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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2013: Iran - Country of Concern update

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There has been no improvement in the human rights situation in Iran between January and March 2014. Significant institutional challenges remain, including for minority religious and ethnic groups, journalists and human rights defenders, prisoners and women.

It remains of great concern that Iran has the second highest rate of executions per capita in the world. According to European colleagues, at least 130 people were executed between 1 January and 20 March 2014. There are also reports that at least two of those executed were minors at the time the crime was committed. Iran continues to use the death penalty for crimes such as drugs offences, which are not internationally regarded as the "most serious crimes" for which the death penalty may be applied.

Early this year, an incident involving a prisoner who survived his hanging sparked domestic debate on the death penalty. The 37-year-old prisoner, who was sentenced to death for drug trafficking, was hanged last October, but was found alive in the mortuary 24 hours later. He was revived after several days in a coma, and there were reports that he would be subjected to a second hanging. Justice Minister Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi had expressed his opposition to hanging the prisoner a second time, but it became a hot topic of discussion among legal officials and the clergy. On 5 February, it was announced that the prisoner had had his sentence commuted to life imprisonment by the Iranian judiciary.

Freedom of religion is still a serious concern in Iran. Members of religious minorities are harassed or arrested on politicised charges. In February, four detained Gonabadi Dervishes were tried after spending ten months in Shiraz's Adelabad Prison. They stood trial for "forming a terrorist group against the regime, participating in seditious gatherings, enmity against God and carrying weapons". The alleged failure of the authorities to provide adequate medical assistance to the detainees resulted in large protests from the Dervish community in Tehran.

Members of ethnic minorities can also experience discrimination and arbitrary arrest. The case of two activists from the Arab minority was of particular concern. Hadi Rashedi and Hashem Shabani Amouri were reportedly executed in secret in January following proceedings that did not meet international fair trial and due process standards. After reportedly being denied access to lawyers and family members, and tortured into confessing,

they were sentenced to death on what Ravina Shamdasani, spokeswoman for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said were the “ill-defined” charges of “enmity against God” and “corruption on earth”, as well as acts against national security. In addition, on 9 March, the Iranian Appeals Court approved the jail sentences of Khosro and Massoud Kordpour, two Kurdish journalists and human rights activists convicted of “collaboration in protest gatherings” and “propaganda against the regime”. In November 2013, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention called their detention arbitrary and requested their immediate release with appropriate reparation.

Freedom of expression is also a concern, although discussion about the role of social media has increased. In March, the Interior Minister, Rahmani Fazli, said neither membership of social networks, nor using internet circumvention tools to connect to those networks, are regarded as a crime. He added that websites such as Facebook and Twitter are only blocked “technically”, implying that there is no legal ground for imposed restrictions.

However, on 17 January, a Tehran Police sting against the capital's internet cafes resulted in 67 being shut down. According to Communication & Information Technology News Agency (CITNA), Hoseyn Sajedi Nia, commander of the Tehran Police, announced: “Since last week police officials have visited 352 internet cafes, of which 67 internet cafes were shut down because of owner violations and various others have received closure notices. It is worth mentioning that having VPNs, proxy services, and permitting user access to Facebook are included as violations of the internet cafes that have been shut down”.

On 8 March, President Rouhani spoke in favour of “freedom of press with responsibility”, and criticised the practice of shutting down offending newspapers. He said “the government is in favour of freedom of expression with responsibility... if we break the pens and shut the mouths, public trust will be deeply harmed... Shutting down a newspaper should be the last resort, not the first. If one violates the law we should deal with him or the managing director of the daily”. The extent of these laws on freedom of the press, however, remains unclear.

On 16 March, hardliner publication “9 Dey” was banned after receiving six warnings from the Press Oversight Committee in one year for articles critical of the Rouhani administration. Speaking about the ban, Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Ali Jannati, said “considering the numerous notices the 9 Dey weekly received over the past year, which were not addressed, the Press Oversight Committee decided on the ban. I have said repeatedly that under no circumstances are we in favour of banning any publications, and believe a ban should be the last resort”.

On 20 February, the managing director of the banned pro-reform daily newspaper Aseman, Abbas Bozorgmehr, was arrested and taken to Tehran's Evin prison. He was summoned to court over a decision to publish an article which described the Islamic retribution penal code as “inhumane”.

Iran still has the second highest number of journalists in prison in the world, and speaking out against the regime can result in prison sentences. In March, reformist activist Sa'id Razavi-Faqih was arrested after criticising Iran's ruling system, and questioning the legitimacy of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i's leadership. Razavi-Faqih, a former member of the Central Committee of Office for Fostering Unity, was arrested for “expressing radical and unorthodox remarks” at a meeting of reformists.

The authorities use various techniques to maintain pressure on released prisoners. Prominent lawyer and rights activist Nasrin Sotudeh, who was released on 18 September 2013, has been summoned to the Disciplinary Court for Lawyers after Tehran Prosecutor's Office requested the cancellation of her licence. She was subject to further summons during the Nowruz (Persian New Year) holidays by the Ministry of Intelligence. In addition, Iran has apparently made the recent release of Sakineh Ashtiani, sentenced to death by stoning after being convicted of adultery and murder in 2006, conditional. Her release has not yet been confirmed.

There are also concerns around the impunity of Iranian officials for crimes. On 3 March, it was announced that the security officer who oversaw the case of Sattar Beheshti, the detained blogger who died three days into his arrest by the Iranian Cyber Police, will stand trial in April for manslaughter, not first degree murder, in a court for government staff.

The UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, issued his report into the human rights situation in March 2014. According to the Mehr News Agency, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Marziyeh Afkham said that the report was libellous and untrue. Iran's reaction is indicative of its disregard for international human rights mechanisms

The UK continues to call the Iranian government to account, and the UK's non-resident Chargé d'Affaires to Iran discussed human rights with a range of Iranian government officials during his visit to Tehran in March 2014. The UK also co-sponsored a resolution to extend the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran at the UN Human Rights Council in March 2014. The resolution was passed. #####This publication is part of the [2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report](http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/273713/389477_en.html).