

Trial of Iran's seven Baha'i leaders

The trial of an entire community

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The harsh and unlawful prison sentences handed down to the seven Iranian Baha'i leaders is in reality a judgment against an entire religious community.

The seven prisoners faced such broad and patently false charges that their detention and trial can only be understood in terms of the systematic persecution of the Iranian Baha'i community as a whole.

“The baseless nature of the charges against the seven proved that their indictment is founded entirely on religious persecution,” said Diane Ala'i, a representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations in Geneva.

“Their trial was actually the trial of an entire religious community, an attempt to further intimidate and further ostracize all Iranian Baha'is, who number more than 300,000, simply because they hold a different viewpoint from those in power.

“We can say this unequivocally because the charges – which include the absurd ideas that these people were spying for Israel, have insulted Islam, or acted contrary to national security – were the same charges that have been lodged wholesale against the thousands of other Baha'is who have been arrested, imprisoned, or executed since the 1979 Islamic Revolution,” said Ms. Ala'i.

A history of persecution

In the land where their religion originated, Baha'is have faced a campaign of systematic, centrally directed persecution. At best, by denying them basic rights and freedoms, the government hopes merely to block the growth and development of the Baha'i community, while keeping it as a ready scapegoat for its own failures. At worst, the government harbors the goal of exterminating the Baha'i community as a viable entity in Iran and erasing all traces of its culture.

During the 1980s, Baha'is were executed, tortured, imprisoned, deprived of their jobs, pensions and educational opportunities

— solely because of their religious beliefs. In the 1990s some aspects of this persecution subsided as a result of international pressure. However, in 1993 came the exposure of a secret governmental plan to suffocate the Baha'i community.

Subsequent actions – ranging from random killings, revolving door imprisonment, arbitrary arrest and harassment, denial of access to higher education, the destruction of important Baha'i holy sites, and the continued efforts to deprive Baha'is of their livelihood – reveal the Iranian government's intention of continuing its efforts to destroy the Baha'i community without attracting international attention.

Accusations include spying

Prior to their arrest, the seven served as an appointed group known as the "Friends." Their role, carried out with the government's knowledge, was to see to the minimum spiritual and material needs of Iran's Baha'i community, which has been without formal leadership since its elected governing bodies were disbanded in response to a government decree in 1983.

For some nine months, the seven were held without any official word of the charges against them. Then, in February 2009, an Iranian news service carried statement by Tehran's deputy prosecutor that the seven faced accusations of "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic Republic."

"The charges were all absurd," said Ms. Ala'i. "Take, for example, the idea that they have been spying for Israel. That stems entirely from the fact that the religious and spiritual center of the Baha'i Faith is, through a fact of history, located in Haifa, Israel.

Ms. Ala'i said the other charges were equally baseless. Far from insulting Islam, the Baha'i Faith is the only major independent world religion outside of Islam that recognizes and reveres the station of Muhammad, she noted. And to say that the Baha'is – whose fundamental teachings stress nonviolence, nonpartisanship, and obedience to government – are spreading propaganda against the government is likewise false, she said.

"In their words and deeds, the seven prisoners, along with the entire Iranian Baha'i community as a whole, have sought only to advance the progress and development of Iranian society, through the articulation of high moral standards, the need to serve others, and processes of education and social development," she said.

“The unfounded detention of these seven individuals reflects the degree to which the Iranian government cannot abide the free existence of any group of Iranians whose ideas are not in conformity with their own,” she said.

For most people, whatever their religious background, the continued campaign against the Baha’is defies rational explanation. The Baha’i community in Iran poses no threat to the Iranian authorities. The fundamental principles of the Baha’i Faith require its followers to be obedient to their government and to avoid partisan political involvement, subversive activity, and all forms of violence.

The Baha’is in Iran seek no special privileges. They seek only their rights under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the right to life, the right to liberty and security of person, the right to education and work, and the right to profess and practice their religion.