

November 13, 2015

His Holiness, Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

Your Holiness,

As a group of concerned non-governmental organizations from around the world, we write to urge you to press for an end to the Iranian government's religious discrimination against its own citizens during your upcoming meeting with President Hassan Rouhani. Iran's record of persistent and alarming denial of the fundamental freedom of religion to a number of its communities is cause for serious concern.

The Iranian authorities have jailed Pastor Saeed Abedini for nearly three years for practicing Christianity. He is emblematic of many other Christians who are wrongfully imprisoned and threatened with violence in Iran, including Maryam (Naseem) Naghash-Zargaran, Behnam Irani, Ata Babaei, and Ebrahim Firouzi, whose crime is to have peacefully practiced their faith. There are reports by rights organizations that the authorities have banned Iranian Muslim-born converts to Christianity from attending church services.

Iran's Bahá'í community suffers serious abuses as well. In 2008, the Iranian authorities arrested—and in 2010 sentenced—seven Bahá'í to 20 years in prison on charges of espionage, propaganda against the state system, and “insulting religious sanctities.” The seven are Fariba Kamalabadi, Afif Naeimi, Mahvash Sabet, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm. According to reports from the Bahá'í International Community and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Iran, Iranian authorities routinely subject them and other Bahá'í prisoners to harsh treatment. The Iranian authorities have also closed, threatened to close, or placed other restrictions on the businesses of more than 200 Bahá'í businesspeople since President Rouhani's inauguration alone.

The authorities have also harassed and arrested members of the Sufi Muslim community, including prominent leaders of the Nematollahi Gonabadi Order. And in early November, Branch 28 of Tehran's Revolutionary court confirmed the death sentence of a Sunni preacher, Shahram Ahmadi, based on alleged connections with extremist groups. Sunni Muslims in Iran have also faced substantial government restrictions on constructing and operating their own mosques, human rights organizations report. Iranian Shi'a are also not immune from repression. The authorities have persecuted and imprisoned a dissident cleric, Ayatollah Kazemeini Bouroujerdi, and others for challenging the government's official interpretation of Shi'a Islam.

Finally, we note with equal concern the Iranian government's discrimination against other religious communities, including the Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Yarsan minorities, as reported by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Iran.

Your efforts to draw public attention to the universality of human dignity and rights has been widely recognized as a welcome addition to the global political dialogue. We strongly believe that if you were to draw public attention to religious freedom in Iran, it could advance the rights of many Iranians. We urge you to use your historic meeting with President Rouhani as an opportunity to encourage greater religious freedom for Iranians of all faiths and beliefs.

Sincerely,

Association for Human Rights in Kurdistan of Iran—Geneva

Center for Inquiry

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)—United Kingdom

Freedom House

Human Rights Activists in Iran

Human Rights Watch

International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran

Jubilee Campaign USA, Inc.

Project on Middle East Democracy

The Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church of America