



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

Iran: Baha'i Community

SPEECH

Thursday, 12 March 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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<p>Date Thursday, 12 March 2009 Page 72 Questioner Speaker Robb, Andrew, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr ROBB (Goldstein) (4.35 pm)—I rise to speak on the persecution of people of the Baha'i faith in Iran—in particular, the seven believers who have been incarcerated in Tehran's Evin prison for eight months. Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion ...

Here in Australia, section 116 of our Constitution prohibits the government controlling or mandating a particular religion. However, such is not the case in Iran. On 18 February this year, I met with two representatives of the Bayside and Glen Eira Baha'i communities, Mr Murray Davies and Ms Niloufar Zamani. Mr Davies and Ms Zamani shared with me what they called 'the continuing abuse of the fundamental human rights of the Iranian Baha'i community' and what they saw as 'a renewed wave of persecution and control similar to that which occurred in the 1930s in Nazi Germany'.

Founded in 1844, the Baha'i faith is the youngest of the world's independent religions. Today the faith has more than five million believers. The largest population of Baha'is live in India, numbering around 2.2 million. The next largest population exists in Iran, at roughly 350,000 people. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the Baha'i community has suffered the effects of a systematic campaign orchestrated by the Iranian government. The government's aim is to eliminate the Baha'i community as a viable entity in Iran, despite Iran being the birthplace of the faith. To begin, the Iranian constitution does not recognise the religion. Baha'is are not permitted to meet, to hold religious ceremonies or to practise their religion communally. Holy places, shrines and cemeteries have been confiscated and demolished. According to Amnesty International, hundreds of Baha'is have been executed for refusing to recant their faith and embrace Islam. Since the election of President Ahmadinejad in 2005, dozens more have been arrested.

Amongst those who have been recently arrested are seven leaders of the Baha'i organisation known as Friends of Iran. The organisation is believed to have served as an ad hoc coordinating body representative of Baha'is in Iran, apparently to the full knowledge of the Iranian government. Recently,

however, the government labelled the organisation illegal and arrested its seven leaders—one in March 2008 and the other six in May 2008. They are expected to go on trial shortly on charges of espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the system. Amnesty International considers the charges to be politically motivated and those held to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely because of their conscientiously held beliefs or their peaceful activities on behalf of the Baha'i community.

The accusation of spying has been used as a pretext to persecute Baha'is for more than 75 years. They have been accused of being tools of Russian imperialism, British colonialism, American expansionism and, most recently, Zionism. The seven imprisoned leaders are being held in section 209 of Tehran's infamous Evin prison, run by the Iranian ministry of intelligence. After eight months, no evidence has been brought to light by the prosecutors. The five male detainees are said to be held together in one cell of about 10 metres squared without any beds. All have been permitted access to relatives but none has been granted access to their lawyer. The lawyer is said to have been harassed, intimidated and threatened since taking on the case. The trial is expected to take place shortly in the Iranian revolutionary court. If convicted, the seven will face lengthy prison terms or even the death penalty.

This is not the first time the plight of the Baha'i community in Iran has been raised in this House. In 2006, the members for Macmillan, Boothby and Stirling, with strong support from the other side of the House, spoke with heavy hearts as they recounted stories of persecution passed on to them from their local communities. As they did then, I today call on the Australian government to continue to raise this matter with the Iranian embassy and urge the immediate and unconditional release of the seven prisoners. I appeal to authorities to ensure that the seven prisoners are protected from torture and other ill treatment and to ensure that they are given regular access to their relatives and lawyer. Finally, I implore the Iranian government to stop persecuting the Baha'i people and allow their citizens the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.