

Iran's Denial of Education to Baha'is

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*Abstract:*

*This paper briefly describes the background of the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran, especially the denial of education, and explores what could be done to alleviate this injustice, including enlisting the support of nations, organizations, media and people around the world. Bahá'ís are the largest religious minority in Iran and have been subjected to systematic genocide by the religious and governmental authorities for over 150 years. With the coming of the Islamic revolution in 1979, religious leaders took the reins of government, the influence of outsiders was limited, and the oppression of the Bahá'ís increased as a matter of government policy.*

*Though oppression has been and continues to be a part of all societies, it is a mark of a civilized society to proactively limit its pernicious influence and to afford as much as is possible equal rights and opportunities to all its citizens. The persecution of the Bahá'ís will be compared other instances of genocide, such as the Holocaust, to see what can be learned that might help humanity to establish a more just and humane world.*

At some point in your life you may have been unjustly denied rights or opportunities, as likely had your ancestors. We would hope that our children would be spared from such unfair treatment, but unless we do what we can today to rid our communities and world of racial, sexual, national, class, religious or other prejudices and discrimination, we remain vulnerable to their pernicious influences.

Minorities have been persecuted throughout history. Even a young country like the United States has had its history marred by persecution and discrimination against those considered inferior by the arbiters of power. Increasingly, prejudice and unfair discrimination are considered unacceptable and signs of greater equality and opportunity for the previously disenfranchised groups are growing.

Though oppression has been and continues to be a part of all societies, it is a mark of a civilized society to proactively limit its pernicious influence and to afford as much as is possible equal rights and opportunities to all its citizens. Religious persecution has been and continues to be

especially evil and destructive. When viewed through the most fundamental of all religious teachings, to love your neighbor as yourself, the hatred and cruelty that have been propagated in the name of religion boggles the mind. In view of this perversion of religious teachings that promote love and brotherhood and religious practices that wreck mayhem and disunity, it is little wonder that many have a general distrust or revulsion against religion.

The newest of the world's religions, the Bahá'í Faith, like the world religions founded before it, finds itself being attacked by the earlier established religions, most vehemently by the religion that immediately preceded it and out of which it emerged: Islam. Muhammad was attacked by the religious believers of his time as was Jesus, Moses, Abraham on the other prophets throughout history. It seems the most ardently religious people, those most earnestly awaiting the advent of God's messenger, are the quickest to judge and put these prophets to death when they do come, largely because these promised ones appear in a manner and form they do not accept. Interestingly this very denial and persecution seem to water the newfound religion and cause it to grow. The spirit of love, courage, sacrifice and faith in the new religion stands in stark contrast to the depravity and degradation of the old.

Though the Bahá'ís have been consistently and systematically persecuted by the followers and leaders of Islam, especially in Iran, Bahá'ís around the world respect both Islam and Iran, partly because of their association with the faith and place out of which their religion emerged, and partly because the Bahá'í teachings hold them in high regard. The persecuted Bahá'ís find themselves supporting tolerance and respect toward a religion and government that show them none. The Bahá'í Faith is the only world religion that reveres and recognizes the station of Muhammad and considers the Quran as holy scripture.

A noteworthy aspect of the persecution of the Bahá'ís by the Muslims is that the Bahá'ís have refused to compromise their high moral standards, to seek revenge, to hate their oppressors or to assume the role of victimhood. After decades of continuous persecution and the last thirty years of government supported genocide, the Bahá'ís continue to love their country and be loyal to its government. All they have asked for is their basic human rights as citizens given in the Iranian constitution. Rather than succumb to the incessant persecutions, the Bahá'í community has grown in strength. This moral stance has resulted in sympathetic support from nations, organizations, media and people around the world.

The Bahá'í community, Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority has been persecuted since its founding in Persia in 1844 because the Bahá'í teachings challenged the authority of the influential mullahs, and they in turn incited the governmental leaders and their fanatical followers to try to extinguish it. Over twenty-thousand of its early followers were tortured and put to death in the cruelest fashion. The oppression of the Bahá'ís in Iran has been ongoing for over 160 years. These pogroms have been lessened when voices from the outside, such as the United Nations, national governments and non-governmental organizations, condemned these egregious violation of the Bahá'ís basic human rights. With the coming of the Islamic revolution in 1979, when the religious leaders took the reins of government, the influence of outsiders was limited, and the oppression of the Bahá'ís has increased as a matter of government policy.

Denial of Education

One right that the Iranian government has denied the Bahá'ís is the opportunity for education, part of a larger plan to not just deny rights to the Bahá'ís in general, including arbitrary executions, arrests, imprisonments, personal violations and confiscation of property, but to eradicate them as a community. Education is an important virtue in the Bahá'í Faith and its followers are enjoined to develop to their fullest capacity. As a result of its emphasis on education, the Bahá'í community had been at the forefront of educational advances in Iran with a 100% literacy rate among Bahá'í women under forty in 1973 compared to the national women's literacy rate of 23%, and Bahá'ís were disproportionately among the most respected and accomplished professions.

