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# An Open Letter to the Islamic Republic

*Tehran's persecution of its religious minorities violates its own constitution.*

By KISHAN MANOCHA

Seven former leaders of the Bahai community in Iran are in their first year of a decade of unjust incarceration. They were arrested in mid-2008, held without charge for months and denied proper access to lawyers or regular visitation from their families. When finally charged with outrageously unsubstantiated crimes—especially the capital crime of "spreading corruption on earth"—the seven Bahais categorically denied each offense. They were convicted this past August and their lawyer, Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, said that the charges were without "cause or evidence."

Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli and Vahid Tizfahm—these seven individuals represent a 30-year history of a state-sponsored persecution of the largest religious minority in Iran. The Islamic Republic wants us to forget about the prisoners, their long-suffering co-religionists, and the countless other victims of human-rights abuse in that country.

These seven Bahais are a portrait of Iran. Their ages range from 37 to 77. Some have aging parents and all have children, the youngest of whom was only nine when his father was arrested. They come from across the country. Their professions are also varied: psychologist, industrialist, manufacturer, engineer, educator, social worker, optician. Each has given voluntary service to their fellow Iranians: promoting literacy, advancing the equality of men and women—and providing education to the thousands of Bahai youth who are denied admission to Iranian universities because of their religion.



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Bahai News Service

These seven Bahais are a portrait of Iran; they now face a decade in jail.

This is no band of spies, as was alleged. An Iranian appeals court was forced to admit as much, overturning the original charges of espionage, undermining state security, and tarnishing the reputation of the Islamic Republic. The only charges that were upheld were that these Bahais had administered to the social and spiritual needs of their religious community. And yet, the government has known of their activities for the past 20 years—to suddenly brand their work illegal is baseless and unjust. The Iranian judiciary distorted the peaceful religious beliefs of the defendants, and

sought to criminalize their benign service to the Bahai community. This is a brazen contravention of Iranians' freedoms of conscience and belief, which are safeguarded by Iran's own constitution, by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that Iran has ratified.

Not only was there no proof for the charges brought against these Bahais, but the treatment they received during their detention and trial violated every legal norm and standard of fairness.

Officials from the Ministry of Intelligence used interrogation methods that disregarded the standards of civilized behavior—and were still unable to extract false confessions. The judge during their trial declared the proceedings "open and public"—and then refused to grant attendance requests from family members and international observers. Journalists were excluded—but government cameramen and intelligence agents were an active presence. When innocent citizens are subjected to a show trial, it is the judiciary and not the defendants who are tried before the public gaze. This trial was devoid of impartiality, made a mockery of Iran's judicial process, and exposed the absurdity of its claim to be a champion of human rights.

The seven Bahais are today incarcerated in Gohardasht prison, near Karaj. This facility is notorious for its appalling filth, pestilence, disease, and the privation of adequate facilities for basic personal hygiene. They are being held in prison cells that make it difficult to lie down, or even to perform their daily prayers. The prison is overcrowded, with reports of inmates being forced to sleep in corridors. These inhuman conditions contradict the Islamic Republic's professed principles of Islamic compassion and justice. The treatment of the Bahai prisoners—and their fellow inmates, whether innocent or guilty—violates the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

In these conditions, the Bahai community has received accounts of a growing admiration among the prison population for their fellow inmates, the seven Bahais, who have become beacons of hope and sources of comfort. For the Gohardasht prisoners, they are symbols of the free spirit of sincere Iranians.

The Bahais in Iran are not "others"—they are an inseparable part of the Iranian nation. The injustices they have suffered reflect the oppression that has engulfed the nation. If the leaders of the Islamic Republic could respect the rights of Iranian Bahais, it would signal their willingness to respect the rights of all Iranian citizens. The Bahai community today calls for the release of the seven Bahai prisoners, and the dozens of other Bahais incarcerated throughout the country. But this call is not limited to the Bahais: The Iranian government must respect the rights of all Iranian people.

This is no more than what the Islamic Republic asks on behalf of Muslim minorities in other lands. Bahais merely seek the same treatment from Iran.

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