Iran throws leading Bahai activists back in jail for 10 years each

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By AFP

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Iran has jailed two prominent Baha’i figures for 10 years each as part of a crackdown on its largest non-Muslim religious minority, the group representing the community at the UN said Sunday.

Mahvash Sabet, 69, and Fariba Kamalabadi, 60, who had both previously served 10-year prison terms over their activism, were handed new sentences after a one-hour trial on November 21, the Bahai International Community said in a statement.

The two women had been arrested in late July at the start of a fresh crackdown against the Baha’i, who are estimated to number some 300,000 in Iran.

The Islamic republic recognizes minority non-Muslim faiths including Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism but does not extend the same recognition to Baha’ism.

“It is profoundly distressing to learn that these two Bahai women… are once again being incarcerated for another 10 years on the same ludicrous charges,” said Simin Fahandej, representative of the Bahai International Community to the UN in Geneva.

“Words fail to describe this absurd and cruel injustice,” she added.

The precise nature of the national security-related charges were not immediately clear, but Iran’s intelligence ministry said in August it had arrested Baha’is suspected of spying for a center in Israel and working illegally to spread their religion.

At least 90 Baha’is are currently in prison or subject to ankle-band monitoring, the Bahai International Community said, adding that it had counted 320 individual acts of persecution against members of the community since the end of July.

The crackdown has seen Baha’i homes destroyed and business shut down, it added.

Iran is also in the throes of a nationwide crackdown against protests over the September death of Mahsa Amini, a young Iranian women of Kurdish origin, after her arrest by the morality police.

Baha’is are used to Iranian accusations of links to Israel, whose northern city of Haifa hosts a center of the Baha’i faith that was established following the exile of a Baha’i leader well before the state of Israel was created.

Baha’is regard such allegations has a pretext for persecution.

Both Sabet and Kamalabadi had been part of a now disbanded Baha’i administrative group known as the Yaran.

The pair were first arrested in 2008 and released in 2018, according to the Bahai International Community.

Sabet, who wrote poetry during her decade in Tehran’s Evin prison, was recognized in 2017 as an English PEN International Writer of Courage.