

Chapter V

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE PRESENT DAY status of human rights and social reform in the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be adequately understood without taking into account the historical background of persecution against the Bahá'í community — a history that does much to explain the cultural crisis gripping Iranian society today as its leadership struggles to face the challenge of modernity.

The Bahá'í Faith has been persecuted in Iran since its founding there in the mid-1800s. Early followers faced violent opposition from both the Islamic religious authorities and succeeding dynasties. It has been estimated that some 20,000 persons perished in these pogroms during the nineteenth century.

The illustration at top left, depicting the death of an early Bahá'í, appeared in the Persian magazine, Imá'mat, circa 1911. The photo bottom left, a Bahá'í father and son (left) in chains after being arrested with fellow Bahá'ís shown in a photograph taken around 1896. Both were subsequently executed.

.....
*Early followers faced
violent opposition
from both the
Islamic religious
authorities and
succeeding dynasties.*
.....



The takeover of the National Bahá'í Centre in Tehran during the Khomeini regime, 1979.

The persecutions have continued intermittently in the twentieth century, coinciding most often with the need of various governments to shore up support with certain elements of Iran's Islamic leadership. And they have come regardless of the leaders' political orientation.

Some of the outbreaks against Bahá'ís were directed by local or regional authorities. In 1903, for example, 101 Bahá'ís were killed in the city of Yazd after the populace was incited by hostile mullahs. At other times the oppression of Bahá'ís was made a part of official national policy. During the early years of the Pahlavi regime (1927 to 1979), the government formalized a policy of discrimination against the Bahá'ís as a concession to the clergy. Beginning in 1933, Bahá'í literature was banned, Bahá'í marriages were not recognized, and Bahá'ís in public service were demoted or fired. Bahá'í schools — of which there were some 50 in



Mullah Falsafi supervising workmen in the act of destroying the dome of the National Bahá'í Center in 1955, Tehran.

the country — were forced to close.

Another round of persecutions commenced in 1955, when the Pahlavi regime allowed the nationwide broadcast of a series of incendiary sermons against the Bahá'ís by a leading Shia preacher in Tehran — apparently hoping to make the Bahá'ís a scapegoat to deflect attention from unpopular government policies. Both the national and army radio stations were put at the disposal of the responsible cleric, Sheikh Muhammad Taqi Falsafi, who joined the Shah's Minister of Defense, General Batmangelich, in demolishing the dome of Bahá'í national headquarters with pickaxes. A wave of anti-Bahá'í violence swept the country. Murders, rapes and robberies were reported in many areas, while the government assured the Majlis that it had ordered the suppression of all activities of “the Bahá'í sect.”



Successive stages of the demolition of the House of the Báb. The first image is an interior room in early 1979; the second photo shows Revolutionary Guards in the process of destruction; the third the collapse of the roof.



Bahá'ís understand that this pattern of persecution is a manifestation of the misunderstanding and fear that often occur when a new religion emerges from the matrix of a well-established orthodoxy. The pattern has been repeated through the ages; virtually all of the world's great religions have faced intense persecution at their birth.

In the case of the Bahá'í Faith, the teachings of its two Founders, especially when viewed through the lens of traditional Islam, are as challenging as those of any Prophet in ancient times.



The initial wave of persecution came in response to the claims of a young Iranian merchant, known to history as the Báb, who announced in Shiraz in May 1844 that He was the bearer of a new revelation from God. His primary mission, the Báb said, was to prepare humanity for the advent of "Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest," the universal divine

Messenger anticipated in the scriptures of all the major religions.

The teachings of the Báb called for the spiritual and moral reformation of Persian society, and for the upliftment of the station of women and the poor. His promotion of education and the useful sciences was also revolutionary. Such progressive and idealistic teachings, which made a clear break with the Islamic frame of reference, were rapidly embraced by thousands of followers and were seen by both secular and

The area is completely razed in preparation for the later construction of the Mosque of Mihdi. The white circles on the images below indicate the location of the House of the Báb. The last photo shows the Mosque in 1994.

religious authorities as a threat to their power. Widespread persecutions ensued, and, as noted above, some 20,000 believers, who were known as Bábís, paid with their lives. The Báb Himself was executed by the government in 1850.

Among the followers of the Báb was an Iranian nobleman named Bahá'u'lláh. In 1863 He announced that He was the Messenger the Báb had heralded, founding the Bahá'í Faith, which develops and extends many of the teachings and principles introduced by the Báb. The central theme of Bahá'u'lláh's message is that humanity is a single race and that the day has come for unification into one global society. "The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens," wrote Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh taught that there is only one God, and that all of the world's religions are expressions of a single, unfolding divine plan, "the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future."

