

**ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY: TAKE ACTION FOR MAHVASH SABET**

8 March 2016

*‘Beyond those gates, another world, another race,
a people poisoned and oppressed by woe;
they stared wearily at us, the prisoners we faced,
with sunken eyes, lack-lustre, circled with sorrow’
– extract from ‘From Evin to Raja’I Shah’ in Prison Poems, published in English on* [*1 April 2013*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Prison-Poems-Mahvash-Sabet-ebook/dp/B00D61HVAW/ref%3Dla_B00E9BACV8_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1410523465&sr=1-1)

**Mahvash Sabet (Iran)** **is a teacher and poet who is currently serving a 20-year prison sentence in Evin prison, Tehran. She is one of a group of seven Bahá’í leaders known as the ‘Yaran-i-Iran’ (‘Friends of Iran’) who have been detained since 2008 for their faith and activities related to running the affairs of the Bahá’í community in Iran. Mahvash Sabet began writing poetry in prison, and a collection of her** [**prison poems**](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Prison-Poems-Mahvash-Sabet-ebook/dp/B00D61HVAW/ref%3Dla_B00E9BACV8_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1410523465&sr=1-1) **was published in English translation on 1 April 2013. PEN International is calling on the Iranian authorities to release Mahvash Sabet and all other writers imprisoned in Iran solely for exercising their right to legitimate freedom of expression.**

The Baha’i community in Iran has been the focus of a systematic, state-sponsored persecution since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. After the revolution, the ‘Yaran-i-Iran’ (‘Friends of Iran’) was formed with the full knowledge of the government and served as an informal council for the Baha’i in Iran, working to support the spiritual and social needs of Iran’s 300,000-member Baha’i community, until the Yaran’s entire membership was arrested in 2008. Teacher and poet Mahvash Sabet was arrested on 5 March 2008 while on a trip to Mashhad. The other six members of the group - Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm - were arrested on 14 May 2008 at their homes in Tehran. All were imprisoned without charge until January 2010, during which they were held incommunicado for weeks and were not allowed access to legal counsel. All suffered appalling treatment and deprivations during pre-trial detention.

Charged with espionage, propaganda against the Islamic republic, the establishment of an illegal administration, co-operation with Israel, sending secret documents outside the country, acting against the security of the country, and corruption on earth, their trial began on 12 January 2010. On 14 June 2010 each of the defendants was sentenced to 20 years’ imprisonment after six brief court sessions characterised by their lack of due legal process. Their sentences were later reduced to 10 years each when an appeals court revoked three of the charges; however, in March 2011, the prisoners were informed of the reinstatement of their original sentences. They have never received official copies of the original verdict or the ruling on appeal despite repeated requests.

**TAKE ACTION:**

**Send appeals:**

* Calling on the Iranian authorities to release Mahvash Sabet and all other writers currently imprisoned in Iran solely for exercising their right to legitimate freedom of expression;
* Urging that further measures be taken to fully enshrine the right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion in law and practice in Iran as provided for under Articles 18 and 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Iran is a state party.

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| **Leader of the Islamic Republic**Ayatollah Sayed ‘Ali KhameneiThe Office of the Supreme LeaderShoahada Street, Qom, Islamic Republic of IranSalutation: Your ExcellencyEmail: info\_leader@leader.ir Twitter: @khamenei\_ir | **President**Hassan RouhaniOffice of the PresidencyPasteur Square,Pasteur Street,Tehran, Islamic Republic of IranSalutation: Your ExcellencyEmail: media@rouhani.irTwitter: @HassanRouhani | And copies to:**Secretary General, High Council for Human Rights**Mohammed Javad Larijani c/o Office of the Head of the Judiciary Pasteur St, Vali Asr AveSouth of Serah-e Jomhouri, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran Email: larijani@ipm.ir (Subject line: FAO Mohammad Javad Larijani) |

It is recommended that you send a copy of your appeals via the diplomatic representative for Iran in your country. Contact details for embassies can be found [here](http://ir.embassyinformation.com/).

**PUBLICITY**

PEN members are encouraged to:

* Publish articles and opinion pieces in your national or local press highlighting the situation about freedom of expression in Iran;
* Organise public events, stage readings, press conferences or demonstrations;
* Share information about Iran and your campaigning activities for Mahvash Sabet via social media.

**SOLIDARITY**

* Elect Mahvash Sabet as an Honorary Member of your Centre and by doing so provide long term support and advocacy for her and her family. For details of the PEN International Honorary Membership scheme, read the [PEN WiPC Guide to Defending Writers Under Attack](http://www.pen-international.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/WIPC_handbook_2010_online.pdf) (Part V, pgs 15-20). Please let us know if you do so and we will ensure that your Centre is networked with others working on the case.
* To write to Mahvash Sabet in prison, please contact Emma Wadsworth-Jones (emma.wadsworth-jones@pen-international.org)

Please let us know about your activities and send us a report about them by 21 April 2016 so that we can share them with other centres.

**Background**

Mahvash Sabet, now aged 62, began her professional career as a teacher and worked as a principal at several schools. She also collaborated with the National Literacy Committee of Iran. Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Sabet was fired from her job and blocked from working in public education, like thousands of other Iranian Baha’i educators. She served for 15 years as director of the Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education, which provides alternative higher education for Baha’i youth. She began writing poetry while in prison, a [collection](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Prison-Poems-Mahvash-Sabet-ebook/dp/B00D61HVAW/ref%3Dla_B00E9BACV8_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1410523465&sr=1-1) of which was published in English translation on 1 April 2013. Her poems are described as ‘sometimes a means of historical documentation…; sometimes a series of portraits of other women trapped in prison with her; sometimes meditations on powerlessness, on loneliness’…. She is married and has two grown children.

*‘My first encounter with Mahvash Sabet took place on a hot summer’s day. After many hours of tedious waiting in a special room set aside for lawyers, I was finally allowed to meet her in the presence of two women guards . . . it was obvious that the Baha'i prisoners had been deprived of fresh air and daylight for a long time; their entire beings seemed thirsty for the energizing heat and light of the sun. However, despite all their hardships, their will remained unbroken.’* Mahnaz Parakand, Member of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders and one of the four lawyers for the Yaran.

Mahvash Sabet is an honorary member of Austrian PEN and Danish PEN. Her case featured in PEN’s [Day of the Imprisoned Writer campaign 2014](http://www.pen-international.org/newsitems/day-of-the-imprisoned-writer-mahvash-sabet/). In November of that year, Argentine writer, [Alberto Manguel](http://www.pen-international.org/newsitems/alberto-manguel-writes-to-imprisoned-writer-mahvash-sabet/) wrote, *‘I can’t offer you anything in your cell except my devotion as your reader, my trust in better times, and my distant but sincere friendship. I hope that in the very near future we will meet in person, not only on the page.’*

*For further information please contact Emma Wadsworth-Jones at PEN International, Unit A, Koops Mill Mews, London, SE1 2AN, Tel.+ 44 (0) 20 7405 0338, email:* *emma.wadsworth-jones@pen-international.org*