The Iranian leaders continue to systematically keep Bahá'ís from attending universities and even refuse them enrollment in elementary and secondary schools. Any national entrance exam identified as that of a Bahá'í is automatically rejected. Being obedient to the laws of their country, the Bahá'ís have little recourse but to appeal to outside sources for some justice. Even their efforts to start their own higher education programs for the Bahá'ís denied university admission have been blocked by the authorities. Bahá'í schools that had been established early in the 20 century were closed by the government, though they offered a model education sought by all. Though their schools were closed, which were among the most respected in the country, their commitment to education remained very strong.

#### Efforts to Assist the Bahá'ís

Though efforts to assist the Bahá'ís have been ongoing since the earliest days of their persecution, we will focus on recent work. As a Bahá'í and an academic, I had sought ways to champion the cause of my co-religionist in Iran through my work and community. I turned to the organization that most stood for academic freedom and the rights of education: the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). I worked through the association to get a resolution on the floor at the AAUP's ninety-fourth annual meeting in June 2008. They voted unanimously to support the Iranian Bahá'ís when they passed the following resolution.

The Ninety-fourth Annual Meeting of the American Association of University Professors observes with dismay practices by the government of Iran which discriminate against the country's citizens belonging to religious or ethnic minorities, including unjustly denying them opportunities for education at all levels. We note in particular the worsening situation of Iran's Baha'i community, whose members are subject to constant harassment and punitive measures by Iranian authorities and who are wrongly kept out of universities or prevented from completing their studies. We urge the government of Iran, consistent with the constitution of Iran, to remove barriers that deny access to higher education on religious or ethnic grounds, and to ensure for members of the Baha'i community the same rights accorded to other citizens of Iran.

Since the AAUP's resolution condemning the denial of education rights of the Bahá'ís in Iran, several other organizations have also voiced their concern. A recent U.S. Department of State report condemned Iran's treatment of Bahá'ís. In November 2008, a leading think tank in Britain, the Foreign Policy Centre, published a report documenting violations of the Iranian government against its own constitution and international agreements it has signed. Highlighting the persecution of the Bahá'ís at the launch of the report, Baroness Haleh Afshar, professor of

politics and women's studies at the University of York stated, "The treatment of the Bahá'ís is appalling, unacceptable and—in every way—not only against accepted human rights regulations but the ancient traditions of Iran..."

On December 10, 2008, the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human rights, prominent figures in education, law, human rights, religion and the press in Britain published an open letter in *The Times* calling the Iranian government's policy denying education to Bahá'ís as "manifestly unjust". Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states "Everyone has the right to education" and "Higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit". The government of Iran denies Bahá'ís both rights. In January 2009, the European parliament passed a resolution critical of Iran's mistreatment of Bahá'ís.

In a February 5, 2009 report, Amnesty International documents many violations of human rights in Iran, including those against the Bahá'ís. On February 6, 2009, CNN reported that forty-two Iranian intellectuals who all live outside of Iran released a public apology for the mistreatment of the Bahá'ís entitled "We are ashamed". The letter says "As Iranian human beings, we are ashamed for what has been perpetrated upon the Bahá'ís in the last century and a half in Iran." Of the many statements listing their shame is that the voice of protest against the many barbaric murders, heinous crimes, desecrations, personal violations, systematic oppressions and brutal persecutions against Bahá'ís solely on their religious beliefs has been absent or muted. Two statements related directly to the AAUP's June 2008 resolution.

**We are ashamed** of our silence that on the account of their fidelity to their religion and truthfulness in stating this conviction, thousands of Baha'i youth have been barred from education in universities and other institutions of higher learning in Iran;

**We are ashamed** that because of their parents' religious beliefs, Baha'i children are subjected to denigration in schools and in public.

(<http://www.iranpresswatch.org/2009/02/we-are-ashamed/>)

They pledge to stand up against the injustice and seek tolerance.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement of concern about Iran's human rights abuses in October 2008, including rights denied the Bahá'ís. In addition to these recent statements condemning the Iranian government's attempts to eradicate, harass and suppress its 300,000 member Bahá'í community, ongoing resolutions passed nearly every year since 1982 by the United Nations International Commission on Human Rights decrying the oppression of the Bahá'ís in Iran.

On February 17, a document endorsed by the entire 27-nation membership of the European Union expressed concern over seven Baha'i prisoners that were being held on trumped up charges when their only "crime" is to hold religious beliefs that differ from the ruling class. Also, the president of the Human Rights Commission of the Federal Chamber of Deputies Brazil sent an open letter to Iran seeking the release of the Baha'i prisoners. Governmental bodies in several

other countries, including Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, have also issued statements of concern.

Besides denying Baha'is access to higher and regular education, the persecution and discrimination against the Bahá'ís includes secretly monitoring their actions, raiding their homes, confiscating their property, arbitrary arrests and publishing incendiary material to incite the public against them. Through government sanctions they have been destroying Bahá'í homes, cemeteries and holy places and barring Bahá'ís from having jobs, loans, licenses, retirement and other rights as citizens.