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Freedom in the World 2010 - Iran

Capital: Tehran

Population: 73,244,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Trend Arrow ↓

Iran received a downward trend arrow due to strong evidence of fraud in the June 2009 presidential election and the violent suppression of subsequent protests.

Overview

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was awarded a second four-year term in the June 2009 presidential election, but public outrage at the allegedly fraudulent results sparked widespread demonstrations that persisted for the remainder of the year. The government responded by violently suppressing the protests and heavily restricting the flow of information. Security forces were accused of raping and torturing detained demonstrators and opposition supporters, many of whom were subjected to televised show trials. The regime continued its crackdown even as the troubled economy suffered from the effects of a global financial crisis and ongoing international sanctions.

In 1979, a revolution ousted Iran's monarchy, which had been marked by widespread corruption and misguided modernization efforts. The revolution mobilized much of the population and brought together diverse political interests, but democratic and secular elements were largely subsumed under the leadership of the previously exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Although the constitution drafted by Khomeini's disciples provided for an elected president and parliament, an unelected body, the Council of Guardians, was empowered to approve candidates and certify that the decisions of elected officials were in accord with Sharia (Islamic law). Khomeini was named supreme leader and vested with control over the security and intelligence services, the armed forces, and the judiciary. Soon after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein launched an invasion to settle a long-running border dispute. The ensuing war, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, cost over a million lives.

After Khomeini's death in 1989, the title of supreme leader passed to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a middle-ranking cleric who was a compromise candidate but lacked the religious credentials and popularity of his predecessor. The constitution was changed to

consolidate his power and give him final authority on all matters of foreign and domestic policy.

Beneath its veneer of religious probity, the Islamic Republic had given rise to a new elite that accumulated wealth through opaque and unaccountable means. Basic freedoms had been revoked, and women in particular experienced a severe regression in their status and rights. By the mid-1990s, dismal economic conditions and a demographic trend toward a younger population had contributed to significant public dissatisfaction with the regime. A coalition of reformists began to emerge within the leadership, advocating a gradual process of political change, economic liberalization, and normalization of relations with the outside world that was designed to legitimize, but not radically alter, the existing political system.

Representing this coalition, former culture minister Mohammad Khatami was elected president in 1997 with nearly 70 percent of the vote. Under his administration, more than 200 independent newspapers and magazines with a diverse array of viewpoints were established, and the authorities relaxed the enforcement of restrictions on social interaction between the sexes. Reformists won 80 percent of the seats in the country's first nationwide municipal elections in 1999 and took the vast majority of seats in parliamentary elections the following year, with student activists playing a major role in their success.

The 2000 parliamentary elections prompted a backlash by hard-line clerics. Over the four years after the polls, the conservative judiciary closed more than 100 reformist newspapers and jailed hundreds of liberal journalists and activists, while security forces cracked down on the ensuing student protests. Khatami was reelected with 78 percent of the vote in 2001, but popular disaffection stemming from the reformists' limited accomplishments, coupled with the Council of Guardians' rejection of the candidacies of most reformist politicians, allowed hard-liners to triumph in the 2003 municipal and February 2004 parliamentary elections.

The Council of Guardians similarly rejected the candidacies of popular reformists ahead of the June 2005 presidential election, though the victory of Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over other approved candidates reflected popular desires for change. As Iran's first nonclerical president in more than two decades, he had campaigned on promises to fight elite corruption and redistribute Iran's oil wealth to the poor and middle class. Nevertheless, his hard-line administration oversaw a crackdown on civil liberties and human rights, and a stricter enforcement of the regime's morality laws.

The new government also adopted a more confrontational tone on foreign policy matters, feeding suspicions that its expanding uranium-enrichment activity, ostensibly devoted to generating electricity, was in fact aimed at weapons production. In an effort to compel Iran to halt the uranium enrichment, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on the country in December 2006, and subsequently expanded them as negotiations failed to make progress.

In the December 2006 municipal and Assembly of Experts elections, voters signaled their disapproval of the government's performance by supporting far more moderate officials. Carefully vetted conservative candidates won nearly 70 percent of the seats in the March 2008 parliamentary elections, but many were considered critics of Ahmadinejad, and particularly of his economic policies.

