

# U.S. Christians rally around Iranian pastor

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Religious freedom advocates rallied Wednesday (Sept. 28) around an Iranian pastor who is facing execution because he has refused to recant his Christian faith in the overwhelmingly Muslim country.

The British-based group Christian Solidarity Worldwide has asked international supporters to urge Iranian officials to halt plans to execute Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani.

The pastor was found guilty of apostasy last year, and the conviction has been upheld by the Iranian Supreme Court. If carried out, the execution would mark the first time since 1990 that an Iranian pastor was killed for his Christian faith.

"Despite the finding that Mr. Nadarkhani did not convert to Christianity as an adult, the court continues to demand that he recant his faith or otherwise be executed," said Leonard Leo, chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. "The most recent court proceedings are not only a sham, but are contrary to Iranian law and international human rights standards."

Author and megachurch pastor Rick Warren went to Twitter to ask his followers to join in protesting Nadarkhani's possible execution. House Speaker John Boehner called on Iranian leaders "to abandon this dark

path, spare Youcef Nadarkhani's life, and grant him a full and unconditional release."

The attention on Nadarkhani comes a week after Iran released two American hikers who had been in custody for two years after they were convicted of spying, which they denied.

Writing in the National Review Online, religious freedom activist Nina Shea said Western voices made a difference in the hikers' case and could influence the pastor's fate: "Those of us in the free world should press our members of Congress to speak up."