

AI INDEX: MDE 13/24/97

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## **IRAN: SHI'A RELIGIOUS LEADERS AS VICTIMS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS**

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, victims of human rights violations have included religious leaders opposed to fundamental tenets of the Iranian political system or governmental policies, and their followers or co-religionists. While some of these violations have been well documented over the years, it has been less well known that victims have included certain Shi'a religious leaders and their followers, Amnesty International said in a report issued today.

In a 23-page report, the organization has documented the pattern of violations targeting Iranian religious circles. At least three senior religious figures are reportedly held under house arrest and their followers have been detained and reportedly tortured. Some were unfairly tried, often in a special court, while others were held without trial. The fate of some is still unknown. Many, if not all, may be prisoners of conscience.

Human rights violations against religious leaders and their followers have occurred when those leaders have opposed governmental policies such as the absolute authority of the *vali-ye faqih* (Leader) or the continuation of the Iran-Iraq war, or who have criticized human rights violations. Some have been unwilling to accept Ayatollah Khamenei (the successor to the late Ayatollah Khomeini) as a senior religious figure.

Many of those tried were brought before the Special Court for the Clergy (*dadgah-e vizhe-ye rouhaniyat*), established in 1987 to investigate and try crimes such as "counter-revolution, corruption, immorality, unlawful acts, anything which might damage the prestige of the clergy and acts committed by 'pseudo-clergy'". Such broad charges often carry heavy penalties in Iran, including long prison terms or the death penalty.

"The extraordinary nature of this court and its procedures are such that it violates international human rights standards to which Iran is a state party, and is inherently incapable of fulfilling defendants' rights to a fair trial," Amnesty International said.

In the late 1980s, hundreds of supporters of Grand Ayatollah Montazeri were arrested. At least 12 of them were executed. Hundreds of followers of other religious leaders have also reportedly been arrested, tortured or ill-treated, particularly since 1995. Following Grand Ayatollah Rouhani's June 1995 open letter to President Hashemi Rafsanjani criticizing certain governmental actions, security forces arrested his youngest son, Javad, who was apparently sentenced to three years' imprisonment, later reduced to one year.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of Grand Ayatollah Sayed Mohammad Shirazi's supporters and relatives have been harassed. Many have been detained and tortured. According to reports, methods of torture used against some of these detainees have included beatings, prolonged sleep

deprivation, electric shocks and threatened execution by electrocution after attaching electrodes to the body. Sheikh Ali Ma'ash is said to have required medical treatment after his release for the effects of torture, including for a toe on his right foot which was broken and left untreated.

This pattern of violations is not recent, but can be traced back to the early years after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Religious figures who have been placed under house arrest or whose followers have been detained include Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Taher Al Shubayr Khagani, and Grand Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari, both now dead. Grand Ayatollah Sayed Hassan Tabataba'i-Qomi has been under house arrest in Mashhad for more than 13 years and Grand Ayatollah Sayed Mohammad Sadeq Rouhani for more than 12 years.

Senior Shi'a religious figures are also said to have been tortured during their detention. Grand Ayatollah Ya'sub al-Din Rastgari, in his 70s, accused of criticizing government policies, has been arrested and detained several times. During his last arrest in late February 1996, he was held in incommunicado detention, reportedly mainly in Tawhid and Evin Prisons in Tehran until July 1996. He is believed to have been transferred to a hospital, possibly as a result of torture. In August 1996, he was reportedly sentenced to three years' imprisonment after a summary trial on vaguely worded charges, in which he had no access to a lawyer.

Grand Ayatollah Rastgari was released from prison in December 1996, but immediately afterwards was placed under house arrest in Qom. Amnesty International believes that he could be a prisoner of conscience, held under house arrest solely on account of his non-violent activities or beliefs.

On numerous occasions, Amnesty International has sought clarification from the Iranian authorities concerning the reasons for the arrest and detention of such people, and their legal status. The organization has called for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and for prompt and fair trials of political prisoners. The Iranian authorities have ignored these calls and gross human rights violations are continuing unabated.

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**For further information, to obtain a copy of the report or to arrange an interview, please call the Amnesty International press office on +44 171 413 5831**