

# Hanged for being a Christian in Iran

(10/11/2008- By Alasdair Palmer -Telegraph.co.uk)

Eighteen years ago, Rashin Soodmand's father was hanged in Iran for converting to Christianity. Now her brother is in a Mashad jail, and expects to be executed under new religious laws brought in this summer.

Life for Rashin Soodmand, her siblings and her mother became extremely difficult after her father was executed in Iran for the 'crime' of abandoning his religion. Hossein Soodmand, Rashin's father, was the last man to be executed in Iran for apostasy. Her brother Mashad is now in death row awaiting the same fate.

A month ago, the Iranian parliament voted in favour of a draft bill, entitled "Islamic Penal Code", which would codify the death penalty for any male Iranian who leaves his Islamic faith. Women would get life imprisonment. The majority in favour of the new law was overwhelming: 196 votes for, with just seven against.

Imposing the death penalty for changing religion blatantly violates one of the most fundamental of all human rights. The right to freedom of religion is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and in the European Convention of Human Rights. It is even enshrined as Article 23 of Iran's own constitution, which states that no one may be molested simply for his beliefs.

And yet few politicians or clerics in Iran see any contradiction between a law mandating the death penalty for changing religion and Iran's constitution. There has been no public protest in Iran against it.

David Miliband, Britain's Foreign Secretary, stands out as one of the few politicians from any Western country who has put on record his opposition to making apostasy a crime punishable by death. The protest from the EU has been distinctly muted; meanwhile, Germany, Iran's largest foreign trading partner, has just increased its business deals with Iran by more than half. Characteristically, the United Nations has said nothing.

It is a sign of how little interest there is in Iran's intention to launch a campaign of religious persecution that its parliamentary vote has still not been reported in the mainstream media.

For one woman living in London, however, the Iranian parliamentary vote cannot be brushed aside. Rashin Soodmand is a 29-year-old Iranian Christian. Her father, Hossein Soodmand, was the last man to be executed in Iran for apostasy, the "crime" of abandoning one's religion. He had converted from Islam to Christianity in 1960, when he was 13 years old. Thirty years later, he was hanged by the Iranian authorities for that decision.

Today, Rashin's brother, Ramtin, is also held in a prison cell in Mashad, Iran's holiest city. He was arrested on August 21. He has not been charged but he is a Christian. And Rashin fears that,

just as her father was the last man to be executed for apostasy in Iran, her brother may become one of the first to be killed under Iran's new law.

Not surprisingly, Rashin is desperately worried. "I am terribly anxious about him," she explains. "Even though my brother is not an apostate, because he has never been a Muslim – my father raised us all as Christians – I don't think he is safe. They assume that if you are Iranian, you must be Muslim."

Her brother's situation has ominous echoes of her father's fate. Rashin was 14 when her father was arrested. "He was held in prison for one month," she remembers. "Then the religious police released him without explanation and without apology. We were overjoyed. We thought his ordeal was over."

But six months later, the police came back and took her father away again. This time, they offered him a choice: he could denounce his Christian faith, and the church in which he was a pastor – or he would be killed. "Of course, my father refused to give up his faith," Rashid recalls proudly. "He could not renounce his God. His belief in Christ was his life – it was his deepest conviction." So two weeks later, Hossein Soodmand was taken by guards to the prison gallows and hanged.

Life for Rashin, her siblings and her mother became extremely difficult. Some Muslims are extremely hostile to people of any other religion, never mind to those who they consider apostates: Ayatollah Khomeini declared that "non-Muslims are impure", insisting that for Muslims to wash the clothes of non-Muslims, or to eat food with non-Muslims, or even to use utensils touched by non-Muslims, would spoil their purity.

The family was supported with financial and other help from a Christian church based in Iran. That support became even more critical as Rashin's mother began to lose her sight. Rashin herself was eventually able to leave Iran. She now lives in London, married to a fellow Christian from Iran who successfully applied for asylum in Germany.

It took years for Rashin to understand how her father could have been legally executed simply for becoming a Christian. In 1990, there was no parliamentary law mandating the death for apostates. What, then, was the legal basis for Hossein Soodmand's execution?

"After the revolution of 1979, Iran's rulers wanted to turn Iran into an Islamic state, and to abolish the secular laws of the Shah," explains Alexa Papadouris of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, a human rights organisation that specialises in freedom of religion. "So the clerics instituted a mandate for judges presiding over criminal cases: if the existing penal code did not include legislation on whether a certain kind of behaviour is an offence, then the judges should refer to traditional Islamic jurisprudence." In other words: sharia law.

"That automatically created problems" says Mr Papadouris, "because Islamic jurisprudence is not codified law: it is a series of formulations developed across generations by scholars and clerics. Depending on the Islamic school or historical era, these formulations can differ and even contradict each other."

On one subject, however, sharia law is unequivocal: men who change their religion from Islam must be punished with death. So when the judge heard the case of Rashid's father, he could refer to sharia and reach a straightforward decision: the death penalty. There was no procedure for appeal.

Nevertheless, in the 18 years since Hossein Soodmand's execution, there have been no judicially sanctioned killings of apostates in Iran, although there have been many reports of disappearances and even murders. "As the number of converts from Islam grows," notes Ms Papadouris, "apostasy has again become a serious concern for the Iranian government." In addition to 10,000 Christian converts living in Iran, there are several hundred thousand Baha'is who are deemed apostates.

There is another factor: President Ahmadinejad. "The President didn't initiate the law mandating the death penalty for apostates," says Papadouris, "but he has been lobbying for it. It is an effective form of playing populist politics. The Iranian economy is doing very badly, and the country is in a mess: Ahmadinejad may be calculating that he can gain support, and deflect attention from Iran's problems, by persecuting apostates."

The new law is not yet in force in Iran: it requires another vote in parliament, and then the signature of the Ayatollah. But that could happen within a matter of weeks. "Or," says Papadouris, "it could conceivably be allowed to drop, were there a powerful enough international outcry".

Time may be running out for Rashid's brother. She believes that the new law will be applied in an arbitrary fashion, with individuals selected for death being chosen to frighten others into submission. That is why she fears for her brother. "We just don't know what will happen to him. We only know that if they want to kill him, they will."

**(Article Source:**

**<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/3179465/Hanged-for-being-a-Christian-in-Iran.html>**)