

Baha'is Oppression in Iran

by Sophia Koosha

Religious freedom is something that I may have taken for granted my whole life. I have never realized how lucky I am to have the ability to fearlessly practice my religion, until I learned more about it. Learning more about it rose discussion with my dad, Aurang, who grew up as a Baha'i in Iran. The things he told me and experiences he had opened my eyes to the harsh reality of religious freedom in other parts of the world. Around the world, since 1948, religious freedom has been considered a fundamental human right when the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, enforcement is limited based on a country's human rights records (Johnson 1). So basically, many governments maneuver the system to the disadvantage of minority groups, in order to force their own beliefs upon citizens.

Of the world's population, nearly three-fourths of people live in places with "Very high" degrees of restrictions on religious freedom according to the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life (Johnson 1). Within those three fourths are those in the middle east, specifically in Iran. Many minority groups are punished and harassed in Iran including Christians, Sunni Muslims, Zoroastrians, Jews, and one of the biggest minority groups, Baha'is. These groups are oppressed and discriminated against, constantly fighting for their freedom within the regime. According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, religious discrimination is defined as "Treating a person unfavorably because of their religious beliefs" and "Treating someone differently because that person is associated with an individual of a particular religion" ("Religious Discrimination"). These minority groups fit this definition perfectly. After finding all this out, as a Baha'i myself, I grew curious as to how the

discrimination all began. Furthermore, how, and why did the discrimination of Baha'is in Iran begin, and how is it still happening?

The Baha'i Faith is a universal religion founded back in the mid nineteenth century which believes in equality of all mankind, in attempt to achieve world peace "Through the establishment of unity, justice, and equality" ("Bahá'u'lláh – the Divine Educator"). It was founded by a man known as the Bab. The Baha'i Faith official website says how the Bab announced that he was "Destined to transform the life of humanity" ("The Báb – Herald of the Bahá'í Faith"). He inspired those who followed to perform acts of heroism, creating the Babi Faith. However, the Bab was prosecuted in Tabriz for saying a new Manifestation would arrive soon. The Bab's message was carried out for six years until the coming of the new Manifestation of God, Baha'u'llah. According to the Official Website of the Baha'i community, a Manifestation of God is "A fuller measure of inspiration for the next stage in the awakening and progress of humanity is released into the world" ("Baha'u'llah- the Divine Educator"). Examples of other religion's Manifestation of Gods would be Moses, Buddha, or Jesus. Furthermore, as soon as Baha'u'llah heard the Bab's message, he knew he had to carry it out, and the followers of the Babi faith became followers of Baha'u'llah.

Baha'u'llah began leading by refusing a position in the court of the Shah and left his privilege in order to tend to the poor in his country. He transformed his action into a movement, where he peacefully preached to construct new social order, while attempting to form unity among all people and religions.

For decades Baha'u'llah continued the Bab's writings with many verses, books, and letters which would construct the Baha'i Faith, and pass on teachings. However, he suffered imprisonment for the accusation of the attempted assassination of the Shah of Persia since his

teachings were thought to be influential of the assassination attempt. When he got out, his teachings were so influential that they reached the Muslim leaders of Baghdad, and he was banished (“What Bahá’ís Believe”). The Muslim leaders disagreed with his new writings and did not approve. He then traveled to Adrianapole, where he was imprisoned for 40 years (“Religions – Baha’i: Bahá'u'lláh”). Moreover, ever since the origin of the Baha’i faith within Persia and the middle east area, Baha’u’llah was discriminated against by people of power. And since he was discriminated against, so were his followers.

Following the death of Baha’u’llah, Baha’is would be treated differently for the next 100 years. Although they’d be discriminated against, they were at least safe. My Dad was a Baha’i in Iran until he moved to the US in 1976. When he was in Iran, he didn’t want to hide that he was a Baha’i since he loves his faith. However, Muslim extremists who were other students would not talk to him and bash the Baha’i faith. Additionally, the teachers at the time wouldn’t do anything against Baha’is, but also wouldn’t help if there was name calling. He felt overall safe since the Shah at the time, named Mohammad Reza, protected Baha’is. Additionally, the prime minister of Iran at the time, Amir Abbas Hoveida, had a parent who was a Baha’i, so he also protected Baha’is. Overall, there were a few people of power who had the ability to make sure Baha’is were safe in Iran. They were safe until the late 1970s, when the Shah was overthrown and fled.

