

How significant is Baha'i persecution in Iran on the American agenda?
By Kritika Bharadwaj, World Outline
13 April 2013

The crisis of Iran's minority persecution seems to be overlooked as international actors place Iran's nuclear enrichment program as a primary issue on their agendas.

Amidst recent talks in Kazakhstan, pressure by Western powers did little to change Iran's rebuttal to curb its nuclear program. Reuters reports that after failed negotiations between Iran and the six world powers – U.S., Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany, the latter continues to fear the threat of a "new war in the Middle East."



Photo Credit: US Mission Geneva

This comes as a surprise at a time when the crisis of Iran's minority persecution seems to be somewhat overlooked by international actors. Not long before the discussion in Kazakhstan, U.N. Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed released a detailed report highlighting serious human rights violations in Iran. As of March 22, 2013, the U.N. Human Rights Council passed a 26 to 2 vote as a means for Shaheed to continue his work regarding Iran. In his report, Shaheed mentioned countless cases of executions, including the incessant suffering of Baha'is.

Prejudice against Iranian Baha'is dates back to mid 19th century during the Qajar dynasty, when the Baha'i sect came into being. Bab, predecessor to Baha'u'llah and founder of the Baha'i sect was executed and both Baha'u'llah and his son Abdu'l-Baha spent most of their time imprisoned or under house arrest.

After the Qajar regime, modern Western outlook, better educational backgrounds and pro-monarchist attitude of the Baha'is made them loyal subjects to the Shah which heavily challenged vested interests of power and wealth of the Islamic clergy. The Baha'i sect was then declared an enemy of Islam and its situation only worsened after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Despite an international outcry in 1955 over the Shah's participation in Baha'i persecution, the plight of 300,000 Baha'is remains at stake.

The most recent case of the minority's ill-treatment, taking the international arena by storm is the arrest of seven Baha'i leaders who completed 10,000 days in prison as of April 1, 2012. Among the charges leveled, espionage for Israel, propoganda against the Islamic republic and establishing illegal administration were most significant.

Ironically enough, state controlled Iranian media produces hate propoganda against the Baha'is. According to reports by The Baha'i International Community (BIC), during the period of December 17, 2009 to May 16, 2011, 367 print and online media articles, 58 seminars and conferences, three documentary television series and several other media produced anti-Baha'i information. Increased censorship and control of Iranian media (post Islamic Revolution) could serve as an answer to the rising violence against Baha'is. Unfortunately, that alone is not the case.

State controlled Iranian media is countered with international efforts towards the issue through BIC's registration with the U.N. in 1948, the work of U.N. Rapporteurs as well as the minority's coverage by publications such as the New York Times, the Times of London, the Washington

Post and Times of India. Why then, does the focus of U.S. policymakers remain more geared towards Iran's nuclear issue?

It is not the first time that an issue such as the nuclear enrichment program has been on Washington's agenda regarding Iran. The American administration's direct involvement in Iran's 1951-1953 oil nationalization crisis as well as C.I.A's backing of the 1953 coup remain significant historical chapters of international intervention in the Middle East – The same American government that thrives on democratic ideals of being the savior towards an oppressive regime, became responsible for overthrowing a democratically elected Mossadegh when its own position as a world power and oil interests were vulnerable. As U.S.-Iran relations deteriorated in 1980, American involvement became minimal in the region, including towards human rights violations such as Baha'i persecution.

The Baha'i International Community (BIC) and the U.N. have provided relief to a certain extent. The approval of 20 resolutions by the U.N. in favour of the Baha'is and an additional 20 resolutions being passed by U.N. Commission on Human Rights for Baha'is in Iran, have propelled international awareness on the issue.

Following such efforts, the U.S. and world bodies such as the European Council and European Parliament expressed their concern including legislatures from Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, among others. Although distress towards the problem has increased among international political actors, Baha'i executions remain on the rise, without experiencing any direct intervention.

It would not be valid to state that steps are not being taken towards the issue. However, detailed coverage by the BIC, the U.N. and several organizations such as Amnesty International and the Human Rights Watch, has not encouraged a significant intervention.

The current stature of world powers like the United States and their dominance over global agendas as to what is and isn't significant places Iran's nuclear enrichment program as a primary issue much like past American interests for oil in Iran. This is despite statements by U.S. think-tanks Carnegie Endowment and the Federation of American Scientists that Iran's estimated uranium is not sufficient for its nuclear plan.

For now, continued efforts by BIC, the U.N. and international media provide some hope as to steer the focus of world powers towards the Baha'i issue in Iran.

© World Outline Group, 2013