

## **Zoroastrians Face Uncertain Future in Iran**

Emigration over years and centuries has left this ancient faith community much reduced.

Thirteen centuries after the Muslim Arabs invaded Iran and forced Zoroastrians to choose between conversion and emigration, the same dilemma continues to confront the dwindling numbers of this ancient religious community.

For Zoroastrians, this kind of choice is embedded in their faith, which is founded on the eternal clash between light and darkness, day and night, Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, purity and impurity. (The accompanying slideshow on Zoroastrians and their rituals can be seen here: **[Ancient Iranian Faith Survives Despite Odds.](#)**)

For centuries, Zoroastrians in Muslim Iran have seen their property and land arbitrarily confiscated. This has intensified and taken on new forms under the Islamic regime.

By law, Zoroastrians are not allowed to open new fire temples or other religious buildings.

Until this year, the Zoroastrian association in the capital Tehran was allowed to use the school premises it owns for religious ceremonies outside working hours, but this has now been banned.

Zoroastrian schools are legally classed as “endowments”, property of the community. By law, though, all religious minority schools operate under government supervision. To compensate for this management, the government pays the Zoroastrian association a fee as rent for the property, but this leaves Muslim officials with a major say in how the schools are used.

“Unlike previously, the association is no longer allowed to use its property after hours for religious ceremonies,” said Rostam Vahidi, a Zoroastrian priest who emigrated to the United States a few years ago and now lives in California. “The government has offered no good reason for this.”

### **LONG HISTORY OF DISCRIMINATION**

Historically, the confiscation of Zoroastrians lands by Muslims was one of the major factors prompting emigration, or relocation to remote desert areas in central Iran, such as the city of Yazd.

The first wave of migration to India took place in the early years after the arrival of Islam in Iran in the seventh century. A second wave followed the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in the 14th century, when the Shia version of Islam was adopted as Iran’s official religion and Zoroastrians were encouraged to convert, or else chose to move to remote areas to preserve their faith.

The Zoroastrians were required to pay the “jaziyyeh” tax, levied on all non-Muslim citizens of the state. Until the Qajar era of the 19th century, Zoroastrians were subject to harsh restrictions which forbade them from doing business, travelling freely, and even coming out on rainy days.

In his memoir of a childhood in Iran, Ardeshir Khazae, who died in Mumbai in 1987, wrote that Muslims considered Zoroastrians like him untouchable.

“We were not even allowed to walk through their fields because [they thought] we would defile their crop,” he wrote. “One day, when I was six, I secretly went through a Muslim field to get home quicker because it was a long way from our shop to our home. But they spotted me and gave me a flogging. My screams fell on deaf ears.”

### **COMMUNITY SHRINKING WORLDWIDE**

The only recent data on the number of Zoroastrians remaining in Iran come from a 1996 census, showing that there were 28,000. The next census, conducted in 2006 after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had become president, did not specify religious affiliation. Kourosh Niknam, who represents the Zoroastrians in the Iranian parliament, raised objections to this omission, but the government did not shift position, so the true number of Zoroastrians remains obscure.

Given recent emigration, the best guess among Iranian Zoroastrians is that the community is somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000.

Emigration cannot, however, be the only cause of population decline within Iran, since the Zoroastrian community is also declining in other parts of the world. That includes India, which has the world’s biggest Zoroastrian population – larger than Iran.

In India, where Zoroastrians are commonly known as Parsis, aversion to marriage with members of other communities or faiths means the population is falling by ten per cent every decade.

Conservative Parsis oppose marriage outside the faith and do not recognise the children of such unions as Zoroastrian. This naturally leads to a net loss of community members over the years.

But there have also been attempts to adopt a less rigid approach. The Wadia brothers, members of a family of influential businessmen in Mumbai, have adopted a reformist approach, establishing a fire temple that they say is open to all. The two brothers have accused conservatives of being more concerned about racial purity than the survival of the faith itself.

Would such a reformist approach work among the Zoroastrians of Iran?

Vahidi says that the country's Zoroastrian clerics have for centuries characterised marriage with outsiders as "religiously problematic".

Priests in Iran remain reticent on the issue.

But in Vahidi's view, "The Zoroastrian Priests Association is not against such marriages and nowhere in the Avesta is marriage with non-Zoroastrians prohibited."

He believes that such marriages were common even before the arrival of Islam.

These days, the problem such marriages pose is that they can throw up legal problems, since Iranian law tolerates indigenous non-Muslim groups only as long as they do not proselytise.

"The Islamic government exerts so much pressure on the Zoroastrian association and its priests to refrain from religious dissemination that, in order to protect ourselves, we are forced to use tactics that prevent marriage with non-Zoroastrians."

Apart from India and the United States, there are Zoroastrian communities scattered across Britain, Canada, and Australia. Each has its own fire temples, but the worldwide faith community has no central leadership to look to in Iran.

The death of Rostam Shahrzadi ten years ago deprived Zoroastrians of their "Mobad-e Mobadan", literally "priest of all the priests".

Shahrzadi was notable for ensuring that the red, white and green colours of the Iranian national flag were preserved in the post-1979 version, despite attempts by Islamic radicals to adopt an all-green banner.

Since his death, no other priest has attained the rank of Mobad-e Mobadan. Traditionally, this title is bestowed on priests sons who have studied since childhood at the Cama Athornan religious school in Mumbai. It seems that sons no longer aspire to follow their fathers into the priesthood.

Ardeshir Khorshidian is a priest who trained as an ophthalmic surgeon in Tehran, and now only attends religious services on special occasions. He argues that religion no longer plays such a central role in people's lives.

"When one can serve people through medicine, why should one waste one's own time and their time on the Avesta or on burial rites and rituals?" he said. "In these changed times, when people can read the Avesta for their dead, everyone has to be their own Zoroaster."

## **PRESERVING ANCIENT CULTURE AGAINST THE ODDS**

The Zoroastrians of Iran mostly speak an archaic form of Persian known as Dari (not to be confused with the Dari of Afghanistan). The Avesta, the Zoroastrian holy book, is written in the even older Avestan or Din Dabire, although few are familiar with the language or script today. Some pupils learn the basics of the ancient alphabet in Zoroastrian schools, but the curriculum is in modern Persian.

Where no special schools are available or pupil numbers are too low, Zoroastrians often attend Iranian state schools. They are allowed to opt out of classes on Islam and instead take courses led by Zoroastrian teachers, using textbooks approved by the priests' association.

But attending a Muslim school can leave Zoroastrians isolated and discriminated against.

Katayoun Yazsheni, now 26 and living in the US, has a bitter memories from her high school days in Iran.

One of her classmates was particularly insistent that she convert to Islam.

"She said that if I didn't become Muslim I would go to hell. Perhaps because she cared a lot about me, she didn't want that to happen to me," said Yazsheni. "So one time she poured red ink on my manteau [coat] so that I'd be embarrassed to get up and go to my Zoroastrian religious class."

**Niloofar Rostami is an Iranian Zoroastrian journalist who has recently moved to the United States.**

**Location:** [Iran](#)

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