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[Freedom](#) Status: Not Free

Aggregate Score: 17/100 (0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free)

[Freedom](#) Rating: 6/7 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Political Rights: 6/7 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Civil Liberties: 6/7 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Quick Facts

Population: 79,500,000

Capital: Tehran

GDP/capita: \$5,443

Press [Freedom](#) Status: Not Free

Net [Freedom](#) Status: Not Free

OVERVIEW

The Islamic Republic of Iran holds elections regularly, but they fall short of democratic standards due to the role of the hard-line Guardian Council, which disqualifies all candidates deemed insufficiently loyal to the clerical establishment. Ultimate power rests in the hands of the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the unelected institutions under his control.

Key Developments

- In February, Iran held elections for the parliament and the Assembly of Experts, the body tasked with appointing and monitoring the supreme leader. Most reformist candidates were disqualified by the Guardian Council.
- In May, prominent human rights defender Narges Mohammadi was sentenced to 16 years in prison on national security charges stemming from her activism, including membership in a group that aims to reduce the high number of executions in Iran. The sentence was upheld on appeal in September.
- In August, Iranian authorities hanged 25 Sunni Muslim prisoners who had been convicted on terrorism-related charges; human rights organizations and lawyers representing some of the men cited a pattern of due process violations in the cases. Iran also continued to impose

the death penalty on juvenile offenders, including a prisoner who had been convicted of raping a teenage boy when he was 17.

- In October, a court in Iran sentenced an Iranian-American businessman and his 80-year-old father to 10 years in prison for collaborating with the U.S. government. Their friends and family dismissed the charges, calling the men "hostages" of the Iranian regime.

Executive Summary

Human rights abuses continued unabated in 2016, with the authorities carrying out Iran's largest mass execution in years and launching a renewed crackdown on women's rights activists. The regime maintained restrictions on [freedom](#) of expression, both offline and online, and made further arrests of journalists, bloggers, labor union activists, and dual nationals visiting the country, with some facing heavy prison sentences.

Hard-liners in control of powerful institutions, including the judiciary and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), were behind many of the year's abuses. There were no indications that President Hassan Rouhani, a self-proclaimed moderate seeking reelection in 2017, was willing or able to push back against repressive forces and deliver the greater social freedoms he had promised.

Opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi, his wife Zahra Rahnavard, and reformist cleric Mehdi Karroubi remained under [house](#) arrest for a sixth year without being formally charged or put on trial. As in 2015, the media were barred from quoting or reporting on former president Mohammad Khatami, another important reformist figure.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 7 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 3 / 12

A1. Is the head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

A2. Are the national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair?

The supreme leader, who has no fixed term, is the highest authority in the country. He is the commander in chief of the armed forces and appoints the head of the judiciary, the heads of state broadcast media, and the Expediency Council – a body tasked with mediating disputes between the Guardian Council and the parliament. He also appoints six of the members of the Guardian Council; the other six are jurists nominated by the head of the judiciary and confirmed by the parliament, all for six-year terms. The supreme leader is appointed by the Assembly of Experts, which also monitors his work. However, in practice his decisions appear to go unchallenged by the assembly, whose proceedings are kept confidential. The current supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, succeeded Islamic Republic founder Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989.

Elections in Iran are not free and fair, according to international standards. The Guardian Council, controlled by hard-line conservatives, vets all candidates for the parliament, presidency, and the

Assembly of Experts – a body of 86 clerics who are elected to eight-year terms by popular vote. The council has in the past rejected candidates who are not considered insiders or deemed fully loyal to the clerical establishment, as well as women seeking to run in the presidential election. As a result, Iranian voters are given a limited choice of candidates.

