



5.9.18

IRAN | Sentences Upheld for Christians

CSW has confirmed that the 10-year sentences handed down to Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, Mohammadreza Omid (Youhan), Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Saheb Fadaie in July 2017 have been upheld on appeal. Lawyers representing the four Christian men were notified of the verdict by the Iranian authorities in Rasht on May 2.

Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, Mohammadreza Omid, Yasser Mossayebzadeh, and Saheb Fadaie were arrested in Rasht on May 13, 2016 during a series of raids by security agents on Christian homes. Their church was accused of receiving money from the British government.

In July 2017, they were found guilty of “acting against national security” by “promoting Zionist Christianity,” and sentenced to 10 years in prison. The pastor and Omid received additional two year sentences to be served in inhospitable locations in the south of the country.

Mossayebzadeh, Fadaie and Omid are also awaiting the outcome of their appeal against a sentence of 80 lashes each, handed down in 2016 following their conviction for drinking wine during a communion service.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The charges levelled against these men are spurious and their sentences are excessive, amounting to a criminalization of Christian practice. We call for an annulment of these sentences. The international community must press the government of Iran to uphold its constitutional and international obligation to ensure the full enjoyment of the right to freedom religion or belief for all of its citizens, regardless of their creed."

Iranian convicts routinely receive SMS messages from court informing them of the outcome of their hearings and the details of the prison where they will spend their sentences. Initially, only Fadaie received an SMS. CSW's sources have confirmed that all of the sentences have been upheld and that the four men, who are currently out on bail, may be called by the authorities in Rasht to serve their sentences at any time. The initial lack of clarity is believed to have been part of a deliberate attempt by the authorities to gauge the international response to this decision.

The men's case has consistently been overseen by infamous judges, who are not impartial. In July 2017, they were given 10-year sentences by Judge Ahmadzadeh, head judge of the 26th Branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran, who is accused of overseeing miscarriages of justice and is subject to financial sanctions in the United Kingdom.

The last hearing on Dec. 13, 2017 took place before Judge Hassan Babaei and Judge Ahmad Zargar, both of whom allegedly played prominent roles in the crackdown on freedom of expression in Iran. Judge Zargar, a Hojjatolislam, was among several Iranian officials deemed responsible or complicit in serious human rights violations in 2012. He was also one of six judges accused in 2014 of losing judicial impartiality and overseeing miscarriages of justice in trials involving journalists, lawyers, political activists and members of Iran's ethnic and religious minorities. He is currently facing financial sanctions in the United Kingdom.

Pastor Nardarkhani has been imprisoned before. He was released from prison Jan. 7, 2013 after finishing a three-year sentence for evangelizing. He was initially arrested in 2009 after going to his children's school to question the Muslim monopoly of religious education for children, which he felt was unconstitutional. He was charged with apostasy and sentenced to death in 2010, a decision that was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2011. On Sept. 8, 2012, he was released from prison following his acquittal on apostasy charges but was found guilty on charges of evangelizing. The pastor was recalled to prison on Dec. 25, 2012 to complete the remainder of his three-year sentence and released once again on Jan. 7, 2013.