



Universal Periodic Review: Stakeholders' Report

## ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN: Rights violations against Christians

Joint submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council's

Universal Periodic Review Working Group;

48th session; 4th UPR cycle

16 July 2024

Submission by:

Middle East Concern

Article18

CSW

Open Doors

Article18 is a non-profit organisation based in London, dedicated to the protection and promotion of religious freedom in Iran and advocating on behalf of its Christian community.

CSW is a Christian organisation working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice.

Middle East Concern was founded in 1991, and seeks to promote freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the Middle East and North Africa, with a focus on the Christian communities.

Open Doors supports communities of Christians in more than 60 countries where their fundamental rights are violated because of their faith.

## **METHODOLOGY**

1. The violations documented in this report were compiled by the above-named organisations, in collaboration with credible contacts, including the victims of these abuses and their lawyers, as well as through research and analysis of copies of official documents concerning prosecutions such as indictments and court rulings.

2. The actual number of members of the Christian community who experienced violations within the reporting period extends considerably beyond the numbers articulated in this joint submission. An increasing number of cases go unreported, or are handled discreetly, often due to fear on the part of victims or their families that public exposure may worsen their situation. In these circumstances, and generally due to the difficulty of accessing comprehensive information from abroad, our reporting on cases does not capture the full extent and total number of violations. As such, our reporting should properly be considered indicative of broader such violations.

## **BREADTH AND FOCUS**

3. Whilst violations are regularly suffered by most of Iran's religious or belief minority communities<sup>1</sup>, this report seeks to highlight issues concerning the Christian community; particularly those who have exercised their right articulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to adopt a religion of their choice. The joint submission focuses on events which have occurred since Iran's last Universal Periodic Review (UPR), with a particular emphasis on more recent concerns and the current situation.<sup>2</sup>

## **BACKGROUND, LEGAL OVERVIEW, RIGHTS VIOLATIONS**

4. Christians suffer rights violations at the hands of the authorities for peaceful faith practices. While estimates vary, the number of Christians in Iran is estimated conservatively by Article18 to be approximately 800,000, or roughly 1% of the country's total population<sup>3</sup>. However, Christians continue to flee Iran due to the continuing and egregious violations they experience, which have impacted their right to peacefully practise their faith, and due to related pending prison sentences.<sup>4</sup>

5. Iran is a State Party to the ICCPR, which it ratified in 1975, without reservation. However, Article 13 of Iran's constitution contravenes the ICCPR's stipulations with regard to fulfilling FoRB for all religious communities. Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity are the only minority faiths afforded rights by the constitution "within the limits of the law"<sup>5</sup> (which are examined further in a subsequent section).

6. Christian converts from Islam ('Christian converts'/converts') are numerically the largest section of the Christian community, but are not recognised by the State, which only acknowledges ethnic Armenians, Assyrians, and the small expatriate community. Christians from these groups are relatively free to practise their faith, but amongst impediments, they face lengthy prison terms if deemed to have promoted Christianity among people from a Muslim background, or to have invited them to attend church services. However, the authorities predominantly target Christian converts, some of whom also experience mistreatment at the hands of extended family and community members.

7. In its Mid-term UPR Report Third Cycle<sup>6</sup>, Iran claimed that "according to the thirteenth principle, Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Iranians are recognised religious minorities"<sup>7</sup>. It also made claims regarding considerable numbers of places of worship in the country belonging to these recognised minorities.<sup>8</sup> However, not only is the largest Christian constituency not recognised; their right to the freedoms of religion or belief, association, peaceful assembly, equality before the law, and others articulated in the ICCPR are also violated regularly. They cannot attend permitted churches, yet are precluded from having a place of worship and face severe consequences from the authorities when gathering even in private homes. While those from recognised Christian backgrounds enjoy a greater degree of freedom, they too face violations by the State.

8. Christians suffer violations not only of their right to FoRB under Article 18 ICCPR; violations extend across numerous protections afforded under the Covenant. In connection with peaceful religious practices, they are interrogated (sometimes violently), arrested, prosecuted, imprisoned, as well as subjected to further punishments and pressures. They also face lack of due process in the justice system, and discrimination in many areas of public life.

## **DENIAL OF PLACE OF WORSHIP**

9. The Iranian authorities do not permit converts to attend the churches of the Armenian and Assyrian communities, who are themselves prohibited from holding services in Persian, the national language, in a further measure to dissuade converts from attending. Converts are targeted for involvement in informal meetings in private homes, known as “house-churches”, forcing converts to become isolated and disconnected from other Christians and violating their right to manifest their religion in community with others. Activities such as attending a house-church or participating in religious conferences are regularly deemed by the authorities to be criminal acts that allegedly threaten national security. Bibles and other Christian material are also commonly confiscated by the authorities during raids on Christians’ homes and house-churches as evidence of a crime.