The president, the second-highest-ranking official in the Islamic Republic, is elected by popular vote for four years and can serve two consecutive terms. Ahead of the 2013 election, the Guardian Council disqualified more than 600 candidates, including former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Rahim Mashaei, an aide to incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, apparently due to political infighting. Nearly all of the eight approved candidates, including Rouhani, were deemed close to Khamenei. Only one reformist candidate, who was widely seen as lacking both charisma and significant popular support, was allowed to run. In the run-up to the election, censorship increased, the government intensified its press crackdown, and authorities restricted the already slow speed of the internet. However, Rouhani's victory – with nearly 51 percent of the vote amid 72 percent turnout – appeared to reflect the choice of the voters.

In February 2016, elections were held for the both the parliament and the Assembly of Experts. Only 51 percent of candidates who had applied to run for parliament were approved by the Guardian Council, the lowest figure to date. Only 20 percent of candidates were approved to run for the assembly, also a record low. Human Rights Watch reported that a significant number of candidates were disqualified due to their political beliefs and their prior convictions for supposed national security crimes that stemmed from legitimate political activities. Reformist politician Hossein Marashi said that only 30 reformist candidates were approved to run, out of more than 3,000 who had applied.

After the first round of parliamentary elections was held in February, a runoff took place in April for all constituencies where no candidate garnered at least 25 percent of the vote. At the end of the process, relatively moderate Rouhani supporters held more than 40 percent of seats in the parliament, while independents – who included a number of reformists – and hard-liners each took about a third. The result was perceived as a victory for moderates and reformists, though the exact orientations and allegiances of individual lawmakers are often unclear. Moderates and reformists similarly made symbolic gains in the Assembly of Experts, but because so many had been disqualified, the supposedly moderate lists included conservative candidates. A majority of the new assembly ultimately chose hard-line cleric Ahmad Jannati, head of the Guardian Council, as the body's chairman.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 2 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system open to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

B2. Is there a significant opposition vote and a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, totalitarian parties, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group?

B4. Do cultural, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

Only political parties and factions loyal to the establishment and to the state ideology are permitted to operate. Reformist parties and politicians have come under increased state repression, especially since 2009.

In 2015, two new reformist parties – Nedaye Iranian (Voice of Iranians) and Ettihad Mellat Iran (Iranian National Unity) – were established ahead of the 2016 parliamentary elections. However, most candidates from these and other reformist groups were disqualified by the Guardian Council ahead of the voting.

Iran's leading opposition figures – Mir Hossein Mousavi; his wife, university professor Zahra Rahnavard; and reformist cleric Mehdi Karroubi – have been under [house](#) arrest since February 2011 with no access to the outside world. Mousavi and Karroubi were presidential candidates in the disputed 2009 election, and the three are seen as the leaders of the reformist Green Movement, whose mass protests were brutally suppressed following that vote.

The parliament grants five seats to recognized non-Muslim minorities: Jews, Armenian Christians, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, and Zoroastrians. However, ethnic and especially religious minorities are rarely awarded senior government posts, and their political representation remains weak.

C. Functioning of Government: 2 / 12

- C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?
- C2. Is the government free from pervasive corruption?
- C3. Is the government accountable to the electorate between elections, and does it operate with openness and transparency?

The elected president's powers are limited by the supreme leader and other unelected authorities. The powers of the elected parliament are similarly restricted by the supreme leader and the unelected Guardian Council, which must approve all bills before they can become law. The council often rejects bills it deems un-Islamic. Nevertheless, the parliament has been a platform for heated political debate and criticism of the government, and legislators have frequently challenged presidents and their policies.

Corruption remains endemic at all levels of the bureaucracy, despite regular calls by authorities to tackle the problem. Powerful actors involved in the economy, including the IRGC and bonyads (endowed foundations), are above scrutiny, and restrictions on the media and civil society activists prevent them from serving as independent watchdogs to ensure transparency and accountability.

Civil Liberties: 10 / 60

D. [Freedom](#) of Expression and Belief: 2 / 16

- D1. Are there free and independent media and other forms of cultural expression?
- D2. Are religious institutions and communities free to practice their faith and express themselves in public and private?

