

# With a Mass Trial, the Persecution of Baha'is in Yemen Continues Unabated

Saturday 6 October 2018, by [MATHARU Aleesha](#) (Date first published: 26 September 2018).

**The Baha'is, among them eight women and a teenage girl, face charges which can carry the death penalty in Yemen, including espionage apostasy. Making matters worse, this later chapter comes after hate speeches by Houthi leaders have incited violence against the community in the war-torn country.**

A Shi'ite Houthi rebel in police uniform stands guard on a wall in downtown Sanaa. Credit: Khaled Abdullah/Reuters

**New Delhi:** The Baha'i community in Yemen is once again stuck in a fresh nightmare – on September 15, 24 Baha'i's were [indicted](#) at a court hearing in the Houthi-controlled capital, Sana'a.

The pattern is familiar and the charges – ranging from espionage (being agents of the UK, the US or Israel) to apostasy – as absurd and irrational as they have been in the past. Not surprisingly, at the time of the hearing, only the judge, prosecutor and other court officials were present. The Baha'is being charged were not told about the session in court, nor were their lawyers informed.

Among those being charged are a teenage girl and eight women. Many of those who have been locked up hold leadership positions in the Baha'i community in Yemen.

The next hearing is scheduled for September 29. The charges are punishable by death.

"We are seeing trumped up charges and flagrantly unfair proceedings used to persecute Yemeni Baha'is for their faith," [said](#) Lynn Maalouf, head of Middle East research at Amnesty. "It is particularly abhorrent that some of these men and women could face the death penalty for their conscientiously held beliefs and peaceful activities." Maalouf said, calling for their immediate release.

"The charges are extremely alarming and mark a severe intensification of pressure at a time when the community is already being threatened and the general humanitarian crisis in the country requires urgent attention," said Bani Dugal, Principal Representative of the Baha'i International Community to the UN.

"We have every reason to be concerned about the safety of the Baha'i community in Yemen. We urge the international community to call upon the authorities in Sana'a to immediately drop these absurd, false and baseless accusations against these innocent individuals who have been maliciously charged simply because they have been practising their Faith," Dugal said.

In January, when Hamed Kamal Muhammad bin Haydara was [sentenced to public execution](#) by the specialised criminal court in Sana'a, he too was not allowed to defend himself against the charges that had been hoisted on him, which ranged from "insulting Islam" to "apostasy" and urging Muslims to "embrace the Baha'i religion". At present, he is among six other Baha'is who have been

in jail for more than a year. According to [reports](#), the official charges against some of the current prisoners include 'showing kindness to the poor' and 'displaying good behaviour'.

Hamed Haydara wasn't even allowed to attend his own sentencing. Credit: Mwatana for Human Rights

Dozens of others have also been arrested and released in recent years. In August 2016, armed men stormed a Baha'i community workshop and arrested 65 people.

The UK has [condemned](#) the mistreatment of the Baha'i community by Houthi rebels in Yemen. "The persecution of members of the Baha'i community in areas of Yemen under Houthi control due to their religious beliefs is a serious violation of international human rights law," Britain's special envoy for freedom of religion and belief, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, said on Monday.

### **'We will butcher every Baha'i'**

The accusations against the 24 Baha'is also comes on the back of Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi authorities openly inciting violence against the community.

In a televised speech earlier this year, the leader of the Houthis [vilified and denounced the Baha'i faith](#).

Abdel-Malek al-Houthi denounced the Baha'i faith as "satanic", and stated that it was "waging a war of doctrine" against Islam. He urged Yemenis to defend their country from the Baha'is and members of other religious minorities under the pretext that, "those who destroy the faith in people are no less evil and dangerous than those who kill people with their bombs".

In the aftermath of the speech, the hate being spewed against the community turned up a notch. A prominent Houthi strategist [tweeted](#) that "we will butcher every Baha'i". From the Mufti of Yemen, Shams al-Din Muhammad Sharaf al-Din, to prominent [writers](#) and [news websites](#), many reiterated the speech and encouraged acts of violence.

Making matter worse, the ministry of information proceeded to [hold workshops](#) to train Yemenis active on social media on "how to respond to the war of doctrine waged by the Baha'is".

### **Past, present, future**

In Yemen, which, according to UN, is the "[worst humanitarian crisis in the world](#)" with more than 22 million people - three-quarters of the population - "in desperate need of aid and protection", the Baha'i community has witnessed increased harassment since 2014 under the watchful eye of Tehran. From hate speeches, arrests, false imprisonment and even a death sentence, the community has been hit by a maelstrom of ill-will.

The government also announced the dissolution of all Baha'i administrative bodies in Yemen. More than one source has confirmed that Iranian authorities are directing efforts to persecute the Baha'is in Yemen.

"The manner in which the Houthis are targeting the Baha'i community in Yemen is eerily reminiscent of the persecution of Baha'is in Iran in the 1980s during which leaders of the Baha'i community were rounded up and killed," Bani Dugal said.

Founded by Baha'u'llah in late-19<sup>th</sup>-century Iran, the Baha'i faith has been under attack since when it was learning to take baby steps. One of the founders of the faith, known to his followers as the Bab,

was executed by a firing squad in 1850 at the age of 30. Over 2,000 of his early believers were massacred.

The cruelty towards the Baha'is has not abated since then. They've been targeted for being "heretics", "enemies of Islam", and "a depraved sect", and subjected to waves upon waves of attacks.

In June 1983 in Iran, ten women and girls were hanged in Shiraz for refusing to give up their faith. Three days earlier, the authorities had executed their husbands, sons and fathers. Over the years, many members of the Baha'i spiritual assemblies have been rounded up and imprisoned or summarily executed.

On August 7, 2010, seven members of the Yaran, the leaders of the Baha'i spiritual assemblies in Iran, were sentenced to 20 years each in prison on fictitious charges which included espionage, propaganda activities, against the Islamic order and spreading "corruption on Earth".

But steadfastly holding on in the face of persecution, the Baha'i faith has managed to spread around the globe. There are over six million Baha'is around the world, including 2,000 in Yemen and more than 100,000 local Baha'i communities, including in India.

The Baha'is, despite being among the most persecuted religious minorities in the world, pride themselves in being a universal religion, espousing kindness and peace. As Baha'u'llah's said: "The Earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."

The latest developments only serve to prove that the international community must come together, as various rights groups have advocated time and again, to assist the Baha'i community in Yemen before the world is made to witness another genocide and bow its head in shame.

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