10. In a *Communication* to Iran dated 11 November 2020, five UN Special Rapporteurs and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention raised the violation of the rights of Christians, expressing “serious concern at the reported widespread repression against and persecution of persons belonging to the Christian minority in Iran, and in particular those who have converted from Islam”.<sup>9</sup> Iran responded by claiming “nobody is prosecuted on religious grounds”, and that “regarding private churches<sup>10</sup> legal action will be taken in case of illegal activity for anti-security purposes of Zionist Christian cult”.<sup>11 12</sup>

11. Such labelling serves to differentiate Christian converts from the recognised Christians of Armenian and Assyrian descent, and deny them protections under the constitution or international legislation to which Iran is party. In reality, house-church meetings are religious gatherings. They are not political vehicles and are in no way associated with Zionism, subversive, or a threat to security. Christian converts gather in homes because they are precluded by the State from attending public churches. In the words of a lawyer who represented three Christian converts who were each sentenced to five years’ imprisonment in 2022, “their only “crime” is “meeting to pray and worship as Christians”.<sup>13</sup>

12. Regarding the recognised religious minorities, as well as being prohibited from holding services in Persian, they are also not permitted to possess any religious material in Persian unauthorised by the State, including Bibles. Previously, Christian converts sought to attend Persian-language services in established churches; however, since 2009, the authorities have forced churches to refuse admission to converts and cease Persian-language services, closing down the churches that refused to comply.<sup>14</sup>

13. The Anglican churches of St Luke in Isfahan, St Paul in Julfa (suburb of Isfahan), St Paul in Tehran, and St Simon the Zealot in Shiraz - the only Persian-language churches that remained in operation - were unable to function freely. Members had to be able to prove their families were Christian before the 1979 Revolution, and the churches are not permitted to accept new members. Notably, these churches were closed, along with other public places of worship, for public-health reasons during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, unlike other places of worship, they have not been permitted to reopen since these restrictions were lifted.<sup>15</sup>

14. Please also see information in paragraph 45 concerning Article 18.3 ICCPR.

## **CRIMINAL CHARGES, ARRESTS AND SENTENCES**

15. Christians are usually targeted with serious charges under Articles 498, 499, 500 and 513 of the Islamic Penal Code.<sup>16</sup> For example, the authorities deem membership of a house-church to be an “action against national security”, punishable by between three months and five years in prison under Article 499. The establishment or leadership of house- churches – also considered a “national security” crime – carries a

penalty ranging from two to 10 years' imprisonment under section 498. The imposition of lengthy sentences, including the maximum sentences, is common.

16. In 2021, amendments to Articles 499 and 500 were incorporated into the Islamic Penal Code, further facilitating the prosecution of those deemed to be acting against national security, and increasing certain imprisonment tariffs. "Such provisions [were] destined to be abused against religious minorities"<sup>17</sup> and have also been termed a "full-on attack on religious freedom".<sup>18</sup> Many Christians have since been prosecuted and imprisoned under the new provisions.

17. In 2023, in its concluding remarks on Iran's compliance with the ICCPR, the Human Rights Committee said it remained "concerned by numerous reports indicating that religious minorities are victims of State-sanctioned human rights violations, including discrimination, arbitrary detention, torture, harassment and confiscation of property solely for practising their faith"<sup>19 20</sup>. It also called on Iran to "appeal or amend" the amended Articles 499 and 500 of the Islamic Penal Code.<sup>21</sup>

18. In its written response dated 5 July 2023<sup>22</sup> to the Committee's written 'List of Issues'<sup>23</sup>, Iran claimed religious minorities in the country, including Christians, "perform their own religious teachings freely", and that their human rights are respected provided they "refrain from engaging in activities that breach public order, public safety and public security". However, this is far from being the case, given the expansive and excessive interpretation of actions that constitute public security in particular.

19. The organisations responsible for this joint submission are aware of over 160 arrests of Christians during 2023 alone for peaceful religious practices, an increase on 134 arrests in 2022 and 59 in 2021.<sup>24</sup> Before the end of 2023, at least 17 of those arrested that year had received prison sentences of between three months and five years, or non-custodial punishments such as fines, flogging, and in one case the community-service sanction of grave-digging. Meanwhile, at least nine Christians were pardoned and released from prison in 2023, although the majority were already nearing the conclusion of their sentences related to the peaceful practise of their faith.<sup>25</sup>

20. Public sources<sup>26</sup> reference 10 Christians currently imprisoned for sentences relating to the peaceful practise of their faith.<sup>27</sup> Eight of them are serving sentences of five years or more, and three of the eight are serving 10-year terms. The real number is higher<sup>28</sup> and the organisations submitting this report are aware through credible sources that the actual number is at least 16.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, a Christian convert, previously imprisoned under a one-year prison term, recently completed a two-year term in internal exile.<sup>30</sup>

## **EIGHT CHRISTIAN CONVERTS SENTENCED TO COMBINED ALMOST 45 YEARS' IMPRISONMENT**

21. Between May and June 2024, eight Iranian Christian converts from Izeh city were sentenced to a combined total of almost 45 years in prison.<sup>31</sup> The eight were among at least 46 Iranian Christians arrested over the 2023 Christmas period and sentenced under Article 500 of the Islamic Penal Code. According to Iranian Christian website Mohabat News<sup>32</sup>, Yasin Mousavi was sentenced to 15 years in prison: 10 years for "membership of a group intent on disrupting national security" and a further five years for "propaganda against the regime through the promotion of 'Zionist' Christianity". The indictment against him reportedly included an allegation he played an active role in protests, and was "one of the leaders" of an evangelical Christian organisation.

