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IRAN | Verdict Pending for Church of Iran Members

A verdict in the trial of four members of the Church of Iran denomination in Rasht is pending after local authorities decided to refer the case to Tehran.

Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, Mohammadreza Omid, Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Saheb Fadaie are charged with “action against national security.” The four men were arrested May 13 during a series of raids by security service (VEVAK) agents on Christian homes in Rasht. If found guilty, they could face a maximum of five or six years in prison. A ruling was expected prior to Iranian New Year on March 21; however, the decision to refer the case to authorities in Tehran will mean a further delay.

The deadline is also overdue for a decision on an appeal by Omid, Mossayebzadeh and Fadaie against a sentence of 80 lashes each for drinking wine during a Communion service.

The latest developments come amidst an apparent rise in repression as the May 19 presidential election approaches. Middle East Concern reports that Feb. 20, two Catholic converts, Anousheh Reza-bakhand and her son Soheil Zagarzadeh Sani, were arrested in Urmia, the capital of West Azerbaijan Province, after their home was raided by Revolutionary Guard intelligence officers.

In addition, according to the Centre for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI), since January 2017 the Ministry of Intelligence has been targeting ethnic and religious minorities, civil and women’s rights advocates, journalists, dual nationals, environmentalists and the relatives of protesters killed during the crackdown on peaceful protestors following the disputed 2009 presidential elections in an escalating series of arrests. Among those detained is Faezah Hashemi, the daughter of the late former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. The activist and politician was charged with “spreading falsehoods,” “disturbing public opinion,” and “propaganda against the

state” after meeting with a Baha’i leader and other well-known civil rights activists, and sentenced to six months in prison.

More recently, and in a move that has been criticized by pro-reform politicians, from March 14-16, security officers arrested 12 administrators of Telegram social app media channels, which are reportedly used by around 20 million Iranians to distribute and receive uncensored information on the upcoming elections. Many of those detained had voluntarily registered their channels with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in line with a December 2016 order by the Supreme Cyberspace Council, the body tasked with formulating internet policies and regulations. While most were later released, two remain incarcerated in an unknown location.

In an indication of the tensions, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei used his New Year’s message to warn that he will stand up to anyone who refuses to accept the outcome of the elections.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, “It is puzzling that a verdict in a case that clearly calls for a dismissal, given the excessive nature of the charges, is being referred to authorities in Tehran, causing further delays and subjecting the defendants and their families to additional uncertainty. The spurious national security-related charges and continuing arrests are illustrative of a continuing campaign against members of the Christian community, who are peaceably exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief in accordance with article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is a state party. Moreover, a significant Christian sacrament should not be criminalized in a nation with a constitution that recognizes Christian rites and ceremonies and prohibits the harassment of individuals on account of their beliefs. CSW calls on the Iranian Government to ensure these four men receive a fair hearing. In addition, the restrictions imposed on social media channels violate article 19 of the ICCPR and article 175 of the Iranian constitution, which guarantees freedom of expression and the dissemination of thoughts in the media. We therefore urge the Iranian government to respect and uphold its constitutional and international obligations in this regard.”