

RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST
CHRISTIANS
IN IRAN

ANNUAL REPORT



20
21



OpenDoors



CSW everyone
free to believe

A Joint Report - January 2022



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قوه قضائیه دادگاه اعلیٰ اسلامی استان تهران



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Christian community in Iran continues to suffer widespread violations of their rights under national and international law, though Iran continues to **deny** this. In an official **response** to senior UN experts in January 2021, Iran's judiciary claimed "nobody is prosecuted on religious grounds". However, in the same response, it admitted to taking legal action against members of "enemy groups" and "private churches" (house-churches), which it accused of belonging to a "Zionist Christian cult" with "anti-security purposes".

Persian-speaking Christians¹ are penalised for the peaceful practice of their faith. They are exposed to harassment, arrest, interrogation, and pressure to recant or to commit to refrain from meeting other Christians or engaging in Christian activity.

These Christians, denied access to "recognised" church buildings by the state authorities, can be charged with "anti-security activities" if they gather in informal private meetings for worship, prayer, and Bible study. The constraint on such Christians, refusing them collective worship, has led to an impassioned plea from Christian converts for a place to worship and an international appeal: the **#place2worship** campaign.

¹ In this report the term "Persian-speaking Christians" is used to denote either converts or ethnic Christians ministering to converts, as opposed to regular members of the "recognised" Armenian and Assyrian minorities in Iran.

Following **amendments** to Articles 499 and 500 of the Penal Code, signed into law in February 2021, members of religious minorities face prison sentences of up to five years for “engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam”. The first known case of Christians being charged under the amended articles took place in May 2021 (see case study), and since then many other Christians have been charged under the amended articles.



The persecution of Christians in Iran is increasingly acknowledged by international bodies. In February 2021, the verdict of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention was **published**, declaring the detention of pastor and Christian convert Yousef Nadarkhani to be in violation of international law, and calling for his immediate release. He remains in detention.

However, in a positive development in November 2021 the Supreme Court **ruled** that the prison sentences of nine converts should be reviewed since “promoting Christianity and ‘Zionist evangelism’ in private homes is not an example of gathering and collusion against internal or external security as decided in the original verdict”. According to this decree, house-church activities and the promotion even of the pejoratively termed “Zionist” Christianity are not crimes. It remains to be seen how this ruling will be applied by the Revolutionary courts, but the Christians have at least since been released while their cases are reviewed.

In another positive development in November 2021, the public prosecutor of a branch of the Revolutionary Court in the western city of Dezful issued a **decision** not to press charges against eight other Christian converts, stating that although apostasy is a crime under Sharia, it is not an offence according to the laws of Iran.

That same month, however, the Supreme Court rejected the appeal of a Christian couple **sentenced to a combined 10 years in prison** for their involvement in a house-church.

The differing decisions highlight the inconsistencies that plague the judicial system in Iran and suggest that favourable rulings reflect the views of individual judges rather than systemic improvements at the heart of the judiciary.



Christian couple Homayoun Zhaveh and Sara Ahmadi, sentenced to 2 and 8 years in prison, respectively, for membership and leadership of a house-church.

The appeal court also occasionally mitigates the harshness of some sentences administered to Christians. In 2021 it was noted that appeal hearings generally took place promptly and showed some leniency, although the injustice of the arrest and sentencing of Christians was not acknowledged through acquittals.

Iranian Christians permitted conditional release while the judicial process was ongoing were subjected to bail demands as high as 600 million tomans (US\$22,000). This is less than some of the bail demands in recent years (as much as US\$220,000).

In 2021 **some** Christian converts were allowed to complete prison sentences in home detention with an electronic ankle tag to monitor their movement. However, other Christians eligible for parole were **denied** that possibility.

Some Christian victims of persecution felt compelled to flee the country after facing harassment or being threatened with long terms of imprisonment, despite the **worsening conditions** for asylum seekers in neighbouring countries.

Expatriate church leaders with official posts in Iran have reported difficulties and delays in obtaining permits, including the **new Catholic archbishop**. Meanwhile, a Catholic nun, Sister Giuseppina Berti (75), who ministered for 26 years in the leprosarium of Tabriz, was refused residency, and **ordered to leave the country**.

There were also multiple reports in 2021 of the Christian heritage in Iran being threatened and church property being reconfigured to erase the public Christian presence.