22. Mr Mousavi had been arrested on 24 December 2023, after which he was reportedly held in solitary confinement for 20 days at the Ministry of Intelligence detention centre, before being transferred to Shibani Prison in Ahvaz. After nearly four months in detention, he was released on bail on payment of the approximate equivalent of USD 30,000 on 20 April 2024, before being sentenced a month later.

23. In addition, Hamid Afzali was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment; Nasrullah Mousavi, Bijan Qolizadeh and Iman Salehi were each sentenced to five years in prison; two as yet unnamed individuals received two-year prison sentences; and Zahrab Shahbazi received a nine-month prison sentence. While Mr Salehi is

reportedly detained, Mr Mousavi and the six others are currently free on bail (thus their cases were not factored into the numbers currently imprisoned/detained under prison sentences articulated in paragraph 20). Those on bail await summonses to commence their prison sentences.

## **EXAMPLES: CHRISTIANS CURRENTLY IMPRISONED UNDER 10-YEAR SENTENCES**

24. Case 1: Mehdi Akbari and three fellow-Christian converts (one man, Mehdi Rokhparvar; and two women, Fatemeh Sharifi and Simin Soheilinia).<sup>33</sup> Mr Akbari is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence in Evin Prison, Tehran, for “acting against national security” by “forming an illegal evangelical Christian group” (i.e. a house-church). He and the others were arrested on 28 January 2019 following raids on their homes in Tehran by intelligence agents. All four were then detained in Evin Prison, placed in solitary confinement and interrogated for 30 days before eventually being released on bail on 18 March 2019.

25. Mr Akbari and the others were all tried on the aforementioned charge, in June 2020, and he has been imprisoned since being sentenced in October 2020. The two women also received 10-year prison sentences, while Mr Rokhparvar received a five-year prison term. The men were taken to Evin Prison while the women were released on bail. Mr Akbari subsequently challenged his sentence at the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court, but was unsuccessful. He was a single parent to his only son, who had cerebral palsy, and who died in 2021 at the age of 18 in a care facility where he had stayed following his father’s imprisonment.<sup>34</sup> Mr Rokhparvar remained imprisoned until his release in February 2023.

26. Case 2: Armenian national, Hakop Gochumyan.<sup>35</sup> Mr Gochumyan has been detained since his arrest on 15 August 2023. He is held in Evin Prison, serving a 10-year prison sentence, after being convicted of “engaging in deviant proselytising activity that contradicts the sacred law of Islam” through alleged membership and leadership of “a network of evangelical Christianity”. Mr Gochumyan’s sentence also included a fine and the deprivation of certain rights, including membership of political or social groups. According to a credible source, the conviction was based solely on his possession of seven copies of the New Testament in Persian and his alleged visit to two Armenian churches and a Persian-language house-church while on holiday in Iran from Armenia.

27. Article 160 of Iran’s Islamic Penal Code allows judges to use their “personal intuition” when evidence is lacking. Mr Gochumyan’s lawyer argued the judge in this case had been forced to use this provision, having found no evidence against Mr Gochumyan. Mr Gochumyan was sentenced in February 2024, and in early June 2024 he was informed his appeal had failed. He was arrested together with his wife Elisa (who is Iranian-Armenian), in the presence of their two school-aged children. At that time Mr Gochumyan and his wife were placed in solitary confinement in Evin Prison. They were subjected to intense psychological torture and back-to-back interrogation sessions, each lasting between two and five hours. His wife was released on bail after spending over two months in detention.

28. Case 3: Anooshavan Avedian<sup>36</sup>. Pastor Avedian is an Iranian-Armenian church leader in his sixties. On 11 April 2022, the 26th Branch of the Revolutionary Court of Tehran sentenced him to 10 years’ imprisonment. The pastor had been arrested on 21 August 2020 by Ministry of Intelligence agents, in connection with his alleged leadership of a house-church. On 23 September 2020, he was released after posting bail approximately equivalent to USD 50,000. He was found guilty of engaging in “propaganda contrary to and disturbing to the holy religion of Islam”, and in September 2023 was summoned to commence the sentence, to which he willingly complied. Following his sentencing, in May 2022, an appeals court upheld his conviction and sentence, as did the Supreme Court in the following months.

29. Pastor Avedian was sentenced alongside two Christian converts, Abbas Soori and Maryam Mohammadi, who were handed non-custodial sentences. In addition to imprisonment, Pastor Avedian was also sentenced to 10 years’ “deprivation of social rights”, to be enforced once he is released.

## NON-EXHAUSTIVE LIST OF ICCPR VIOLATIONS<sup>37</sup>

30. **Article 7, Torture**<sup>38</sup>: Many Christians report enduring severe mistreatment during arrest and detention. Since 2021, raids on house-churches and the arrest and interrogation of their members are increasingly being conducted by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Correspondingly, reports of Christians suffering physical abuse and degrading treatment during arrest and interrogation have become more frequent. Previously, action against Christians was almost exclusively carried out by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence. The conditions in IRGC detention facilities are particularly poor and bail demands are often higher. In 2022, a male Christian convert was reportedly sexually assaulted during interrogation by IRGC agents.<sup>39</sup> Intense psychological torture was reported in the case of Mr and Mrs Gochumyan, as noted in paragraph 27.

