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Iran: New wave of attacks against journalists as repression escalates

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A sharp rise in arrests, prosecutions and imprisonment of independent journalists in Iran signals the authorities' utter determination to crush hopes for increased freedom heralded by the election of President Hassan Rouhani, said Amnesty International in a new briefing today.

"The way journalists are being treated puts everything journalism should stand for at risk in Iran. Anyone deemed critical of the authorities has been at increased risk of arrest and prosecution in recent months, creating an intense climate of fear where voicing any criticism has become a direct road to prison," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"The authorities' zero tolerance for anything other than state-sanctioned ideas and voices means that merely reporting the news can put people at risk of incarceration."

The wave of repression which intensified after the disputed presidential election in 2009 has reached new highs over the past few months. The authorities appear to have widened the circle of repression in a bid to crumple any aspirations for change created by the promises of increased freedoms that followed the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013.

Iranian journalists and foreign correspondents have faced harassment, intimidation, arrest and imprisonment for their legitimate journalistic activities. Other media workers, such as filmmakers, have also faced judicial bans preventing them from carrying out their work.

Many of those arrested are charged under provisions of the Islamic Penal Code which loosely define 'crimes' such as "spreading lies", "spreading propaganda against the system", and "creating unease in the public mind", in effect criminalizing a wide range of peaceful activities. The authorities are also using protracted prosecutions, unserved prison sentences and denial of medical leave as threats hanging over the heads of journalists who dare to criticize authorities.

"These overly broad legal provisions have in effect been used as a tool to stop media professionals from providing independent news to the world about the social and political situation in Iran," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

"Iran's Judiciary is toying with the law and using drawn-out trials and unserved prison sentences to coerce independent journalists into self-censorship."

Jason Rezaian, the Washington Post's correspondent in Iran and a dual Iranian-American national, and his wife, Yeganeh Salehi, a journalist for the United Arab Emirates newspaper the National, were arrested on 22 July 2014 in Tehran. Three days later, Gholamhossein Esma'ili, the Head of Tehran's Judiciary confirmed the arrests, saying that further information will only be provided upon the completion of "technical investigations and interrogations".

The whereabouts of both journalists are still unknown.

In a separate case, Saba Azarpeik, a journalist working for a number of reformist publications in Tehran, was arrested on 28 May 2014 and is also being held in an undisclosed location. She was brought before Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran on 21 and 22 July to face charges of "spreading propaganda against the system" and "spreading lies" linked to her previous arrest in January 2013.

Journalist and member of the Participation Front political party Hossein Nourani Nejad, is facing six years of imprisonment after a Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced him for "spreading propaganda against the system" and "gathering and colluding against national security" in June 2014. He had been arrested on 21 April 2014 and taken to solitary confinement in Evin Prison in Tehran.

Two months before his arrest, he had returned to Iran from Australia, where he was a postgraduate student, to see his new-born child for the first time. Hossein Nourani Nejad had been arrested previously in 2009.

Another journalist, Serajeddin Mirdamadi, was also sentenced to six years in prison on 27 July on the charges of "gathering and colluding against national security" and "spreading propaganda against the system".

Mahnaz Mohammadi, a documentary filmmaker and women's rights activist, Reyhaneh Tabatabaei, a journalist and a former writer for Shargh and Bahar newspapers, Marzieh Rasouli, an editor of a number of reformist newspapers, and journalist Sajedeh Arabsorkhi were also among the media workers summoned in recent months to start serving prison terms handed down on them on broadly defined national security charges.

"Independent journalism is not a crime. Authorities in Iran must immediately and unconditionally release all those who have been arrested and imprisoned in recent months only for peacefully exercising their legitimate right to freedom of expression, association and assembly," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

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