Despite crackdowns on human and women's rights activists and restrictions on internet freedom in the months prior to the June 2009 presidential election, supporters of all candidates seemed to enjoy a relatively relaxed and politically vibrant atmosphere. The Council of Guardians approved only three of 475 potential candidates to compete against Ahmadinejad, but all three were well-known and potentially formidable figures: Mir Hussein Mousavi, a reformist former prime minister; Mohsen Rezai, a conservative former head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC); and Mehdi Karubi, a reformist former speaker of parliament and the only cleric approved. Mousavi emerged as the main challenger, confronting Ahmadinejad in unprecedented televised debates.

Despite polls that indicated a close race, Ahmadinejad was declared the winner soon after the election, credited with over 63 percent of the vote. Mousavi officially received only 33.75 percent, while Rezai and Karroubi reportedly garnered 1.73 percent and 0.85 percent, respectively. All three challengers lodged claims of fraud, and subsequent findings by independent analysts reinforced suspicions that irregularities had occurred. According to official data, the conservative vote increased by 113 percent compared with the 2005 election, and several provinces registered more votes than the number of eligible voters. In 10 provinces won by Ahmadinejad, his victory was only possible if he had secured the votes of all former nonvoters and all those who had voted for his main conservative opponent in 2005, as well as up to 44 percent of those who had previously voted for reformist candidates.

Protests broke out on a massive scale as voters rejected the official results. In a rare show of defiance, high-profile political figures publicly broke with Khamenei's validation of the election, with Khatami going so far as to publicly call for a referendum on the government's legitimacy. The security forces violently cracked down on all public expressions of dissent and tightened government control of both online and traditional media, but protesters continued to mount periodic demonstrations for the rest of the year, using mobile-telephone cameras and the internet to document abuses and communicate with the outside world.

Meanwhile, Iran's relations with the United States and Britain, which had seemed to improve earlier in 2009, worsened in the wake of the election as the regime accused those and other foreign governments of attempting to orchestrate a velvet revolution. Iranian authorities temporarily detained nine employees of the British embassy in late June, alleging that they played a "significant role" in the postelection unrest. At the end of July, three Americans were arrested when they strayed into Iranian territory while hiking in northern Iraq; they remained in custody at year's end. Separately, it was revealed in September 2009 that Iran had been secretly building a second uranium-enrichment plant near the city of Qom, stirring calls for additional international sanctions.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Iran is not an electoral democracy. The most powerful figure in the government is the supreme leader (*Vali-e-Faghih*), currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He is chosen by the Assembly of Experts, a body of 86 clerics who are elected to eight-year terms by popular vote, from a vetted list of candidates. The supreme leader is head of the armed forces and appoints the leaders of the judiciary, the chiefs of state broadcast media, the commander of the IRGC, the Expediency Council, and half of the Council of Guardians. Although the president and the parliament, both with four-year terms, are responsible for designating cabinet ministers, the supreme leader exercises de facto control over appointments to the ministries of Defense, the Interior, and Intelligence.

All candidates for the presidency and the 290-seat, unicameral parliament are vetted by the Council of Guardians, which consists of six clergymen appointed by the supreme leader and six civil law experts selected by the head of the judiciary, all for six-year terms (the latter are nominally subject to parliamentary approval). The Council of Guardians also has the power to reject legislation approved by the parliament; disputes between the two are arbitrated by the Expediency Council, another unelected, conservative-dominated body. Both it and the Assembly of Experts are currently headed by former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who has at times sided with the reformist camp to curb the influence of his rival, current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The IRGC's influence within Iran continues to grow, as it now wields military, political, and economic power. Former members of the IRGC, including Ahmadinejad, hold key positions within the government, and its commercial arms have been awarded the right of first refusal for government contracts, some of which have been extremely lucrative.

Corruption is pervasive. The hard-line clerical establishment has grown immensely

wealthy through its control of tax-exempt foundations that monopolize many sectors of the economy, such as cement and sugar production. Iran was ranked 168 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is severely limited. The government directly controls all television and radio broadcasting. Satellite dishes are illegal, and while they are generally tolerated, there have been increasing reports of dish confiscation and steep fines. The authorities have had some success in jamming broadcasts by dissident satellite stations based overseas, and cooperation with Persian-language satellite channels is banned. Even the purchase of satellite images from abroad is illegal. The Ministry of Culture must approve publication of all books and inspects foreign books prior to domestic distribution.

