

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light persecuted in Iran

Submission of Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light

Issue 1: The interests of persons belonging to this minority religious group are not appropriately taken into account in Iran

Introduction: Iran is an Islamic Republic with Twelver Ja'afari Shia Islam being the official state religion. The only recognised religious minorities permitted to worship and form religious societies within the confines of the law are Zoroastrians, Jews and traditional Christians. Other religious minorities are not accepted by the regime and face persecution in Iran. The government considers any citizen who is not a registered member of one of these three groups or who cannot prove his or her family was Christian prior to 1979 to be Muslim.

The Iranian regime's persecution of religious minorities is well-documented, with reports of violence and torture tactics targeting these communities. The UN Secretary-General has expressed concern over alleged violations of the right to life by the state, including arbitrary executions, the use of deadly force against peaceful protesters, and the harassment of minority rights activists.

The reasons of the state repression: There are over one hundred known members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light in Iran, with likely many more individuals concealing their affiliation due to the risks associated with belonging to this faith in Iran. The members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light in Iran have been labelled as "enemies of the state" and "corrupters in the land," and the religion has been portrayed as a "Hostile and deviant group." Since the beginning of 2019, the Iranian regime has launched a campaign to hunt down and prosecute members of this faith. Their teachings challenge the concept of the so-called "Rule of the Jurisprudence" or (Wilayat Al-Faqih), which forms the ideological basis of the Iranian regime, and ascribes absolute authority to the clergy. For this, members of this faith community were called "enemies of the state" and their religion was officially declared a "hostile and deviant group." The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light also has multiple teachings which have been deemed "heretical" by the Islamic authorities in Iran. For example: 1) the fact that the true Kaaba is in Petra, Jordan, not in Saudi Arabia, 2) the wearing of the hijab and the five daily prayers are not mandatory, 3) alcohol is permissible, 4) members from the LGBTQ+ community are accepted in their midst.

The faith community is headed by Abdullah Hashem Aba Al-Sadiq, an American-Egyptian citizen held by his followers to be the awaited Mahdi. Cases of abuse against the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light members in Iran have escalated significantly following the release of their official 'gospel' titled "The Goal of the Wise."

Issue 2: About institutional arrangements, legal and administrative barriers, and/or political practices that de facto exclude persons belonging to this religious minority from society

The ideological foundation of the Iranian regime is built upon the Rule of the Jurisprudence (Wilayat Al-Faqih), granting absolute authority to the clergy, a concept challenged by the religious teachings of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light that only God can appoint a ruler, and that only the divinely appointed messenger has authority to speak on matters of religion. This fundamental premise of the Rule of the Jurisprudence shapes Iran's legal framework and governance structure.

In Iran, the penal code imposes severe punishments for various religious offences, including amputation, flogging, stoning, and the death penalty for acts such as proselytising, attempting to convert Muslims, or insulting Islam. Amendments to the penal code in 2021 further criminalised activities deemed contrary to Islamic law, increasing the risk of persecution for religious minorities.

The amendments added provisions to criminalise insulting legally recognized religions and Iranian ethnicities, enabling authorities to impose prison sentences and fines for such offences. Sharia, as interpreted by the government, prohibits conversion from Islam, considering it apostasy punishable by death. Moreover, Muslim citizens are barred from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs.

Adherence to "Islamic criteria" is a prerequisite for citizens to enjoy human, political, and economic rights in Iran, as outlined in the constitution. Failure to comply with prescribed Islamic dress codes, such as wearing the hijab in public, may result in imprisonment or fines, highlighting the regime's enforcement of religious norms. This puts female members of the faith at significant risks because the headscarf is not mandatory as part of the faith.

Issue 3: The faces of the persecution

Since 2019 the Iranian regime has conducted raids on their members' homes, subjecting them to assaults in front of their families, arrests, and threats of execution if they continued practising their faith. Many of them were put under tight surveillance and family members were pressured to report them to the authorities for being "traitors of the state".

Multiple members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light have been prosecuted and charged according to the "Islamic criteria," such as "insulting the leadership" and "opposition to the principle of the system" have been used against them.

In 2018/2019 the Iranian government produced a propaganda documentary targeting the leader of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light and the religion. The documentary defamed the leader of the religion, portraying him as a Zionist, specifically because the faith community holds the 6-pointed star as their symbol. The documentary was broadcast on national television, giving rise to incidents of police harassment, attacks by plain-clothes policemen, and family members and neighbours reporting members to the police.

In October 2022, a member named Sayed Ali was brutally attacked by undercover Iranian police officers during a wedding in his hometown. The officers, aware of his affiliation with the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, assaulted him with sticks, causing severe injuries to his legs and cracking his skull open. He bled profusely for 25 minutes until he reached the hospital, where he required several nights of treatment, including 17 serums and injections.

Two members from the city of Babel, reported a harrowing experience where their homes were surrounded by five police cars, and over 20 officers stormed in. They were subjected to physical assault. They were blindfolded and put in solitary confinement, ultimately receiving prison sentences ranging

from 5 to 10 years. Additionally, the government applied pressure on employers to terminate their employment, placing them under significant economic strain. Officers from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance summoned members and their families, coercing them to sign declarations by which they were renouncing any involvement with the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light.