31. **Article 9.1, Arbitrary arrest and detention**<sup>40</sup>: The Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded in 2021<sup>41</sup> that Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani<sup>42</sup> was being detained arbitrarily. The Working Group found his detention lacked legal basis; that he was penalised for the “legitimate exercise of his religious and other rights”; that he was not afforded a fair trial or due process; and that the deprivation of his liberty violated his rights and was based on “discrimination based on religious belief”. Consequently, the Working Group called for his immediate release, as well as for compensation and “other reparations” to be made to him, and for Iran to conduct an independent investigation into his arbitrary detention and to hold those responsible accountable. Nevertheless, he remained imprisoned for two more years before being pardoned in February 2023.<sup>43</sup>

32. In recent years several Christian converts have also been deprived of their liberty through being sentenced to terms of internal exile in remote areas, such as Sasan Khosravi, who recently completed a two-year term in internal exile, post-release from prison.

33. **Article 9.2, Reasons for arrest and prompt information of charges**<sup>44</sup>: Many arrested Christians report not being informed of the reason for their arrest or shown warrants, and not receiving any information on charges levelled against them. On 24 December 2023 in Dezful, Christian convert Esmaeil Narimanpour had his house searched, Christian books confiscated, and was arrested without a warrant being produced.<sup>45</sup>

34. **Article 10.1, Treating detainees with humanity and respecting their dignity**<sup>46</sup>: The dire conditions in Iranian prisons have been regularly referenced in recent years in reports by UN special procedures and mechanisms. Christian prisoners of conscience confirm the terrible conditions and degrading treatment endured. One example is the case of Pastor Joseph Shahbazian, who was imprisoned between August 2022 and September 2023 for “acting against national security by promoting ‘Zionist’ Christianity”. Pastor Shahbazian suffered ill-health during his 13 months in prison but for several months was denied a medical appointment and even after an eventual medical appointment he was not told of his diagnosis. Shortly before his release, the pastor discovered by chance that he was suspected to be suffering from a serious illness.

35. **Article 14.1&2, Fair trial and presumption of innocence**<sup>47 48</sup>: Christians routinely do not receive fair and public hearings before independent courts. Many are brought before Revolutionary Courts, which are generally closed to the public, and fail to ensure due process.

36. Judges and Revolutionary Court branches are carefully selected to ensure Christians are tried harshly, as illustrated since 2016 by the repeated choice of Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court of Tehran, currently headed by Judge Iman Afshari, who is noted for handing down additional penalties, such as periods in internal exile, on top of lengthy prison sentences. In court, Judge Afshari has behaved insultingly towards Christians, ridiculing their faith, and has pressured converts to recant, promising them shorter sentences if they do so, while threatening harsher sentences if they refuse to comply. He has also intimidated their defence lawyers.

37. Moreover, a lawyer informed Article18 that intelligence agencies were making sure no more ‘Christian cases’ were sent to the branch of the Supreme Court responsible for a 2021 decision favourable to those affiliated with house- churches (more details in paragraph below on Article 18.3).

38. Since Christians typically face charges of “propaganda” or “acting against national security”, their cases are usually heard by Revolutionary rather than criminal courts. Lawyers representing Christians have reported on numerous occasions that the intelligence branch of the IRGC interferes with the legal process and demands severe punishments for Christians.

39. **Article 14.3, In-person defence through a lawyer of one's choosing**<sup>49</sup>: Example 1: On 26 June 2021, at the

Revolutionary Court (in Karaj), Judge Mehdi Zeinali claimed that the lawyer defending three Christian converts had not completed the necessary documentation and refused to allow him to represent his clients.<sup>50</sup> As a result, Amin Khaki, Milad Goodarzi and Alireza Nourmohammadi had to represent themselves. They each received a maximum five-year sentence under the amended Article 500 of the Islamic Penal Code for “engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam”.

40. Example 2: The Iranian-Armenian church leader Anooshavan Avedian<sup>51</sup> began a 10- year prison sentence in September 2023, after being tried before the Revolutionary Court, where he was not permitted to have a lawyer. His subsequent appeal hearing took place in his absence, despite repeated requests by his lawyer.

41. In cases involving alleged “national security” violations – the majority of charges against Christians are of this nature – defendants are only permitted to choose from a list of lawyers approved by the authorities.

42. **Article 17.1, Arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy, etc.**<sup>52</sup>: In 2023, US-based researchers reported<sup>53</sup> that intelligence officers belonging to the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran (FARA JA) were using spyware, most likely installed while the owners of mobile phones were being detained, to monitor members of minority communities, including Christians. It was noted that most of those targeted were in areas with high levels of residents from minority faiths. A researcher stated: “In particular, about 25 victim locations were gathered in the city of Orumiyeh, West Azerbaijan Province, which is historically associated with Armenian and Assyrian Christianity. Some files stolen from victims indicate Christian faith, particularly snippets or scanned sections of relevant books.”<sup>54</sup>

43. **Article 18.1, Re. FoRB**<sup>55</sup> : The questions asked by Iranian intelligence agents to arrested Christians leave no doubt that their religious conversions or faith practices are the reason they are being targeted. Christian convert Nasser Navard Gol-Tapeh, who in October 2022 was released after nearly five years in Evin Prison for “acting against national security through the establishment of house churches”, said in an open letter from prison that it was “clear to all, including the prison authorities, judges, lawyers and my fellow prisoners, that I am in prison because of my faith in Jesus Christ”.<sup>56</sup>

44. **Article 18.2, Non-coercion**<sup>57</sup>: Forced religious “re-education” has become increasingly common. For example, in 2022, 10 Christian converts in Dezful were forced to attend Islamic re-education classes<sup>58</sup> even though eight of them had been acquitted in 2021. Also, many Christian converts have reported that they were subjected to coercion to recant their faith during interrogations and by a judge in court, while some have reported that family members were brought into places of detention to try to persuade them to return to Islam.