In June 2021, Ebrahim Raisi, the former Chief of Justice and political hardliner who oversaw the executions of thousands of political prisoners in the 1980s, became President. With his appointment, and in view of his poor record on human rights while head of the judiciary, few international observers anticipated improvements, and rights' violations continue to be widely reported.

This report records the publicly reported violations against the Christian community during 2021.²

² The details contained in this report are from public cases for 2021. Confidential cases have been included in totals for numbers arrested, etc.



INTRODUCTION

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF UNDER NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

Iran is a diverse country, home to a rich variety of religious and ethnic groups whose presence in the area is historically established. However, since the 1979 revolution the government has imposed a homogeneous Iranian identity with an Islamic Shi'a belief system, resulting in the repression of other groups – their culture, traditions and religious beliefs being considered a threat to the Islamic Republic and its values.

The first article of the Iranian constitution institutes a theocracy, with Article 12 establishing the Twelver Ja'fari school of Shi'a Islam as the nation's official religion. Accordingly, all Iranian laws must be derived from and be consistent with Islamic law.

Article 13 of the constitution states:



Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are considered the only recognised religious minorities. They may exercise their religious ceremonies within the limits of the law. They are free to exercise matters of personal status and religious education, and to follow their own rituals.

Aside from Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity, no other religious minorities are recognised by law or afforded rights under the Iranian constitution. According to the government, the Christian community in Iran is restricted to ethnic Armenians and Assyrians and a small expatriate community. These churches are not, however, allowed to hold services - or possess religious materials - in Persian (the national language), nor to allow converts to attend.

Christian converts from Islam are numerically³ the largest Christian community in Iran, but they are not recognised by the state and are frequently targeted and persecuted by the Iranian authorities. Unable to attend existing churches belonging to the Armenian and Assyrian communities, converts either gather in informal meetings in private homes, known as "house-churches", for prayer, worship, and Bible study, or are forced to remain isolated and disconnected from other Christians.



This treatment of the Christian community is against Iran's obligations as a signatory of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Iran ratified in 1975, without reservation.

³ In 2020 a [survey](#) of Iranians' attitudes towards religion, conducted by a secular Netherlands-based research group, revealed that 1.5% of Iranians from a sample size of 50,000 self-identified as Christians. Based on this, researchers estimate there are around 1 million Christians in Iran overall. Ethnic Assyrian and Armenian Christians account for approximately 170,000, the remainder - perhaps even as many as 1 million - being converts from Islam.

ARTICLE 18 OF ICCPR



Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.



No-one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.



Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.



The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.



TRENDS

One of the most striking trends in 2021 was the increased involvement of the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the crackdown on Persian-speaking Christians. The IRCG was responsible for 12 of the 38 documented incidents of arrests of Christians or raids on their homes or house-churches in 2021.

The trend was set at the start of the year when an IRGC news agency **boasted** of “dismantling” a “network” of Christians in several provinces.

A second trend observed in 2021 was a new focus from the authorities on the online sphere. The Supreme Leader and the Friday prayer leaders who act as his mouthpiece made numerous references throughout the year to the so-called “cyber army” acting at his behest to “protect” Iran from perceived threats at home and abroad.

Over the space of two weeks in January and February, Ministry of Intelligence agents summoned 11 Christian couples from the city of Fardis to sign commitments to refrain from meeting together, whether in person or online. This was the first known instance of Christians being banned from online meetings, culminating in three of the Christians also becoming the first to be charged under the newly amended Article 500 and **sentenced** to five years each in prison, later **reduced** to three years on appeal (see case study).

Since then, the trend has been for more Christians to be charged with “propaganda” under the amended Article 500.

The trend of offering some prisoners serving shorter-term sentences the chance to spend the rest of their sentences at home with electronic tags was also observed in 2021, perhaps in an attempt to reduce overcrowding in Iran’s prisons.



CHRISTIANS ARRESTED OR SENTENCED IN 2021



The following cases have all been publicly reported, but it should be noted that there are many more cases that go unreported, either because no-one raises awareness – arresting authorities frequently issue threats to prevent publicity – or because those involved request confidentiality.



On **23 January**, a news agency connected to the IRGC **reported** the arrest of a “network” of Christians in “several provinces” for “creating moral deviations” and “promoting [religious] conversion”.



On **25 January**, Christian convert Reza Zaeemi was sentenced to 18 months in prison for “propaganda against the Islamic Republic by promoting evangelical Christianity”. His appeal was rejected on **25 April**, but his sentence was **reduced** to nine months.



