

The Bahá'í Community in Yemen: A brief history of the recent persecution (August 2024)

The Yemeni Bahá'í community traces its roots to the mid-nineteenth century and the inception of the Bahá'í Faith. In recent decades, the number of Bahá'ís grew as various segments of Yemeni society—including groups of traditional Yemeni tribesmen—learned about and became attracted to Bahá'í teachings. These groups, including some of their tribal leaders and prominent figures, increasingly identified themselves as Bahá'ís. Although accurate statistics are difficult, it is estimated that there are a few thousand Yemeni Bahá'ís in Yemen today. They represent a rich and diverse culture and live in both urban and rural settings, including cities such as Sana'a, Taiz, Hudaydah, Ibb, Aden, Mukalla, Dhale, Shabwa, and the Socotra Islands.

Bahá'ís started to suffer from government harassment in 2008, including imprisonment and torture. This escalated after the rise of the Houthis (Ansarullah) in 2014, as the Houthis' treatment of the Bahá'ís began to increasingly mirror the kind of systematic persecution experienced by Bahá'ís in Iran in policy and practice. In fact, multiple independent sources have, through their conversations with various officials in Yemen, repeatedly confirmed that Iranian authorities are advising or directing efforts to persecute Bahá'ís in Yemen, which has included pressure to deport those of Iranian descent to Iran.

In a statement dated 22 May 2017, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief highlighted the striking resemblance of the recent persecution of the Bahá'ís in Yemen to that of the Bahá'ís in Iran, stating: “The recent escalation in the persistent pattern of persecution of the Bahá'í community in Sana'a mirrors the persecution suffered by the Bahá'ís living in Iran.” He added that “[t]he harassment against the Bahá'ís, as religious minorities, seems to persist, if not worsen amounting to religious persecution in Yemen.”¹ The most notable cases involve the detaining, torturing, and imprisoning of six Bahá'ís for years simply for practicing their faith.

It is important to note that during a turbulent period of civil conflict within Yemen, the Bahá'ís have refused to side with one group or another. In keeping with their beliefs, they have instead endeavored to continue to make positive social contributions, placing particular emphasis on young people, unity, and service to society. At the community level, Bahá'ís have contributed to the betterment of Yemen in various fields including construction, medicine, tribal reconciliation, education, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. Moreover, representatives of the Yemeni Bahá'í community have met with hundreds of government officials, tribal elders, university professors, journalists, human rights activists, and diplomats to further strengthen their societal ties and explain their non-partisan principles and concern for the welfare of their fellow citizens.

Latest developments

Although the Yemeni Bahá'í community has maintained cordial relations with the authorities and Yemeni society in general over the years, the Bahá'í community has also faced challenges, which sharply accelerated in the past year. On 25 May 2023, armed Houthi gunmen stormed a gathering of Bahá'ís in Sana'a who were assembled peacefully for a meeting during which they were to form their governing body that looks after the administrative and spiritual needs of their

¹ Press Release by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, dated 22 May 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21643&LangID=E>.

community. After interrogating the attendees and confiscating books, laptops and other belongings, the gunmen who reportedly belong to Houthi security forces, detained and forcibly took 17 Yemeni Bahá'ís, including five women to an unknown location. In some cases, children and youth were suddenly and cruelly bereft of their parents. The armed gunmen were accompanied by a judge, and it seems that they had a search order from the general prosecutor.

This attack is a clear violation of the freedom of religion or belief and the right, under international covenants, to gather and conduct religious and community affairs. Bahá'ís do not have clergy, and the governing body they were due to elect—a process that takes place in Bahá'í communities around the world—was only intended to minister to the spiritual and material needs of the Yemeni Bahá'í community.

Some individuals who were participating in the meeting via Zoom were able to record the initial interruption by these gunmen and that footage has been made public along with a tweet by the Bahá'í International Community (BIC)². Mr. Tarad Al-Samawi, the lawyer representing the Bahá'ís, visited the Houthi Criminal Prosecution Office several times in order to follow up on the detainees. The general prosecutor was noticeably distressed that a video of the raid and abduction of the Bahá'ís was made public. He falsely claimed that the video footage was recorded remotely from a source in Israel and as such, it is a case of espionage with Israel and blasphemy (apostasy). It should be noted that no one from Israel was on the Zoom call. He, moreover, refused Mr. Al-Samawi's requests to release any of the 17 detainees. From these exchanges, Mr. Al-Samawi discerned that the Houthis are building a case against the Bahá'ís based on false information and conjecture and that there is clear intention to take the case to court.

On 2 June, the Grand Mufti of Sana'a, Shams al-Din Muhammad Sharaf al-Din, devoted the Friday prayers to the recent arrest of the Bahá'ís and to denouncing and demonizing the Bahá'ís³. He confirmed the arrest of the 17 Bahá'ís by security services before leveling several false and incendiary allegations and impugning the moral integrity of Bahá'ís in family and financial matters. These claims are absurd and intended to incite hatred and suspicion about the Bahá'ís in the minds of the congregants and the people of Yemen. The Grand Mufti's sermon, which lasted for more than an hour, and focused in large part on castigating the Bahá'ís, was also published on the internet. This incitement to hatred and violence has been echoed by other Houthi leaders.

