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2015 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 90

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 30

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 36

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 24

Iran's media environment remained one of the world's most repressive in 2014. Certain topics – including criticism of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – were subject to long-standing red lines, enforced in part through harsh online and offline censorship. Several dailies and magazines were closed or suspended during the year, and a number of reporters were arrested and prosecuted. Journalists practiced self-censorship, though some said the atmosphere had improved slightly since the 2013 election of President Hassan Rouhani, who presented himself as a moderate. Among other limited improvements that carried over from 2013, reporters and editors were able to cover a marginally broader array of sensitive topics than in the recent past, and a few new publications were allowed to open.

Legal Environment

Constitutional provisions and laws restrict what can be covered in the press and fail to provide protections for journalists. The authorities regularly invoke vaguely worded laws to criminalize dissenting opinions.

Article 24 of the constitution guarantees freedom of the press, but with a broad exception for content that is deemed "detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public." The Press Law, first drafted in 1986 and amended in 2000, states that "publications and news media shall enjoy freedom of expression provided what they publish does not violate Islamic principles of the civil code." Article 3 of the law states, "The press have the right to publish the opinions, constructive criticisms, suggestions and explanations of individuals and government officials for public information while duly observing the Islamic teachings and the best interest of the community."

Article 500 of the penal code states that anyone who undertakes any form of propaganda against the state will be sentenced to between three months and a year in prison, but the code leaves "propaganda" undefined. Under Article 513, certain offenses deemed to be an "insult to religion"

are punishable by death, or prison terms of one to five years for lesser offenses, with "insult" similarly undefined. In 2010, the government broadened the definition of the crime of *moharebeh*, or "enmity against God," in order to convict activists and journalists. Iranian law also provides for sentences of up to two years in prison, up to 74 lashes, or fines for those convicted of intentionally creating "anxiety and unease in the public's mind," spreading "false rumors," writing about "acts that are not true," and criticizing state officials; however, many prison sentences have been arbitrarily harsh, ranging from 6 to 10 years or more. Courts also frequently set exorbitant bail for detained journalists. The high bail amounts and suspended jail sentences often discourage journalists from engaging in media activities and criticism of the establishment even when they are not behind bars.

Multiple journalists faced arrest, indictment, or imprisonment during 2014. Most were charged with propaganda against the state, among other offenses, and some had recently returned to Iran from abroad in the hope that conditions would improve under Rouhani. Journalist Hossein Nouraninejad was arrested in April, about a month after returning to the country from Australia. He was reportedly sentenced in June to six years in prison for crimes including propaganda against the state, but was then released on bail of some \$100,000.

Journalist Serajeddin Mirdamadi, who had recently returned from Europe, was arrested in May and sentenced in July to six years in prison on charges that included "acting against the Islamic republic" and "spreading antigovernment propaganda." Later in May, reformist journalist Saba Azarpeik was similarly arrested on vague security charges. She was released in August on bail of about \$70,000.

In June, journalist Reyhaneh Tabatabaei was summoned to Tehran's Evin prison to serve a six-month sentence that was apparently imposed for her reporting on the opposition movement. Tabatabaei, who was initially arrested in 2011, was released in November after completing her sentence. Also in June, prominent journalist Mashallah Shamsolvaezin was summoned to court and banned from leaving the country. He later wrote on his Facebook page that he had been charged with "propaganda against the state" over a speech and interviews he had given, and was subsequently released on bail. Shamsolvaezin was one of many intellectuals, activists, and politicians who had been arrested in a 2009 crackdown that followed the disputed reelection of former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Journalist Marzieh Rasouli, who worked for several reformist publications, was summoned to Evin prison in July to serve a two-year prison sentence and receive 50 lashes on security charges that included "disturbing public order." Rasouli had initially been arrested in 2012 and released on bail. In October, photojournalist Arya Jafari was arrested after covering protests in Isfahan over a series of acid attacks that targeted young women. His photos were published by the semiofficial Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA) as well as international media outlets. Jafari was released on bail after nine days in detention. Other ISNA staff members were also briefly detained, reportedly in retaliation for the agency's coverage of the acid attacks. The authorities strongly rejected the widespread belief that the women were attacked by religious zealots who disapproved of their attire.