Bahá'ís believe that God progressively reveals religious truth to humanity through a series of divine Messengers, each of Whom has founded a great religion. These Messengers have included Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad; the most recent are the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Others will follow in ages to come.

The idea that there should be new Messengers of God after Muhammad is viewed by many Muslims as heresy. In the Qur'an, Muhammad referred to Himself



.....
*Bahá'u'lláh taught
that there is only one
God, and that all of
the world's religions
are expressions of
a single, unfolding
divine plan.*
.....

as the “Seal of the Prophets,” and most Muslim scholars interpret this to mean that He would be the last Messenger of God.

Bahá'ís, however, believe that the coming of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh poses no contradiction to Islamic teachings or those of any of the other revealed religions. Bahá'ís understand that Muhammad ended or “sealed” the prophetic cycle. Then, with the advent of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, a new era of religious fulfillment began. Bahá'u'lláh referred to this new period in human history as the “stage of maturity.” Bahá'ís believe that this is all in accordance with the prophecies of Islam and the world's other major religions.

Other aspects of the Bahá'í teachings also arouse opposition among some followers of Islam. In outlining His vision for a new world civilization, Bahá'u'lláh advocated a series of highly progressive social principles. These include the elimination of all forms of prejudice; equality between the sexes; the elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth; universal education; the harmony of science and religion; a sustainable balance between human society and the natural world; and the establishment of a world federal system, based on collective security and the oneness of humanity.

Some fundamentalist Muslims view the progressive nature of these teachings, such as the equality of women and the absence of religious clergy, as particularly antithetical to the traditions of Islam. To Iran's Shia establishment, especially — and also to many among their Sunni Muslim counterparts — the emergence of an independent religion that postdates the Qur'an by almost thirteen centuries is not only theologically abhorrent but threatens the system of patronage, endowments, political influence, and social perquisites to which they lay claim. The effect has been to arouse in the Shia establishment a determination to extinguish the new faith and suppress its followers.



The words, "Enemy of Islam," were found written on the leg of Dr. Masih Farhangi, a Bahá'í who was executed in Tehran on 24 June 1981.

The persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran is not related to any underlying issue of ethnicity or political agenda. The overwhelming majority of Iranian Bahá'ís come from the same Persian and Azerbaijani ethnic stock as the rest of the population, and they represent a cross section of Iran's social classes.

Only their religious beliefs distinguish them from their fellow countrymen — beliefs which the Bahá'í teachings forbid them from imposing on others. Paradoxically, because of the control exercised by the Islamic clergy over the media of communication, the nature of Bahá'í beliefs remains virtually unknown to a public that has been systematically taught to fear and hate them.

The Iranian Bahá'í community has itself consistently been denied the use of any means of mass communication, including radio, television, newspapers, films, the distribution of literature and public lectures. The result has been widespread, unreasoning prejudice.

.....

The international response

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY has responded to the persecution of the Bahá'í community in Iran with overwhelming sympathy, expressing concern for the Bahá'ís and condemnation of the Iranian government. The Bahá'í community believes that this outpouring has been a strong restraining force against the government, preventing a pogrom on a much greater scale.

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has passed more than 20 resolutions expressing concern about reports of human rights violations in Iran, and each has made specific mention of the situation of the Bahá'í community there. [*See Appendix II*]. The specific reference to a religious community is quite unusual for the Commission, which normally confines itself to expressions of diplomatic concern and general references to charges of human rights violations and discrimination.

Following the lead of the Commission on Human Rights, the United Nations General Assembly itself has since 1985 approved some 17 resolutions that have specifically mentioned the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran and expressed concern over reports of human rights violations there.

Virtually all of these resolutions have called on Iran to stop violating the rights of Bahá'ís and to abide by the various international covenants on human rights that the government has freely signed. UN resolutions have also called explicitly for the “emancipation” of the Bahá'ís of Iran.

Among the most salient features of the United Nations' attention to the Bahá'í case has been the continuing investigations conducted by a succession of highly regarded human rights specialists. Each was appointed by the Commission on Human Rights and given the mandate to probe into the human rights situation in Iran. And each has reported extensively on the real and serious nature of the persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran, lending unimpeachable credibility to the Bahá'í case.

The first Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights, as these investigators are called, was Andres Aguilar of

Venezuela, who was appointed in 1984. After his resignation in 1986, Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, a law professor and human rights expert from El Salvador, was appointed to the position. Following Mr. Galindo Pohl's departure in 1994, the Commission appointed Maurice Copithorne, a noted Canadian jurist, as its Special Representative for Iran. Unfortunately, as part of an effort to engage Iran in a "human rights dialogue," the Commission on Human Rights stopped appointing Special Representatives in 2002. And in many respects, the situation has grown worse since that time.

