

Iran represses Baha'i students' access to higher education

by Gillian Brooks
The Silhouette
(McMaster University)

"Everyone has the right to education...Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendships among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."

Universal Declaration of Human

Rights, Article 26, sections 1-2

The notion of being deprived higher education based on gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, or race is a foreign idea to many Canadian university students. However, for some students living in Iran, it is a reality.

The Baha'i community of Iran have been denied education throughout the past century. They have been deprived of jobs, pensions, and businesses, all based on their religious belief.

Baha'i children and youth have been expelled from school for no other reason than their religious affiliations. This ban on education has ranged over the years, from primary school to university or college-level

education.

There are numerous Baha'i students studying at McMaster University who have fled persecution in Iran as a result of their denial of higher education.

Following the influential 1979 Islamic revolution that transformed Iran from a pro-western monarchy to an Islamic republic, the persecution of the Baha'i community has been institutionalized.

The Baha'i faith is the youngest independent world religion. It was founded by Baha'u'llah, who is regarded by Baha'is as the most recent messenger of God, following Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, and Mohammad.

Parisa Bahrami, a second-year

electrical engineering student at Mac, arrived in Canada three years ago with her family. Prior to arriving at McMaster, she attended an underground university in Iran for Baha'i students.

"We didn't have classrooms. We ran the classes in the homes of students," she explained. "Even going to classes, students had to be really careful not to leave the house in large numbers. They had to leave with few students at a time so that it didn't create problems, and usually they don't take class in just one home—it usually changes so that it doesn't cause problems."

This way of learning continues today. Many Baha'is in Iran study at an underground university called the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), founded in 1987.

The classes are voluntarily taught by professors who were fired from their positions at various universities in Iran as a result of their religion.

"The profs did it as a service. The money that we paid [in tuition fees] was really little just because of the photocopying and stuff like that," said Bahrami.

According to the Baha'i faith, being educated is one of the most important contributions an individual can make to the world.

As stated in Baha'i Scripture, "the primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward."

The majority of the faculty at the Institute were educated in Iran, however, many have degrees from prominent universities in the west, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Columbia University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the Sorbonne.

Beginning in 1998, there were a series of raids at the Institution by the Iranian government. They arrested 36 BIHE faculty members and confiscated educational equipment and records that were located in more than 500 homes.

"We had several places for labs or for photocopying materials. [The government] came in and confiscated all the photocopy machines and closed all the labs," explained Bahrami.

While the Iranian government still did not recognize the institution as a place of higher learning, universities such as the University of Indiana and Carleton University in Ottawa recognized the importance of such an institution.

"Carleton University in particular, was one of the first universities in the world to recognize this BIHE, even though it had no official standing in Iran," explained Anne Pearson, a Baha'i and professor of religious studies at McMaster University.

Farahnaz Rouhani, a first-year nursing student at Mac, fled Iran with her sister in October 2000 when she was 27 years old. She recalled her Grade six teacher in Iran telling her she was unable to continue studying because she was not Muslim.

"She said that I could study at school under one condition. The condition was that I was to be separate from the other students; I could not sit with them and I could not play with the other students," she said. "I went through Grade six, seven, and eight like that."

"It is a really young age and it is young to understand the meaning of the religion and of the violence," she added.

During the revolution in 1979, Bahrami's aunt and uncle were students attending secondary school. She remembers them telling her about the hardships they faced in Iran.

"They had to sit separately from other students in the corner of the class," she said. "They couldn't interact with the other students and even the teacher didn't touch their books or their seats because she didn't think that they were clean."

Today, Baha'i children and youth are permitted to pursue primary and secondary education, however this ban was only lifted in the 1990s as a result of international pressure.

McMaster's Campus Association for Baha'i Studies hopes to provide more international pressure to the Islamic Republic of Iran to end the persecution of the Baha'is of Iran.

"The issue is not as well-known as we would like it to be," said

Andrew Tartaglia, a first-year science student, and a member of CABS.

"We are here to raise awareness." Bahrami is confident that by raising awareness, international pres-

sure will follow.

"If there is some international pressure from the government, then they will be forced to take some action."

CABS is starting a letter-writing campaign to various organizations pleading them to help stop the persecution in Iran.

Geoffrey Cameron, chairperson for the Association for Baha'i Studies at Trent University, feels that in order to get international help, awareness has to begin with the students.

"We have mostly been involved with enlisting student support," he explained. "The issue resonates here and there has been a good response at Trent."

