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World Report 2022 - Iran

Iranian authorities continued their crackdown on peaceful dissent, prosecuting human rights defenders and dissidents while serious human rights violators enjoyed impunity.

Ebrahim Raeesi, who became president in unfree and unfair elections in June, previously oversaw the country's abusive judiciary and is accused of overseeing the mass extrajudicial execution of political prisoners in 1988.

Deteriorating economic conditions due to US unilateral sanctions and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic have increased poverty and reduced living standards for millions in Iran. The government's response to the pandemic, especially its mismanaged national vaccine procurement plan, has been criticized for its opacity and politicization.

Freedom of Assembly and Expression, Right to Participate in the Conduct of Public Affairs

Iranian authorities severely restricted freedoms of assembly and expression. Over the past three years, security forces have responded to widespread protests stemming from economic rights issues with excessive and unlawful force, including lethal force, and arrested thousands of protestors.

On February 16, authorities arrested photojournalist Noushin Jafari and transferred her to Qarchak prison to serve a revolutionary court sentence for charges of "spreading propaganda against the state" and "insulting the sanctities." Journalists and media activists currently in prison include Keyvan Samimi and Aliyeh Matlabzadeh, the chair and co-chair of the local nongovernmental organization (NGO) the *Society for Defending Press Freedom*. Both have been sentenced to imprisonment for their peaceful activism.

On February 22, according to the Baluchi Activists Campaign, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) blocked the road residents used to transport fuel to Pakistan at the Eskin border area in the town of Saravan, in Sistan and Baluchistan province. The security forces then apparently opened fire at those attempting to open the road, killing at least 10 people.

On June 19, Ebrahim Raeesi, former head of Iran's judiciary, became president after unfree and unfair elections. In the period before the election, the Guardian Council, a body of 12 male religious jurists and legal experts tasked with vetting elections, disqualified many candidates without providing a reason, including several prominent government officials. Raeesi, who has had a career for over three decades in the judiciary, reportedly served on a committee that decided the fate of prisoners in 1988, when the Iranian government summarily and extrajudicially executed thousands of political prisoners held in Iranian jails, in what amounted to crimes against humanity.

On July 15, people in dozens of towns and cities in Khuzestan and Lorestan provinces, which have a large ethnic Arab minority population, took to the streets for several nights to protest not having clean water for days. Human rights groups have verified the identities of at least nine people who were shot dead or died of injuries during the protests, including a 17-year-old boy. Videos shared on social media from protests in cities in Khuzestan show security officials shooting firearms and tear gas toward protesters.

Iran's parliament has been working on a draft bill that seeks to impose further restrictions on internet access for people in Iran. The bill includes a provision requiring international technology companies to have a legal representative in Iran to comply with Iranian law and cooperate with authorities. Iranian authorities have long surveilled users and prosecuted them for views they expressed online and censored online spaces. The bill also seeks to criminalize production and distribution of censorship circumvention tools (VPNs) commonly used in Iran to access a wide range of websites that are blocked by authorities.

Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society Activists

Scores of human rights defenders remain behind bars while authorities continue to harass, arrest, and prosecute those seeking accountability and justice, including human rights lawyers Nasrin Sotoudeh, Mohamad Najafi, and Amirsalar Davoudi.

On August 14, Iranian authorities arrested six prominent human rights lawyers and activists working on filing a complaint against Iranian authorities for their abject mismanagement of the Covid-19 crisis. As of November 8, they continued to detain three of them: Arash Keykhosravi, Mostafa Nili, and Mehdi Mahmoudian. Mahmoudian's lawyer said that authorities are implementing a four-year prison sentence his client previously received for his human rights activism.

On September 26, prominent human rights defender Narges Mohammadi announced that authorities summoned her to serve a 30-month prison sentence for charges including "signing a letter opposing the death penalty," "staging a sit-in at the prison office," "refusing order (to end the sit in)," and "property damage." Authorities previously released Mohammadi on October 5, 2020, after she served five years in prison for her rights activism.

Since the IRGC's downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 in January 2020 that killed 176 people, authorities have harassed the families of victims and restricted their rights to seek truth and justice.

In July, an Iranian court [sentenced](#) Manoucher Bakhtiari, the father of Pouya Bakhtiari, 27, who was fatally shot during the crackdown on protesters in November 2019, to three and a half years in prison and two and a half years in internal exile to a remote area on unclear charges.

Seven members of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, a local NGO focused on preserving biodiversity, [remained behind bars](#) on the charge of "collaborating with the hostile state of the US." Iranian authorities have failed to produce any evidence to support their charges nor have they investigated allegations of torture against them.