D3. Is there academic [freedom](#), and is the educational system free of extensive political indoctrination?

D4. Is there open and free private discussion?

[Freedom](#) of expression and access to information remain severely limited both online and offline. The state broadcasting company is tightly controlled by hard-liners and influenced by the security apparatus. News and analysis are heavily censored, while critics and opposition members are rarely, if ever, given a platform on state-controlled television, which remains a major source of information for many Iranians. State television has a record of airing confessions extracted from political prisoners under duress, and it routinely carries reports aimed at discrediting dissidents and opposition activists.

Satellite dishes are banned, and Persian-language broadcasts from outside the country are regularly jammed. Authorities periodically raid private homes and confiscate satellite dishes.

Newspapers and magazines face censorship and warnings from authorities about which topics to cover and how. At least two publications were temporarily suspended during 2016 for critical coverage that was deemed insulting to the authorities, as were several news websites. Journalists state that they are often forced to practice self-censorship when working on sensitive issues.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, eight journalists were behind bars in Iran at year's end, down from 19 in 2015, marking the first time in eight years that Iran was not among the world's top five jailers of journalists. *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian, who had been in custody since mid-2014, was released from prison along with three other Iranian-Americans in a January 2016 prisoner exchange with the United States.

Journalists continued to face arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment throughout the year. In April, a court in Tehran sentenced three journalists – Ehsan Mazandarani, Saman Safarzaee, and Afarin Chitsaz – to between five and 10 years in prison on numerous political and security charges; the terms were later reduced to two years on appeal. In August, a revolutionary court sentenced journalist Issa Saharkhiz to three years in prison for allegedly insulting the supreme leader and disseminating antistate propaganda. His sentence was reduced to 21 months in September.

Also in September, reformist journalist Sadra Mohaghegh was detained at his home in Tehran. Though the reason for his arrest was not clear, the semiofficial Mehr News Agency accused him of working against state interests. Yashar Soltani, editor of the website Memari News, was detained the same month following a complaint by Tehran's mayor and the chair of its municipal council. Soltani had reported that the municipal government was illegally transferring favorable land and housing to state officials.

Tens of thousands of foreign-based websites remain filtered, including news sites and social media, which have otherwise become a relatively free platform of expression for many Iranians. The government has said it is pursuing "smart filtering" for social-networking sites such as Instagram, allowing it to block certain content without obstructing the entire service.

Authorities continue to persecute online activists and scrutinize users' internet activity. Well-known internet activist and founder of the popular Weblogina portal Arash Zad, detained since 2015 on unknown charges, remained behind bars. In May 2016, authorities announced an operation targeting

"un-Islamic" online modeling agencies. Several people were arrested for posting pictures of women without the obligatory hijab on websites such as Instagram. In August, the IRGC said its cybersecurity arm had spoken to or interrogated about 450 administrators of social media groups over allegedly "immoral" content and warned them against future transgressions.

Various forms of art face restrictions in Iran. All books must be approved by the Ministry of Culture in order to receive a publishing license. Scores of books have been banned, while their authors have been accused of subversion. Filmmakers also face censorship and official pressure. In June 2016, filmmaker Hossein Rajabian, his brother, musician Mehdi Rajabian, and an associated musician, Yousef Emadi, began serving three-year prison sentences after being arrested in 2015 for allegedly distributing underground music. In October, the writer and activist Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee was taken to jail to begin serving a six-year sentence for her authorship of an unpublished story about the practice of execution by stoning in Iran.

Iran is home to a majority Shiite Muslim population and Sunni, Baha'i, Christian, and Zoroastrian minorities. The constitution recognizes only Zoroastrians, Jews, and certain Christian communities as religious minorities, and they are relatively free to worship. The regime cracks down on Muslims who are deemed to be at variance with the state ideology and interpretation of Islam. Spiritual leader Mohammad Ali Taheri has been in jail since 2011 for founding a group centered on mysticism whose beliefs and practices are allegedly un-Islamic. Sunni Muslims complain that they have been prevented from building mosques in major cities and face difficulty obtaining government jobs. In recent years, there has been increased pressure on the Sufi Muslim order Nematollahi Gonabadi, including destruction of their places of worship and the jailing of some of their members.

