

URGENT ACTION

TORTURED SUFI PRISONER MUST BE RELEASED

Behnam Mahjoubi, from Iran's persecuted Gonabadi Dervish religious minority, is being subjected to torture and other ill-treatment, including through the denial of specialist medical care. He is a prisoner of conscience serving a two-year prison sentence in Tehran's Evin prison for attending a peaceful protest.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Head of judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi

C/o Permanent Mission of Iran to the UN

Chemin du Petit-Saconnex 28, 1209 Geneva, Switzerland

Dear Mr Raisi,

Behnam Mahjoubi, from Iran's largest Sufi order, the Gonabadi Dervish religious minority, has been held in Evin prison since 20 June 2020. He is a prisoner of conscience jailed solely for the exercise of his rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. He suffers from a serious panic disorder for which he needs daily medication prescribed by a doctor outside prison. According to informed sources, his psychiatrist outside prison has assessed him as being unable to withstand imprisonment and doctors from the Legal Medicine Organization, a state forensic institute, have also confirmed in writing after examining him that he is not fit for imprisonment. Despite this, the authorities have refused to release him. Instead, according to informed sources, they have subjected him to torture and other ill-treatment by periodically denying him access to his medication and forcibly taking him to a psychiatric hospital on multiple occasions where he has been injected with chemical substances against his will and without information about what he has been administered. In September 2020, the prison clinic's doctor pressured him to take sleeping tablets apparently to control his panic disorder, after which he suffered seizures and partial paralysis. Since then, his health has seriously declined. The left side of his body is partially paralysed, his left hand trembles and he is unable to walk without help. He has gone on several hunger strikes in protest at his imprisonment, treatment in detention, denial of access to specialist medical care outside prison for his seizures and paralysis and the periodic withholding of medication.

Behnam Mahjoubi was arrested in April 2018 in connection with peaceful protests that took place in February 2018 by Gonabadi Dervishes in Tehran, which were violently quashed by security forces and resulted in the arrest of hundreds of men and women. Following his arrest by around 20 plain clothes security agents, Behnam Mahjoubi was held for a week in Esfahan and a further 22 days in Kerman. In both detention facilities, he was beaten, held in solitary confinement with lights on for 24 hours a day and interrogated without a lawyer present. His interrogators questioned him about the activities of Gonabadi Dervishes, told him to provide the names of all the Gonabadi Dervishes he knows, and forced him to sign "confessions". On 9 August 2019, following an unfair trial before Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, which used his forced "confessions" as admissible evidence, he was convicted of "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security" and sentenced to two years in prison and a two-year ban on involvement in social and political groups. He was released on bail on 29 May 2018 and was summoned to begin serving his prison sentence on 20 June 2020.

I urge you to release Behnam Mahjoubi immediately and unconditionally as he is a prisoner of conscience, jailed solely for peacefully exercising his rights. Pending his release, ensure that he is given the specialized medical care he needs, in compliance with medical ethics, including the principles of confidentiality, autonomy and informed consent, and that he is protected from further torture and other ill-treatment. Please ensure that he has access to his family and lawyer of his choosing.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Behnam Mahjoubi was arrested following a violent crackdown by security forces on hundreds of Gonabadi Dervishes, both men and women, who had gathered peacefully on 19 February 2018. The peaceful gathering was outside the residence of their spiritual leader Noor Ali Tabandeh, in an area of Tehran known as Golestan-e Haftom, to protest against the authorities' intensified persecution of their community, prevent the arrest of their leader and call for the release of detained Gonabadi Dervishes. Those present at the protest reported that police and plainclothes Basiji paramilitary forces resorted to beating the protestors with batons, electric cables and sharp objects, and used tear gas, water cannons and live ammunition to disperse the crowd, violently arresting over 300 men and women. Those present reported that security forces raided a nearby five-storey apartment building to which the protesters had escaped, fired tear gas into the staircases, formed a "tunnel" of batons and struck protesters repeatedly on their backs, heads and faces as they violently dragged them down the stairs and into police vans. Pictures and videos from the incident and its aftermath show protesters with lacerations and other wounds to their faces and bodies and bandaged heads and other body parts.

In relation to this incident, more than 200 Gonabadi Dervishes were sentenced to a total of 1,080 years in prison, 5,995 lashes as well as internal "exile", travel bans, and bans on joining political and social groups. In Behnam Mahjoubi's court verdict, the prosecution had cited peaceful activities protected under international human rights law as evidence of criminal activity. The court cited activities such as his peaceful participation at the protest, his forced "confessions" admitting his attendance in what the prosecution called an "illegal" protest, and his alleged membership of online groups that report on human rights violations perpetrated against Gonabadi Dervishes to convict him.

Since his imprisonment, Behnam Mahjoubi has undertaken several hunger strikes. Amnesty International understands that the prison authorities often delay giving his medication to him for several weeks after his family have taken it to the prison. He went on his first hunger strike on 31 July 2020 and ended it three days later after the prison authorities promised to provide him with his medication. He went on hunger strike again around mid-August for 12 days in solidarity with human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh who was on hunger strike demanding the release of prisoners of conscience amidst the spread of COVID-19 in Iran's prisons. Earlier in the year, the Iranian authorities had temporarily released around 128,000 prisoners on furlough and pardoned another 10,000 in response to COVID-19, but hundreds of prisoners of conscience were excluded. Behnam Mahjoubi's 12 day hunger strike in August 2020 severely weakened him and eventually led to him collapsing in prison, after which he was taken to hospital but was returned to prison the same day, despite doctors recommending that he be admitted for several days, according to informed sources with knowledge of his case. During the last week of September 2020, Behnam Mahjoubi suffered from seizures, resulting in his head being knocked to the ground and temporary paralysis on the left side of his body. Sources with knowledge about his case told Amnesty International that a doctor in the prison clinic had pressured him to take sleeping tablets to treat his panic disorder but that they may have been incompatible with his prescription medication and may therefore have contributed to his seizures. Although the prison authorities had promised to take him to a regular hospital to examine him following his seizures, on 27 September 2020, they instead forcibly transferred him to Aminabad psychiatric hospital where he was forcibly injected with chemical substances against his will. He went on hunger strike on 29 September 2020 in protest at his enforced detention in the psychiatric hospital. He was returned to the prison after six days in hospital and ended his hunger strike two days later. Following his return to the prison, his health declined; the left side of his body had become numb, his legs had become swollen, and he was unable to walk without a walking aid. Consequently, on 29 October 2020, he began another hunger strike and, two days later, on 31 October 2020, the prison authorities again forcibly transferred him to Aminabad psychiatric hospital but falsely informed his family that they were taking him to a regular hospital. According to information available to Amnesty International, the doctors in the psychiatric hospital threatened Behnam Mahjoubi that if he did not end his hunger strike, they would give him electric shocks. He was returned to prison on 2 November 2020 and ended his hunger strike the next day. His health has continued to decline since.

The Gonabadi Dervish religious minority are members of Iran's largest Sufi order and consider themselves Shi'a Muslims. They describe Sufism as neither a religion nor a sect, but rather a way of life by which people – from any religion – may find God. The Iranian authorities have persecuted them because of their faith, and they have persistently subjected them to discrimination, harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention, imprisonment and flogging sentences, and attacks on their sacred or important sites, including prayer houses.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Persian, English

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 5 February 2021

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Behnam Mahjoubi (he; him)