About the wave of arrests on December 15, 2022

In December 2022, Human Rights Without Frontiers, The Human Rights Activist News Agency and Iran International TV station reported on the arrest in Khoy City of 15 Iranian members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, three of which were minors. They were subsequently taken to Evin prison after attempting to flee the country after receiving death threats and persecution. While detained they were forced to sign papers to renounce their faith and defame the religion and its leader. They were threatened with execution if they did not cooperate with the Iranian regime and their passports were confiscated. Many of them are still held in detention and are scheduled to appear in front of the Clergy Court in Tehran at any moment.

Amir Mahdi, a member of the community from Tehran was a victim of societal stigmatisation and threats of violence from close friends and family members. His father even went to the extent of threatening to take his life and promising to hand him over to the authorities unless he renounced his faith. Fearing for his life and safety, Amir Mahdi decided to leave the country along with other adherents of his faith community. However, on December 15, 2022, he was apprehended by officers of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence. As of early May 2024 we have no information whether he was released or not.

One member of the group reported that they were stopped by the Ministry of Intelligence of Iran who handcuffed and blindfolded them and pointed guns at them, including the children. After being taken to different locations for three consecutive days in extreme cold weather and under harsh conditions, they were all sent to Evin Prison section 209 in Tehran. At the Evin prison, they were pressured to sign papers to recant their faith, make false confessions and lie about the rest of the members of the religion as well as about the leader of their religion. That member awaits trial; possible charges include “insulting the leadership” and his “opposition to the principle of the system” (Anti-Regime propaganda). The authorities have prohibited communication among the group, warning of further arrests if they try to contact each other again.

One of the female members of the religion, **Saba Sedaqat**, was arrested on December 15, 2022 with the rest of the group, while attempting to flee the country after suffering physical and verbal abuse from her husband and family. She had already endured severe beatings from her husband for not wearing the headscarf. While in prison, her decision to not wear a headscarf as per her beliefs in the teachings of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light has put her life in danger and she was subjected to threats of sexual violence. Other members who were imprisoned alongside her reported hearing the cries and screams of anguish from within the prison. Her status and current condition remains unknown except that she is still detained and awaiting trial.

Saeed Goodarzi, a member from Tehran, held a prominent role as one of the administrators of the Farsi-language Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light group on Telegram. He actively spoke about his religion on a daily basis. He was arrested on the 15th of December 2022 along with 14 other co-religionists as they were attempting to flee the country. Following the confiscation of his phone by the authorities they uncovered all his activities and affiliation with the local religious community in Iran. There is no information about his current status except that he awaits trial. He will be possibly charged

with "insulting the leadership" and his "opposition to the principle of the system." Prior to December 15th, he had made a first attempt to leave the country (with a few other members of the religion) but was intercepted and prevented from doing so. His passport was confiscated on the 8th of December at the Imam Khomeini Airport.

Farzan FarajiZadeh, another member of the religious group, faced religious persecution due to his active engagement in the community as an administrator of the Farsi group for the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light on Telegram. On multiple occasions, he received death threats on Telegram and was contacted by anonymous individuals claiming government connections. Out of fear for his life and safety, he decided to go into hiding, seeking a way to leave the country. On December 15th, 2022, he was arrested while attempting to leave the country. It is unknown whether he was released or if he remains in detention.

Mohammadreza Shekariyanasl, a member from Tehran had his house searched and was taken to a detainment facility where he was blindfolded. The police held him in solitary confinement for eleven days and questioned him about his beliefs. He was also detained in the Evin Prison. The state sentenced him to two years of exile from his home city of Tehran. He lived in exile for two years, away from his family.

Mohammed Amin Nouri, another member was arrested as a minor and spent his eighteenth birthday in Evin Prison. He endured severe beatings while detained and was compelled by force to sign papers renouncing his faith. He managed to escape the country.

Another member, **Arman Feidh-Abadi**, was beaten so badly by his family when he told them about his beliefs in the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light that his arms and legs were soaked in blood.

Forced psychiatric treatment

In terms of persecution from non-state actors, **Leila Hossein Rastegarpanah** from Tehran was held down by her husband and son and injected with antipsychotic medication when she told them about her belief in the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light. Her family later took her to a psychiatrist. Since then, she has been forced to take antipsychotic medicine on a regular basis, as they consider her beliefs "crazy".

Another member, **Puria Lotfinallou**, shared a similar account, being locked in a mental institution by his family and forcibly administered antipsychotic medicine.

Arrest in 2023

In July 2023, one member of the religious community was arrested in the Iranian city of Urmia while attempting to flee the country due to the persecution that he had endured. He was required to explain the tenets of his faith to the police officers and his reasons for abandoning state sanctioned mainstream Muslim beliefs. The officers dismissed his beliefs.

He endured torture at their hands while the officers demanded that he denounce his faith and falsely declare that the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light was affiliated with ISIS. Fearing for his life he falsely confessed to their demands.

He was held at the Urmia detention centre for seven days, subsequently presented with a deed and released on bail awaiting a trial. The current status of his case remains uncertain with the possibility of an impending trial and sentencing. The charges will most likely pertain to “Anti-regime propaganda” specifically “insulting the leadership’ and “opposition to the principle of the system.” He is currently afraid of being watched and afraid to speak to anyone out of fear for his safety.

Conclusion

These cases highlight that, due to all sorts of barriers (constitutional, theological, legal, political, institutional, administrative, etc.) members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light are unable to practise their religion openly and are effectively excluded by the authorities in Iran from any decision-making processes because of their religious beliefs.