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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2021 - Iran

NOT FREE

16

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 6 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 10 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

17 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

The Islamic Republic of Iran holds elections regularly, but they fall short of democratic standards due in part to the influence of the hard-line Guardian Council, an unelected body that disqualifies all candidates it deems 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. These institutions, including the security forces and the judiciary, play a major role in the suppression of dissent and other restrictions on civil liberties.

Key Developments in 2020

- Iran struggled during the year to contain one of the worst outbreaks of COVID-19 in the Middle East, and the authorities used censorship and criminal prosecutions to suppress independent reporting on the true extent of the contagion.
- Hard-line politicians cemented their control over the parliament after several thousand candidates, including many reformists and independents, were prohibited from running in the February elections. The balloting, which drew record-low turnout, was held just days after the country's first coronavirus cases were officially confirmed, fueling suspicions that the authorities had delayed informing the public of the already surging outbreak in order to ensure smooth elections.
- The authorities continued to detain many political prisoners despite the threat from COVID-19 in places of incarceration, though prominent rights activist Narges Mohammadi was released in October amid concerns about her health. Executions of high-profile dissidents and antigovernment protesters also continued during the year.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

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 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 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.

The president, the second-highest-ranking official in the Islamic Republic, appoints a cabinet that must be confirmed by the parliament. He is elected by popular vote for up to two consecutive four-year terms. In the 2017 presidential election, only six men were allowed to run, out of some 1,600 candidates who had applied. All 137 women candidates were disqualified by the Guardian Council. The main challenger to incumbent president Hassan Rouhani, a self-proclaimed moderate, was hard-line cleric Ebrahim Raisi. In the run-up to the election, the authorities intensified their crackdown on the media, arresting several journalists and administrators of reformist channels on Telegram, the popular messaging application. However, Rouhani's victory, with 57 percent of the vote amid roughly 70 percent turnout, appeared to reflect the choice of the electorate among the available candidates.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

Members of the 290-seat parliament are elected to four-year terms. Elections for the body were held in February 2020, with most seats going to hard-liners and conservatives loyal to the supreme leader. Ahead of the vote, the Guardian Council disqualified more than 9,000 of the 16,000 people who had registered to run, including large numbers of reformist and moderate candidates. Voter turnout, the lowest for parliamentary elections in the history of the Islamic Republic at 42.6 percent, was likely depressed by factors including the mass disqualifications and the announcement of the first coronavirus cases just two days before the balloting. The outbreak was believed to have begun weeks earlier, raising suspicions that the authorities delayed disclosing it for political reasons; Khamenei denounced foreign "propaganda" for supposedly exaggerating the health threat to frighten voters.

Elections for the Assembly of Experts, a group of 86 clerics chosen by popular vote to serve eight-year terms, were last held in 2016. Only 20 percent of the would-be candidates were approved to run, a record low. A majority of the new assembly ultimately chose hard-line cleric Ahmad Jannati, head of the Guardian Council, as the body's chairman.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 1 / 4

The electoral system in Iran does not meet international democratic standards. The Guardian Council, controlled by hard-line conservatives and ultimately by the supreme leader, vets all candidates for the parliament, the presidency, and the Assembly of Experts. The council typically rejects 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.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 0 / 4

Only political parties and factions loyal to the establishment and to the state ideology are permitted to operate. Reformist groups have come under increased state repression, especially since 2009, and affiliated politicians are subject to arbitrary detention and imprisonment on vague criminal charges. In August 2020, six reformist political activists were sentenced to one year in prison for their criticism of the crackdown on antigovernment protesters in November 2019.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 1 / 4

While there is some space for shifts in power between approved factions within the establishment, the unelected components of the constitutional system represent a permanent barrier to opposition electoral victories and genuine rotations of power.