The government also subjects some non-Muslim minorities to repressive policies and discrimination. Baha'is are systematically persecuted, sentenced to prison, and banned from access to higher education. In October 2016, 14 Baha'is were arrested in the city of Shiraz, though the charges against them were not clear. The Baha'i International Community has also reported the destruction of cemeteries and the closure of Baha'i-owned businesses in recent years. There is an ongoing crackdown on Christian converts. In the past several years, a number of informal [house churches](#) have been raided and their pastors detained.

Academic [freedom](#) remains limited in Iran, despite attempts by Rouhani's government to ease the harsh repression universities have experienced since 2009. Khamenei has warned that universities should not be turned into centers for political activities. Amnesty International estimates that hundreds of students have been prevented from continuing their studies for political reasons or because they belong to the Baha'i community. In March 2016, Iranian-Canadian academic Homa Hoodfar was detained while traveling in Iran, and authorities confiscated her passport and prevented her from returning to Canada. She was questioned by police for months before being arrested and imprisoned in June. In October, she was released after spending four months in prison, where she had been subjected to harsh interrogations.

Iran's vaguely defined restrictions on speech, harsh criminal penalties, and state monitoring of online communications are among several factors that deter citizens from engaging in open and free private discussion.

- E1. Is there [freedom](#) of assembly, demonstration, and open public discussion?
E2. Is there [freedom](#) for nongovernmental organizations?
E3. Are there free trade unions and peasant organizations or equivalents, and is there effective collective bargaining? Are there free professional and other private organizations?

The constitution states that public demonstrations may be held if they are not "detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam." In practice, only state-sanctioned demonstrations are typically permitted, while other gatherings have in recent years been forcibly dispersed by security personnel, who detain participants. In October 2016, for example, police made hundreds of arrests after thousands of people gathered in Fars Province for an unusually large annual celebration of Cyrus the Great, a pre-Islamic Persian king known for religious tolerance. By December more than 70 detainees had been sentenced to jail terms of up to eight years, though appeals were pending at year's end.

Nongovernmental organizations that work on nonpolitical issues such as poverty and the environment are allowed to operate relatively freely. Other groups, especially those that have highlighted human rights violations, have been suppressed. They include the Center for Human Rights Defenders, which remains closed with several of its members in jail, and the Mourning Mothers of Iran (Mothers of Laleh Park), which had been gathering in a Tehran park to bring attention to human rights abuses.

Iran does not permit the creation of labor unions; only state-sponsored labor councils are allowed. Labor rights groups have come under pressure in recent years, and more than a dozen activists have been sentenced to prison. Three prominent teachers' union activists were temporarily released in 2016 after undergoing hunger strikes in prison, but they were later ordered to complete their sentences.

F. Rule of Law: 3 / 16

- F1. Is there an independent judiciary?
F2. Does the rule of law prevail in civil and criminal matters? Are police under direct civilian control?
F3. Is there protection from political terror, unjustified imprisonment, exile, or torture, whether by groups that support or oppose the system? Is there [freedom](#) from war and insurgencies?
F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

The judicial system is used as a tool to silence critics and opposition members. The head of the judiciary is appointed by the supreme leader for a five-year term. Under the current head, Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani, human rights advocates and political activists have been subjected to unfair trials, and the security apparatus's influence over judges has reportedly grown.

