

Pastor Nadarkhani among prisoners released in Iran

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TEHRAN, Iran (BP)—Long-persecuted Iranian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani is among at least three Christian prisoners released in Iran’s national amnesty marking the 44th anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported.

Nadarkhani, leader of a 400-member house church network in the northern city of Rasht in the Gilan province, had been imprisoned since 2018 on a 10-year sentence for apostasy that was reduced to six years in 2020.

He was accused of “acting against national security” by promoting house churches and Zionist Christianity. But he was first detained in 2006, commencing a series of governmental acts of persecution against his church.

The [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) welcomed Nadarkhani’s release, but called on Iran to release all prisoners of conscience in the country where evangelical Christianity is banned.

“The Iranian regime has relentlessly targeted Christian converts from Islam for peacefully practicing their faith. Though we are relieved by his release many still remain imprisoned. We call for the release of all religious prisoners in Iran,” Vice Chair Abraham Cooper said.

“The U.S. government must continue to work with its partners in the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance to hold Iranian authorities accountable for its unjustified arrests and many violations of freedom of religion or belief.”

The International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance is a network of 37 countries the U.S. State Department describes as “fully committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world,” and committed to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration for Human Rights promoting religious freedom.

Nadarkhani benefited from [international advocacy in 2010 after he was sentenced to death](#) on a conviction of apostasy and evangelism that was overturned in 2012.

He grew up in a Muslim family but converted to Christianity at age 19. He and his wife, Tina, who was arrested and released in 2010, have two sons.

‘Long-overdue release’

In advance of Nadarkhani’s release Feb. 27 from the notoriously brutal Evin Prison, church members Hadi Rahimi and Zaman Fadaie were released from Evin Prison on Feb. 15 and Feb. 8, respectively, *Morning Star News* reported March 5. All three men are Christian converts from Islam.

Mervyn Thomas, [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#) founder and president, also confirmed the release of Fadaie, who served as a deacon at Nadarkhani’s church.

“We welcome the long-overdue release of Pastor Nadarkhani and Deacon Fadaie, but note that they have lost years of their life in prison on false charges as a result of Iran’s continuing criminalization of the Christian faith, among other religions and beliefs,” Thomas said.

“We call on the Iranian authorities to ensure that these men are permitted to enjoy their freedom without further harassment or intimidation, and continue to call for the immediate and unconditional release of all others

who are currently imprisoned on account of their religion or belief.”

Fadaei had been arrested with Nadarkhani and was serving a six-year sentence under the same charges of “acting against national security” and “promoting Zionist Christianity.” He had been sentenced to 10 years in 2018, but the sentence was reduced in 2020. Rahimi had been serving a four-year sentence since 2020 for his house church involvement.

As many as “tens of thousands” of prisoners were pardoned in recognition of the revolution, according to the government-controlled Islamic Republic News Agency that is widely considered a source of propaganda. The pardons were approved by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Iran’s constitution does not recognize evangelical Christian communities, USCIRF said, and only nominally recognizes other Christian groups. The country particularly targets for persecution Christian converts from Islam.

The U.S. State Department in November 2022 designated Iran a country of particular concern, noting systemic, ongoing and egregious religious freedom violations. Other countries on the list are Burma (Myanmar), China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Open Doors International, in its 2023 World Watch List, ranked Iran as the eighth most dangerous country for Christians, noting an increasingly strict Islamic regime that views house churches as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the regime’s authority.