45. **Article 18.3, Justifiable limitations on freedom to manifest religion or belief**<sup>59</sup>: In November 2021, Iran’s Supreme Court ruled<sup>60</sup> that nine Christian converts sentenced to five years in prison for their membership of house-churches should not have been charged with “acting against national security”. The court decision stated that “[m]erely preaching Christianity, and promoting the ‘Evangelical Zionist sect’, both of which [are used to refer to] propagating Christianity through family gatherings [house-churches] is not a manifestation of gathering and collusion to disrupt the security of the country, whether internally or externally,” and that the “formation of these societies and groups [house-churches] is not [in breach of] Articles 498 and 499 of the Islamic Penal Code [relating to membership or organisation of “anti-state groups”], or other criminal laws.” However, highlighting the inconsistency in and arbitrary nature of the justice system, despite rulings of courts up to Supreme Court level, Christians have continued to be prosecuted and imprisoned under these legal provisions for the same “offences”.

46. **Article 18.4, Rights of parents/legal guardians regarding religious and moral education**<sup>61 62</sup>: Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani came to the authorities’ attention after complaining that his sons’ school was forcing his children to take classes on Islamic Studies and the Quran. Members of recognised religious minorities– including Christians – are ordinarily exempt from these classes, but children of converts from Islam to Christianity, such as Pastor Nadarkhani’s, are not afforded this right. The pastor received a death sentence<sup>63</sup> for apostasy, which was quashed following an international outcry. However, after being sent back to prison for house-church activities, he continued to fight for his children’s right to be educated, going on a three-week hunger strike in 2019<sup>64</sup>. Since then, as well as the children of other Christian converts, one of Pastor Nadarkhani’s sons has been denied a high-school certificate, and hence an opportunity for further education, because he

did not complete the required Islamic education.

47. **Article 19.1, Right to hold opinions**<sup>65</sup>: The authorities frequently interfere with the rights of religious minorities to hold their own opinion, particularly concerning their religion. For example, there has been a notable increase in recent years of arrested Christians being forced to undergo religious re-education sessions with Islamic clerics, as in the case referenced in paragraph 44 of the 10 Christian converts in Dezful in 2022.

48. **Article 19.2, Re. freedom of expression**<sup>66</sup>: Article 500 of the Islamic Penal Code, as amended, prohibits, *inter alia*, “psychological manipulation” or “mind control”, which are vague and expansive terms. “The passage of these provisions despite warnings about their grave consequences for human rights only demonstrates that the Iranian authorities are adamant to stifle any expression that does not align with their liking.”<sup>67</sup> The amended Article has been used to convict numerous Christian converts, including Amin Khaki, Milad Goodarzi and Alireza Nourmohammadi in 2021<sup>68</sup>; and Ahmad Sarparast, Morteza Mashoodkari and Ayoob Poor-Rezazadeh in 2022<sup>69</sup>.

49. **Article 21, Right of peaceful assembly**<sup>70</sup>: Please see information above, including under the heading entitled ‘Denial of place of worship’.

50. **Article 26, Re. Equality before the law, without discrimination, including on the ground of religion**<sup>71</sup>: Shia Islam is the official State religion and all laws must be consistent with the official interpretation of Islamic law (Sharia). The Constitution bans parliament from passing laws contrary to Islam, and states there may be no amendment to its provisions related to the “Islamic character” of the political or legal system or to the specification of Shia Ja‘fari Islam as the official religion.

51. The fact all laws conform with Shia Islam points to inherent inequality before the law for non-adherents. It also explains why even “reformists” within the government are conservative in their decisions, and why Christians and other religious minorities are barred from high public office and other influential positions within the system.

52. The promotion of any faith besides Shia Islam is considered unlawful. Christians face discrimination when arrested, during interrogation, and throughout the judicial process. Along with adherents of other minority religions, they are not afforded due process and equality.

53. According to Article 881 of Iran’s Civil Code, when an *infidel* (unbeliever) dies, if there is any Muslim among the beneficiaries, this legatee inherits all the property, even if they are a distant relative. Even religious minorities afforded recognition under the constitution are referred to as *infidels* in this article.

54. Article 1059 of Iran’s Civil Code stipulates that marriage between a Muslim female and non-Muslim male is prohibited, while marriage between a Muslim male and non-Muslim female is permitted. Meanwhile, Article 234 of the penal code also discriminates along religious lines, prescribing the death penalty for a non-Muslim man who has sex outside marriage with a Muslim woman, but not for a Muslim man who does so with a non-Muslim woman.

55. Additionally, except for three out of five designated seats for religious minorities in the Iranian parliament, Christians are not permitted to hold high public offices, including the presidency or in the judiciary. This also constitutes a restriction of their right under Article 25 ICCPR “to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives”.