On **27 January**, an appeals court in the southwestern city of Bushehr **upheld** the one-year prison sentences given to three Christian converts - Habib Heydari and brothers Sam and Sasan Khosravi - for “propagating against the Islamic Republic through promoting Christianity”.

In **January** and **February**, 11 Christian couples from Fardis were **ordered** by agents of Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence to sign commitments to refrain from meeting together – either in person or online. In **May**, three of the Christians, Amin Khaki, Milad Goodarzi, and Alireza Nourmohammadi, were **charged** under the newly amended Article 500 with “engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam”. On **26 June**, they were told they had been given the **maximum sentence** of five years each in prison. On **26 August**, they were informed their appeals had been rejected, but their **sentences reduced to three years** (see case study).

FEB
7

On **7 February**, Christian convert Ebrahim Firouzi was **told** he must report to the local prosecutor's office in his city of exile within five days to respond to fresh allegations of "propaganda against the Islamic Republic in favour of hostile groups". On **8 February**, Ebrahim was **transferred** to Chabahar Prison, then a week later to **Zahedan Prison**, before being **released on bail** on **27 February**, after which the new charges were dropped.

MAR
19

On **19 March**, Homayoun Zhaveh, a 62-year-old Iranian Christian convert with advanced Parkinson's disease, and his wife Sara Ahmadi, 42, were **summoned** to begin prison sentences of two and eight years in prison, respectively, for membership of a house-church. Their lawyer **referred their case to Iran's Supreme Court**, which rejected their appeals.

APR
12

On **12 April**, Christian convert Hamed Ashoori from Fardis was verbally informed that he had been **sentenced** to 10 months in prison for "propaganda against the Islamic Republic". On **26 June**, he was told his appeal had been **rejected**.

APR
19

On **19 April**, four Christian converts - Hojjat Lotfi Khalaf, Esmaeil Narimanpour, Alireza Varak-Shah, and Mohammad Ali Torabi, also known as Davoud - were **arrested** in Dezful. They were **released** on **21 April**, but several other Christians were also summoned for interrogation. On **3 August**, four of these Christians - Esmaeil, Alireza, Davoud, and Mohammad Kayidgap - were **charged** with "propaganda against the Islamic Republic". However, on **30 November** the charges against all eight men named in the case file were **dropped**.

SEP
05

On **5 September**, three Christian converts - Ahmad Sarparast, Morteza Mashhoodkari, and Ayoob Poor-Rezazadeh - were **arrested** in Rasht and held in a detention centre belonging to the IRGC. Ahmad and Morteza were transferred to Lakan Prison on **18 September**, and released on bail on **22 September**, but there was **no news** about Ayoob until his **release** on **3 October**.

**OCT
16**

On **16 October**, five Iranian Christians - **Joseph Shahbazian**, an Iranian-Armenian, and Christian converts **Mina Khajavi, Somayeh (Sonya) Sadegh**, Salar Eshraghi Moghadam and Farhad Khazaee - were **summoned** to give their final defence before the Evin prosecutor's office. The charges read out to them included: "weakening the foundation of the family", "attracting Muslims to house-churches", "being members of hostile groups to the Islamic Republic in order to damage national security", "weakening the belief in Muslim clerics", "propagating Christian Zionism", and "establishing and organising corrupt meetings".

**NOV
03**

On **3 November**, Iran's Supreme Court **ruled** that nine Christian converts serving **five-year prison sentences** for their involvement in house-churches and the promotion of "Zionist Christianity" should not have been charged with "acting against national security". Their case was referred back to the Revolutionary Courts for a review, and on 30 December the first of the nine was released pending a review. The other eight men were released two days later.

59 CHRISTIANS ARRESTED

30
CHRISTIANS
ENDURED
PRISON SENTENCES
(Solitary confinement, prison,
exile, electronic tags)



34
CHRISTIANS
DETAINED

CRIMINAL PROCEDURE FACED BY CHRISTIANS

In Iran, the promotion of any faith besides Shi'a Islam is regarded as criminal activity and hence Christians face criminal procedure if they are assumed to be promoting their faith among Persians. In addition, Christian converts are liable to be treated as criminals both on account of their conversion and by practising their right under Article 18.1 of the ICCPR to manifest their religion "in community with others". Iran fails to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief for its citizens as enshrined in the ICCPR. Christians are typically penalised under the following provisions of the Islamic Penal Code:

“ 498 Anyone, with any ideology, who establishes or directs a group, society, or branch, inside or outside the country, with any name or title, that constitutes more than two individuals and aims to perturb the security of the country, if not considered as "mohareb"⁴, shall be sentenced to two to 10 years' imprisonment.