Iran, after China, carries out the largest number of executions in the world each year, and the annual total has increased under Larijani. Convicts can be executed for offenses other than murder, such as drug trafficking, and for crimes they committed when they were less than 18 years old. According to the UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran, at least 200 individuals were reportedly executed in the first half of 2016. Though this represented a decrease in the rate of

executions compared with the previous year, the rapporteur noted that such patterns are common around elections. In August, Iran hanged 25 Sunnis in a single day for their alleged involvement in terrorist violence. As in previous years, Iran refused to allow a visit to the country by the UN special rapporteur.

Lawyers taking up sensitive political cases have been jailed and banned from practicing, including prominent human rights lawyer Abdolfatah Soltani. A number of lawyers have been forced to leave the country to escape prosecution.

Activists are routinely arrested without warrants, held indefinitely without formal charges, and denied access to legal counsel or any contact with the outside world. Many are later convicted on vague security charges in trials that sometimes last only a few minutes. Activists say they have been beaten during interrogation, forced into false confessions, and subjected to psychological pressure, including threats that their relatives will be arrested. In the past few years, the IRGC's intelligence unit appears to have increased its involvement in political repression. The unit reportedly controls a section of Tehran's Evin prison.

Amnesty International reported that authorities engaged in a campaign of harassment against women's rights activists early in 2016, subjecting more than a dozen to harsh interrogations and threatening them with arrest and imprisonment. In September 2016, an appeals court upheld a 16-year prison sentence imposed in May against prominent human rights defender Narges Mohammadi for a variety of security charges stemming from her activism, including membership in a group that aims to reduce the high number of executions in Iran. In October, a court sentenced an Iranian-American businessman, Siamak Namazi, and his 80-year-old father, Bagher Namazi, to 10 years in prison for allegedly colluding with the United States.

Security forces are seldom held responsible for human rights violations.

Ethnic minorities complain of various forms of discrimination, including restrictions on the use of their languages. Some provinces with large minority populations remain underdeveloped. Activists campaigning for more ethnic rights and greater autonomy have come under pressure from authorities, and some have been jailed.

The penal code criminalizes all sexual relations outside of traditional marriage, and Iran is among the few countries where individuals can be put to death for consensual same-sex conduct. Members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community face harassment and discrimination, though the problem is underreported due to the criminalized and hidden nature of these groups in Iran.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 4 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy [freedom](#) of travel or choice of residence, employment, or institution of higher education?

G2. Do individuals have the right to own property and establish private businesses? Is private business activity unduly influenced by government officials, the security forces, political parties/organizations, or organized crime?

G3. Are there personal social freedoms, including gender equality, choice of marriage partners, and size of family?

G4. Is there equality of opportunity and the absence of economic exploitation?

Freedom of movement is restricted, particularly for women and perceived opponents of the regime. Women are banned from certain public places, such as sports stadiums, and can obtain a passport to travel abroad only with the permission of their fathers or husbands. Many journalists and activists have been prevented from leaving the country.

Iranians have the legal right to own property and establish private businesses. However, powerful institutions like the IRGC play a dominant role in the economy, and bribery is said to be widespread in the business environment, including for registration and obtaining business licenses.

The government interferes in most aspects of citizens' private lives. Home parties are often raided and citizens detained or fined for drinking alcohol or mingling with members of the opposite sex. In May 2016, some 30 students were each given 99 lashes for attending a mixed-sex graduation party in Qazvin. Women are regularly harassed and detained by the police for not fully observing the obligatory Islamic dress code. An increasing number of women defy the state by wearing tight clothes and short coats.

Women remain significantly underrepresented in politics and government, though Rouhani has appointed three women among his vice presidents, and four women have been appointed as governors. During the 2016 parliamentary elections, 17 women were elected to serve as representatives, the highest number in the Islamic Republic's history. Women are denied equal rights in divorce, child custody, and inheritance. A woman's testimony in court is given only half the weight of a man's, and the monetary compensation awarded to a female victim's family upon her death is half that owed to the family of a male victim.

The government provides no protection to women and children forced into sex trafficking, and both Iranians and migrant workers from countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan are subject to forced labor and debt bondage.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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