

COMMENTARY

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Baha'is in Iran: Denial of Education

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The right to education proclaimed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and guaranteed by the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights—which has been signed and ratified by Iran—stresses equitable access to higher education, with the only legitimate admissions criterion being meeting academic standards.

Since 1979, the government of Islamic Republic of Iran has systematically sought to deprive young members of its largest non-Muslim religious minority—the 300,000 strong Baha'i community—from higher education. Thousands of other students have also been barred from universities for being active in student unions, campus publications or social and political issues including women's rights, academic freedom, human rights and the rights of prisoners.

The government has also sought to close down Baha'i efforts to establish their own educational initiatives, including the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). Such efforts are aimed at thwarting the socio-economic development of the Baha'i community.

The Baha'i Question

During the first years of the Islamic Republic more than 200 Baha'is—many of them occupying positions of leadership—were presumed to have disappeared or were publicly executed. Allegations of Baha'i centres and cemeteries being destroyed and of arson, looting, mob attacks, and forced recantations were reported by Baha'is in more than 50 cities and towns across Iran. Large numbers of Baha'i youth were expelled from universities.

The targeting of Baha'is by the regime drew widespread international exposure which likely contributed to a revised approach by the government. In December 1990, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei directed President Hashemi Rafsanjani to address 'the Baha'i Question,' and the issue was referred to the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCCR). According to the text of the memorandum, Ayatollah Khamenei wanted policy proposals 'devised in such a way that everyone will understand what should or should not be done' with respect to the Baha'is. In response to Ayatollah Khamenei's request, Seyyed Mohammad Reza Hashemi Golpaygani, Secretary of the SCCR, prepared a confidential memo outlining policy guidelines in light of the constitution and religious and civil laws of the country.

According to sources within the Baha'i community, the memorandum signed by some of the most powerful members of the government, clarifies what had become a *de facto* state policy: the Baha'is must be treated in such a way that 'their progress and development will be blocked.' Inter alia, the memorandum states that Baha'is may earn a 'modest livelihood', but 'they must be expelled from universities,' and the state must 'deny them employment if they identify themselves as Baha'is,' and 'deny them any position of influence, such as in the educational sector, etc.' Children, the memorandum says, 'should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing religious ideology.'

After this secret memorandum was leaked in 1993, Human Rights Watch concluded that it provided concrete evidence of 'an official policy of persecution.'

Access to higher education

Baha'i students have been formally denied access to higher education since 1981. The government's efforts in this respect perhaps most clearly demonstrate the lengths to which it is willing to go in its campaign of denial of basic rights to the Baha'i community.

Initially, a very simple mechanism was used to exclude Baha'is from higher education: it required that everyone who took the national university entrance examination declare their religion. Applicants who indicated other than one of the four officially recognized religions in Iran, namely Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, were excluded.

In the late 1980s, Baha'is sought to mitigate the effects of the ban, making informal arrangements to provide for the education of their young people, using the volunteer services of Baha'i professors who had been fired from their jobs immediately following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. This undertaking evolved and began being referred to as Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). It offered correspondence courses and classes in private homes throughout the country.

Since then, the Iranian government has made repeated attempts to bring to a halt this quiet, peaceful, and vital initiative. In 1998, agents of the government staged a series of raids, arresting at least 36 members of the BIHE faculty and staff and confiscating much of its equipment and records.

The raids on the Institute, however, drew considerable international attention to the government's oppressive policies. Human rights organs at the UN called for an end to religious discrimination against Baha'i students and various governments have pressed Iran to allow Baha'is back into university.

In an apparent response to this pressure, the government officially announced in late 2003 that it would drop the declaration of religious affiliation on the application for the national university entrance examination.

81 universities instructed to expel Baha'is

A leaked confidential communication in 2006 from the director general of the Central Security Office of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology—which oversees all state-run universities—instructed 81 Iranian universities to expel any Baha'i students. '[I]f the identity of Baha'i individuals becomes known at the time of enrolment or during the course of their studies, they must be expelled from university,' stated the letter.

The directive flatly contradicted public and private statements of Iranian officials over the previous several years, who had sought to portray their educational system being open to Baha'is and free of discriminatory practices.

In early March 2007, for example, the *Reuters* news agency reported that some 70 Baha'i students had been expelled that academic year from universities in Iran. In that report, an anonymous spokesperson for the Iranian Mission to the United Nations was quoted as saying in reply: 'No one in Iran because of their religion has been expelled from studying.'

Lack of credibility of these statements came to light when Clare Short, a member of Parliament in the United Kingdom, received a communication from Hamid Reza Arefi, the charge d'affaires of the Iranian Embassy in London, who wrote, 'In Iran, no individual is excluded from higher education solely because of his/her ideology.'

A variety of means have since been devised to obstruct Baha'is entering higher education. In June 2007, around 1,000 Baha'i students wrote their entrance exams, but more than 700 were informed afterwards that their files were 'incomplete' and their exams could not be graded. Of more than 200 admitted, 128 were later identified as Baha'is and consequently expelled.

In 2008, Baha'i students attempting to access their university entrance examination results were directed to a webpage that said 'Error-incomplete file.' Since then, of those Baha'i students who have managed to secure places in universities, a number have been expelled once it is known that they are Baha'is, often just before they sit for their final examinations.

On 21 May 2011, personnel of the Ministry of Intelligence, acting simultaneously in several cities across the country raided the homes of individuals who are closely involved

in assisting with the operations of the BIHE. At least thirty households were known to have been subjected to extensive searches and sixteen Baha'is were arrested.

There can be no doubt that the campaign against the BIHE is being carried out under a centrally orchestrated campaign aimed at demoralizing Baha'i youth and eroding the formal educational level of the community. Not content with excluding the Baha'is from the nation's universities, the government is revitalizing its efforts to thwart the informal educational arrangements that the Baha'i community has undertaken to enable its youth to expand their knowledge beyond the high school level. There is no doubt that arrests are part of the official campaign to block development of Iranian Baha'is.

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