Top opposition leaders face restrictions on their movement and access to the media. Mir Hossein Mousavi, Zahra Rahnnavard, and Mehdi Karroubi—leaders of the reformist Green Movement, whose protests were violently suppressed following the disputed 2009 presidential election—have been under house arrest without formal charges since 2011. Reformist former president Mohammad Khatami is the subject of a media ban that prohibits the press from mentioning him and publishing his photos. Former hard-line president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who fell out of favor for challenging Khamenei, was barred from running in the 2017 presidential election.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 0 / 4

The choices of both voters and politicians are heavily influenced and ultimately circumscribed by Iran's unelected state institutions and ruling clerical establishment.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, 1 / and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4

Men from the Shiite Muslim majority population dominate the political system. Women remain significantly underrepresented in politics and government. In 2017, Rouhani appointed two women among his several vice presidents but failed to name any women as cabinet ministers. No women candidates have ever been allowed to run for president.

Five seats in the parliament are reserved for recognized non-Muslim minority groups: Jews, Armenian Christians, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, and Zoroastrians. However, members of non-Persian ethnic minorities and especially non-Shiite religious minorities are rarely awarded senior government posts, and their political representation remains weak.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives 1 / determine the policies of the government? 4

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.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 0 / 4

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 Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and bonyads (endowed foundations), are above scrutiny in practice, and restrictions on the media and civil society activists prevent them from serving as independent watchdogs to ensure transparency and accountability.

In 2019, the judiciary launched a crackdown on corruption amid accusations that the effort was politically motivated. The initiative continued in 2020 and included high-profile prosecutions of former politicians and court officials.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 0 / 4

The transparency of Iran's governing system is extremely limited in practice, and powerful elements of the state and society are not accountable to the public. A 2009 access to information law, for which implementing regulations were finally adopted in 2015, grants broadly worded exemptions allowing the protection of information whose disclosure would conflict with state interests, cause financial loss, or harm public security, among other stipulations.

The ruling establishment actively suppressed or manipulated information on a number of important topics during 2020. In January, for example, a Ukrainian passenger jet was shot down near Tehran, killing all 176 people on board, many of whom were Canadian citizens. After initially denying reports that one of its missiles had destroyed the airliner, the IRGC admitted days later that its personnel had targeted the plane after mistaking it for an incoming missile amid heightened tensions with the United States following the US assassination of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's elite Quds force, in neighboring Iraq. A Canadian government report subsequently criticized Iran for what it called a secretive investigation of the incident, and no senior official was known to have resigned or been punished. Meanwhile, as of May authorities had sentenced at least 13 people to prison terms for protesting the disaster and criticizing the initial denial of responsibility.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the authorities engaged in increased censorship to conceal its actual extent. Journalists were reportedly told to use only official statistics, while hospital workers were allegedly warned not to discuss the number of infections and fatalities with the media. Official data leaked to foreign media in August suggested that the true death toll was nearly three times higher than what the government publicly claimed. In addition to censorship, some officials promoted disinformation and conspiracy theories, warning that the virus could be a US biological weapon.

A year after the violent crackdown on antigovernment protests in November 2019, authorities continued to intimidate the families of victims and obstruct efforts to clarify the number of protesters killed.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 due to the government's restriction of information on a series of major events, including mass protests and a related crackdown in late 2019, the military's accidental destruction of a civilian airliner in January 2020, and the spread of COVID-19.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

Media freedom is 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.

Newspapers and magazines face censorship and warnings from authorities about which topics to cover and how. Tens of thousands of foreign-based websites are filtered, including news sites and major social media services. Satellite dishes are banned, and Persian-language broadcasts from outside the country are regularly jammed. Police periodically raid private homes and confiscate satellite dishes. Iranian authorities have pressured journalists working for Persian-language media outside the country by summoning and threatening their families in Iran.

In 2020, the government stepped up censorship and harassment of journalists in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of journalists were summoned by authorities after reporting information that contradicted official statements about the health crisis. In late March, a public health task force temporarily suspended all newspaper printing, delivery, and distribution, citing the need to reduce the spread of the virus. Two journalists with a semiofficial news agency were detained in April after a cartoon posted on one of the outlet's social media accounts suggested that Khamenei supported fake treatments to ward off the coronavirus. The cartoon was deleted minutes after it was posted. The business daily *Jahan Sanaat* was temporarily suspended in August after it reported the comments of an epidemiologist on the task force who suggested that the real numbers of infections and deaths could be up to 20 times higher than what was officially reported.

