

Last week, families of some of the Baha'i compatriots whose loved ones are in prison gathered together in order express their appreciations for the efforts of Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani in defense of civil rights of Bahá'ís. They also presented his symbolic artwork to the parents of Navid Aghdasi, Nava Majzoob, and Yavar, Haghghat, and to the wife and child of Shahram Najaf Tamraei.

Not long ago, an inscription from the verses of the Bahá'í book, *The Hidden Words*, written in calligraphy by Ayatollah Masoumi-Tehrani was gifted to Bahá'í compatriots: Sahba Farnoush, Navid Aghdasi, Parvin Nik-Aeen, Arshia Rohani, Mateen Janamian, Zarrin Aghabani, Yeganeh Agahi, Negar Bagheri, Nava Majzoob, Yavar, Haghghat, Helia Moshtagh, Naghmeh Zabihian, Faraneh Daneshgari, Sanaz Eshaghi, Nika Pakzadan, and Shahram Najaf Tamraei who have been recently arrested. We are hopeful that these loved ones and other compatriots who are imprisoned for their religious or political beliefs are freed immediately so that they can return to their families and use their talents and capacities for the construction of the country.

In 2014, Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, a prominent Muslim cleric in Iran announced to the world that he has gifted to the Baha'is of the world an illuminated work of calligraphy of a paragraph from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith. His bold action in support of Bahá'í compatriots exerted significant influence on the discourse of peaceful coexistence of religions. For the first time, a senior Shia cleric and jurist had issued an emphatic call for complete recognition of the human rights of followers of various religions. It created a broad global support and attracted the attention of religious leaders and human rights activists all over the world.

It is necessary to mention that Ayatollah Masoumi-Tehrani has been consistently advocating equal rights for the followers of all religions, especially emphasizing civil rights of Bahá'ís. Throughout these years he has faced oppositions and stiff resistance from some Shia clerics. In 2005, he addressed his critics in these words: *"I have repeatedly said that I'm not the kind of Muslim you want me to be. I renounce that interpretation of Islam. Here, I reiterate my words, saying, O Jews, O Christian, O Muslim, O Zoroastrian, O Buddhist, O Bahá'í, O atheist, I love you all and I value and celebrate your life. Let every sanctimonious fanatic be perturbed with the truth of human oneness!"*

The accumulated works of Ayatollah Masoumi-Tehrani in support of religious minorities for the past 18 years have provided a conceptual framework within which religious beliefs and viewpoints are used to highlight the need for fundamentals of human rights. He has repeatedly said that *"a right that comes about with a fatwa, will also go down with another fatwa."* Hence, people themselves should know, demand, and protect their rights.

Meanwhile, cooperation and empathy of a number of human rights activists with the Baha'i community of Iran has also contributed to the formation of a new discourse on civil rights of all Iranians. It is now the time for progressive people of Iran to advance the topic of civil rights for all Iranians irrespective of religion, sex, race, and ethnicity. All citizens of Iran should enjoy equal rights and legal protection. National identity and not

religious differences should be regarded as the unifying agency for all citizen of that country. Aggrandizing differences instead of accentuating similarities result in nothing but oppression and corruption. Those in power tend to rely on religious conflicts in order to advance their own personal interests and partisan political agenda.

Ultimately if we free our conscience from prejudices and zealous religious attitudes, and disregard the malicious intent of imprudent leaders, we can establish new human relationships based on rationality, human dignity, and civil rights.