Nevertheless, the Commission's Special Representatives have produced over the years a series of extremely important and influential reports to the United Nations on the situation in Iran. Gathering their information from a variety of sources and — in at least four cases — making visits to Iran, Special Representatives have managed to catalogue the whole range of abuses and persecutions which the Bahá'í community in Iran has experienced.

For example, Mr. Galindo Pohl's 1990 report to the General Assembly noted that he had received extensive documentation that provides "evidence of discrimination, confiscation, rejection by universities, suspension of pensions, demands for the return of pensions earned and paid, denial of passports and other irregularities."

The report added that "it would seem that the attitude towards the Bahá'ís and their situation depends on the temperament and personal convictions of individual officials. This keeps the Bahá'ís in a perpetual state of uncertainty about their activities."

In Mr. Copithorne's 1998 report to the General Assembly, he wrote that continuing reports of violations of human rights against the Bahá'ís force him "to conclude that the pattern of persecution of members of this community has not abated."

And in his last report, released in 2002, Mr. Copithorne said that while there had been "some hopeful signs" concerning the "commutation of death sentences" and "the release of prisoners," the Bahá'í community "continues to be subject to harassment and discrimination in the areas of, inter alia, education, employment, travel, housing and



Diane Ala'i, a Bahá'í International Community representative to the United Nations, addresses the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva.

the enjoyment of cultural activities.” Seven Bahá’ís were in prison at that time, he said, and “Bahá’í property continues to be subject to confiscation.”

Of interest, Mr. Copithorne also expressed a conviction that the “Bahá’í Question” policy is still operative.

Also of concern is the sentence issued by a judge of the Supreme Office of Control and Review, Hamzih Khalili, on 15 September 2001, in the context of an appeal by the Muslim owners of property rented to the Baha’is that was confiscated in 1998. According to an unofficial translation to which the Special Representative has had access, the verdict declares that the “seizure and confiscation of the properties belonging to the misguided sect of Baha’ism is legally and religiously justifiable” and states that “the cultural activities of the misguided sect of Baha’ism — as prescribed by the order of His Excellency the Supreme Leader — do need to be seriously opposed”. This would seem to indicate that the 1991 memorandum on “The Baha’i Question”, issued by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and approved by the Supreme Leader, is still in force and therefore that discrimination against Baha’is continues to be official practice, a situation the Special Representative deeply deplors.

As well, in 1996, United Nations support for the Bahá’í case was further strengthened by the release of a report by the UN’s Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, which called on Iran to end its ban on Bahá’í institutions and other oppressive measures. Authored by Professor Abdelfattah Amor, a noted Tunisian legal expert, the report explicitly stated that the persecution of the Bahá’ís was based on religious intolerance.

More recently, in 2003, the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance took note of the continuing confiscations, imprisonments, and efforts to block Bahá’í youth from receiving higher education, and concluded:

While noting some promised improvements in treatment of the Baha’i minority, the Special Rapporteur is of the view that the measures taken by the Iranian authorities to end the persecution of Baha’is, including by non-State entities, and to guarantee them the same rights as any other Iranian citizen are still inadequate. He

again reminds the Iranian authorities of the need to ensure respect for the relevant provisions of international law, including article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. In addition, as a religious minority, Baha'is are entitled to the respect due to all other religious minorities.

In addition to efforts by the United Nations and its subsidiary bodies and agencies, numerous national legislatures and regional bodies have spoken out against Iran's treatment of the Bahá'í community over the last twenty years. Expressions of concern for Iran's Bahá'ís have come from the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, and from the legislatures of Australia, Brazil, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, among others. Many heads of state and government leaders have also voiced their dismay over Iran's treatment of the Bahá'ís.

International and national non-governmental organizations have also risen to the defense of Iran's Bahá'ís. Amnesty International, the Minority Rights Group, and Middle East Watch, among others, have closely monitored the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran and published extensive reports that confirm the persecutions there.

The world's news media, as well, have reported extensively on the persecution of Iran's Bahá'í community. Major articles and editorials which detail, confirm and condemn the persecutions have appeared in *Le Monde*, the *Times of London*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Economist*, the *Times of India*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* — as well as smaller and lesser known newspapers such as the *Uganda Times*, the *Papua New Guinea Post Courier*, the *Straits Times of Singapore*, and *La Republica* in Panama City. The Associated Press, Reuters, and the Agence France-Presse have also carried numerous dispatches on the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran and the response of international organizations and agencies.

In many respects the Bahá'í case has been a model for how international human rights machinery can be used to protect an oppressed minority. Thanks to international support for the Bahá'ís, the wholesale genocide of the Bahá'í community in Iran has so far been prevented.