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Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2015 - Iran

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic republic with a Shia Islamic political system based on “velayat-e faqih” (“guardianship of the jurist” or “rule by the jurisprudent”). Shia clergy, most notably the “supreme jurisprudent” (or supreme leader), and political leaders vetted by the clergy dominated key power structures. While mechanisms for popular election existed within the structure of the state, the supreme leader held significant influence over the legislative and executive branches of government (through various unelected councils under his authority) and held constitutional authority over the judiciary, the government-run media, and the armed forces. The supreme leader also indirectly controlled the internal security forces and other key institutions. Since 1989 the supreme leader has been Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In 2013 voters elected Hassan Rouhani president. Despite high popular participation following open debates, candidate vetting by unelected bodies based on arbitrary criteria and restrictions on the media limited the freedom and fairness of the election. In the last parliamentary elections in 2012, the government controlled candidate vetting and media reporting. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

The most significant human rights problems were severe restrictions on civil liberties, including the freedoms of assembly, association, speech (including via the internet), religion, and press; limitations on citizens’ ability to choose the government peacefully through free and fair elections; and abuse of due process combined with escalating use of capital punishment for crimes that do not meet the threshold of most serious crime or are committed by juvenile offenders.

Other reported human rights problems included disregard for the physical integrity of persons, whom authorities arbitrarily and unlawfully detained, tortured, or killed; disappearances; cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, including judicially sanctioned amputation and flogging; politically motivated violence and repression; harsh and life-threatening conditions in detention and prison facilities, with instances of deaths in custody; arbitrary arrest and lengthy pretrial detention, sometimes incommunicado; continued impunity of the security forces; denial of fair public trial, sometimes resulting in executions without due process; the lack of an independent judiciary; political prisoners and detainees; ineffective implementation of civil judicial procedures and remedies; arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home, and correspondence; harassment and arrest of journalists; censorship and media content restrictions; severe restrictions on academic freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement; official corruption and lack of government transparency; constraints on investigations by international and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) into alleged violations of human rights; legal and societal discrimination and violence against women, ethnic and religious minorities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons based on perceived sexual orientation and gender identity; incitement to anti-Semitism; trafficking in persons; and severe restrictions on the exercise of labor rights.

The government took few steps to investigate, prosecute, punish, or otherwise hold accountable officials, whether in the security services or elsewhere in the government, who committed abuses. Impunity remained pervasive throughout all levels of the government and security forces.

Note: This report draws heavily on non-U.S. government sources. The United States does not have an embassy in Iran.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

The government and its agents reportedly committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including, most commonly, by execution after arrest and trial without due process, or for crimes that do not meet the threshold of most serious crimes. The government made few and limited attempts to investigate allegations of deaths that occurred after or during reported torture or other physical abuse or after denying detainees medical treatment. Members of ethnic minority communities were disproportionately victims of such abuses.

There were numerous reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. The government executed 964 persons during the year, according to the NGO Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC), which reported that many trials did not adhere to basic principles of due process. This included four individuals charged with crimes committed while under 18. The government officially announced 362 executions but for many did not release further information, such as the dates of executions, the names of those executed, or the crimes for which they were executed.

The law provides for the death penalty for murder, as well as “attempts against the security of the state,” “outrage against high-ranking officials,” “enmity towards God” (“moharebeh”), “corruption on earth” (“fisd fil-arz”), rape, adultery, drug possession and trafficking, recidivist alcohol use, consensual same-sex sexual activity, and “insults against the memory of Imam Khomeini and against the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic.” Prosecutors frequently used “enmity towards God” as a criminal charge against political dissidents and journalists, accusing them of struggling against the precepts of Islam and against the state that upholds those precepts. On February 20, the government executed six Iranian Kurds, including political activists Ali and Habib Afshari, for “enmity towards God” and “corruption on earth,” and did not permit their families to bury them or hold funerals. Saman Naseem, arrested but not executed with the group, was 17 at the time and appealed his death sentence.

The law does not stipulate the death penalty for apostasy or heresy, but courts handed down capital punishments for similar charges. In August a court sentenced Mohammad Ali Taheri, spiritual leader of the Islamic offshoot group Irfan e Halghe, to death for “corruption on earth,” after he had served most of his previous five-year sentence for “insulting the sanctities.” On December 21, the Supreme Court annulled the death penalty sentence and returned the case to the lower court for retrial. Authorities have imprisoned Taheri since 2011, and he remained in prison at year’s end pending new action by the lower court.

