



## Pastor's Fate Rests in the Hands of Iran's Ayatollah

After initially claiming it would not execute a minister for converting from Islam to Christianity, the Iranian government is — in the words of one analyst — engaging in a “variety of tactics in an effort to neutralize a situation that has called into question its flaunted commitment to religious freedom.”

In an article (“[Deny, Deceive, Discredit: Iranians Try Range of Tactics to Resolve Apostasy Case](#)”) CNSNews writer Patrick Goodenough observes that Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani’s (picture, left) conviction — and looming execution — for “apostasy” from Islam to Christianity led to an avalanche of letters of support pouring into Iran’s diplomatic missions. However, according to Goodenough, the Iranian government has attempted to sow confusion regarding Nadarkhani’s case, by spreading disinformation regarding the actual charges leveled against him:



Nadarkhani, who embraced Christianity aged 19, was sentenced to death late last year for apostasy. Last July the Supreme Court considering his appeal ordered the sentencing court to reexamine whether he had been a practicing Muslim at the time of conversion. “If it can be proved that he was a practicing Muslim as an adult and has not repented, the execution will be carried out,” the ruling stated.

Back before the lower court in his home province of Gilan, Nadarkhani was asked repeatedly to renounce his faith, and refused.

Amid a growing chorus of international condemnation, Iran officials a month ago began to claim that the apostasy story was a fabrication — that Nadarkhani was in fact guilty of offenses including rape, violence and “being a Zionist.”

Despite those claims, an English translation of Farsi court [documents](#) states clearly that he was “convicted of turning his back on Islam.”

As [reported previously](#) for *The New American*, Nadarkhani has been the target of a deliberate campaign by the Iranian government to confuse the Western media regarding the charges made against him. The regime even claimed that there was never a plan to execute Pastor Nadarkhani. For example, [an article](#) for the *International Business Times* reported both the false accusations against Nadarkhani, and the government’s denial of its intention to execute him:

“Youssef Nadar-Khani [sic] has been charged with a crime and is in a prison based on an arrest warrant issued against him,” Gilan Province Judiciary Chief Mohammad-Javad Heshmati said on



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Wednesday, according to Iran state news agency Press TV.

“There has been no execution order. No conviction at all has been issued yet and it is up to the court to finally decide the verdict after studying his case,” he added.

Since news of Nadarkhani’s looming execution spread, Iran has been loudly decrying the pastor as “a convicted rapist and extortionist,” and the Fars News Agency said over the weekend that Nadarkhani was to be executed for Zionism and threats to national security.

The author of *International Business Times* then declared that “If Nadarkhani were indeed guilty of rape and of Zionism, which could be the treasonous crime of spying for Israel, the death penalty would not be off the table. Both convictions are subject to capital punishment in Iran, and the death penalty is mandatory in rape cases unless the victim forgives the rapist.” However, given the sudden appearance of these charges against Nadarkhani, long after he had, in fact, actually been convicted for apostasy — and not rape or espionage — treating the Iranian regime’s charges as anything other than a smokescreen does a disservice to the persecuted pastor.

Nadarkhani’s fate is now purportedly in the hands of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and could be announced as soon as November 2. [The Christian Post website](#) reports that the ayatollah’s decision could be announced at any time:

“The ayatollah can make any decision he wants. He controls the judiciary, who’s executed, who’s not executed, the military. The list goes on,” Jordan Sekulow, executive director of the American Center for Law and Justice, told *The Christian Post*.

“Next time [the court] takes real action we’ll know that [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei] has made some kind of decision,” he added.

The Ayatollah’s supreme authority provides him with an infinite timeline to make his decision.

Nadarkhani’s travails are by no means an isolated incident in Iran; there are many Christians who are facing similar persecution at this time. According to a [report](#) for Independent Catholic News, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has further information on two other Christians suffering persecution quite similar to that which Nadarkhani is undergoing:

CSW was also informed that another Church of Iran member, Mehdi Furutan, was recently transferred from Shiraz prison to an underground cell in Adelabad security prison, where the torture of inmates regularly takes place. Mr Furutan has been incommunicado for a week and his current condition is unknown. He had just begun serving a one year prison sentence, after an earlier sentence for ‘crimes against the order’ was upheld at an appeal hearing. Whilst in the general prison in Shiraz Mr Furutan had also been presented with Islamic religious books, and sources fear that his transfer to Adelabad may have been prompted by responses he may have made when questioned about them.

CSW has also learned that Pastor Benham Irani of the Church of Iran, who led a church in Karaj, was informed on 18 October that he would immediately begin serving a five-year sentence for an earlier conviction for “action against the security of the country,” which had been suspended since the verdict was confirmed at an appeal hearing in February 2008. The pastor was due to complete a one-year prison sentence for Christian activities on 20 October. While a charge of apostasy was not brought against him, the verdict included text that defined Pastor Irani as an apostate and reiterated that apostates “can be killed.”



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While the Iranian regime spreads disinformation regarding Nadarkhani, and an ayatollah weighs his fate, the circumstances of Nadarkhani, Furutan, and Irani are akin to those who have faced martyrdom in past generations, for whom the answer of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego to King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3 stands as a reply to all tyrants who threaten death to those who will not worship an idol: “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.”



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