



January 2008

country summary

Iran

Respect for basic human rights in Iran, especially freedom of expression and assembly, continued to deteriorate in 2007. The government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad routinely detains people solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association, and regularly tortures and mistreats those detained. The Judiciary, which is accountable to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, is responsible for many serious human rights violations. The government increasingly cites “national security” as a pretext for silencing expressions of dissent or calls for reform.

Freedom of Expression

Iranian authorities systematically suppress freedom of expression and opinion by imprisoning journalists and editors and strictly controlling publishing and academic freedom. The few independent dailies that remain heavily self-censor. The government has fired dissident university professors or forced them into early retirement. Many writers and intellectuals who have evaded imprisonment have left the country or have ceased to be critical. The Ministry of Culture and Guidance increasingly denies publication permits to publishing houses, including republication permits for books previously in circulation.

In 2007 the authorities also targeted student and internet journalists in an effort to prevent the independent dissemination of news and information. The government systematically blocks websites inside Iran and abroad that carry political news and analysis.

Freedom of Assembly

The Ahmadinejad government shows no tolerance for peaceful protests and gatherings. In March 2007 security forces arrested over 30 women peacefully demonstrating outside a courthouse in Tehran to protest the prosecution of three

prominent women's rights activists. That same month security forces arrested hundreds of teachers peacefully protesting outside parliament in Tehran and in other cities for wage and benefits improvements. After releasing them the government prosecuted some of the protesters, leading mainly to suspended sentences. Some protesters were suspended from teaching or had their jobs transferred to other cities. In July security forces arrested six Amir Kabir University students who were staging a peaceful sit-in in commemoration of the anniversary of the 1999 student protests that the government had violently suppressed. The government released the six on bail and their cases remain open at this writing.

Torture and Ill-Treatment in Detention

Under Ahmadinejad the treatment of detainees has worsened in Tehran's Evin prison as well as in detention centers operated clandestinely by the Judiciary, the Ministry of Information, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The authorities subject those imprisoned for peaceful expression of political views to torture and ill-treatment, including beatings, sleep deprivation, and prolonged solitary confinement. Judges often accept coerced confessions. In July 2007 former student detainees and the families of three imprisoned student journalists, Majid Tavakoli, Ahmad Ghasaban, and Ehsan Mansouri, made public allegations that Ministry of Information agents had physically and psychologically tortured the three detained students and five others whom the government had held in relation to student publications.

Authorities broadcast statements obtained from detainees who were denied access to lawyers. In July the government aired the "confessions" of Haleh Esfandiari and Kian Tajbakhsh, two Iranian-American scholars detained since May on vague charges of "endangering national security." The government released Esfandiari and Tajbakhsh on bail in late August and September, respectively.

Impunity

There is no mechanism for monitoring and investigating human rights violations perpetrated by agents of the government. The closure of independent media in Iran has helped to perpetuate an atmosphere of impunity.

In recent years public testimonies by numerous former detainees have implicated Tehran's public prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi and his office in some of the worst cases of human rights violations. Despite extensive evidence, Mortazavi has not been held responsible for his role in illegal detentions, torture of detainees, and coercing false confessions. The case of Iranian-Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi, who died in the custody of judiciary and security agents led by Mortazavi in June 2003, remains unresolved. Mustafa Pour-Mohammadi, the current interior minister, has been implicated in extrajudicial killings of thousands of political prisoners in 1988.

Human Rights Defenders

In 2007 the authorities intensified their harassment of independent human rights defenders and lawyers in an attempt to prevent them from publicizing and pursuing human rights violations. In July Branch Six of Iran's Revolutionary Court sentenced human rights activist Emad Baghi, as well as his wife and daughter, to suspended sentences of three years for their work in documenting and publicizing human rights violations. In October court authorities arrested Baghi after he responded to a summons to appear before an interrogator, and at this writing he remains in detention.

The government closed nongovernmental organizations that encourage civil society participation and raise awareness of human rights violations. In March authorities raided and closed the offices of the Civil Society Organizations Training and Research Center, and closed the offices of Rahi Institution, a nongovernmental organization providing legal and social aid to women victims of violence.