In his October 27 report to the UN General Assembly, Ahmed Shaheed, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, reported that the penal code retained the death penalty for consensual same-sex sexual activity although authorities reportedly had not carried out any executions during the year.

Authorities carried out many executions in public; according to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, observers confirmed at least 33 of the more than 900 executions during the year as conducted publicly. NGO reports suggested that the actual figure was significantly higher.

There were also deaths in custody. Multiple NGOs, including Iran Human Rights, reported on the September 14 death of labor activist Shahrokh Zamani at Rajai Shahr Prison. Zamani was serving an 11-year sentence for attempting to form a painters’ labor union. His body allegedly showed signs of bruising, although it is unknown whether they were the result of torture.

In his October 6 report, the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran noted that the updated penal code allowed for the execution of juvenile offenders starting at age nine for girls and age 13 for boys. According to Amnesty International (AI), the government executed at least four juvenile offenders during the year, including Javad Saberi, Vazir Amroddin, Samad Zahabi, and Fatemeh Salbehi; authorities resented two others, Sajad Sanjari and Hamid Ahmadi, to death for crimes committed when they were under 18 years of age.

Adultery remained punishable by death by stoning. In December a court sentenced a woman referred to as "A.Kh." to death by stoning for alleged complicity in the murder of her husband, according to multiple media and NGO reports. The sentence was not carried out by year's end. There were no confirmed reports of death by stoning during the year.

In an August 7 report, Christophe Heyns, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, expressed concern over the large number (approximately 1,200) of Afghans facing the death penalty for drug-related crimes in the country.

Impunity for past unlawful killings continued. On August 19, a judge acquitted former prosecutor general Saeed Mortazavi on charges of killing three detained protestors after their arrests during the 2009 election protests. According to multiple human rights groups and local media, a parliamentary committee in 2010 found Mortazavi responsible for the deaths of three protestors at Kahrizak Prison. The court acquitted Mortazavi of murder but sentenced him to six months in prison for embezzlement charges. Security forces re-arrested political prisoner Majid Moghadam, who testified against Mortazavi, in December 2014 and sentenced him in May to six years' imprisonment for "propaganda against the regime" and not fulfilling his mandatory military service. Authorities moved Moghadam into solitary confinement in Evin Prison when he went on a hunger strike.

There was an update in the case of blogger Soheil Arabi, who a court sentenced to death in November 2014 on charges of "insulting the prophet." A higher court commuted the death sentence to 90 days in prison, in addition to ordering him to read 13 religious books and participate in two years of theological study. Arabi was also serving a separate seven-year sentence for "insulting the supreme leader."

b. Disappearance

There were reports of politically motivated abductions during the year, all of which were attributed to government officials. The government made no effort to prevent or investigate such acts and meted out no punishment. Plainclothes officials often seized journalists and activists without warning, and government officials refused to acknowledge custody or provide information on them. In other cases authorities held persons incommunicado for lengthy periods before permitting them to contact family members.

Authorities reportedly detained information technology expert and blogger Arash Zad on August 1; no information was available on his whereabouts or whether charges were filed against him. According to Reporters without Borders, authorities also arrested internet activists Mahmud Moussavifar and Shayan Akbarpour on May 31; no information was available on their whereabouts or whether the government filed charges against them.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution prohibits all forms of torture "for the purpose of extracting confession or acquiring information," but there were credible reports that security forces and prison personnel tortured and abused detainees and prisoners. In his October report, the UN special rapporteur cited testimony from minority groups indicating the widespread use of physical and psychological abuse by authorities to secure confessions.

Commonly reported methods of torture and abuse in prisons included prolonged solitary confinement, threats of rape, forced virginity tests, sexual humiliation, threats of execution, sleep deprivation, electroshock, burnings, the use of pressure positions, and severe and repeated beatings. There were reports of severe overcrowding in many prisons and repeated denials of medical care for prisoners.

