

Religious dissidents subjected to mistreatment in prison

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Oppressive governments not only violate freedom of religion by imprisoning adherents of disfavored religions, but also subjecting them to harassment and even torture during their incarceration, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom reports.

“Governments deliberately use mistreatment as a strategy to demoralize and disavow religious dissidents of their belief or the expression of those beliefs,” the commission states in a December [factsheet on prison mistreatment](#) and freedom of religion or belief.

“Reports of mistreatment in prison have a chilling effect on disfavored religious communities outside of prison as well,” as individuals fear their lawful exercise of religion will make them targets of government repression, the factsheet states.

The factsheet cites specific examples of mistreatment of prisoners in Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, Saudi Arabia and Turkmenistan.

Mai Serwa Prison in Eritrea

Most inmates at Mai Serwa Prison—an isolated and overcrowded facility north of the Eritrean capital of Asmara—are packed into metal shipping containers, where they are subject to extreme heat and cold.

“Scores of prisoners, including those detained on the basis of religion, have died at Mai Serwa,” the commission factsheet states.

“Former inmates and doctors report torture by Mai Serwa prison staff.

Since inmates are rarely charged or sentenced, imprisonment at Mai Serwa is often a de facto life sentence.”

Christian prisoners at Mai Serwa are singled out for mistreatment on the basis of their religion, the factsheet reports.

“Former inmates report prison guards using torture to attempt to force Christians to renounce their faith. One recounts being pressured to sign a document saying she ‘would neither preach, praise, sing, nor spread the gospel,’” the factsheet states.

Individuals imprisoned at Mai Serwa for their faith include 15 members of the Christian Mahalian praise group who were imprisoned for an “illegal church gathering” after they recorded religious songs and attempted to post them online.

Scores of Jehovah’s Witnesses also have been imprisoned at Mai Serwa. They include Henok Ghebru, incarcerated for conscientious objection, who has been denied medical treatment.

Evin Prison in Iran

Sixty percent of the Christians detained in Iran are held at Evin Prison, a facility built in Tehran more than 50 years ago to hold political dissidents.

As in the case of Mai Serwa Prison in Eritrea, Christian former prisoners of Evin Prison report harassment by guards, as well as pressure to make false confessions to participating in illegal religious activities.

“An Armenian Christian woman reported that in 2022, an interrogator at Evin sexually assaulted and disparaged her for not wearing hijab on account of her non-Muslim religious identity,” the commission factsheet reports.

“In April 2025, a convert to Christianity who was recently released from Ervin reported that in late 2023 or early 2024, an interrogator at Evin tried to pressure him to sign a legal commitment to cease his religious activities.”

Establecimiento Penitenciario Integral de Mujeres in Nicaragua

Former inmates of Establecimiento Penitenciario Integral de Mujeres in Nicaragua—ironically also known as “La Esperanza” or “the hope”—report “torture, denial of adequate medical care, rodent and insect infestations, inadequate protection from other inmates, and sexual assault,” the commission factsheet states.

Eleven leaders of Mountain Gateway Church were arrested in December 2023 and spuriously charged with money laundering and organized crime, the factsheet reports. At La Esperanza and La Modelo prisons, they reportedly were denied access to Bibles and medication before being deported to Guatemala.

“In January 2025, officials at La Esperanza Prison severely restricted outdoor access for inmates who prayed out loud,” the factsheet states. “The inmates had been beaten during interrogations and denied access to Bibles.”

Dhanban Prison in Saudi Arabia

In recent years, reports of mistreatment of inmates imprisoned at Dhanban Prison in Saudi Arabia for their religious beliefs have included torture resulting in death, the commission factsheet stated.

Raif Badawi, who was imprisoned for allegedly insulting Islam, conducted a

hunger strike to protest his mistreatment, including denial of access to crucial medicine.

Although Badawi eventually was released, his attorney, Waleed Abu al-Khair, remains in prison.

“Officials at Dhanban Prison placed al-Khair in solitary confinement, denied him contact with family, and subjected him to torture,” the factsheet stated.

Women who were arrested for peaceful protests have been imprisoned, sexually assaulted and tortured. The factsheet reports officials taunted the women during the encounters by asking, “Where is your Lord to protect you?”

Ovadan-Depe Prison in Turkmenistan

Former inmates who were imprisoned at Ovadan-Depe Prison in Turkmenistan report “egregious conditions, including lack of sufficient food, mass beatings, and other forms of torture,” the commission factsheet states. Some inmates report being held in five-foot-tall “hunchback cells” where they are unable to stand upright.

Several inmates are charged with being “Wahhabi” Muslims—an offense that carries a six-year sentence in Turkmenistan.

“However, the charge is often used against people regardless of their actual beliefs or activity, including a Protestant Christian in 2024,” the factsheet states.

In light of “systemic and egregious” restrictions on freedom of religion, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom calls on the heads of U.S. government agencies to “raise cases involving individuals imprisoned because of their religion with foreign counterparts.” The factsheet also urges U.S. diplomats to “seek to meet with imprisoned religious leaders.”