In 1979, the start of the Islamic Revolution, everything changed in Iran especially for Baha’is. The new ruler of 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, made it clear he’d deny Baha’is of basic human rights, that would be given to other religious minority groups. Additionally, within the new republic, the influential people of power were leaders of the anti-Baha’i society. Immediately, Baha’is knew they were in danger as “The Islamic regime began to pursue a program of ‘implacable hostility toward the Baha’is’” (Karlberg 226). Panic among Baha’is

began, as did the rush to get out. However, since Baha'is were denied so many rights, they had no protection against killings or assaults, and were losing their jobs quickly, so it was extremely difficult to escape. Luckily for my family specifically, they were able to escape as soon as they realized they were in danger. However, some were stranded. According to my dad, Aurang, since they wouldn't allow Baha'is over the border freely, my Aunt Parveen had to find her own way out. She travelled through Turkey with a mule, then from there went to England, then flew from England to the US. She had help traveling and getting money from family who were already in the US and was one of many who had to figure out a way to escape the danger. My dad explained to me how Baha'is ended up everywhere: some in Germany, Britain, Canada, and the US. He has a zoom call with them monthly to check in on his family. However, some people didn't have advantage of help from family and were stuck in the terrible conditions of Islamic Republic of Iran.

At the end of 1979, conditions were so intense to a point where over 200 were executed, over a thousand imprisoned, and many thousands lost their jobs. Additionally, many were denied their pensions, forced to repay past pensions and salaries, expelled from schools and universities, denied health care, had their personal property plundered, and had their grave sites defiled (Karlberg 227). People were so strong within their faith that they would not give up practicing even if it cost their lives. Some people even risked their lives for others by being active Baha'is. According to Aurang, "An active Baha'i is someone who chooses to take care of Baha'is, hold assemblies in their house, and basically give their life for the faith, knowing they'd be captured and killed." Eshragheh Foroohar, my great aunt, and Mahmoud Foroohar, my great uncle, lived in a small town around Karaj. They decided to be active Baha'is during this revolution. The extremists came to take Mahmoud first, breaking in at night, then captured Eshragheh in attempt

to torture them until they become Muslim. They refused to give up their faith and were shot with bullets, Aurang told me. In some cases, family members of executed victims were forced to pay the government for the cost of the bullets used (Karlberg 227). In this case, according to Aurang, the family members were my grandmother and her sister, who paid and fortunately were able to get their bodies in order to peacefully bury them.

The conversation of what happened to Baha'is is intense and uncomfortable but needs to be exposed so people can learn just how little justice they received for the conditions they were put through. In Iran now, citizens are pro-western, and have been trying to fight the regime that has been built. They rise to "Demand their basic human rights, whether in the 1999 student protests, the 2009 Green Movement, or the most recent protests of 2019," according to the US Department of State ("Islamic Republic of Iran"). Within those pro-western ideals that Iranian citizens want is freedom of religion. However, it is difficult for Baha'is to have their own protests for the pro-western aspect of freedom of religion since the writings "Encourage a 'spirit of resourcefulness and practicality' in their efforts to maintain a 'vibrant community life' even 'under the most arduous conditions.'" This doesn't mean that they shouldn't attempt to receive justice, it just means if justice isn't on the way they should avoid violence and try to remain patient. In fact, they "Are directed to pursue 'every principled means to defend themselves and others against oppression and to work toward the empowerment of oppressed people everywhere,'" just not within the legal system (Karlberg 235). Furthermore, Baha'is have been and will continue to fight for justice, while staying within the writings of what Baha'u'llah said to do.

This leads me to how far Baha'is have come in their fight for justice, and where they stand in Iran now. The Islamic Public of Iran still is not the safest for Baha'is, but not nearly as dangerous as it was during the revolution. Usually, Baha'is can make it through with only being

called names and looked down upon for their beliefs, yet still safe. However, there still are the occasional killing of Baha'is, such as the killing of Ataollah Rezvani, an active member of the Baha'i community with two kids in 2013 (Farmand 1). Through this painful shooting, Baha'is continued to fight, in their own way, for justice. In January 2020, to receive a national identification card, Baha'i families had to declare their religion, even though the Iranian constitution only recognizes Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism (Farmand 1). Therefore, Baha'is and other religious minorities/atheists had to lie or were denied access to basic services needed to live. It put these people in a position to either betray their beliefs and be able to live in the rough conditions of Iran, or to put the truth and struggle to survive. Thankfully, in March 2020, the Iranian Supreme Court approved Baha'is access to the national education card. Yet, people were still confused since according to the Atlantic Council, "A lack of transparency" was "A concern in regard to their children's access to essential resources" (Farmand 1). It is almost as if Baha'is face the regime and constantly are taking two steps forward and one step back. Although it's a slow process, it's still happening, and change is slowly on the way.

Although the process to human rights of Baha'is is slow, it is being pushed on this slow and steady rate. People in Iran within the Baha'i Faith will not give up their faith and continue to be patient until their rights are given. They have made it closer to equality since the revolution and will make it even farther as the fight for justice continues. The slow process is worth it since it is peacefully done, and once Baha'is fully have these rights, they will know they received them how they were supposed to: following the religion of the Baha'i Faith.

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