Some prison facilities, including Evin Prison in Tehran and Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj, were notorious for the use of cruel and prolonged torture of political opponents of the government, particularly Wards 209 and 2A of Evin Prison, which news organizations and human rights groups reported the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) controlled. Authorities also allegedly maintained unofficial secret prisons and detention centers outside the national prison system where abuse reportedly occurred.

In October imprisoned cartoonist and activist Atena Farghadani stated to AI that authorities forced her to undergo a virginity test after being charged with "non-adultery illegitimate relations" for shaking hands with her male lawyer. Farghadani was serving a 12-year sentence for "spreading propaganda," "insulting members of parliament," and "insulting the supreme leader." She went on a hunger strike to protest abuse by prison officials.

On December 30, according to Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), prison authorities at Rajai Shahr Prison placed several political prisoners, including activist Iraj Hatami, into criminal wards of the prison where authorities held nonpolitical prisoners, and forced the nonpolitical prisoners to beat the political prisoners as punishment for holding hunger strikes. The beatings reportedly severely injured Hatami.

Judicially sanctioned corporal punishment included flogging, blinding, and amputation, which the government defended as “punishment,” not torture. According to Reporters without Borders, on an unknown date in January or February, a court sentenced former journalist and current director of the Iranian History Society, Abbas Salimi Namin, to six months in prison and 74 public lashes for “insulting” former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and judicial officials in 2011. According to Iran Human Rights, authorities amputated the right hand and left foot of a prisoner identified by local authorities as “M.R.” on August 9 in Mashhad’s Vakilabad Prison for charges including “enmity against God,” armed robbery, and consuming alcohol and illegal drugs. In an October report, the UN special rapporteur documented two cases of forced blinding as “retribution in kind” for two men found guilty in acid attacks in March and January.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions reportedly were often harsh and life threatening. Prison authorities often refused medical treatment for injuries that prisoners reportedly suffered at the hands of abusers and for illness due to the poor sanitary conditions of prison life. According to the NGOs Justice for Iran and AI, Kurdish women’s activist Zeinab Jalalian, serving a life sentence for “enmity against God,” suffered from internal bleeding, intestinal infections, and eyesight problems stemming from torture and beatings during her detention. She was repeatedly denied medical treatment. Prisoner hunger strikes in protest of their treatment were common. Prisoners and their families often wrote letters to authorities and, in some cases, to UN bodies to highlight and protest their treatment. The UN special rapporteur reported that authorities sometimes subjected prisoners to threats after accusing them of contacting his office. Refugee detainees were held in separate facilities.

Physical Conditions: Based on government data, the University of Essex-affiliated International Center for Prison Studies estimated the country’s total prison population to be 225,624, which was significantly above the estimated capacity of 140,000. Approximately 25 percent of the population was composed of pretrial detainees, 3.5 percent were women, and 1 percent were minors. Overcrowding reportedly forced many prisoners to sleep on floors, in hallways, or in prison yards.

There were multiple reports of juvenile offenders detained with adult offenders. Authorities occasionally held pretrial detainees with convicted prisoners. Authorities held women separately from men and encouraged them to keep their infant children up to the age of 18 months with them in prison. According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, children often remained in prison with their mothers for longer than the 18-month limit, and there were reports of children being abused while in prison with their mothers.

Authorities often held political prisoners in separate prisons, wards, or in solitary confinement for long periods of time. Human rights activists and the international media also reported cases of political prisoners confined with accused and convicted violent criminals. Former prisoners reported that authorities often threatened political prisoners with the prospect of transfer to criminal wards, where attacks were likely. According to Reporters without Borders, on November 28, nonpolitical prisoners attacked with knives Said Madani and Said Razavi Faghih, two journalists imprisoned in Rajai Shahr Prison. Prison guards reportedly did not intervene to stop the attack.

There were reports of prisoner suicides. Multiple sources reported that on August 9, Ali Mohamedi, imprisoned since 2009 on espionage-related charges, committed suicide after several weeks of solitary confinement and a hunger strike to protest prison conditions.

Prison authorities routinely denied medical treatment to prisoners. During the year prison authorities continued to deny treatment at external facilities for Bahareh Hedayat, a women’s and students’ rights defender sentenced in 2010, who suffered from serious gynecological problems. There were NGO reports that prison medical staff routinely mixed a variety of medications into a common solution, which they distributed to inmates with little regard to individual medical conditions.