“ 499 Anyone who joins, as a member, any of the groups, societies, or branches aforementioned in Article 498, shall be sentenced to three months to five years' imprisonment, unless it is proved that he had been unaware of its aims.

“ 499₂ Anyone who insults Iranian ethnicities or divine religions or Islamic schools of thought recognised under the Constitution, in the real or virtual sphere, with the intent to cause violence or tensions in the society, shall be sentenced to up to five years' imprisonment, or 10 years if they received financial or organisational help from outside the country.

“ 500 Anyone who engages in any type of propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran or in support of opposition groups and associations, shall be sentenced to three months to one year of imprisonment.

“ 500₂ Anyone who engages in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam, through mind-control or psychological indoctrination, or making false claims, shall be sentenced to up to five years' imprisonment, or 10 years if they received financial or organisational help from outside the country.

“ 513 Anyone who insults the sacred values of Islam or any of the Great Prophets or [12] Shi'ite Imams or the Holy Fatima [Muhammad's daughter], if considered as "Saab ul-nabi" [blasphemy], shall be executed; otherwise, they shall be sentenced to one to five years' imprisonment.

⁴ The Islamic Penal Code defines mohareb as any person resorting to arms to cause terror, fear or breach public security and freedom will be considered as mohareb and to be "corrupt on the Earth".



CHRISTIANS IMPRISONED IN **2021**



According to public sources, at least 30 Iranian Christians endured either prison or exile in 2021 on charges related to their Christian faith, and 21 were still serving these sentences by the end of the year - 18 in **prison**, one in **exile**, and two more serving the remainder of their sentences at home with an **electronic tag**.

Of those detained, many are from Rasht but were imprisoned in Evin Prison in Tehran, making family visits more difficult - despite the law mandating that prisoners should be detained as near to home as possible.

The poor conditions within Evin Prison were vividly exposed by the publication of **leaked videos** showing prison guards beating one detainee and dragging another elderly prisoner across the floor and up some stairs as a cleric casually stepped over him, suggesting such behaviour is not unusual.

A handful of Christians returned home after completing jail sentences in 2021, while many others are on temporary release from bail and/or are in the process of appealing sentences. Meanwhile, one Christian former prisoner of conscience is now **living in internal exile**, while a second completed his **two years in exile** in November 2021.

On **9 February**, Sasan Khosravi and Habib Heydari began serving their **one-year sentences** in Bushehr Central Prison alongside another Christian convert, Pooriya Peyma, who had not appealed against his 91-day sentence. Pooriya was released in **April** after 52 days' detention. Sasan and Habib were released on furlough in **March**, which was later extended, but were **told to return to prison** on **11 November** to serve the remainder of their sentences.



On **11 February**, Farhad Mohebbi and fellow converts Reza N., Alireza M., and Arash R. began serving their 10-month prison sentences for "propaganda against the state through the promotion of Christianity". On **19 March**, Farhad was released from prison but **ordered to wear an electronic tag** for the remainder of his sentence. Reza was granted early release in **May**. Alireza was conditionally released on **26 June**, and Arash on **20 July**, the condition in both cases being no further "promotion of Christianity".



On **18 February**, it was **revealed** that the UN's Working Group on Arbitrary Detention had ruled that the Iranian government was guilty of arbitrarily detaining Christian pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, and called for his immediate release.



On **22 February**, Christian convert Mohammad Ali (Yasser) Mossayebzadeh was granted **conditional release** after serving two and a half years of his **10-year sentence** for membership of a house-church. His sentence had been reduced to three years in **January**, reportedly after being pressured to abandon his Christian faith.



On **13 March**, Christian convert Abdolmajid Heydari began serving his one-year sentence for "propaganda against the Islamic Republic for the benefit of Christianity" in Bushehr's Central Prison. On **24 August** he was released with an electronic tag to complete the remainder of his sentence at home.



Reza Zaeemi **began** serving his nine-month sentence on **2 June** at Karaj Central Prison. On **8 August**, he was released, having been **fitted with an electronic tag**, and told to serve the remainder of his sentence at home.