He also believes that university students are the ideal demographic to help raise awareness about human rights issues.

"Any university in Canada would be interested in human rights issues and the denial of education based on religion," he said.

Gerald Filson, the director of external affairs of the Canadian Baha'i Community, agrees with both Tartaglia and Cameron about the importance of having student support.

"Students are more sensitive to human rights issues than anyone else," he said. "As long as we keep public awareness and attention on the issue, [the international community] will take steps to moderate the persecution."

McMaster University, along with the Canadian government, has been actively involved in helping Bahais' in Iran for many years.

"International pressure really does make a difference," said Pearson.

"The Canadian government in general has been very helpful to the Baha'is. After the revolution of 1979, the Canadian government was one of the most generous of governments around the world in terms of recognizing Baha'is as refugees, recognizing the persecution, and facilitating their arrival in Canada."

As Pearson stated, "it is incumbent on all of us, the McMaster community, the university communities, and Canada, where we enjoy freedom of education and freedom of religious expression, that we do not take this for granted."

"It is incumbent on us to try to exert pressure where we can."

Equality in education

by Josh O'Kane

The oppression of Baha'is in Iran is not something that can be localized to just that country. Not only is it something that should not be ignored, but Baha'is everywhere have taken a stance against it, and to spread the word of the oppression to make sure that someday soon, the problem will stop.

Will Van den Hoonaard is a professor of Sociology at UNB, and has been Baha'i since he was 22 years of age. He holds that it is very important to speak out about the issue, in order to allow the system of equality that underlies the Baha'i faith prevail.

"The Baha'is have been denied the right of education," he explains. "And since we don't believe in violence, we don't believe in political protest of that sort, there are very few avenues open to Baha'is to express their concern and to mobilize people."

It is up to the individual Baha'is in their own community to express their concern to whatever bodies of government they can, to raise interest in the issue.

"We have had a public meeting, and invited the students on campus to come to the presentation. As it turns out, that evening coincided with a lot of other activities on campus, so very few people showed up."

Regardless of interest, the stu-

dent council did take their own stance on the issue: not to have a stance at all.

Student Union Vice-President External Ellen Creighton says that it was unfair to get into the issue, regardless of the fact that even Canada itself has no political ties with Iran.

"Council decided that we would not be taking a stance on this issue as an institution, although undoubtedly some individual members have their own opinions and expressed concern over the situation."

"Council felt that it was outside of their mandate to take a stance on a political and religious issue like this."

So why is it that the Baha'is seem to be all talk and no action themselves? Because peace is their nature. Van den Hoonaard explains of why he chose the religion himself:

"It made eminent sense, what they taught: the unity of humankind, a creator known by different names, and that occasionally, these prophets manifest themselves, renewing the teachings of all the religions of God, but also bringing social teachings that are relevant for that age."

"For this particular day and age, it's unity of humankind, elimination of prejudice and racism, it's the promotion of education, of equality, of women and men, and the agreement between science

and religion. Now potentially, other religions have these teachings, I suppose, but in the Baha'i faith, it's very explicit, because it's about the unity of humankind. A voluntary unity, not from the top down, but from the bottom up. And since I was raised in different countries myself, in different religious systems, it made eminent sense to me."

Van den Hoonaard himself was even a representative of the Baha'i community for the United Nations for four years.

"In many respects, the Baha'i community is an ideal candidate to be working at the United Nations, because we do not lobby, we don't pressure people to take action on behalf of Baha'is."