The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that at least 15 journalists were imprisoned in Iran as of December 2020. Among those sentenced during the year was award-winning journalist Mohammad Mosaed, who in August received a term of four years and nine months in prison followed by a two-year ban on journalistic activity; he had been arrested for his coverage of the November 2019 crackdown on protests and of the coronavirus pandemic. In December, authorities executed exile journalist Rouhollah Zam, the editor of the Amad News channel on the Telegram messaging application; a resident of France, he was abducted while in Iraq in 2019 and taken to Iran, where he was accused of stirring violence during 2017 antigovernment protests.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public 0 / 4 and private?

Iran is home to a majority Shiite Muslim population and Sunni Muslim, Baha'i, Christian, and Zoroastrian minorities. The constitution recognizes only Zoroastrians, Jews, and certain Christian communities as non-Muslim religious minorities, and these small groups 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.

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 its places of worship and the jailing of some of its members.

The government also subjects some non-Muslim minorities to repressive policies and discrimination, including Baha'is and unrecognized Christian groups. Baha'is are systematically persecuted, sentenced to prison, and banned from access to higher education. Among other acts of repression during 2020, security forces raided the homes of dozens of Baha'is in cities across the country in November, seizing religious books and other material.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political 1 / 4 indoctrination?

Academic freedom remains limited in Iran, and universities have experienced harsh repression since 2009. Khamenei has warned that universities should not be turned into centers for political activities. Students have been prevented from continuing their studies for political reasons or because they belong to the Baha'i community.

Foreign scholars visiting Iran are vulnerable to detention on trumped-up charges. In October 2020, authorities temporarily released Iranian-French anthropologist Fariba Adelkhah, who had been arrested in June 2019 and sentenced in May to five years in prison for alleged offenses against national security. In November, Kylie Moore-Gilbert, a British-Australian researcher detained in 2018 and accused of spying for Israel, was released in exchange for the release of three Iranians jailed abroad. Iranian-Swedish physician and academic Ahmadreza Djalali was reportedly at risk of execution during the year, having been arrested in 2016 and sentenced to death for alleged espionage.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics 1 / without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4

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. Despite the risks and limitations, many do express dissent on social media, in some cases circumventing official blocks on certain platforms.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

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 addition to thousands of arrests, hundreds of people were killed and thousands were injured in the protests that erupted in mid-November 2019. Estimates of the death toll ranged from more than 300 to 1,500. A temporary internet shutdown imposed by authorities suppressed communication about the demonstrations, but videos that showed security forces firing directly at protesters still emerged. Rallies were organized in support of the regime later in November, and they received live coverage from state media. Ahead of the one-year anniversary of the protests, authorities pressured the families of some victims to remain silent and warned them not to hold public memorials for their loved ones.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged 0 / in human rights- and governance-related work? 4

Nongovernmental organizations that seek to address human rights violations are generally suppressed by the state. For example, the Center for Human Rights Defenders remains closed, with several of its members in jail. Even groups that focus on more apolitical issues are subject to crackdowns. In June 2020, the founder of the Imam Ali Popular Students Relief Society, an influential charity dedicated to helping the poor and victims of natural disasters, was arrested along with two of his aides on unknown charges. In 2019, six environmental activists who had been detained in a larger wave of arrests in 2018 were sentenced to between six and 10 years in prison based on dubious charges of collaboration with the United States.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

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, with key leaders and activists sentenced to prison on national security charges. Workers who engage in strikes are vulnerable to dismissal and arrest. Several detained labor activists received heavy prison terms of 14 years or more during 2019. One prominent figure, Sepideh Gholian, was released on bail that year but returned to prison in June 2020 after she refused to ask the supreme leader for clemency.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

While the courts have a degree of autonomy within the ruling establishment, the judicial system is regularly used as a tool to silence regime critics and opposition members. The head of the judiciary is appointed by the supreme leader for renewable five-year terms; Ebrahim Raisi was named to the post in 2019. Political dissidents and advocates of human and labor rights have continued to face arbitrary judgments, and the security apparatus's influence over the courts has reportedly grown in recent years.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

The authorities routinely violate basic due process standards, particularly in politically sensitive cases. Activists are 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. Lawyers who take up the cases of dissidents have been jailed and banned from practicing, and a number have been forced to leave the country to escape prosecution. In 2019, prominent human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh was reportedly sentenced to an additional 33 years in prison and 148 lashes for her activities; she had been in prison serving a five-year sentence since mid-2018. In October 2020, she was temporarily released amid concerns about her health following a hunger strike.