Right to Life and Executions

Iran continues to be one of the world's leading implementers of the death penalty. According to rights groups, in 2021 Iran had executed at least 254 people as of November 8, including at least seven people on alleged terrorism-related charges.

The judiciary also executed at least one individual sentenced to death for crimes they allegedly committed as a child. Under Iran's current penal code, judges can use their discretion not to sentence to death individuals who committed their alleged crime as children. However, several individuals who were retried under the penal code for crimes they allegedly committed as children have then been sentenced to death again.

Iranian law considers acts such as "insulting the prophet," "apostasy," same-sex relations, adultery, drinking alcohol, and certain non-violent drug-related offenses as crimes punishable by death. The law also prescribes the inhumane punishment of flogging for more than 100 offenses, including "disrupting public order," a charge that has been used to sentence individuals to flogging for their participation in protests.

More than two years after a brutal crackdown against widespread protests in November 2019, authorities have failed to conduct any transparent investigation into the use of excessive and unlawful force against protestors.

Iranian authorities' criminal investigation into the January 2020 shooting down of the Ukrainian plane has been handled by the judicial organization of the armed forces and remains shrouded in secrecy, with families of victims receiving very few details. On August 31, the association of families of flight PS752 said that they received a government notification that the military prosecutor's office had indicted 10 officials, ranging from a commander of a Tor M1 air defense missile system to operators deemed "worthy of punishment" for charges that include participating in unintentional murder, negligence, imprudence, and not following the protocol.

Covid-19 Vaccine Access

Authorities' prohibition on procuring US and UK-produced vaccines, lack of transparency, and mismanagement exacerbated the already devastating impact of Covid-19 in Iran, with an official death toll at 127,299 as of November 8.

In January, Ayatollah Khamenei placed a ban on the import of US and UK-produced vaccines. It appeared that authorities also sought to prioritize domestic production but fell behind in delivering promised quotas. Faced with widespread criticism, authorities have said that the ban has been

reversed. The pace of national vaccination has picked up since mid-August. According to official statistics, as of November 8, more than 46 percent of the population had received two doses of Covid-19 vaccines.

Due Process Rights, Fair Trial Standards, and Prison Conditions

Iranian courts, and particularly revolutionary courts, regularly fall far short of providing fair trials and use confessions likely obtained under torture as evidence in court. Authorities have failed to meaningfully investigate numerous allegations of torture against detainees. Authorities routinely restrict detainees' access to legal counsel, particularly during the initial investigation period.

The IRGC's Intelligence Organization continues to arrest Iranian dual and foreign nationals on vague charges, such as "cooperating with a hostile state."

There have been numerous reports of suspicious deaths in Iranian prisons, which authorities have failed to properly investigate. According to Amnesty International, in 2010 at least 72 people had died in custody in Iranian prisons, while authorities have failed to provide accountability despite credible reports of torture and ill-treatment. Moreover, over the past year, there have been at least two reported deaths of prisoners, with families alleging that delayed or improper medical care contributed to their deaths. In many cases, Iranian authorities have restricted access of prisoners to medical care, particularly outside prison.

On March 1, a group of formerly imprisoned political activists and human rights defenders filed a complaint against the authorities use of prolonged solitary confinement in Iranian prisons, particularly for vaguely defined national security crimes.

Women's Rights, Children's Rights, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity

Women face discrimination in personal status matters related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and decisions relating to children. Under the Passports Law, a married woman may not obtain a passport or travel outside the country without the written permission of her husband who can revoke such permission at any time. Under the civil code, a husband is accorded the right to choose the place of living and can prevent his wife from having certain occupations if he deems them against "family values." Iranian law allows girls to marry at 13 and boys at age 15, as well as at younger ages if authorized by a judge.

At least five activists are currently behind bars for their peaceful protests against compulsory hijab laws.

While cases of femicide are increasingly reported in media and social media, Iran has no law on domestic violence to prevent abuse and protect survivors. On January 3, the cabinet approved the draft bill on violence against women. While a step forward in providing legal definitions surrounding violence against women and measures to support victims, the bill lacks provisions for criminalizing marital rape and child marriage. With the change in the administration, it is unclear whether the bill will be introduced to parliament for a vote.

Iran's criminal law exempts parents and guardians from penalty for inflicting corporal punishment "within the customary limit."

On November 1, the Guardian Council passed the "rejuvenation of the population and support of family" bill that offers numerous incentives for childbearing and seeks to further limit access to contraception and abortion.