Since 25 May 2023, one of the methods used by the de facto Houthi authorities to violate the rights of the Bahá'ís in Yemen is by imposing conditions on most of the released detainees. These conditions include forcing the detained Bahá'ís to sign a pledge not to communicate with Bahá'ís inside and outside Yemen, as well as refraining from engaging in any Bahá'í activities. While in detention, these Bahá'ís were compelled to take part in a "cultural" program scheduled to last 40 days, with the apparent intention of promoting Houthi ideological principles. Additionally, as per a statement from one of the employees of the Security and Intelligence Service, shared with the lawyer representing the Bahá'ís on 9 June 2023, it was revealed that the detained Bahá'ís faced two options following this cultural program: either they renounce the Bahá'í Faith and convert back to Islam to secure their release, or if they continue to hold onto their Bahá'í beliefs, they will be deported after undergoing a trial.

The Bahá'í International Community immediately issued press releases and tweets⁴ regarding these alarming incidents, alerting United Nations mechanisms, governments, and civil society and calling for the release of the 17 Bahá'ís through diplomatic means and public pressure. Thirteen

² Tweet by the Bahá'í International Community, dated 25 May 2023, <https://twitter.com/BahaiBIC/status/1661762453577822210>

³ Press release by the Bahá'í International Community, dated 9 June 2023, <https://www.bic.org/news/yemens-houthi-grand-mufti-targets-bahais-un-security-council-consider-yemen-next-week>

⁴ <https://www.bic.org/situation-in-yemen/reports-situation-yemen>

of the 17 detained individuals were released over a span of 15 months, with the last last four being released in the summer of 2024. As of August 2024, all 17 Bahá'ís have been released, with the last two men having been released on 20 August, also under the same unjust conditions outlined below.

The released Yemeni Bahá'ís had to comply with several conditions for their release: 1) They were compelled to sign agreements stating that they would not communicate with other Bahá'ís. 2) They are prohibited from changing their phones or sim cards. The phones and sim cards they possessed during their detention were retained by the Houthi authorities. 3) They may not leave a stipulated jurisdiction without permission. 4) They live under constant threat. Additionally, to secure their release, financial or commercial guarantees were insisted upon. These guarantees had to be provided solely by their family members, who had to be physically present to sign them. This process seems to be a method used for applying pressure and extorting the Bahá'í community in Yemen.

Despite all the ongoing efforts, the Bahá'í community in the Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen continues to be persecuted and its members are deprived of the freedom to hold gatherings or otherwise practice their faith.

Background incidents

In 2008, under the Presidency of Mr. Abdullah Ali Saleh, authorities detained six Bahá'ís in connection with their faith and eventually deported two of them. Later, in December 2013, Mr. Hamed Kamal bin Haydara was imprisoned by the authorities in Sana'a and was accused of various unfounded charges. Following the Houthi seizure of power of Sana'a in 2014, a pattern of oppression of the Bahá'ís in northern Yemen has unfolded over the next decade.

In 2016, an educational gathering organised by Bahá'ís was raided and over 60 participants, including women, men, and children, were arrested. In May 2017, following a call for the arrest of over two dozen Bahá'ís including members of Bahá'í institutions, five Bahá'ís—Mr. Waleed Ayyash, Mr. Akram Ayyash, Mr. Kayvan Ghaderi, Mr. Badiullah Sanai, and Mr. Wael al-Arieghie—were forcibly detained (in some cases taken off the street) and held by the Houthis.

In 2018, a local court in Sana'a issued a death sentence on Mr. Hamed bin Haydara, another Bahá'í who had been arrested in 2013, and issued an order for the dissolution of all Bahá'í Assemblies (the local and national elected structures through which Bahá'ís handle their community affairs) in Yemen. In a televised speech in March 2018, Abdel-Malek al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthis, vilified and denounced the Bahá'í Faith. He incited the Yemeni people to violence, urging them to defend their country from the Bahá'ís and members of other religious minorities. Within days of his speech, several Yemen news sites reiterated these attacks, and a prominent Houthi writer and strategist commented on social media that “we will butcher every Baha'i”.⁵ Similar sentiments were expressed by religious authorities in Sana'a, including the Mufti of Yemen, Shams al-Din Muhammad Sharaf al-Din, who was educated in Iran and was appointed by the Houthis. In early 2020, an appeals court upheld the death sentence against Mr. Haydara.

Over the next couple of years, the BIC worked at the international level, including with United Nations representatives, to secure the release of the six Bahá'ís who were in custody. As a result of these efforts, in March 2020, the President of the Supreme Political Council, Mr. Mahdi al-Mashat, ordered the release, in another general televised address, of the Bahá'í prisoners and a pardon for Mr. Haydaya. Following four additional months of efforts, the six Bahá'ís detained in

⁵ <https://twitter.com/ahmedayed2000/status/977663202606632962>

Sana'a were released from prison on 30 July 2020. Their release was conditioned, however, on their immediate departure from the country.

A month after the release, a local court continued with its proceedings in the case of 24 other individuals under indictment because of their beliefs and association with the Bahá'í Faith. In these hearings, the government prosecutor branded the previously released prisoners, who had been forced by the Houthis to leave Yemen, as fugitives. The Head of the Specialized Criminal Prosecution office in Sana'a and the judge presiding over their case continued to use any means available to confiscate Bahá'í-owned assets and property and to deny the indicted individuals their right to freely practice their faith. Furthermore, despite the verbal public pardon issued by the President of the Supreme Political Council, the judiciary and prosecutorial office have not yet confirmed Mr. Haydara's pardon.