

Treatment of Bahais: A Test of Human Rights in Iran

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

On May 14, the Iranian government arrested six prominent Bahai leaders and accused them of "endangering national security." The timing of the arrests has led some to speculate that the Iranian government is trying to link these leaders to the April explosion at a religious center in Shiraz that killed fourteen people. Considering Iran's clerical establishment believes the existence of religious minorities undermines official Shiite orthodoxy, these latest arrests are just another black mark on Iran's long and dismal record of protecting individual human rights and religious freedom.

Bahais: A Threat to Shiite Orthodoxy

Unlike Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity, Bahaism emerged after Islam and claims to supercede the Shiite faith. A centerpiece of Shiism is the belief in the Twelfth (or Hidden) Imam, a descendent of Ali who is said to reappear at the end of days. The Bahai religion originated from Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819-1850), who claimed to be the gateway to the Hidden Imam and then later proceeded to declare himself the Imam. By claiming to be this important religious figure, he challenged not only the clerical establishment but also the official interpretation of the sacred texts. Although the Bahai faith explicitly asks its worshipers not to participate into political activities, Persia's leaders at that time (the Qajar kings) viewed Shirazi's claims as a challenge to the legitimacy of the state, in so far as the king was the head of a Shiite country. Later on, the Pahlavi dynasty resisted clerical pressure to make anti-Bahaism official government policy.

After the Iranian revolution in 1979 however, that policy went into effect since the clerics saw the Bahai faith as a denial of their legitimacy. In the Islamic Republic's constitution, the state does not recognize Bahaism as a religion and forbids its members to publicly hold ceremonies and rituals. At the time of the revolution, dozens of Bahais were lynched and many were arrested. Bahais are not permitted to study at universities or work in government. Even in the private sector, there are many official and unofficial restrictions that make life difficult for Bahais.

Apocalyptic President Pressures Bahais

Bahais were generally tolerated during the 1997-2005 presidency of Muhammad Khatami, as a few of them obtained permission to study at officially recognized universities instead of clandestine Bahai training programs. But since

Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad became president in 2005, the government has increased pressure on the group, expelling Bahais from universities and removing them from certain positions. In March 2006, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief expressed concern about an October 2005 letter instructing various government agencies to identify and collect information about Iranian Bahais.

The Ahmadinezhad government argues that according to the constitution, Bahaism is not recognized and therefore is not protected in Iran. The president's tougher stance toward Bahais is probably also motivated by his apocalyptic views and his special attachment to the idea of the Hidden Imam. Ahmadinezhad, who believes that his government is under the supervision of the Hidden Imam, cannot tolerate a religion that denies the Imam's existence, even as the Bahais keep out of politics. On May 23, Sayyed Ahmad Alam al-Hoda, the Friday prayer leader in Mashhad and a supporter of Ahmadinezhad, stated that "Bahaism is neither a religion nor a thought. How we can accept that these Israeli soldiers [meaning Bahais, whose headquarters is in Haifa, Israel] who have the blood of a million men on their hands, be free in our country...and commit any kind of crime."

Other Groups Facing Discrimination and Violence

Other religious minorities, such as the Sufis and Dervishes (ascetics known for their extreme poverty and austerity), have suffered under the Islamic Republic as well. Sufism -- of which there are both Shiite and Sunni variations -- has an esoteric interpretation of Islam. Followers of Sufism usually oppose institutionalized Islam and thus have often been persecuted by Iranian clerics. Sufis and Dervishes, like Bahais, avoid political activities, an outlook that comes from the heart of their religious creeds. But the Iranian government sees these two minorities as a threat not because of their political activities but because of their very existence.

The Islamic Republic has never admitted that anti-Sufism is official policy. However, in the ministry of intelligence, there is a special department that gathers information about sect members. Since Ahmadinezhad came to power, the government has intensified pressure on both groups. In November 2007, Iranian police destroyed the Sufi religious center in Lorestan province and arrested dozens of Dervishes, and in February 2006, police destroyed the Dervish center in Qom. During the operation, in which hundreds were injured, the police arrested more than a thousand Dervishes and expelled their leader from the city.

In general, all non-Shiite religious minorities and non-mainstream Shiites suffer varying degrees of official and unofficial discrimination in education, employment, and housing. This is true even with mainstream Sunnis. Although there are hundreds of thousands of Sunnis living in Tehran, the government has consistently blocked their plans to build a mosque there. The government went so far as to break up Sunni prayer meetings held in public parks, and even harassed Sunnis who went to the grounds of the Pakistani embassy to pray.

Dangerous Step in Pressing Religious Minorities

On May 20, Gholam Hossein Elham, an Iranian government spokesman, stated that the recent arrest of the six Bahai leaders was for security reasons, and not their religious beliefs. He said they associated with "foreigners, especially Zionists" and were working "against the country's interests." Although the government has not made the allegation directly, some observers said the arrests are part of a government effort to link the Bahai leaders to the April 13 explosion in Shiraz that killed fourteen and injured nearly two hundred. After first denying that the explosion was a bomb attack, officials in early May reversed themselves and said the terrorist attack was carried out by "royalists" with links to the United States and the United Kingdom. A few days later, ministry of intelligence officers arrested the Bahai leaders.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic's use of national security concerns is just the latest form of persecution against religious minorities. Perhaps Iranian leaders believe this will allow them to deflect pressure from international human rights

organizations for violating freedom of religion. Nevertheless, the Iranian government's attitude toward religious minorities, whether they are small but recognized religious sects (Sufis and Dervishes) or officially unrecognized religions (Bahaism), must be seen as a fundamental criterion in evaluating human rights and freedom of religion in Iran.

Mehdi Khalaji is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the role of politics in contemporary Shiite clericalism in Iran and Iraq. ❖

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