Also in **June**, Christian convert Nasser Navard Gol-Tapeh was **told** his request for conditional release had been rejected, despite being eligible for parole having served over one third of his **10-year sentence** for “actions against national security” - because of his membership of a house-church. In **September**, Nasser was once again assured he would soon be released on parole - this time by Tehran’s chief prosecutor. But in **October**, he **learned** that the chief prosecutor himself had signed a second rejection of his request for parole on **21 September**.



On **27 July**, Hamed Ashoori **began** his 10-month prison sentence for “propaganda against the Islamic Republic”. In late **August** he was given **leave from prison** and hoped he may be permitted to spend the rest of his sentence at home with an electronic tag. However, he was later told he must return to prison on **11 September** and that he would have to spend at least two more months in prison before his release with a tag may be considered. On **24 November**, Hamed was given leave from prison and told he would not need to return to prison to serve the remainder of his sentence.



Also in **July**, Christian convert Saheb Fadaie was told his request for parole had been rejected, though he had never applied for it, being unable to accept the condition of no further involvement with a house-church. On **24 October**, Saheb was told a second request for parole had been rejected, though again he had **never applied**.



On **10 November**, Amin Khaki, Milad Goodarzi and Alireza Nourmohammadi **began** serving their three-year sentences in Central Prison, Karaj, for “engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam”.



TABLE OF PRISONERS

The following table includes cases of detention and enforced exile throughout 2021 which have appeared in public reports, and does not constitute a comprehensive record of every Christian detained in Iran in 2021:



NAME	LOCATION	DETENTION BEGAN	RELEASED	SENTENCE
Nasser Navard Gol-Tapeh	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jan 2018	-	10 years
Yousef Nadarkhani	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jul 2018	-	10 years (reduced to 6) + 2 years' exile
Mohammad Ali (Yasser) Mossayebzadeh	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jul 2018	Feb 2021	10 years + 80 lashes
Zaman (Saheb) Fadaie	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jul 2018	-	10 years (reduced to 6) + 2 years' exile + 80 lashes
Abdolreza Ali (Matthias) Haghnejad	Evin/Anzali Prison	Jul 2019	Dec 2021 (on bail)	5 years
Mohammad (Shahrooz) Eslamdoost	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jul 2019	-	5 years
Babak Hosseinzadeh	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jul 2019	-	5 years
Mehdi Khatibi	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jul 2019	-	5 years
Behnam Akhlaghi	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jul 2019	-	5 years
Ebrahim Firouzi	Rask	Oct 2019	Nov 2021	2 years' exile
Hossein Kadivar	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jun 2020	-	5 years
Khalil Dehghanpour	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jun 2020	-	5 years
Kamal Naamanian	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jun 2020	-	5 years
Mohammad Vafadar	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jun 2020	-	5 years
Mehdi Akbari	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jun 2020	-	10 years
Mehdi Roohparvar	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jun 2020	-	5 years
Mohammad Reza (Youhan) Omidi	Borazjan	Aug 2020	-	2 years' exile
Reza N	Evin Prison, Tehran	Feb 2021	May 2021	10 months
Farhad Mohebbi	Evin Prison, Tehran	Feb 2021	March 2021 (with tag)	10 months
Arash R	Evin Prison, Tehran	Feb 2021	July 2021 (conditional)	10 months

Name	Location	Detention Began	Released	Sentence
Alireza M	Evin Prison, Tehran	Feb 2021	June 2021 (conditional)	10 months
Sasan Khosravi	Bushehr Central Prison	Feb 2021	-	1 year
Habib Heydari	Bushehr Central Prison	Feb 2021	-	1 year
Pooriya Peyma	Bushehr Central Prison	Feb 2021	Apr 2021	3 months
Abdolmajid Heydari	Bushehr Central Prison	Mar 2021	Aug 2021 (with tag)	1 year
Reza Zaeemi	Karaj Central Prison	Jun 2021	Aug 2021 (with tag)	18 months (reduced to 9)
Hamed Ashoori	Karaj Central Prison	Jul 2021	Nov 2021	10 months
Amin Khaki	Karaj Central Prison	Nov 2021	-	5 years (reduced to 3)
Milad Goodarzi	Karaj Central Prison	Nov 2021	-	5 years (reduced to 3)
Alireza Nourmohammadi	Karaj Central Prison	Nov 2021	-	5 years (reduced to 3)

JUDICIAL RULINGS IN 2021



38

REPORTED
CASES

(only a fraction publicly reported)

209

INDIVIDUALS
AFFECTED

(including non-Christian family
members)