Dual nationals and those with connections abroad have also faced arbitrary detention, trumped-up charges, and denial of due process rights in recent years. Several such individuals remained behind bars in 2020.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

Former detainees have reported being beaten during arrest and subjected to torture until they confess to crimes dictated by their interrogators. Some crimes can be formally punished with lashes in addition to imprisonment or fines. Prisons are overcrowded, and prisoners often complain of poor detention conditions, including denial of medical care. Political prisoners have repeatedly engaged in hunger strikes in recent years to protest mistreatment in custody. In 2020, authorities temporarily released tens of thousands of prisoners to prevent the spread of COVID-19 behind bars. Very few political prisoners were reportedly among those granted leave, though prominent rights activist Narges Mohammadi was released in October after her sentence was reduced amid concerns about her health; she had first been arrested in 2015. The number of coronavirus infections in prisons was allegedly larger than acknowledged by authorities.

Iran has generally been second only to China in the number of executions it carries out, putting hundreds of people to death each year. Convicts can be executed for offenses other than murder, such as drug trafficking, and for crimes they committed when they were younger than 18 years old. Legislation enacted in 2017 significantly increased the quantity of illegal drugs required for a drug-related crime to incur the death penalty, prompting sentence reviews for thousands of death-row inmates. In September 2020, wrestler Navid Afkari was executed for allegedly murdering a state employee during 2018 antiestablishment protests; a global campaign had called for a fair retrial, as Afkari had reportedly confessed under torture and was subjected to a closed trial. Separately, the death sentences of three young men arrested in connection with the November 2019 protests were suspended in July 2020 following a social media campaign on their behalf; a retrial was pending at year's end.

The country faces a long-term security threat from terrorist and insurgent groups that recruit from disadvantaged Kurdish, Arab, and Sunni Muslim minority populations.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4

Women do not receive equal treatment under the law and face widespread discrimination in practice. For example, a woman's testimony in court is given 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.

A majority of the population is of Persian ethnicity, and ethnic minorities experience various forms of discrimination, including restrictions on the use of their languages. Some provinces with large non-Persian populations remain underdeveloped. Activists campaigning for the rights of ethnic minority groups and greater autonomy for their respective regions have come under pressure from the authorities, and some have been jailed.

Members of the LGBT+ community face harassment and discrimination, though the problem is underreported due to the criminalized and hidden nature of these groups in Iran. 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.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 1 / 4

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

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 1 / 4

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, limiting fair competition and opportunities for entrepreneurs, and bribery is said to be widespread in the business environment, including for registration and obtaining licenses. Women are denied equal rights in inheritance matters.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4

Social freedoms are restricted in Iran. All residents, but particularly women, are subject to obligatory rules on dress and personal appearance, and those who are deemed to have violated the rules face state harassment, fines, and arrest.

Police conduct raids on private gatherings that breach rules against alcohol consumption and the mixing of unrelated men and women. Those attending can be detained and fined or sentenced to corporal punishment in the form of lashes.

Women do not enjoy equal rights in divorce and child custody disputes. In 2019, the Guardian Council approved a legal amendment that would enable Iranian women married to foreign men to request Iranian citizenship for their children.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

The government provides no protection to women and children forced into sex trafficking, and both Iranians and migrant workers from countries like Afghanistan are subject to forced labor and debt bondage. The IRGC has allegedly used coercive tactics to recruit thousands of Afghan migrants living in Iran to fight in Syria. Human Rights Watch has reported that children as young as 14 are among those recruited.

The population faces widespread economic hardship driven by a combination of US-led trade sanctions and mismanagement by the regime. The crisis has resulted in the rapid devaluation of the national currency and soaring prices for many basic goods. The United States continued to impose new sanctions during 2020 despite international concern that they could hinder Iran's ability to secure supplies of food and drugs as it struggled with the coronavirus. Some Iranian officials blamed the country's poor handling of the pandemic on the effects of the sanctions.

ecoi.net summary:

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