

Six-year jail sentence for Iranian church leader upheld

Country/Region: Iran, Middle East and North Africa

A six-year prison sentence for an Iranian pastor, who was arrested as part of a major crackdown on the country's house church movement, has been upheld following an unsuccessful appeal hearing.

Farshid Fathi Malayeri was convicted by a court in Tehran of being the chief agent of foreign organisations in Iran and of administering funds for foreign organisations. The political charges are a pretext for locking up the pastor, a convert from Islam to Christianity, on account of his faith.

Farshid was originally sentenced to six years in prison on 5 March after several delays to his trial; at that point he had already been detained for 14 months, including over 100 days in solitary confinement. Both the verdict and sentence were upheld on appeal at the end of June. Farshid, a married father of two, will serve out his term in the notorious Evin Prison.

Concerns have been raised about the lack of due process in the case. Farshid's lawyer was denied full access to his case until just a few days before the initial hearing. The pastor was not released on bail despite his family presenting the title deeds to their home. And it seems that the authorities toyed with him; at one point Farshid was told to pack his belongings and was led out to the prison gate, only to be returned immediately to his cell.

Farshid was among dozens of Christians arrested on 26 December in a major crackdown on the country's house church movement. Many of those detained were released after making exorbitant bail payments.

The Iranian authorities conduct frequent raids on house churches in their desperate efforts to stop the spread of Christianity in the country. In one recent incident, a Christian artist and his heavily pregnant wife, both converts from Islam, were among those detained in a house church raid by plain clothes security officers in Mashhad.

Vahid Zarday, who has collaborated with a number of famous Iranian artists and received awards as a music composer, was taken to an unknown location. His wife was temporarily released on account of her condition.

Vahid has previously been arrested, five years ago, because of his Christian faith. On that occasion he was interrogated for 48 hours and subjected to mental torture, which affected him for a long time.

