follow legal procedures” to rectify the issue of closures.¹⁶

Concerning higher education, despite the Iranian government’s public declarations that universities are open to Bahais, its policy is to de facto prevent them from entering higher education.¹⁷ In spite of good academic results, more than 50 Bahai students have been reportedly expelled since 2013. In November 2017, three Bahai students, who complained

to the government because they were not allowed to enrol in university, were convicted of “membership in the anti-state Bahai cult” and given a five-year prison sentence.¹⁸ In late December 2017 Kashan University’s security office asked computer-science student Neda Eshraghi to confirm her Bahai faith in writing. They then confiscated her student ID, blocked her access to the university’s online facilities and banned her from student accommodation. Officials subsequently said that she had been expelled because of her Bahai faith.¹⁹

Soha Izadi was expelled from Zanjan University in March 2018. During examinations, she was summoned by the university’s training department which told her that the Education Evaluation Organisation’s ethics division had sent them a letter debarring her from her course. University officials told her that she could only continue her studies if she renounced her Bahai faith.²⁰

In September 2016, two brothers stabbed Farhang Amiri to death because he was Bahai and, in their view, an apostate.²¹ They later confessed that they thought that killing him would guarantee them a place in heaven.²² In July 2017, the eldest brother was sentenced to 11 years in prison and two years of internal exile for the murder. The other was given five-and-a-half years in prison. According to Iran’s penal code, the murder of a Muslim carries the death penalty, the murder of a Bahai or members of an unrecognised religion carries much lighter penalties.²³

According to a report by the UN’s Human Rights Council, Iranian Christians of Muslim background continue to face arbitrary arrest, harassment and detention. A common accusation against them is action or propaganda against the state.²⁴ They also risk prosecution for apostasy. The annual report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) mentions numerous incidents of Iranian officials raiding church services or threatening, arresting and imprisoning Church members, particularly converts to Evangelical Christianity.

During the period under review, government-controlled and pro-government media continued to spread anti-Christian messages, while anti-Christian content proliferated online and in print. Although Iranian authorities have raided house churches for decades and arrested hundreds of worshippers and Church leaders, the severity of the crackdown has increased in recent years.²⁵

Between May and August 2016, nearly 80 Christians were arrested. Although the majority were interrogated and released within days, some were held without charges for months, and several remain in detention or are awaiting trial because of their religious beliefs and activities.²⁶

In May 2016, four Christian converts²⁷ were arrested. As a result of their involvement in the house church movement, they were accused of acting against national security.²⁸ One of them, Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, previously served several years in prison following an apostasy conviction.²⁹ The other three, all men, were charged with drinking alcohol. They appealed their sentences of 80 lashes each. In June 2017, Pastor Nadarkhani was sentenced along with the three co-defendants to 10 years in prison because of their

house church activities. Nadarkhani received an additional two years of internal exile. In May 2018 they lost an appeal against their sentences.

In December 2016, Maryam Naghash Zargaran, a Christian convert from Islam, had at least six weeks added to her four-year sentence because of time spent outside prison for medical treatment. She went on hunger strike twice to protest against having been denied medical treatment for her chronic health problems.³⁰ In August 2017, she was released after completing her four-year prison sentence.³¹ However, she had to pay a 50-million Toman (over US\$14,000) fine for allegedly insulting staff at the prison's hospital. She also reportedly received a six-month travel ban.³² In December 2017, two members of the Church of Iran, arrested in 2012 during a raid on a prayer meeting, were sentenced to eight years in prison each.³³

In 2017, several other incidents against Christians were reported.³⁴ Four Evangelical Christians, three of them Azerbaijani citizens, were sentenced in May 2017 to 10 years in prison each for house church activities and evangelism. In July 2017, Pentecostal Assyrian Church Pastor Victor Bet Tamraz, together with three other members of his community, received 10 to 15-year sentences.³⁵

Arrests and seizures continued throughout 2018. In January Pastor Tamraz's wife was sentenced to ten years in jail. Shamiram Isavi Khabizeh was charged with "acting against national security and against the regime by organising small groups, attending a seminary abroad and training church leaders and pastors to act as spies". She had been previously detained in June 2017 and was only released after paying the equivalent of US\$30,000 in bail. The couple's son, Ramil was also facing charges. Aziz Majidzadeh, a 54-year-old Iranian Christian convert, was arrested in March 2018 and 20 others were seized at the same time when security forces stormed their workshop near Karaj. Authorities confiscated personal effects, including mobile phones and laptop computers. Majidzadeh's family did not know what had happened to him until he contacted them 45 days later. He said that he was in Evin Prison, Tehran. He had still not been formally charged; questioning by authorities had focused on his Christian faith.³⁶

Minority Sunni Muslims live mostly in underdeveloped areas. They tend to experience discrimination in the workplace and are also politically under-represented. As a result of their religious practices, many Sunni activists report harsh conditions and treatment in prison. About 120 Sunnis are in prison for their beliefs and religious activities. In August 2016, 22 Sunnis, including cleric Shahram Ahmadi, were executed for "enmity against God."³⁷ A false confession was extracted from Ahmadi, who had been arrested in 2009 and charged with unsubstantiated security offences. The charge of "enmity against God" has been used against other Sunnis who were also sentenced to death after unfair trials.³⁸

According to human rights groups, the detention and harassment of Sunnis have intensified following the June 2017 attacks in Tehran by Daesh (ISIS). Furthermore, despite repeated requests for the right to build an official mosque in Tehran, Iranian authorities have refused, forcing Sunnis to pray in smaller prayer halls.³⁹

Eminent Sunni leader Molavi Abdul Hamid and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei publicly exchanged letters in August and September 2017 concerning anti-Sunni discrimination in employment and mosque construction.⁴⁰ Khamenei wrote that "no kind of discrimination or inequality by the institutions of the Islamic Republic is allowed based on race, ethnicity or religion."⁴¹ This, however, is far from what Sunni communities experience.