Bloggers and online activists face many of the same legal repercussions for their work those applied to professional journalists. In July 2014, the official Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) reported that a Revolutionary Court had sentenced eight Facebook activists to a total of 127 years in prison. The unnamed individuals, who reportedly administered several pages on Facebook, were found guilty of spreading "propaganda against the establishment," "acting against national security," and "insulting" Iran's leaders. Political cartoonists have also drawn the ire of the authorities; in August, artist and activist Atena Farghadani was arrested and jailed for a cartoon criticizing members of parliament who were considering legislation limiting access to

birth control. After reportedly being subject to ill treatment in Evin Prison – including solitary confinement, daily interrogations, and beatings and body searches by female prison guards – she was released on bail in November; however, her case remains open.

The judiciary frequently denies accused journalists and bloggers due process by referring their cases to the Revolutionary Courts, a venue intended for those suspected of seeking to overthrow the regime. Cases against journalists before these courts generally feature closed-door hearings and denial of access to an attorney.

In November 2014, the government issued regulations for the implementation of a moribund 2009 law on access to official information. The law had called for the regulations to be produced within three months, but the government apparently failed to act for over five years. The legislation includes no penalties for failure to release information; exemptions apply to state secrets, personal information, and information that conflicts with public morality.

Press licenses are issued by the Press Supervisory Board and have been rescinded in retaliation for criticism of the ruling establishment. The authorities also target journalists' associations and civil society organizations that support freedom of expression. The Association of Iranian Journalists, a professional syndicate dedicated to protecting journalists' rights, was shut down in 2009. Despite numerous attempts by members of the association, officials refuse to permit it to resume its activities. State media and other loyalist outlets are used to propagate false claims about freedom of expression activists. Hard-line media, including the daily *Kayhan* and Fars News Agency, are notorious for attacking reformists and others.

Political Environment

The Iranian media landscape is dominated by official, semiofficial, and conservative news outlets that support the authorities or particular factions of the ruling establishment, and strongly oppose reformists and opposition figures. *Kayhan* in particular is often seen as the mouthpiece of the supreme leader, although in some cases – namely on the nuclear issue – the daily has not necessarily reflected Khamenei's official stance. Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), a state agency with a monopoly on domestic television and radio broadcasts, airs programs aimed at smearing and discrediting dissidents and critical journalists. IRIB also has a record of working with security forces and airing forced confessions by dissidents and others. Its news and analysis are censored and biased in favor of the establishment.

Media outlets that carry independent or critical content regularly face closure. In 2014, several newspapers and magazines were shut down or forced to stop publishing. In February, for example, the daily *Aseman* was shut down after publishing only six issues. The official reason was that an article had criticized *Qisas*, the principle of in-kind retribution in Islamic jurisprudence, as "inhumane." A court said the daily had violated religious sanctities. *Aseman*'s managing editor, Abbas Bozorgmehr, was arrested and later released on bail of \$100,000. In March, the hard-line weekly *9-Day*, which had vocally criticized the policies of the Rouhani administration, was suspended by the Press Supervisory Board for alleged "publication of false information." In December, authorities suspended the newspaper *Roozan*, apparently over a front-page article marking the fifth anniversary of the death of dissident Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri. One of the newspaper's journalists, Yaghma Fashkhami, was arrested a day after the daily was ordered closed by the prosecutor's office.

In addition to the print media, blogs and news websites – particularly those in the Persian language – are subjected to state censorship and periodic filtering. In October, the news website Entekhab.ir was blocked temporarily. The website's editors were quoted as saying that criticism of government policies was the reason for the filtering. There were also reports during the year that authorities had blocked the website of conservative lawmaker Ali Motahari, who has criticized the

house arrest of opposition figures Mir Hossein Mousavi, his wife Zahra Rahnavaard, and Mehdi Karroubi.

The authorities' systematic internet controls and pervasive censorship have continued despite Rouhani's promises to ease restrictions on media and information. The government has relaxed curbs on media coverage of topics that were previously deemed sensitive, including the state of U.S.-Iran relations and some very limited discussion of the house arrest of opposition leaders. However, the wholesale blockage of social-media websites including YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, and surveillance of the activities of Iranians who manage to reach such platforms, remained in effect in 2014. Throughout the year, the Intelligence Unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) targeted and detained internet activists and social-network users. A few detainees are said to have been tortured to extract televised confessions.

