

Trial of Iran's seven Baha'i leaders

The Baha'i Institute of Higher Education

<http://news.bahai.org/human-rights/iran/yaran-special-report/feature-articles/the-bahai-institute-of-higher-education>

Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, hundreds of Baha'i students who had entered university have been expelled. Thousands of others have been deprived from entering in the first place. The reason for their expulsions, or non-admittance, has been solely their membership of the Baha'i Faith.

To provide some means of educating their youth, the Baha'i community established its own higher education program – the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education – to meet the educational needs of as many of its young people as resources would allow.

In the case of the seven Baha'i leaders, questions have been asked about the existence of the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). One of the defendants, Mrs. Mahvash Sabet was a teacher and school principal who was dismissed from public education after the 1979 Iranian revolution for being a Baha'i. For the 15 years before her arrest, she was the director of the BIHE.

Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, was denied the opportunity to study at a public university because she is a Baha'i. In her mid-30s, she embarked on an eight year period of study and ultimately received an advanced degree from the BIHE. Mr. Vahid Tizfahm studied sociology at the Advanced Baha'i Studies Institute, an affiliate of the BIHE.

In what the *New York Times* called “an elaborate act of communal self-preservation,” the Baha'i community established its own higher education program in 1987. The program evolved over the years into a full-fledged university which, at its peak, had an enrollment of some 900 students, a faculty of more than 150 first-rate academics and instructors, and complete course offerings in ten subject areas.

Because of the continual threat of persecution, the BIHE was forced to operate in a highly circumspect and decentralized manner. Most of its classes were held in private homes throughout Iran and what little permanent infrastructure it had was composed of a handful of rented classrooms and laboratories scattered throughout the capital.

Then, in an act that speaks volumes about the Iranian government's real attitude towards Baha'is, hundreds of government agents fanned out across the country in September

1998, arresting some 36 BIHE faculty and staff, raiding some 500 homes, and confiscating hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of books, equipment and records in a blatant effort to shut the university down.

“The materials confiscated were neither political nor religious, and the people arrested were not fighters or organizers,” said the *New York Times*, in a 29 October 1998 article about the raids. “They were lecturers in subjects like accounting and dentistry; the materials seized were textbooks and laboratory equipment.”

Teaching was done principally via correspondence, or, for specialized scientific and technical courses and in other special cases, in small-group classes that were usually held in private homes.

“At the beginning, the students did not even know the names of their professors,” said one BIHE professor, who asked to remain anonymous out of fear for his safety and that of his relatives in Iran. “Even after three or four years, the students did not know the names of their professors. They had never seen them. Because it was very dangerous. If somebody knows the name of them, maybe they would tell their friends. So it was all correspondence at the beginning of this plan.”

Over time, however, the Institute was able to establish a few laboratories, operated in privately owned commercial buildings in and around Tehran, for computer science, physics, dental science, pharmacology, applied chemistry and language study. The operations of these laboratories were kept prudently quiet, with students cautioned not to come and go in large groups that might give the authorities a reason to object.

Among its faculty were approximately 25 or 30 professors who had been fired from government-run universities after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Other faculty members included doctors, dentists, lawyers and engineers. The majority were educated in Iran, but a good number have degrees from universities in the West, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Columbia University, the University of California at Berkeley and the Sorbonne. None of the Baha’i faculty members were paid for their time; all worked as volunteers.

“These youth are very precious people,” said a faculty member, explaining why they were willing to take such risks, without monetary remuneration, to establish the Institute. “We all care about them. They have been through tests and trials and they had no hope. They have been deprived of many things so if there was any chance for us to get something better for them, we did it.”