56. **Article 27, Rights of religious minorities, in community with other members, to profess and practise their religion, use their own language, etc.**<sup>72</sup>: See information above, including under the heading entitled ‘Denial of place of worship’, and in paragraph 45 concerning Article 18.3 ICCPR.

## **CONTINUING INTIMIDATIONS**<sup>73</sup>

57. Pressures on Christians and their families continue after they are released from imprisonment, or following arrest or detention, including monitoring and harassment; denial of employment; denial of education and qualifications; the cycle of new charges or reopening cases; enforced Islamic re-education classes, during which converts are pressured to return to Islam; additional post-prison penalties, such as internal exile, flogging,



finances, travel bans, and deprivation of social rights, including membership of any group; the imposition of community-service orders, for example grave-digging or washing dead bodies before burial; and coercion through threats to leave Iran.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

58. Article 18, CSW, Middle East Concern and Open Doors appeal for rights violations against Christians in Iran to be raised with Iran and for the following recommendations to be made. For Iran to:

- Respect and protect the rights enshrined in the ICCPR, including the right to FoRB for everyone, including religious converts, and regardless of their ethnic or linguistic group;
- Amend Article 13 of the constitution to conform with the provisions of the ICCPR, including under Article 18 ICCPR;
- Release immediately and unconditionally Christians detained under investigations, criminal charges or prison sentences related to peaceful religious activities;
- Drop all charges against Christians related to church activities deemed lawful by Iran's Supreme Court;
- Cease the criminalisation of house-church organisation and membership, allowing Christians of all ethnic backgrounds to worship freely and collectively;
- Return places of worship and other properties and material confiscated from Christians in connection with peaceful faith practices;
- Permit the reopening of churches closed during the Covid-19 pandemic, and those forcibly closed for allowing the attendance of converts and holding services in the Persian language;
- Clarify where Persian-speaking Christians may worship in their mother tongue, without experiencing arrest, prosecution and imprisonment;
- Ensure the cessation of the use of provisions such as those under Articles 498, 499, 500 and 513 of the Islamic Penal Code and Article 167 of Iran's constitution to unjustly prosecute and convict Christians;
- Guarantee access to legal counsel for all individuals charged with "national security"- related crimes, as well as and the right to select a lawyer of their choice, and repeal the Note to Article 48 of Iran's Criminal Procedures Regulations;

- Cease discrimination against minority-faith adherents in public life, including by repealing or amending discriminatory provisions in the Civil Code, such as those concerning marriage (Article 1059) and inheritance (Article 881 bis). Further, grant them equal employment opportunities, including eligibility for high public positions;
- Grant unhindered access to the country to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, allowing the Special Rapporteur unhindered access to assess compliance with international human rights law.

<sup>1</sup> Including the Baha'i community, Jews, Sunni Muslims, Yarsans, Gonabadi Dervishes, and the non-religious.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see in particular the 2022 report of Article18, Middle East Concern, Open Doors, and the World Evangelical Alliance to the Human Rights Committee (136th session)

<https://un.worldea.org/iran-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-joint-report-to-the-human-rights-committee-136th-session/>; and

'2024 Annual Report on Rights Violations against Christians in Iran', by Article18, CSW, Middle East Concern, and Open Doors: published Feb 2024; <https://www.meconcern.org/2024/02/19/annual-report-rights-violations-against-christians-in-iran-2024/>

<sup>3</sup> Article18, 'Iran Country Profile'; <https://articleeighteen.com/country-profile/>

<sup>4</sup> The pressures make it increasingly difficult for Christians to remain in Iran. Many flee from Iran, only to find new considerable challenges await, as documented in the 2023 report by Article18, CSW, Middle East Concern and Open Doors entitled 'The Plight of Iranian Christians Claiming International Protection in Türkiye'; <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/13404/>

<sup>5</sup> Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution states: "Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognised religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education." Constitute: Islamic Republic of Iran 1979 (rev. 1989); [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran\\_1989](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989)

<sup>6</sup> Mid-term Universal Periodic Review Report on the Islamic Republic of Iran's Human Rights Achievements in Light of U.P.R Recommendations Third Cycle (2020-2021); <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/UPR-MID-TERM-REPORT-IRAN.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> See article linked in endnote immediately above, at page 38.

<sup>8</sup> See article referred to in endnote immediately above, at page 39.

<sup>9</sup> Ref: AL IRN 26/2020: 11 Nov 2020;

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=25678>

<sup>10</sup> House-churches, in other words.

<sup>11</sup> Article18, 'Iran denies persecuting Christians, calls house-churches "enemy groups": 20 Jan 2021; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/7675/>

<sup>12</sup> Comment by the High Council for Human Rights of the Islamic Republic of Iran concerning the allegation of prosecution of a number of people due to their religious belief;

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gld=35896>

<sup>13</sup> PIME Asia News, 'Rasht court sentences Christian converts to five years in prison for praying together': 14 April 2022; <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Rasht-court-sentences-Christian-converts-to-five-years-in-prison-for-praying-together-55591.html>

<sup>14</sup> Article18, '10 years since forced closure of Iran's largest Persian-speaking church': 19 May 2023;

<https://articleeighteen.com/news/13225/>

<sup>15</sup> See article linked in endnote immediately above.

