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## **IRAN | Christians Sentenced to 80 Lashes for Drinking Communion Wine**

A court in the Iranian city of Rasht sentenced Church of Iran members Yasser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie and Mehdi Reza Omidi (Youhan) to 80 lashes each after finding them guilty of drinking wine during a communion service. The verdict follows a hearing that took place Sept. 10 that lasted for 10 minutes.

This is the second time that Fadaie and Omidi have been found guilty of consuming alcohol during a Communion service. They are appealing the sentence, which allows for the execution of third-time offenders. All three men are converts from Islam.

Commenting on the sentences, sources close to CSW highlighted a recent increase in repression, adding that in the absence of apostasy legislation, the Iranian authorities appear to be making use of this provision to deter or punish anyone who changes religion.

The men were arrested May 13, during a series of raids on Christian homes by security service (VEVAK) agents that also targeted the home of Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani. All four are currently charged with "actions against national security," for which the maximum sentence is 5-6 years in prison.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "These men are being punished simply for partaking in a sacrament practiced for centuries by Christians the world over. The effective criminalization of an important Christian sacrament is unacceptable and should not be occurring in a country with a constitution that not only recognizes Christianity, but also states that no-one should be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief. We urge the Iranian authorities to end this unjust infringement on the right to manifest faith in practice, worship and observance. We also call on Iran to ensure that the nation's practices, legal procedures and provisions do not contradict its constitutional and international

commitments to ensure the full enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief, including the right to change belief, for every religious community.”