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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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ADJOURNMENT

Iran: Persecution of Baha'i Faith

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Simpkins, Luke, MP

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Mr SIMPKINS (Cowan) (7.38 pm)—Tonight I would like to raise the issue of the persecution of the practitioners of the Baha'i Faith and other religious minorities by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. On this occasion I would like to speak about the particular persecution of the Baha'is. There are over 300,000 followers of the Baha'i Faith within Iran, and this religion actually began some 150 years ago within the borders of that country. When we talk about current day Iran, it is worth noting the persecution of the Baha'is has occurred continually over the entire existence of the religion. Its followers have regularly been made scapegoats for the failures of the Iranian government and the Iranian economy. Since the establishment of Israel, and with the presence of the Baha'i Universal House of Justice in Haifa, the Iranian persecution of the Baha'is has been characterised by allegations that they are supporters of Israel and the West, as well as being responsible for the economic woes of Iran.

It is widely believed that, since the rise of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the persecution of the Baha'is has intensified. Although I believe that the majority of the persecution of Baha'is relates to scapegoating for the regime's persistent failures, it cannot be ignored that the Islamic religion and its authorities struggle with a monotheistic religion that came into being after the establishment of the Islamic religion. The problem for the Islamic leadership group in Iran is that, while other Abrahamic religions such as Christianity and Judaism may be disregarded as outdated precursors, the Baha'i Faith is a religion that actually relegates Mohammed to the position of a divine messenger only, rather than the final messenger. This represents a significant challenge to the Islamic religion for the leadership in Iran.

The reason I am raising the issue of persecution is that last year the seven main leaders of the Baha'i Faith in Iran were arrested. In March 2008 Mrs Mahvash Sabet was arrested. In May 2008 Mrs Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr Afif Naemi, Mr Saeid Rezaie, Mr Behrouz Tavakkoli and Mr Vahid Tizfahm were arrested. The charges accused these five men and two women of espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctity and propaganda against the republic. It is my firm view that these charges have no validity,

and they are inconsistent with the teachings of the Baha'i Faith in any case.

I have already written to the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to inform him of my view that the arrests were wrong and that the treatment of these people whilst in custody has been unfair, unreasonable and inhumane. I have asked for the charges to be dropped and, if they are not dropped, for a fair and open trial to be conducted in front of international media. I am greatly concerned about the history of persecution of not only the practitioners of the Baha'i Faith but also other religious and minority groups in Iran. I believe that the actions of the government of Iran demonstrate a renewed period of religious and political intolerance.

We should also note that there are a further 30 Baha'is in jail and another 80 currently on bail who face trial. I have been informed that the 80 on bail were required to surrender documents relating to the ownership of land and the licences of their businesses. Clearly, the government of Iran intends that Baha'i property rights can now easily be forfeited to the government. The obligation to surrender their assets in this way is unjust and can easily be perceived as further persecution, targeting of minority groups and religious intolerance. I have also raised this matter with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and I look forward to seeing a response to the situation. I know that the issue of Iranian government persecution of Baha'is has a long history of being raised in this place. I am the first member for Cowan to raise it but I know that many members of this current parliament have raised the issue in the past.

Iran faces an election this year. I believe that as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad seeks to shore up his position the blaming and persecution of Baha'is will continue to be a political tactic. A number of followers of the Baha'i Faith live in the electorate of Cowan, and I thank them for bringing this matter to my attention. This issue is about persecution. It is about the withdrawal of the right to freely practise religion, it is about religious intolerance and it is about the extreme practice of politics. These seven Baha'is are on trial for their lives. It should never have come to that. I will finish by saying that Australia should once again send a clear message to the government of Iran that this sort of injustice has no place in a modern world and no justification in any religion.