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IRAN | Pastor Behnam Irani Released From Prison

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) confirmed that Church of Iran leader Pastor Behnam Irani was released from prison in Karaj on Oct. 17 after completing a six-year sentence.

Pastor Irani was initially arrested in December 2006. He was released the following year but was given a five-year suspended sentence in 2008. The pastor was arrested again in 2010 and imprisoned in 2011 for “action against the state” and “action against the order.”

During his first few months in Ghezal Hesar Prison, Pastor Irani was held incommunicado in a small cell where guards repeatedly woke him from sleep as a form of psychological torture. He was subsequently moved to a cramped room where inmates could not lie down to sleep before being transferred to a crowded, filthy cell which he shared with 40 criminals, many of whom were violent. The pastor was also subjected to physical and psychological pressure and suffered regular beatings from cell mates and prison officials, as well as death threats. As his health deteriorated due to the harsh conditions, he suffered severe bleeding as a result of ulcers and colon complications and eventually underwent successful surgery in February 2014.

In June 2014, Pastor Irani was assaulted in prison by Iranian Security Service (VEVAK) officers after objecting to an irregular court summons from Judge Mohammad Yari of the Sixth Branch of the Revolutionary Tribunal. He was subsequently brought before Judge Yari, charged with communicating with the media, and was placed in solitary confinement at a VEVAK detention center and interrogated on five occasions for four hours each time. Two weeks prior to the assault, the authorities confiscated his Bible and other Christian literature. In October 2014, he was sentenced to six-years imprisonment and exile to a prison in the northern city of Zabol for Mofsed-e-filarz, or "spreading corruption on earth." However, in December 2014, the sentence was revoked following an appeal.

Under Iranian law, prisoners can be released conditionally for good behavior once they have served more than half of their sentence, although this is subject to the agreement of prison authorities and a judge. In 2015, prison authorities agreed to Pastor Irani's conditional release; however, a judge disagreed, and he remained in jail. The Iranian authorities also had the option of releasing Pastor Irani in September 2016, but opted to enforce his complete sentence.

Mervyn Thomas Chief Executive of CSW said, "CSW welcomes Pastor Irani's release from prison following his unjust arrest and conviction on false charges. His ordeal at the hands of the authorities risked his health and kept an innocent man away from his family for years. The continuing systematic harassment and imprisonment of Christians and other religious minorities is in violation of Iran's commitments under its constitution and the international covenants to which it is party. We urge the international community to continue to press Iran to uphold its obligations to respect the right to freedom of religion or belief of every religious community within its borders. No one should suffer as Pastor Irani has done, simply for following their conscience and belief."