The authorities frequently issue ad hoc orders banning media coverage of specific topics and events. Although some foreign media outlets had been specifically invited to cover the 2009 presidential election, the government officially banned the foreign media from reporting on the postelection demonstrations. Most foreign journalists were confined to their hotels and ultimately forced to leave as their visas expired. Reporters from a number of countries were arrested and temporarily detained during the year.

The Press Court has extensive power to prosecute journalists for such vaguely worded offenses as "insulting Islam" and "damaging the foundations of the Islamic Republic." The use of "suspicious sources" or sources that criticize the government is also forbidden. Fear of stepped-up penalties has reinforced a trend toward journalistic self-censorship. The Association of Iranian Journalists reported in 2007 that the profession had suffered in quality and investment due to the government's crackdown on independent newspapers. The organization was subsequently harassed by the government, and in August 2009 its offices were raided and closed.

Iran leads the world in the number of jailed journalists, with 39 behind bars at the close of 2009. Some received sentences of up to 15 years in prison, and at least one was sentenced to flogging. Several dozen other journalists were arrested and released on bail during the year, often after they issued coerced confessions on television.

Individuals used mobile-telephone cameras and social-networking websites to provide some of the only independent coverage of the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election, particularly given the crackdown on traditional media. The effectiveness of this type of reporting has improved as internet use in Iran has skyrocketed, reaching about 25 percent of the population by 2008.

Recognizing the internet's growing influence, the government has forced service providers to block a growing list of "immoral" or politically sensitive sites. In 2006, the authorities announced the creation of a central filtering facility to block unauthorized websites, identify internet users, and keep a record of sites visited.

The number of blocked websites rose sharply ahead of the presidential election, affecting internationally known sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as several political websites. In late 2009, a group calling itself the Iranian Cyber Army hacked Twitter, redirecting users to a message that appeared to support the current regime. Text-messaging services were completely shut down on the day of the election, and phone services were severely disrupted the next day. Sites associated with minority and human rights, and particularly women's rights, were also targeted during the year. Some women's rights activists who were detained by police later reported that their online activities had been monitored by officials, who produced copies of their instant-messaging discussions during interrogations.

Religious freedom is limited in Iran, whose population is largely Shiite Muslim but includes Sunni Muslim, Baha'i, Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian minorities. The Special Court for the Clergy investigates religious figures for alleged crimes and has generally been used to persecute clerics who stray from the official interpretation of Islam. Ayatollah Seyd Hussain Kazemeini Boroujerdi, a cleric who advocates the separation of

religion and politics, is currently serving 11 years in prison for his beliefs.

Sunnis enjoy equal rights under the law but face discrimination in practice; there is no Sunni mosque in Tehran, and few Sunnis hold senior government posts. The Sunni militant group Jundallah, associated with the ethnic Baluchi minority, has waged a campaign of bombings and other attacks on the government in recent years, and the authorities have accused the United States and Britain of supporting the group. At least 13 Sunni men were executed in July 2009 for alleged involvement in a December 2008 bombing. In October 2009, a suicide bombing attributed to Jundallah struck a meeting between IRGC commanders and tribal leaders, killing more than 40 people.

Sufi Muslims have also faced persecution by the authorities. The constitution recognizes Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as religious minorities, and they are generally allowed to worship without interference, so long as they do not proselytize. Conversion by Muslims to a non-Muslim religion is punishable by death. The non-Muslim minorities are barred from election to representative bodies (though a set number of parliamentary seats are reserved for them), cannot hold senior government or military positions, and face restrictions in employment, education, and property ownership.

Some 300,000 Baha'is, Iran's largest non-Muslim minority, are not recognized in the constitution, enjoy virtually no rights under the law, and are banned from practicing their faith. Hundreds of Baha'is have been executed since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Baha'i students are often barred from attending university and prevented from obtaining their educational records. Seven Baha'i leaders arrested in 2008 were officially accused of espionage in February 2009. After prominent human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi became involved in their case in 2008, state-controlled media accused her daughter of converting to the Baha'i faith. Ebadi's colleague and fellow human rights lawyer, Abdolfattah Soltani, was arrested in June 2009 and released on bail in September; it was unclear whether the arrest was related to his involvement with the Baha'i case. In November and December, several more Baha'is were arrested, including at least four women.

