

Baha'i humanitarian activities in Shiraz and the Iranian government's charges against them

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The 53 Baha'is who were arrested in May 2006, recently sentenced on charges of "propaganda" against the government, were in fact engaged in a series of loosely organized social service projects aimed at helping underprivileged children in Shiraz and surrounding localities.¹

Reports received from Iran indicate that the first project had in fact been initiated in 2004 by a small group of Baha'is who wanted to render some form of service to children and junior youth.

Although the idea came from these Baha'is, it was actually a Muslim friend of one of them who suggested that the program be instituted to help school children in Katsbas, a poverty-stricken suburb of Shiraz. The project aimed specifically at tutoring children to help them prepare for their end of term school examinations.

Those that served as tutors, not all of whom were Baha'is, met with the children every Friday from 8 a.m. until noon. In the project's infancy, the tutors would lay out rugs in front of the houses of the parents so that the families could see that their only intention was to serve the children and therefore be at ease. The mothers would stand nearby to observe the lesson plans and exercises the tutors were delivering and expressed interest in learning their methods.

Originally the tutors were working with twenty, then sixty, then one hundred and twenty children. At the end of the school term, the parents of the children asked whether the activities could continue. At that point the group decided to extend their services to include assisting the children to acquire social and moral skills so that they themselves could become the agents of advancement in their own lives and in the society.

By the summer of 2005, the number of children involved in the program had increased so significantly that it was necessary to divide them into two groups, each group comprising more than one hundred participants and thirty tutors.

At the same time, as a result of a desire to engage in social service expressed by a Muslim friend of one of the Baha'is, a similar project was started in another locality, Sahlabad, where children and their families had voiced keen interest in such an undertaking. That project involved one hundred children, again tutored both by some who were Baha'is and others not, and continued for a year, until the arrest of the Baha'is in Shiraz in May 2006.

Concurrently with the project in Sahlabad, the group commenced a further initiative involving one hundred children and junior youth being assisted by fourteen tutors at an educational center in Shiraz. That project was carried out within the ambit of the program "Protection of the Rights of Children" in Shiraz, which was registered with the Ministry of the Interior.

In addition to the foregoing activities, the group would organize a weekly program offering art classes to young cancer patients at the hospital for children and junior youth in Shiraz. This program, which had been enthusiastically received by the head of the hospital, also ran for a year

¹ While wire service reports quote Iranian government officials as saying that 54 Baha'is were arrested in May 2006, of which three have been sentenced to four-year jail terms and the other 51 given suspended one-year sentences, Baha'i sources indicate that only 53 individuals were arrested on 19 May 2006.

until it was halted because of the arrest of the Baha'is. During that same period, members of the group made regular visits to orphanages and facilities for physically and mentally challenged children.

As part of their preparation for these projects, the tutors studied material on pedagogy, on teaching arts and crafts, on first aid and on the moral development of junior youth, among which was the book "Breezes of Confirmation." [View a sample lesson from "Breezes of Confirmation."](#)

"Breezes of Confirmation" is a workbook for strengthening language skills and the power of expression in young people aged 11 to 12. Developed in Zambia, it is organized around simple readings followed by language exercises. The readings discuss moral concepts that are inspired by the Baha'i Teachings, but they cannot be considered religious material. For example, there are no references to the Baha'i Faith in the publication. Indeed, the book has been used in many countries around the world in programs aimed at elevating the level of literacy of junior youth. It is also used by Baha'i communities in their own educational endeavors.

The aforementioned projects never involved teaching the Baha'i Faith, nor did the participants ever engage in spreading anti-regime propaganda, as had been stated to the press by an Iranian government official.

As reported by one of the Baha'i organizers of these projects, in 2005, the group carrying out the tutoring wrote to the Islamic Council of the city of Shiraz to introduce their activities and request permission to continue their projects. Their request was approved after having been reviewed by the Cultural Commission, and a letter of permission was issued to the group.

The group's submission included reference to the materials being used in the programs, and no one raised the issue of religion with the group members. No reports were ever received of any of the children or their parents expressing concern about the religious background of the tutors.

Furthermore, until the 53 Baha'is were arrested in May 2006, there was no distinction made between the Muslims involved in the social service projects and the Baha'is; in fact, since religion was not an issue, some of the Muslims were reportedly unaware that their colleagues in these enterprises were not themselves Muslims.

In August 2007, the 53 were notified by a local court that they had been convicted of "offenses relating to state security." Then, in November 2007, three of those were told by telephone to go to the Ministry of Information office in Shiraz to retrieve items that had been confiscated in the May 2006 arrests. Instead of receiving their belongings, however, they were immediately imprisoned.

According to an account in an urgent action appeal issued on 25 January 2008 by Amnesty International, "[w]hen they did not return home, family members who had accompanied them were given conflicting information by intelligence officials. The officials tried to claim that the three had not entered the building, even though their relatives had seen them do so. Eventually, their relatives were informed that the three were still being held at the Office of the Ministry of Intelligence in Shiraz."

On 29 January 2008, according to international wire service reports, an Iranian judicial spokesperson elaborated on the charges against the three. "Three Bahais have been sentenced to

four years in prison for propaganda against the regime," said judiciary spokesman Ali Reza Jamshidi, according to Agence France-Presse (AFP).

Mr. Jamshidi also told reporters that 51 others received suspended one-year jail terms, conditional on their attendance of courses held by state Islamic Propaganda Organization.

The AFP quoted another, anonymous judicial official as saying that the Baha'is "were proselytizing in the southern city of Shiraz under the cover of helping the poor."

The court has not given detailed information regarding these Islamic Propaganda Organization courses that the 50 Baha'is who are facing one-year suspended sentences will be required to attend. However, experienced lawyers have indicated that this is unprecedented. These lawyers have recommended that the youth not participate in such classes since they believe that the goal is to exert pressure on them to disavow the Faith. This matter is being investigated more closely, but certainly no Baha'i would knowingly agree to engage in a process that would seek to have him or her deny the Faith.

Moreover, the court's charge that the Baha'is arrested in Shiraz were engaged in indirect teaching is misleading. Indeed, such a charge could be leveled at Baha'is for any activity that reflects the distinctive principles and qualities to be found in Baha'i Teachings. That said, even if the Baha'is themselves had been teaching the Faith directly, this cannot constitute legitimate grounds on which to imprison them. Article 18 of the International Bill of Human Rights — the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights — which has the force of law in countries that have signed it, including Iran, confirms the right of "everyone", "to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching."



Tutors and children gathered for class in Sahlabad, outside Shiraz, Iran. Such classes were shut down by the government in 2006.



Class in Sahlabad, outside Shiraz, Iran.



Class in Katsbas, outside Shiraz, Iran.



Class in Sahlabad, outside Shiraz, Iran.