

Join Letter Urging Support for Human Rights in Iran

From: The Honorable Janice D. Schakowsky

Sent By: Andrew.Goczkowski@mail.house.gov

Date: 5/13/2014

Dear Colleague:

Please join us in signing the attached bipartisan, bicameral letter to President Obama urging the Administration to continue raising the issue of human rights abuses in Iran.

The situation in Iran remains dire. Dozens of journalists, labor activists, and other advocates are currently imprisoned for exercising their rights. Religious groups, including Christians and members of the Baha'i community, continue to face widespread discrimination.

We hope you will join us in writing to the President sharing our concerns and urging continued U.S. engagement on this critically important issue.

If you have any questions, or would like to sign onto the letter, please contact Andrew Goczkowski in Rep. Schakowsky's office at [202-225-2111](tel:202-225-2111), or by emailing Andrew.Goczkowski@mail.house.gov.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

Lynn Jenkins
Member of Congress

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President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We write to express our grave concerns regarding the ongoing human rights crisis in Iran and to urge you to continue to raise this important issue as the administration engages with Iran.

Many around the world were cautiously optimistic that the election of President Hassan Rouhani would improve the human rights situation in Iran. Unfortunately, it appears that the situation has, in fact, deteriorated since President Rouhani took office on August 4, 2013.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, for example, at least 35 journalists were in detention at the end of 2013. Amnesty International reports that several students and labor rights activists are prisoners of conscience in Iran, detained for peacefully exercising their rights. Human Rights Watch also highlights a number of human rights lawyers and other rights defenders who remained imprisoned at year's end and further reports that ethnic minorities—including Arabs, Kurds, Ahwazis, and Baluchis—continue to face restrictions and discrimination.

Iran witnessed a sharp spike in executions in the latter part of 2013. The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center reports that more than half of the 624 executions that Iran carried out in 2013 occurred after Mr. Rouhani took office, and further reports that 188 people have been hanged since the beginning of 2014 alone.

The assault on religious freedom is particularly dire. According to reports from the State Department and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Sufis have been harassed and intimidated, Sufi worship services have been raided and religious sites have been destroyed, and several Sufis are currently imprisoned. Sunni Muslims are harassed, intimidated, and prevented from holding religious ceremonies or building new religious buildings.

Christians, particularly evangelical Christians and converts to Christianity from Islam, face surveillance, harassment, raids, and arbitrary arrests and detention. The most notable case is that of Pastor Saeed Abedini, a dual Iranian-American citizen who remains in prison because of his Christian faith.

The Bahá'í community, Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority, continues to face severe repression, including denial of jobs and higher education, non-recognition of marriages, and desecration and destruction of cemeteries and holy places. The Bahá'í International Community reports at least 100 Bahá'ís remained in prison throughout 2013, with the number reaching a two-decade high of 136 during the last quarter of the year. Included are the seven members of the community's leadership group, imprisoned in May 2008 and serving 20 year sentences, the longest of any prisoners of conscience in Iran. No Bahá'ís were among the prisoners of conscience publicly released by the Iranian government ahead of the UN General Assembly session in September 2013. Meanwhile, a Bahá'í was killed in Bandar Abbas in late August, in what evidence suggests was a religiously motivated murder. There has been no progress to date in the investigation of his death.

In addition to these worrying trends, President Rouhani released a draft Charter of Citizens' Rights on November 26, fulfilling a campaign promise he made to release such a document within 100 days of taking office. Rather than expand or strengthen human rights, the Charter appears designed to further entrench existing discrimination. Its enumerated rights are explicitly subject to the Iranian constitution or Iranian law and it specifically limits those rights to religious minorities recognized under the Constitution—a grouping that is limited to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, and specifically excludes Bahá'ís and others.

President Rouhani's positive statements regarding rights and freedoms in Iran, while welcome, must be accompanied by concrete improvement. Thus far, these statements have done little, if anything, to bring about such improvement, and the people of Iran continue to face severe and systematic abuses. Indeed, in his latest report to the United Nations Human Rights Council on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon stated that “[t]he new administration has not made any significant improvement in the promotion and protection of freedom of expression and opinion, despite pledges made by the President during his campaign and after his swearing-in,” and that “[t]here have been no improvements in the situation of religious and ethnic minorities, who continue to suffer severe restrictions in the enjoyment of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.”

The United States' current engagement with Iran provides an unprecedented opportunity to emphasize and elevate the human rights situation in Iran. We urge you to seize this opportunity and to ensure that, whatever the nature and scope of the U.S. dialogue with Iran, human rights issues are a consistent and vital element of the conversation.

Sincerely,