Academic freedom is limited. Scholars are frequently detained, threatened, and forced to retire for expressing political views, and students involved in organizing protests face suspension or expulsion. Shortly after the 2009 presidential election, security forces broke into universities around the country. At least six students at Tehran University were killed, and the chancellor of Shiraz University reportedly resigned in protest over the violence, which reportedly left two of his students dead. At least five members of the Office for Strengthening Unity, a national student and alumni organization, were also killed in the attacks. Several other members were indicted in show trials in August, accused of fomenting a velvet revolution; four remained behind bars at year's end.

The constitution prohibits public demonstrations that "violate the principles of Islam," a vague provision that was regularly invoked in 2009 to deny requests for demonstration permits. Vigilante and paramilitary organizations that are officially or tacitly sanctioned by the government – most notably the Basij militia and Ansar-i Hezbollah – regularly play a major role in breaking up demonstrations. They were instrumental in the violent dispersal of protesters in the second half of 2009.

Demonstrations were mounted nearly every day of the week after the June 12 election, drawing hundreds of thousands of peaceful protesters into the streets. However, a sermon by Khamenei on June 19 made clear that any further protests would be met with harsh violence. The next day, security forces reportedly killed 20 protesters. The death of one of the victims, 26-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan, was recorded on a mobile-phone camera and disseminated via the internet; her name quickly became a rallying cry for protesters. After the violence of June 20, protests were limited almost exclusively to national holidays or days of mourning. Dozens of people, including a nephew of presidential candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi, were killed during protests on December 27, which marked both the major Shiite holiday of Ashura and the seventh day of mourning following the death of Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, a harsh critic of the regime.

Under the pretense of "countering immoral behavior," the government also disrupts private gatherings. The Basij carried out thousands of home raids in 2007, arresting more than 150,000 people and forcing them to sign letters promising to observe official dress codes and adhere to moral standards. A group of women referred to as the Mourning Mothers were attacked and arrested by security forces in December 2009 as they convened to remember their children, who had either gone missing or been killed since the elections.

The constitution permits the establishment of political parties, professional syndicates, and other civic organizations, provided that they do not violate the principles of "freedom, sovereignty, and national unity" or question the Islamic basis of the republic. Human rights discourse and grassroots activism are integral parts of Iranian society. However, the security services routinely arrest and harass secular activists as part of a wider effort to control the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Although permits are not required by law, the Ministry of the Interior has been imposing them and shutting down organizations that do not seek or qualify for them. The offices of the Human Rights Defenders Center, run by Shirin Ebadi, were raided and closed by the authorities in December 2008 for allegedly operating without a license. Ebadi, an outspoken critic of the regime's human rights abuses and the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, argued that the organization had permission to operate but that the authorities refused to hand over the proper documentation. Jinous Sobhani, secretary at the center and a Baha'i, was arrested in January 2009 and released on bail in March.

Iranian law does not allow independent labor unions, though workers' councils are represented in the Workers' House, the only legal labor federation. In 2009, union members throughout the country were attacked and arrested by security forces for participating in May Day celebrations. At least five labor leaders were jailed in 2009 for their efforts on behalf of sugar refinery workers, with one remaining behind bars at year's end. Teachers unions have been banned since 2007, but have not yet been dissolved by courts. Three arrests were made at a Tehran rally to celebrate National Teachers' Day on May 4, and multiple union members were arrested in the wake of the June presidential elections. In October, security forces broke up a strike by workers at a pipe manufacturing company in Ahwaz who were seeking 10 months of unpaid wages; the crackdown resulted in 50 arrests and a number of injuries.