Foreign media are unable to operate freely in Iran. The government requires all foreign correspondents to provide detailed itineraries and proposed stories before visas are granted, and visas are regularly denied to foreign reporters who have previously been critical of the regime. Authorities have in recent years arrested a number of Iranian journalists and documentary makers for suspected ties with Persian-language media outlets based abroad, particularly the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Persian service.

In July 2014, *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian, a dual Iranian-American citizen, was arrested in Tehran along with his wife, Yeganeh Salehi, a reporter with the Abu Dhabi English-language newspaper *National*. Salehi was released on bail in October, but Rezaian remained in jail at year's end on unknown charges. His family said he faced difficult conditions and had lost a significant amount of weight. He was also reportedly denied access to a lawyer.

As of December 2014, Iran had the second-largest number of incarcerated journalists in the world, after China, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). While the number of imprisoned journalists declined from 35 in 2013 to 30 in 2014, CPJ's December census did not account for the dozens of journalists who were arbitrarily arrested and released throughout the year. Authorities have sometimes extended the intimidation and harassment to journalists' family members. Prison conditions remain harsh, and detained journalists are often held in solitary confinement. A group of imprisoned contributors to a Sufi news website, *Majzooban Noor*, reportedly engaged in a hunger strike during 2014 to protest the conditions of their detention. According to Paris-based Reporters Without Borders, Iran is the leading jailer of women journalists and netizens.

In the past, there were reports of harassment and threats against the Iranian relatives of staff members at BBC Persian and Radio Farda, the Persian service of U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Security forces reportedly pressured the families to tell their loved ones to cease their journalistic and media activities. There have been also efforts to spread spurious allegations about such employees. Attempts to hack into the e-mail accounts of Iranian journalists working outside the country have been reported.

Economic Environment

Given the limited distribution of print media outside large cities, radio and television serve as the principal sources of news for many citizens. It is estimated that more than 80 percent of residents receive their news from television. Article 175 of the constitution forbids private broadcasting. The state maintains a monopoly on all domestic broadcast media and presents only the official political and religious viewpoints. In the print sector, the newspapers with the widest circulation and influence adhere to a conservative editorial position or are directly operated by the government. A state-run English-language satellite station, Press TV, was launched in 2007. The

IRGC largely controls the Fars News Agency. Several other hard-line news outlets are also closely associated with the IRGC and state security forces.

Many Iranians use banned satellite receivers to watch international channels. Their number, according to Iranian officials, is on the rise despite a state campaign of dish confiscations and fines that began after the divisive 2009 presidential election. The authorities also engage in systematic jamming of foreign satellite signals for viewers in Tehran and other cities, stepping up the effort during sensitive political times. In recent years, some officials and media reports have raised concerns over the jamming's interference with meteorological forecasts and its potential health hazards for citizens. The government said in February 2014 that it would investigate the health issue thoroughly. Iran has repeatedly jammed the Persian television service of the BBC, whose popular programming challenges the government's portrayals of both the domestic political scene and Iran's foreign relations. The uncensored news broadcasts of Radio Farda are also jammed.

Although access to the websites of international Persian-language media outlets and other organizations is similarly blocked by Iranian authorities, many Iranians use circumvention tools to reach censored information on the internet and discuss taboo subjects on banned social-media sites. The regime's increased monitoring of such activity in recent years is a tacit acknowledgment of its inability to completely silence online dissent through blocking. The internet in general is subject to extremely slow speeds and other practical obstacles in Iran, but it continues to expand as an important source of diverse news coverage and analysis. The penetration rate reached about 39 percent in 2014.

In 2009, as part of an ostensible privatization process, a corporation linked to the IRGC bought a majority stake in the Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI) with little outside competition. The government retains ownership of most of the remaining portion. The transaction effectively gave the IRGC indirect control over the country's dominant provider of fixed-line, mobile, and internet communications services. The country's other major mobile carriers are also linked to the IRGC or the state.

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