<sup>16</sup> The full text of the sections mentioned may be found at page 27 of the 2024 Annual Report of Article18, Middle East Concern, CSW and Open Doors on 'Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran'; <https://www.meconcern.org/2024/02/19/annual-report-rights-violations-against-christians-in-iran-2024/>

<sup>17</sup> Forbes, 'Are New Iranian Criminal Laws Curtailing Freedom of Religion or Belief?': 5 July 2021; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2021/07/05/are-new-iranian-criminal-laws-curtailing-freedom-of-religion-or-belief/>

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<sup>18</sup> ARTICLE 19, 'Iran: Parliament passes law to further choke freedoms and target minorities': 19 Feb 2021; <https://www.article19.org/resources/iran-parliament-passes-law-to-further-choke-freedoms-and-target-minorities/>

<sup>19</sup> Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ref: CCPR/C/IRN/CO/4: 3 Nov 2023, at page 10;

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/DownloadDraft.aspx?key=KzddR3ISX+UGm9533MtadsdETWw9Xv3gP4bZb6AsouLddogFULd+wJ6pXzAjoqceY5n+p+EHPgFXK+/MmYA==](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/DownloadDraft.aspx?key=KzddR3ISX+UGm9533MtadsdETWw9Xv3gP4bZb6AsouLddogFULd+wJ6pXzAjoqceY5n+p+EHPgFXK+/MmYA==)

<sup>20</sup> See also Article18, 'UN experts reiterate concerns over Iran's religious freedom violations': 8 Nov 2023; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/14062/>; and

Article18, 'Islamic Republic delegation quizzed by UN experts on compliance with international law': 13 Oct 2023; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/13851/>

<sup>21</sup> Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ref: CCPR/C/IRN/CO/4: 3 Nov 2023, at page 11;

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/DownloadDraft.aspx?key=KzddR3ISX+UGm9533MtadsdETWw9Xv3gP4bZb6AsouLddogFULd+wJ6pXzAjoqceY5n+p+EHPgFXK+/MmYA==](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/DownloadDraft.aspx?key=KzddR3ISX+UGm9533MtadsdETWw9Xv3gP4bZb6AsouLddogFULd+wJ6pXzAjoqceY5n+p+EHPgFXK+/MmYA==)

<sup>22</sup> Replies of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the list of issues in relation to its fourth periodic report Ref: CCPR/C/IRN/RQ/4: 5 July 2023 [Date received: 2 June 2023];

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR/C/IRN/RQ/4&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR/C/IRN/RQ/4&Lang=en)

<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Committee, List of issues in relation to the fourth periodic report of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ref: CCPR/C/IRN/Q/4: 30 Nov 2022;

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR/C/IRN/Q/4&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR/C/IRN/Q/4&Lang=en)

<sup>24</sup> Numbers could in actuality be significantly higher, with cases not being reported even privately by individuals concerned for reasons such as fear of repercussions from the State.

<sup>25</sup> See for example, Article18, 'Fifth convert released amid mass pardoning of political prisoners', 6 March 2023; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/12739/>

<sup>26</sup> See Article18, 'Iranian Christian Prisoners List'; <https://articleeighteen.com/prisoners-list>, together with Article18, 'Eight Christians sentenced to combined 45 years in prison': 18 June 2024;

<https://articleeighteen.com/news/14877/>

<sup>27</sup> The other two are serving two-year prison terms.

<sup>28</sup> Some cases are not reported publicly, including because of the fear of those imprisoned or their family members of reprisals from the authorities.

<sup>29</sup> Numbers cited in this paragraph as to those currently imprisoned or detained do not incorporate any Christians who are detained post-arrest or during interrogations or investigations or who have been denied bail concerning 'live' criminal charges - or any Christians detained other than connected with sentences of imprisonment that have been handed down.

<sup>30</sup> Article18, 'Christian converts conclude prison sentences, but one now faces exile': 20 Jan 2022; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/10149/>

<sup>31</sup> Article18, 'Eight Christians sentenced to combined 45 years in prison': 18 June 2024; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/14877/>

<sup>32</sup> Mohabat News, 'Yasin Mousavi, a Christian convert, was sentenced to 15 years in prison on security charges'; <https://mohabatnews.com/fa/news/5/7337>

<sup>33</sup> For further details, please see: Church in Chains, 'Mehdi Yasser Akbari': 21 Dec 2023; <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/mehdi-akbari/>

<sup>34</sup> Due to bureaucracy and a hefty bail-demand, Mr Akbari's temporary release was delayed and his son's funeral had taken place before the temporary release (five days, later extended to 10 days) was sanctioned.

<sup>35</sup> 'Armenian Christian given 10-year sentence "on judge's intuition": 11 June 2024; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/14849/>; and

'Armenian Christian remains in Evin Prison four months after arrest': 21 Dec 2023; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/14273/>

<sup>36</sup> See for example: Article18, 'Iranian-Armenian pastor begins 10-year sentence for his "disturbing" teachings': 18 Sept 2023; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/13777/>; and

USCIRF, 'Anooshavan Avedian'; <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/anooshavan-avedian>

<sup>37</sup> The outlining of examples under all articles and sub-sections of the ICCPR under which rights are violated is beyond the scope of this submission, given the applicable word limit.

