

Iran

With the government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continuing to invoke “national security” as a justification for silencing dissent, 2008 saw a dramatic rise in arrests of political activists, academics, and others for peacefully exercising their rights of free expression and association in Iran. There were numerous reports of the torture and mistreatment of such detainees. The Judiciary, accountable to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and the Ministry of Intelligence continued to be responsible for many serious human rights violations. The number of executions also increased sharply in 2008.

Freedom of Expression and Assembly

Iranian authorities systematically suppress freedom of expression and opinion by imprisoning journalists and editors, and strictly controlling publishing and academic activity. Most journalists arrested in 2008 were targeted for covering ethnic minority issues and civil society activities, and the National Security Council has given newspapers formal and informal warnings against covering issues such as human rights violations and social protests. The few independent dailies that remain heavily self-censor.

Many writers and intellectuals who have evaded imprisonment have left the country or ceased to be critical. The government has fired dissident university professors or forced them into early retirement, a trend that intensified in 2008. State universities also recently began banning some politically active students from registering for their next semester, putting pressure on student associations and their supporters to not criticize the government.

In 2008 the authorities continued to target student and internet journalists. The government systematically blocks Iranian and foreign websites that carry political news and analysis.

The Ahmadinejad government shows no tolerance for peaceful protests and gatherings. Security forces arrested over a hundred student activists in 2008, often without informing their families of the arrests. According to some of the imprisoned students and their families, security forces subjected these students to mistreatment and abuse during their detention.

Civil Society

The government has increased pressure on civil society organizations that call for human rights and freedom of speech by restricting their activities and barring activists from leaving the country. These include the Center for Defenders of Human Rights, led by 2003 Noble Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi, and the Association of Iranian Journalists. On October 2 Iran's official news agency warned Ebadi, a lawyer who publically criticizes the government and regularly defends political and human rights cases in court, not to "misuse the tolerance of the government." The Malaysian foreign ministry, under pressure from the Iranian government, forced the International Peace Foundation to cancel an October 2008 conference that Ebadi was due to attend. Earlier in the year Ebadi had received death threats. In response, she announced that the Iranian government would be held responsible for any harm to her. The authorities later promised to guarantee her safety.

Government intelligence officials forced Mohammad Sadigh Kaboudvand, a journalist and human rights activist in the western province of Kurdistan, to shut down his NGO Defending the Human Rights in Kurdistan, and in July 2007 arrested him. He was sentenced to 11 years' imprisonment in June 2008 for acting against national security and engaging in propaganda against the state.

Criminal Justice and the Juvenile Death Penalty

Iranian law allows death sentences for persons who have reached puberty, defined in law as age 9 for girls and 15 for boys. At this writing, Iran was the only country to have executed juvenile offenders in 2008, a total of six persons for crimes committed while under age 18. The country carried out 26 of the 32 known executions of juvenile offenders worldwide since January 2005. According to multiple sources, at least 130 other juvenile offenders are on death row in Iran. In many cases

these sentences followed unfair trials, and the executions themselves sometimes violated Iranian national laws, such as the failure to notify families and lawyers of the execution 48 hours in advance.

On August 4, 2008, the Judiciary cancelled the execution by stoning of four Iranians. The Judiciary spokesman said that it would review all pending stoning sentences. However, stoning remains a sentence permitted under the penal code.

Women's Rights

The government escalated its crackdown on women's rights activists in 2008, subjecting dozens of women to arbitrary detention, travel bans, and harassment. Eight women's rights activists were arrested in June as they were commemorating a 2006 meeting on women's rights that was broken up by police. In October an Iranian-American student researching women's rights in Iran, Esha Momeni, was arrested and held for some three weeks in Tehran's Evin prison. Security agents seized her computer and footage of interviews she had conducted with women's rights activists. Later that month, security agents blocked Sussan Tahmasebi, a leader of the One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality, from boarding a plane and confiscated her passport, without charging her with any crime. The Judiciary has also prosecuted women involved in peaceful activities on behalf of the campaign for "disturbing public opinion," "propaganda against the order," and "publishing lies via the publication of false news."

In September an appeals court in Tehran upheld prison and lashing sentences against two women's rights activists, Massoumeh Zia and Marzieh Mortazi Langrudi, for taking part in a 2006 demonstration demanding equal rights. Four women were also sentenced earlier in the year to six months in jail each for writing articles for feminist websites.

In January 2008 the authorities released Maryam Hosseinkhah and Jelveh Javaheri from Evin prison, where they were serving sentences for "disturbing public opinion" and "publishing lies." Two other activists, Ronak Safazadeh and Hana Abdi, remain in detention in Sanandaj on charges of "endangering national security." Prior to their arrest they were active members of the Azarmehr Association of the Women of

Kurdistan, a group that organizes capacity-building workshops for women in Iranian Kurdistan.

Minorities

Iran's ethnic and religious minorities are subject to discrimination and, in some cases, persecution. In the northwestern provinces of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, the government restricts cultural and political activities by the Azerbaijani and Kurdish populations, including the operation of NGOs that focus on social issues. The government also restricts the promotion of minority cultures and languages. On September 10, for example, plainclothes Intelligence Ministry agents arrested 19 prominent Azerbaijani cultural activists and academics during a private Ramadan celebration and detained them in Evin Prison. The Iranian government accuses them of siding with armed opposition groups and acting against national security.

On September 30, Molavi Abdolhamid, one of the most prominent Sunni clerics in Iran, said that if the government failed to address the problems of the Sunni community, including discrimination, its members would be unlikely to participate in the presidential election in 2009. The 2008 execution of two Sunni clerics in Zahedan, the assassination of two Sunni clerics in Kurdistan, the destruction of the Abu-Hanifeh Sunni religious school near Zahedan, and the arrest of 11 Sunni clerics who protested against this assault, coupled with systematic efforts to remove Sunni citizens from governmental positions, the army, and the police force, are among the major criticisms Abdolhamid leveled against the government.

The government continues to deny Iran's Baha'i community permission to worship publicly or pursue religious activities. On May 14, security forces arrested six leading Baha'i adherents and members of the Baha'i national coordination group, without informing them of the charges against them, and sent them to Evin prison. One associate of this group had already been arrested on March 5. At this writing, all seven remain in detention.

HIV/AIDS

In late June security forces detained without charge Arash and Kamyar Alaei, who are well known in Iran and internationally for their contributions to HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment programs; they remain in detention at this writing. For more than 20 years the Alaei brothers have been active in addressing problems relating to drug use, with a focus on the spread of HIV/AIDS, and have played key roles in putting these issues on the national healthcare agenda.

Key International Actors

In 2008 Iran's nuclear program again dominated discussions and policies in the international arena, overshadowing the urgency of discussing Iran's human rights violations. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, critical dialogue between the West and the Iranian government on human rights issues effectively stopped. The European Union has pledged to tie progress in broader cooperation with Iran to respect for human rights, but the pledge has had little impact. The United Nations Security Council has adopted three resolutions since 2007 to sanction Iran economically for its nuclear program.

In 2008 Iran continued to use what it calls "foreign threats" as grounds to suppress civil society and ignore widespread domestic and international objections to human rights violations. The authorities use the rhetorical support of Western countries, especially the United States, for dissidents and human rights activists as an excuse to restrict the freedom of expression and assembly within the country.

The Iranian government has not allowed the UN Human Rights Council's special rapporteurs to enter Iran and investigate violations of human rights alleged by activists, the media, and independent sources since 2005.