According to the online media outlet, IranWire, security officials routinely raided prison wards. During these raids guards beat both political and nonpolitical prisoners, performed nude body searches in front of other prisoners, and threatened prisoners’ families. In some instances according to HRANA, guards singled out political prisoners for harsher treatment.

Omid Kokabee, a postdoctoral student arrested in 2011 during a return visit to the country from his studies overseas and subsequently convicted on charges including “communicating with a hostile government,” continued to suffer from health problems including heart, kidney, stomach, and severe dental ailments. Although in October 2014 a Supreme Court decision rejected the legal basis of Kokabee’s prosecution and sentencing, Branch 54 of the Tehran Appeals Court subsequently reaffirmed his 10-year prison sentence, and he remained in prison until November 24, when prison authorities reportedly transferred him to a hospital to allow for treatment of deteriorating medical conditions.

Administration: Official public statistics on the prison population were limited. There were no reports on the adequacy of or of any steps to improve recordkeeping or whether the penal system employed prison ombudspersons to respond to complaints. Authorities sometimes used alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent offenders, including probation, house arrest, employment bans, religious rehabilitation study, exile from their province of residence, and foreign travel bans.

Prisoners generally had access to visitors weekly, but authorities often revoked this privilege along with telephone and other correspondence privileges. It was not known whether prisoners could practice religions other than Shia Islam while incarcerated, although some former prisoners reported witnessing Sunni inmates calling for and leading prayer. Prisoners were able to submit complaints to judicial authorities but often faced censorship and retribution for doing so. Authorities did not initiate credible investigations into allegations of inhuman conditions. Families of executed prisoners did not always receive notification of their deaths, and authorities frequently denied them the ability to perform funeral rights for the dead.

Independent Monitoring: The government did not permit independent monitoring of prison conditions.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

Although the constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, they occurred frequently during the year.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

Several agencies shared responsibility for law enforcement and maintaining order, including the Ministry of Intelligence and Security and law enforcement forces under the Interior Ministry, which report to the president, and the IRGC branch of the military, which reports directly to the supreme leader. The Basij, a volunteer paramilitary group with local organizations across the country, sometimes acted as an auxiliary law enforcement unit subordinate to IRGC ground forces. Basij units often engaged in repression of political opposition elements or intimidation of civilians accused of violating the country's strict moral code without formal guidance or supervision from superiors. The supreme leader holds ultimate authority over all security agencies.

The security forces were not considered fully effective in combating crime, and corruption and impunity remained problems. Human rights groups frequently accused regular and paramilitary security forces, such as the Basij, of committing numerous human rights abuses, including acts of violence against protesters and participants in public demonstrations. There was no transparent mechanism to investigate or punish security force abuses, and there were few reports of government actions to discipline abusers.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The constitution and penal code require a warrant or subpoena for an arrest and state that an arrested person should be informed of the charges against them within 24 hours. Authorities often violated these procedures by holding some detainees, at times incommunicado, for weeks or months without charge or trial and frequently denying them contact with family or timely access to legal representation. The law obligates the government to provide indigent defendants with attorneys only for certain types of crimes. The courts set prohibitively high bail, even for lesser crimes, and in many cases courts did not set bail. Authorities often compelled detainees and their families to submit property deeds to post bail. Persons released on bail did not always know how long their property would be retained, whether it would be confiscated under this separate action, or when their trials would be held. This uncertainty effectively silenced them due to fear of losing their families' property.

The government placed persons under house arrest without due process to restrict their movement and communication. At year's end former presidential candidates Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, as well as Mousavi's wife Zahra Rahnavard, remained under house arrest imposed in 2011 without formal charges. Security forces restricted their access to visitors and limited their access to information. Both Karroubi and Mousavi reportedly suffered from serious health problems during the year and were sometimes denied adequate medical care, according to the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHR).

Arbitrary Arrest: Authorities commonly used arbitrary arrests to impede alleged antiregime activities. Plainclothes officers often arrived unannounced at homes or offices; arrested persons; conducted raids; and confiscated private documents, passports, computers, electronic media, and other personal items without warrants or other assurances of due process. Individuals often remained in detention facilities for long periods without charges or trials, and authorities sometimes prevented them from informing others of their whereabouts for several days. Authorities often denied detainees' access to legal counsel during this period and imposed travel bans on individuals if released pending trial.