Juvenile Death Penalty

Iran leads the world in the number of death sentences handed down to defendants for crimes they committed under age 18. At least 70 juvenile offenders are presently on death row, and at this writing Iran has executed two juvenile offenders in 2007: Syed Mohammad Reza Mousavi Shirazi, 20, executed in Adel Abd prison in Shiraz city on April 22 for a murder he allegedly committed when he was 16, and Sa'id

Qanbar Zahi, 17, executed in Zahedan on May 27. In 2003 the head of the Judiciary, Ayatollah Shahrudi, circulated an order among Iran's judges prohibiting death sentences for juvenile offenders, but courts continue to issue such sentences.

Minorities

Iran's ethnic and religious minorities are subject to discrimination and, in some cases, persecution.

After a February 2007 bombing of a bus carrying members of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps in the southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchistan, the government arrested dozens of members of the Baluchi minority. Less than a week after the bombings, the government publicly hanged Nasrollah Shanbezehi after televising his "confession" and following a rushed trial in which he had no access to a lawyer. In a March interview, Iranian parliament member Hossein Ali Shahryari stated that 700 people awaited execution in Sistan and Baluchistan. In May authorities hanged seven in connection with the bombings; one of them was Said Qanbar Zahi, mentioned above.

The government increased its surveillance of the ethnic Arab population of Khuzistan after bombings in 2005 in this southwestern province. In 2006 Revolutionary Courts, whose secret proceedings did not meet international fair trial standards, condemned at least 16 Iranians of Arab origin to death on charges of armed activity against the state. In 2007 at least seven Iranian Arabs were executed in connection with the bombings after secret trials during which they were denied due process rights.

In the northwestern provinces of Azarbaijan and Kurdistan the government restricts cultural and political activities that stress local languages and identities. The government harassed editors of Kurdish newspapers on the grounds that their coverage of events in Iraqi Kurdistan was aimed at instigating separatist ambitions among Iranian Kurds. The authorities similarly persecuted local newspapers in the provinces of East and West Azarbaijan that covered events in the neighboring country Azerbaijan.

The government continues to deny Iran's Baha'i community permission to publicly worship or pursue religious activities. In 2007 the government prevented at least 800 Baha'i students access to National Entrance Examination scores needed for admission to universities in Iran.

Forced Returns to Afghanistan

Iran announced in 2006 that it would "voluntarily repatriate" all of the more than one million Afghans remaining in Iran by March 2008, saying that none of those people are refugees. Between April and June 2007 the Iranian government forcibly deported back to Afghanistan nearly 100,000 registered and unregistered Afghans living and working in Iran.

HIV/AIDS

Iran is reporting increasing rates of HIV infection due to injecting drug use and unsafe sex. In February 2007 Health Minister Kamran Baqeri Lankarani announced that Iranian scientists had produced a new HIV/AIDS medication, made from seven native Iranian herbs. Iranian health officials claimed that scientists tested the drug on over 200 people over five years. However, Iranian AIDS and human rights activists raised concerns that scientists enrolled people living with HIV in these tests without consent and that the study was conducted with a control group of patients receiving an inert placebo in place of effective medicines.

Key International Actors

In 2007 Iran's nuclear program dominated discussions and policies in the international arena. Two key international actors, the European Union and the United Nations, addressed Iran's human rights situation, but the nuclear program remained their major preoccupation: the UN Security Council increased sanctions on Iran in March 2007, and the European Union's meetings with Iran have focused on the nuclear issue. The EU has pledged to tie progress in broader cooperation to Iranian respect for human rights, but the pledge has had little impact.

In June the UN Human Rights Council decided to end scrutiny of the situation in Iran under the confidential monitoring procedure known as "1503" (after the resolution

that created it). In January the UN Human Rights Council's experts on extrajudicial executions urged Iran to refrain from executing the seven members of Iran's ethnic Arab community mentioned above, a request that Iran ignored. In September UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour visited Iran.

In 2007 the already poor relations between the United States and Iran further deteriorated. The US and Iran traded accusations about support for various armed groups in Iraq and Afghanistan. The US continues to hold five Iranian diplomats detained in northern Iraq, despite protests from the Iraqi and Iranian governments. The US government frequently invokes Iran's human rights record as a matter of concern. Since February 2006 the State Department has budgeted US\$75 million "to support democracy promotion activities in Iran," but many Iranian dissidents, human rights defenders, and civil society activists inside Iran have publicly dissociated themselves from the initiative, making clear they did not seek or accept any financial help from the US government. The Iranian government uses the US program to justify cracking down on dissidents.