The draft bill outlaws voluntary sterilization and free distribution of contraceptives in the public health care system unless pregnancy threatens the woman's health. The draft law also mandates the Health Ministry to establish a committee that includes doctors, Islamic jurists, and representatives of the judiciary and the parliamentary health committee to draft new bylaws for abortion that could lead to further restrictions on access to abortion.

Under the current law, abortion can be legally performed during the first four months of pregnancy if three doctors agree that the pregnancy threatens a woman's life or the fetus has severe physical or mental deformities that would create "extreme hardship" for the mother. In October, a letter, issued by the crime prevention deputy at the judiciary in Iran's Mazandaran province, was leaked on Twitter mandating local laboratories to report on women with positive pregnancy tests to prevent "criminal abortions."

Under Iranian law, extramarital sex is criminalized with flogging if unmarried or death if married, impacting women in particular as pregnancy serves as evidence of sexual relations and women who report sexual violence can find themselves prosecuted if authorities believe it to be consensual.

Same-sex conduct is also punishable by flogging and, for men, the death penalty. Although Iran permits and subsidizes sex reassignment surgery for transgender people, no law prohibits discrimination against them.

Treatment of Minorities, Refugees, and Migrants

Iranian law denies freedom of religion to Baha'is and discriminates against them. Authorities continue to arrest and prosecute members of the Baha'i faith on vague national security charges and to close businesses owned by them. Iranian authorities also systematically refuse to allow Baha'is to register at public universities because of their faith.

The government also discriminates against other religious minorities, including Sunni Muslims, and restricts cultural and political activities among the country's Azeri, Kurdish, Arab, and Baluch ethnic minorities. Minority activists are regularly arrested and prosecuted on vaguely defined national security charges in trials that grossly fall short of international standards.

It appears that over the past year, authorities have increased the crackdown against Kurdish political activists. On September 9, IRGC forces launched missile attacks against the bases of Kurdish opposition forces (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran or KDPI) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Iran hosts a long-staying population of about 780,000 registered Afghan refugees and another estimated 850,000 undocumented Afghans. In mid-August, the government set up [three temporary tent camps](#) for refugees fleeing Afghanistan, but its border remained closed to most Afghan asylum seekers, as entry was limited to people with valid passports and visas. During September, about 2,000 Afghans per day were estimated to enter Iran irregularly, but a comparable number of Afghans were deported from Iran.

Right to Water and Impact of Climate Change

As one of the world's top 10 emitters of greenhouse gases, Iran is contributing to the climate crisis taking a mounting toll on human rights around the globe. Most of its emissions are from the energy sector: 94 percent of Iran's electricity comes from fossil fuels. Iran is the eighth largest producer of crude oil and the third largest producer of natural gas but also has significant renewable energy potential. Energy costs are heavily subsidized, one of the factors leading to a high energy intensity per capita. Iran has taken few steps to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, regularly citing international sanctions as a barrier to transitioning towards cleaner energy. Iran is one of six countries that has not yet ratified the Paris Agreement.

There are longstanding concerns across Iran, and Khuzestan in particular, over mismanagement of water resources and pollution from oil development. For decades, environmental experts [have warned](#) that development projects in oil-rich Khuzestan, including the construction of hydroelectric dams, irrigation schemes, and water transfers to neighboring provinces are causing environmental harm and leading to water shortages affecting a range of rights.

Climate change is a serious threat to Iranian livelihoods including from increased temperatures, more frequent and intense forest fires, dust storms, inland flooding, and sea level rise. In 2021, droughts exacerbated long-standing pressures on water resources. The increasing frequency and intensity of droughts is projected to continue, diminishing agricultural productivity compromising food security.

Key International Actors

While several rounds of indirect negotiations have taken place between Iran and the US for a return to compliance with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the US has maintained its broad sectoral economic and financial sanctions on Iran. Although the US government has built exemptions for humanitarian imports into its sanctions regime, Human Rights Watch found that in practice US and European companies and banks continue to refrain from exporting or financing exempted humanitarian goods and services for fear of legal action and sanctions from the US government.

On June 17, the US Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued an additional general license that expanded an existing humanitarian exemption to transactions and activities involving the delivery of face masks, ventilators and oxygen tanks, vaccines and the production of vaccines, Covid-19 tests, air filtration systems, and Covid-19-related field hospitals, among others.

On July 27, Swedish prosecutors announced their decision to prosecute an Iranian citizen for "committing grave war crimes and murder in Iran during 1988." The trial opened on August 10 and is expected to last through April 2022.

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