Followers of Sufi orders have been targeted for "following a deviant sect"⁴² as their beliefs and practices are considered not to conform with the state's official interpretation of Islam.⁴³ Members of Iran's largest Sufi order, the Nematollahi Gonabadi, have been subjected to widespread harassment. They have been arrested, physically assaulted, and expelled from educational and cultural establishments. They have seen their homes and prayer centres attacked and their leaders have been banned from travelling. Iran's state television regularly portrays them in a negative light.⁴⁴

In November 2016, five Sufis were charged with various offences, including "insulting the sacred" and "insulting senior officials."⁴⁵ In 2017, scores of Sufis were sent to jail, fined and flogged.⁴⁶ In the case of a popular Sufi website, several of its administrators were jailed for "membership in a sect endangering national security."⁴⁷ When in late December 2017 five Gonabadi Sufis visited one of the website's administrators, who was in hospital, they too were arrested.⁴⁸

Over the past few years, Iranian authorities have charged many Shia reformers with "insulting Islam,"⁴⁹ criticising the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials deemed deviant with respect to Islamic norms. A dissident Shia cleric, Ayatollah Mohammad Kazemeini Boroujerdi, spent more than a decade in prison after his arrest in 2006 on unspecified charges and was released in January 2017 for medical reason. During his imprisonment, he was reportedly subjected to torture and denied treatment for the health problems he developed as a result of physical and mental abuse.⁵⁰ Since his release, Ayatollah Boroujerdi has been under virtual house arrest.

Iranian authorities also continue to spread anti-Semitic views and target members of the country's Jewish community for actual or imagined "ties to Israel."⁵¹ Prominent clerics have made anti-Semitic statements in mosques. State-run television programmes have done the same. In May 2016, the Iranian government sponsored a cartoon contest on the Holocaust.⁵² In December 2017, two synagogues in Shiraz were attacked, vandalised and their sacred scriptures desecrated.⁵³ Iranian Jews (15,000-20,000) have to live in a hostile environment in which discrimination and hate speech are commonplace.⁵⁴

Zoroastrians, who number 30,000 to 35,000, have also faced increasing oppression and discrimination in recent years. Most notably, in October 2017 when a Zoroastrian elected to local government was suspended because of his religion based on the views of Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, chairman of the Guardian Council,⁵⁵ who is against non-Muslims holding office in majority-Muslim areas.⁵⁶

The Guardian Council has, in fact, rejected an amendment to the national law on local councils approved by the Iranian parliament in December 2017 that would have allowed

members of recognised religious minorities to hold office. As a consequence, 28 of the 30 candidates from the Yarsani community⁵⁷ who ran in the May 2017 election in the city of Hashtgerd were disqualified.⁵⁸ In May 2017, Yarsani leaders wrote an open letter to President Rouhani asking for a clarification of the constitutional status of their religion. As in previous cases, there was no reply.

Under Iranian law, Iranian women, irrespective of religion or beliefs, risk jail and fines if they do not cover themselves from head to toe in public.⁶⁰ Human rights groups have noted that, at least in Tehran, this rule has not been enforced as forcefully as in the past. In December 2017, Tehran police announced they would stop taking women into custody for violating the regulation. However, offenders would be required to attend state-sponsored Islamic education classes. Outside the capital, the dress code is still enforced.⁶¹

Prospects for freedom of religion

The victory of Hassan Rouhani in the presidential elections of June 2013 slightly improved the state of civil rights. Iran's rank in the World Press Freedom Index indicated improvement between 2013 and 2018 going from 174 to 164 out of 180.⁶² But overall, Rouhani has failed to keep his promise to improve freedom of religion, particularly for religious minorities.

During the period under review, the state of religious freedom continued to deteriorate, especially for Bahais, Christian converts, and Sunni Muslims. Since 2013 the number of members of religious minorities imprisoned has increased. Despite some positive amendments in 2013, the Islamic Penal Code continues to justify serious human rights violations. Given the theocratic character of the state and the links between religion and politics, fundamental improvements cannot be expected as long as the current system is in place.

In June 2018, on the initiative of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Rowan Williams, scores of British and US Church leaders signed a petition condemning the Iranian regime for its human rights abuses and mistreatment of religious minorities. "Today, we announce the initiative by Dr Rowan Williams and supported by more than 50 bishops in the UK along with 78 US church leaders, which highlights the plight of the Iranian people and the religious minorities in Iran, particularly the Christians, calling on the international community to act to defend their rights in the face of government harassment and persecution," said one of the signatories, Rt Rev John Pritchard, former Bishop of Oxford. "In our statement, we call on all countries to take into consideration the deplorable situation of human rights in Iran, particularly the painful situation of religious minorities, in navigating their relations with Iran. We urge them to base any improvement of relations with Iran on a cessation of oppression of minorities and on a halt to executions in Iran," he added.⁶³

In February 2018, UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the United Nations Human Rights Council that: "No improvement was observed concerning the situation of religious and ethnic minorities, who remain subject to restrictions. [I] remain concerned by reports of persistent human rights violations of and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities."⁶⁴

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