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IRAN Baha'i leaders face trial on election anniversary

Seven Baha'i leaders will face trial in Iran on 12 June charged with espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, and "corruption on earth", among other allegations. The trial coincides with the first anniversary of the country's contested presidential election, and will be their fourth court appearance after three previous trial dates were postponed.

Before their imprisonment, Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm attended to the spiritual and social needs of Iran's Baha'i community, which numbers more than 300,000.

Mahvash Sabet was arrested on 5 March 2008, while the other six were arrested on 14 May 2008. Following 20 months of incarceration in Tehran's Evin prison without charge, their trial began on 12 January. The third hearing on 12 April was adjourned after the seven leaders, with the agreement of their lawyers, refused to take part in the proceedings because of the presence of non judicial personnel.

Experts and analysts believe the anniversary date could be a tumultuous day of protests. It is unclear why the authorities have selected this particular date for the next trial session.

Bahá'ís living in Iran have faced intense persecution since 1979. Around 200 Bahá'ís have been killed and 10,000 have been dismissed from government and university jobs. Holy places have been destroyed, many Bahá'ís have been arrested and thousands of students have been denied access to university education.

CSW's National Director Stuart Windsor said, "CSW is concerned by the length of time that it has taken for charges to be brought against the seven Bahá'í leaders, and for the Christians and other minorities in prison in Iran without charge, or under similar allegations of crimes against Islam and the state, simply for exercising their right to freedom of religion and belief."