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- <sup>38</sup> Article 7: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In particular, no one shall be subjected without his free consent to medical or scientific experimentation.”
- <sup>39</sup> A confidential report from a credible source.
- <sup>40</sup> Article 9.1: “Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention. No one shall be deprived of his liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as are established by law.”
- <sup>41</sup> Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Opinion No.83/2020 concerning Youcef Nadarkhani (Iran): 18 Feb 2021; <https://www.freedom-now.org/wp-content/uploads/AUV-WGAD-Opinion-83-2020-Youcef-Nadarkhani-Iran.pdf>
- <sup>42</sup> Article18, ‘Iran found guilty of “arbitrary detention” of pastor’: 23 Feb 2021; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/7890/>
- <sup>43</sup> Article18, ‘Arbitrarily detained pastor released from prison but faces flogging and exile’: 1 March 2023; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/12715/>
- <sup>44</sup> Article 9.2: “Anyone who is arrested shall be informed, at the time of arrest, of the reasons for his arrest and shall be promptly informed of any charges against him.”
- <sup>45</sup> Article18, ‘Christian convert still in custody after Christmas Eve arrest’; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/14302/>
- <sup>46</sup> Article 10.1: “All persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.”
- <sup>47</sup> Article 14.1: “All persons shall be equal before the courts and tribunals. In the determination of any criminal charge against him, or of his rights and obligations in a suit at law, everyone shall be entitled to a fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal established by law.”
- <sup>48</sup> Article 14:2 “Everyone charged with a criminal offence shall have the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law.”
- <sup>49</sup> Article 14.3: “In the determination of any criminal charge against him, everyone shall be entitled to the following minimum guarantees ... (d) To be tried in his presence, and to defend himself in person or through legal assistance of his own choosing.”
- <sup>50</sup> Article18, ‘Christian converts given maximum five-year sentences under penal code amendments’: 28 June 2021; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/8876/>
- <sup>51</sup> Article18, ‘House-church leader loses appeal as seven other Christians await verdict’: 2 June 2022; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/10994/>
- <sup>52</sup> Article 17.1: “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his honour and reputation.”
- <sup>53</sup> Lookout: ‘Lookout Discovers Android Spyware Tied to Iranian Police Targeting Minorities: BouldSpy’ 27 April 2023 <https://www.lookout.com/blog/iranian-spyware-bouldspy>
- <sup>54</sup> See article linked in endnote immediately above.
- <sup>55</sup> Article 18.1: “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”
- <sup>56</sup> Article18, ‘Nasser Navard Gol-Tapeh: “I am in prison because of my faith in Jesus Christ”’: 7 Aug 2018; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/2718/>; and Article18, ‘Christian convert freed after nearly five years in Evin Prison’: 17 Oct 2022 <https://articleeighteen.com/news/11942/>
- <sup>57</sup> Article 18.2: “No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.”
- <sup>58</sup> Article18, ‘Converts cleared of any crime must now attend “re-education” classes’: 1 Feb 2022; <https://articleeighteen.com/news/10283/>
- <sup>59</sup> Article 18.3: “Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.”
- <sup>60</sup> Article18, ‘Iran’s Supreme Court rules converts did not act against national security’: 25 Nov 2021 <https://articleeighteen.com/news/9836/>; see also Article18, ‘Case closed: Converts’ house-church worship was not “action against national security”’: 28 Feb 2022 <https://articleeighteen.com/news/10496/>
- <sup>61</sup> Article 18.4: “The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.”

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<sup>62</sup> Coercion to take such classes in the circumstances referred to in the paragraph under this sub-heading also violates Article 14.1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: “States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.” Iran ratified this Convention in 1994.

<sup>63</sup> Article18, ‘Yousef Nadarkhani sentenced to death for apostasy’: 6 Dec 2010

<https://articleeighteen.com/news/3026/>

<sup>64</sup> Article18, ‘Yousef Nadarkhani ends hunger strike after 21 days’: 15 Oct 2019

<https://articleeighteen.com/news/4809/>

<sup>65</sup> Article 19.1: “Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.”

<sup>66</sup> Article 19.2: “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.”

<sup>67</sup> ARTICLE 19, ‘Iran: Parliament passes law to further choke freedoms and target minorities’, 19 Feb 2021

<https://www.article19.org/resources/iran-parliament-passes-law-to-further-choke-freedoms-and-targetminorities/>

<sup>68</sup> Article18, ‘Christian converts’ sentences reduced but appeals rejected’: 26 Aug 2021

<https://articleeighteen.com/news/9149/>

<sup>69</sup> Article18, ‘Converts given five-year sentences for "deviant propaganda"’: 11 April 2022

<https://articleeighteen.com/news/10782/>

<sup>70</sup> Article 21: “The right of peaceful assembly shall be recognised. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (ordre public), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”

<sup>71</sup> Article 26: “All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

<sup>72</sup> Article 27: “In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.”

<sup>73</sup> For further information, see pages 30-34 of 2024 ‘Annual Report on Rights Violations against Christians in Iran’, by Article18, CSW, Middle East Concern, and Open Doors: published Feb 2024

<https://www.meconcern.org/2024/02/19/annual-report-rights-violations-against-christians-in-iran-2024/>