Journalist Hossein Nouraninejad returned to prison on April 28 to serve a one-year sentence for "propaganda against the system," and "colluding against national security." Authorities arrested him in April 2014 after he

returned to the country from living abroad, and initially sentenced him to six years' imprisonment, which was reduced to one year following an appeal.

On November 16, authorities arrested prominent cartoonist Hadi Heidari in Tehran and continued to hold him without charges at year's end. Heidari was one of seven journalists arrested in November, including former Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance official Issa Sarkhiz.

Pretrial Detention: Pretrial detention was often arbitrarily lengthy, particularly in cases involving alleged violations of national security laws. Approximately a quarter of the prisoners held in government prison facilities were reportedly pretrial detainees. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), a judge may prolong detention at his discretion, and pretrial detention often lasted for months. Often authorities held pretrial detainees in custody with the general prison population.

According to an October 5 report by the Sufi news website *Majzooban Noor*, Omid Behroozi, a human rights lawyer held in pretrial detention from 2011 until his sentencing in 2013 to seven and one-half years in prison, suffered a head injury October 4 in Evin Prison after losing his balance following a 33-day hunger strike.

Amnesty: The supreme leader pardoned 900 prisoners for the Iranian new year (Nowruz); none were political prisoners, according to the ICHRI. On September 3, the supreme leader pardoned political prisoner Habibollah Latifi, whom authorities arrested in 2007 and sentenced to death for "corruption on earth." He commuted the death sentence, but Latifi remained in prison with an unspecified reduced sentence, according to HRANA.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides that the judiciary be "an independent power" that is "free from every kind of unhealthy relation and connection." The court system was subject to political influence, and judges were appointed "in accordance with religious criteria." The supreme leader appoints the head of the judiciary. The head of the judiciary, members of the Supreme Court, and the prosecutor general were clerics. International observers continued to criticize the lack of independence of the country's judicial system and judges, and maintained that trials disregarded international standards of fairness.

Trial Procedures

According to the constitution and criminal procedure code, a defendant has the right to a fair trial, to be presumed innocent until convicted, to have access to a lawyer of his or her choice, and to appeal convictions in most cases that involve major penalties. These rights were not respected. Panels of judges adjudicate trials; there is no jury system in either civil or criminal courts. Human rights activists reported trials in which authorities appeared to have determined the verdicts in advance, and defendants did not have the opportunity to confront their accusers, meet with lawyers, or have access to government-held evidence. The new code of criminal procedure adopted in June restricted the choice of attorneys to those on a government-approved list for defendants charged with certain crimes, including crimes against national security, and for defendants who were journalists.

The government often charged political dissidents with vague crimes, such as "antirevolutionary behavior," "corruption on earth," "siding with global arrogance," "moharebeh," and "crimes against Islam." Prosecutors imposed strict penalties on government critics for minor violations. When postrevolutionary statutes did not address a situation, the government advised judges to give precedence to their knowledge and interpretation of Islamic law. Under sharia judges may find a person guilty based on their own "divine knowledge," or they may issue more lenient sentences for persons who kill others considered "deserving of death." Authorities designed other trials, especially those of political prisoners, to publicize coerced confessions.

During the year human rights groups noted the absence of procedural safeguards in criminal trials. Courts admitted as evidence confessions made under duress or torture. In his October 6 report, the UN special rapporteur cited continuing "torture and violations of fair trial standards." Courts reportedly admitted forced confessions in the convictions of poets Fatemeh Ekhtesari and Mehdi Moosavi. A court sentenced Ekhtesari to 11 1/2 years in prison for "insulting the sacred," "publishing unauthorized content in cyberspace," and "propaganda against the state." A court sentenced Moosavi to nine years in prison for "insulting the sacred" and "possession of tear gas," reportedly mace, at his residence.

On August 26, authorities executed Kurdish prisoner Behruz Alkhani while his final appeal to the Supreme Court was still pending. He had been arrested in 2010 and charged with cooperation with the terrorist organization Free Life Party of Kurdistan, "enmity against God," and murder. He had been held in solitary confinement for much of his incarceration, and authorities refused to return his body for burial by his family.