35

REPORTED INTENSE
PSYCHOLOGICAL
TORTURE

EQUIVALENT OF OVER
\$200,000
DEMANDED IN BAIL



AT LEAST

12

CHRISTIANS
SENTENCED TO:
PRISON, EXILE, TRAVEL BANS,
SOCIAL DEPRIVATION,
COMMUNITY SERVICE



CHURCH CLOSURES & VIOLATIONS OF PROPERTY RIGHTS



Churches which used to hold services for Persian-speaking Christians remained closed to Persian congregants in 2021, including Tehran's St. Peter's Presbyterian Church, Emmanuel Presbyterian Church and Assemblies of God (AoG) Central Church, as well as AoG churches in Janat-Abad, Ahvaz and Shahinshahr, among others. In addition, the AoG retreat centre in Karaj, the Garden of Sharon, remained closed following a [confiscation order](#) in March 2018.

In May 2021, Mohabat News [reported](#) that the Armenian cemeteries in Isfahan and Abadan had been extensively damaged by looters and that the authorities had failed to provide the necessary protection.



In August, IranWire [reported](#) that Doulab Armenian monastery and cemetery in Tehran were threatened by development projects of Tehran City Council. An "informed source" claimed that the intention was to remove the Armenian name and change the public image of the Armenian heritage.

In July, state-funded Mehr News Agency [reported](#) that the former house of Iran's first ethnic Persian Anglican bishop was to be turned into a museum. Mehr said the museum would be "for public use and culture lovers" and would display "the art and history of the country". A trusted source of Article18 later reported that the institute for the blind housed within the same complex is also under imminent threat of redevelopment.





CASE STUDY AMIN, MILAD & ALIREZA



It took just three months for the controversial **amendments** to Article 500 of Iran's penal code to be used against Persian-speaking Christians.

The **charges** against Amin Khaki, Milad Goodarzi and Alireza Nourmohammadi - all converts to Christianity who had already spent time in prison for their faith - were lifted directly from the amended article.

The three Christians, by being members of a house-church, were said to have "engaged in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam".

A month later, they were given the maximum **five-year sentences** for their "crime".

And though these sentences were later **reduced** to three years, and their fines of 40 million tomans (\$1,800) dropped, the precedent had still been set.

Ever since the amendments had been **proposed**, back in May 2020, rights groups had warned they could be used to target religious minorities, including Christians.

ARTICLE 19, an organisation that works to promote freedom of expression, had **called** them a "full-on attack on religious freedom", while one human rights lawyer **said** they would "facilitate the repression and punishment of Christian converts and others belonging to unrecognised religious groups".

When Amin, Milad and Alireza were **summoned** to begin their sentences in November 2021, they became a living testimony to the wisdom behind these fears.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has an obligation under national and international law to respect, protect and fulfil the right to freedom of religion or belief. We therefore call on the government of Iran to:

- ➔ Uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief for every citizen, regardless of their ethnic or linguistic group, including converts from other religions, thereby amending Article 13 of the constitution to recognise fully the freedom of religion or belief of all faiths as envisaged by Article 18 of the ICCPR, to which Iran is a State Party, without reservation, and therefore legally obliged to respect.
- ➔ Release immediately and unconditionally Christians detained on spurious charges related to their faith or religious activities.
- ➔ Drop all charges against Christians related to church activities now **deemed lawful** by the Iranian Supreme Court.
- ➔ Cease the criminalisation of house-church organisation and membership, allowing for Christians of all ethnic backgrounds to worship freely and collectively.
- ➔ Re-establish ownership of churches, properties and material confiscated from Christians and other religious minorities under national security-related charges.
- ➔ Cease to use provisions such as Articles 498, 499, 500 and 513 of the Penal Code and Article 167 of the Iranian constitution to unjustly detain minority-faith adherents.



Guarantee the right to counsel to all individuals charged with national security-related crimes and to select a lawyer of their choice, therefore repealing the Note to Article 48 of Iran's Criminal Procedures Regulations.



Grant access to the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran to allow him to thoroughly investigate Iran's compliance with international law on human rights.

Meanwhile, we call on members of the international community to assist in holding Iran accountable for upholding its obligation to ensure and facilitate freedom of religion or belief for all its citizens by highlighting this principle during political and/or economic discussions with, or concerning, Iran.

We also call on the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran to consistently raise issues faced by religious communities, including Christians, and on the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to include the ongoing mistreatment of Christians and other religious minorities in Iran in his reports.



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