The judicial system is not independent, as the supreme leader directly appoints the head of the judiciary, who in turn appoints senior judges. General Courts ostensibly safeguard the rights of defendants, but in practice suspects are frequently tried in closed sessions without access to legal counsel. Dissident clerics are tried before the Special Court for the Clergy. Political and other sensitive cases are tried before Revolutionary Courts, where due process protections are routinely disregarded and trials are often summary. In August and September 2009, hundreds of journalists and dissidents were convicted of crimes related to national security in five mass trials, none of which met international standards. During each of these televised proceedings, the prosecutor read out a "general indictment" against the hundreds of detainees in attendance. Select individuals then issued confessions that are generally believed to have been coerced.

The country's penal code is based on Sharia and provides for flogging, amputation, and execution by stoning or hanging for a range of social and political offenses; these punishments are carried out in practice. A man convicted of adultery was stoned to death in Rasht in March 2009. Iran's overall execution rate has increased by nearly 300 percent under Ahmadinejad. In July 2009, 44 convicted drug traffickers were hanged, including 24 on the same day. By August, four detainees had been sentenced to death for their involvement in protests, and the December 27 demonstrations prompted the minister of the interior to declare that all protesters would be considered *muharib* – persons waging war against God – and thus subject to execution.

In 2009, at least three prisoners were executed for crimes they committed while juveniles, and 142 others remained on death row. The government had announced in 2008 that it would no longer execute juveniles, but it later clarified that the death penalty remained an option under the parallel "retribution" system, in which the

sentence is imposed by the victim's family rather than the state. This would be allowed for male offenders over the age of 15 and female offenders as young as 9.

Although the constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, such abuses are increasingly routine, and family members of detainees are often not notified for days or weeks. Suspected dissidents are frequently held in unofficial, illegal detention centers, and allegations of torture are common there and in Tehran's infamous Evin prison. A 2004 law banned torture in interrogations, but reports of the practice persisted in 2009, particularly for political prisoners arrested after the June presidential election. Prison conditions in general are notoriously poor, and there are regular allegations of abuse and death in custody. Male and female detainees alleged rape by security forces in the second half of 2009; after reformist presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi released a detainee's first-hand account of rape on his website, prosecutors initiated a case against him. The rape claims were reinforced when a former member of the Basij confessed that security personnel were permitted to rape detainees as a "reward" for their work.

The constitution and laws call for equal rights for all ethnic groups, but in practice these rights are restricted by the authorities. Ethnic Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, and Azeris complain of political and economic discrimination. Kurdish opposition groups suspected of separatist aspirations, such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), are brutally suppressed. The Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), a separatist militant group linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey, has conducted a number of guerrilla attacks in recent years and was declared a terrorist organization by the United States in 2009. In May, after alleged PJAK attacks on police stations in border cities left multiple officers and rebels dead, Iranian aircraft attacked PJAK outposts in Iraq.

Freedom of movement is routinely restricted in Iran. Political activists are often banned from leaving the country after completing prison sentences or being released on suspended sentences. Security services have been known to confiscate passports or interrogate travelers on their return from conferences abroad. Shirin Ebadi, whose Nobel Peace Prize was confiscated in November 2009, was in Spain at the time of the election and did not return to Iran for the rest of the year, although it is unclear whether this was by choice.

Women are widely educated; a majority of university students are female, and 94 percent of secondary-school-aged girls attend school, compared with only 80 percent of boys. Women currently hold seats in the parliament, though they are routinely excluded from running for higher offices. In a sign of female voters' growing political influence, the 2009 presidential candidates addressed issues that concerned women in the weeks preceding the election. Twice-elected parliament member Marzieh Vahid-Dastjerdi became Iran's first female cabinet minister in September 2009, when she was appointed to head the Health Ministry. However, female judges may not issue final verdicts, and a woman cannot obtain a passport without the permission of her husband or a male relative. Women do not enjoy equal rights under Sharia-based statutes governing divorce, inheritance, and child custody, although some of these inequalities are accompanied by greater familial and financial obligations for men. A woman's testimony in court is given only half the weight of a man's, and the monetary damages awarded to a female victim's family upon her death is half that owed to the family of a male victim. Women must conform to strict dress codes and are segregated from men in some public places, and there has been a crackdown in recent years on women deemed to be dressed immodestly. In February 2009, Alieh Eghdam Doust became the first women's rights defender in Iran to have her prison sentence implemented. She is now serving a three-year sentence for participating in a peaceful protest in 2006.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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