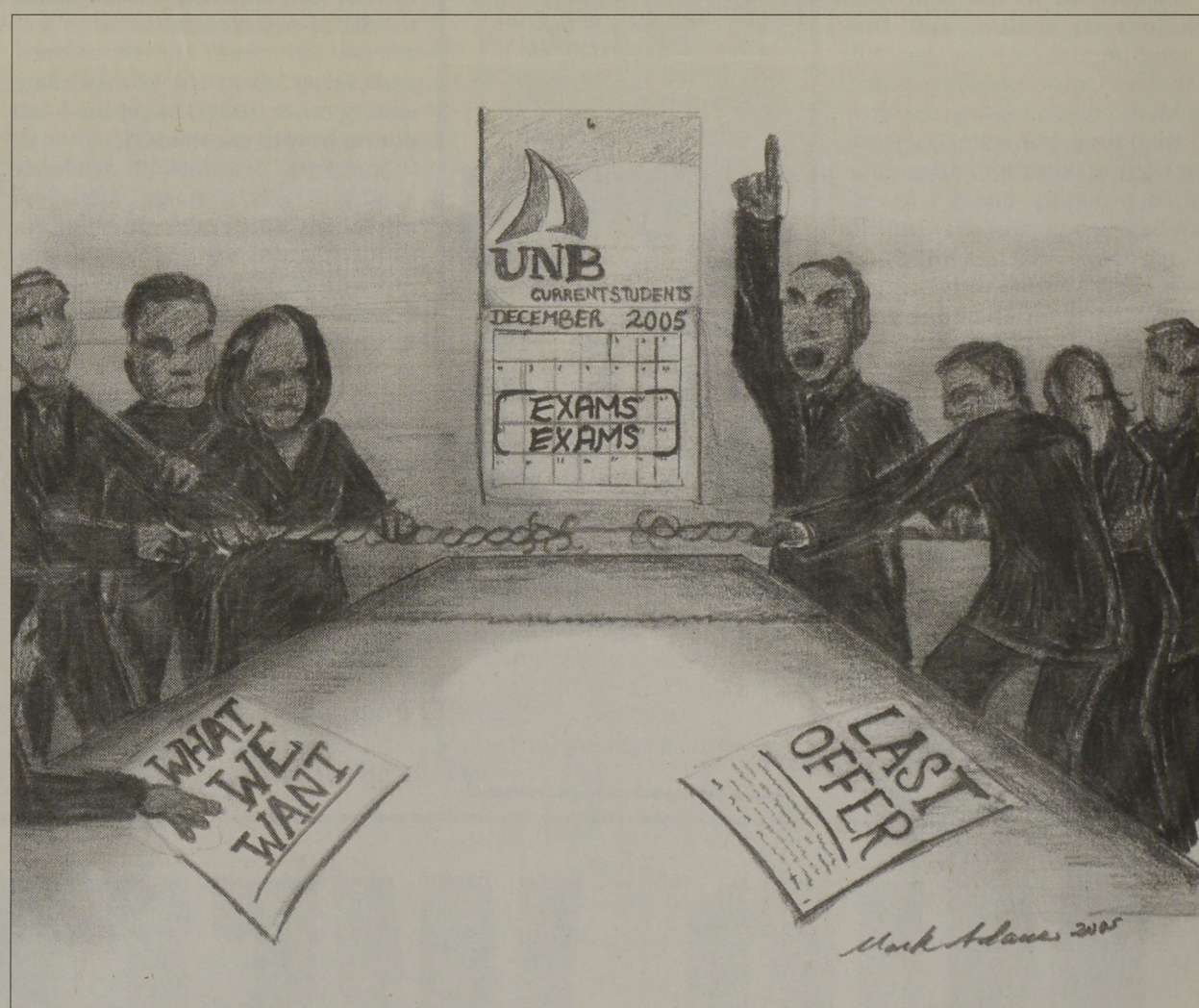
He asserts that these methods of peace and justice are what bring people to the faith. There are about 20 Baha'is on campus, of varying backgrounds, but they all have one thing in common, according to Van den Hoonaard:

"These Baha'is have proven themselves to be very eager and enthusiastic in their work."

Many western schools, including our own, have taken a shine to many of the students who had left Iran to pursue an education.

"Our university has been very open to Baha'is coming to UNB."

For more information about the Baha'i faith and the current events in Iran, feel free to go to the website <http://denial.bahai.org/>.



Mark Adams/The Brunswickan

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action to stop any information from leaking to students. The SU recently attempted to email the entire student body, with information on the forum. This email was intercepted by UNB administration, in consultation with AUNBT, and the email was terminated. It is this very action that has many people wondering what the AUNBT thinks will come of students having correct information.

"[It a strike] is not likely in the near future we know that for a fact. Impossible even. Students should not be worried this semester," said Creighton.

But what about next semester? The process for a strike to legally happen is long, but not impossible. The parties would have to come out of the conciliation stage by asking the government-appointed mediator to submit a report to the province. The province would then have to give AUNBT

permission to strike, then a waiting period... The list goes

on. A strike would mean a loss of class time, which would lead to an extension of the school year. For students this would mean less summer work time, and housing issues for those under a lease.

The SU's forum will be held on Monday, Nov. 21 in the SUB Ballroom at 7 p.m. The SU representatives have said they are not choosing to support either side as negotiations continue.

The Brunswickan presents: Big Fish @ 6pm



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