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IRAN | Fatwa Issued Against Bahai Community

The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khameni, issued a fatwa (religious edict) against the Baha'i community on July 31, calling on Iranians to avoid Baha'is and labeling them a "deviant and misleading sect."

The edict comes days before president-elect Hassan Rouhani assumes office, illustrating that despite the president-elect's promises to rule with moderation and ensure the rights of religious minorities, ultimate power in Iran rests with the Supreme Leader.

Despite the Baha'i community being the largest religious minority in Iran, numbering over 300,000, it is not officially recognized and is refused legal status. Since 1979, over 200 of its leaders have been killed or executed and thousands more imprisoned.

Baha'is are barred from accessing further education and employment in the public sector, with over 10,000 having been dismissed from university and government jobs. In 2008, seven Baha'i leaders were arrested and were each sentenced to 20 years imprisonment in 2010 for "forming an illegal cult." According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), as of February 2013, at least 110 Baha'is are being held in prison solely because of their religious belief, twice the number held in early 2011.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "We are extremely concerned by this new fatwa against the Baha'i community, particularly since previous fatwas have resulted in an intense crackdown on them. There was cautious optimism following the election of Hassan Rouhani, who has promised a more moderate approach than his predecessor. However, this news raises questions as to whether he will be able to do so, since ultimate power clearly resides elsewhere. The fatwa also calls into question the possibility of any early improvements in the plight of Iran's religious minorities. CSW urges the Supreme Leader and president-elect to uphold the rights of the Baha'i community as equal citizens and to guarantee freedom of religion or belief for all religious communities, in line with Iran's international obligations as a signatory to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights."