Numerous human rights groups continued to question the legitimacy and secrecy of the special clerical court, which is headed by a Shia Islamic legal scholar and overseen by the supreme leader. The constitution does not

provide for the court, which operated outside the judiciary's purview. The court is charged with investigating alleged offenses committed by clerics and issuing rulings based on an independent interpretation of Islamic legal sources. Critics alleged that clerical courts were used to control non-Shia clerics, as well as to prosecute Shia clerics who expressed controversial ideas and participated in activities outside the sphere of religion, such as journalism or reformist political activities.

According to a February 1 report by *Majzooban Noor*, a special clerical court sentenced seven dervishes of Kavar to internal exile. The court sentenced Kazem Dehghan, Hamid Reza Arayesh, and Mohammad Ali Shamshirzan to permanent internal exile, and sentenced Mohammad Ali Dehghan, Mohammad Ali Sadeghi, Ebrahim Bahrami, and Mohsen Esmaili to seven years of internal exile.

In December the Supreme National Security Council ordered the indictment of Mahmoud Doaei, the editor of the newspaper *Ettela'at*, for violating a ban on publishing photos or information about former president Mohammad Khatami, according to media reports.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

Statistics regarding the number of citizens imprisoned for their political beliefs were not available. Human rights activists estimated there could be more than 1,000 prisoners of conscience, including those jailed for their religious beliefs.

During the year the government arrested students, journalists, lawyers, political activists, women's activists, artists, and members of religious minorities; charged many with crimes such as "propaganda against the system" and "insulting the supreme leader;" and treated such cases as national security trials (see sections 1.a. through 1.e.; section 6, Women; and section 7.a.).

According to opposition reports, the government also arrested, convicted, and executed persons on criminal charges, such as drug trafficking, when their actual offenses were political. The government reportedly held some persons in prison for years on unfounded charges of sympathizing with alleged terrorist groups. According to press, NGO, and former prisoner testimony, authorities often held political prisoners in solitary confinement for extended periods, denying them due process and access to legal representation. Political prisoners were also at greater risk of torture and abuse in detention. The government often placed political prisoners in prisons far from their families. The government did not permit international humanitarian organizations or UN representatives access to political prisoners.

According to HRANA, authorities have held children's education activist Saeid Shirzad without charges since June 2014. Originally arrested in Tabriz, authorities moved him to Rajai Shahr Prison and denied access to his lawyer.

On May 5, authorities arrested journalist and human rights activist Narges Mohammadi and charged her with "propaganda against the state," "assembly and collusion against national security," and "establishing the antisecurity and illegal 'Step by Step to Stop Death Penalty'." Authorities postponed Mohammadi's trial three times after her arrest and denied her family visitation and telephone calls. Prison authorities repeatedly denied her medical attention for pulmonary embolism.

During the year the government released some political prisoners. Authorities occasionally gave political prisoners suspended sentences and released them on bail with the understanding that renewed political activity could return them to prison. The government also controlled activists by temporarily suspending baseless court proceedings against them, while leaving open the option of re-arrest at any time. The government attempted to intimidate activists by summoning them repeatedly for questioning. Lawyers who defended political prisoners were occasionally arrested.

For example, for many years the government has periodically jailed political activist and lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh on various charges, and authorities briefly suspended her license to practice law due to her advocacy for prisoners of conscience and political prisoners.

The government issued travel bans on some former political prisoners, barred them from working in their professional sectors for years after incarceration, and imposed internal exile on others.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Citizens had limited ability to sue the government and were not able to bring lawsuits against the government for civil or human rights violations through domestic courts.

Property Restitution

The constitution allows the government to confiscate property acquired illicitly or in a manner not in conformity with Islamic law. The government appeared to target religious minorities in invoking this provision. There were several reports during the year of authorities evicting and seizing the property of members of the Bahai community without due process.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution states that “reputation, life, property, [and] dwelling[s]” are protected from trespass, except as “provided by law,” but the government routinely infringed on this right. Security forces monitored the social activities of citizens, entered homes and offices, monitored telephone conversations and internet communications, and opened mail without court authorization. There were widespread reports that government agents entered, searched, and ransacked the homes and offices of reformist or opposition leaders, activists, political prisoners, journalists, and their families to intimidate them.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of expression and of the press, except when words are deemed “detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public.” The law states that anyone who undertakes any form of propaganda against the state may be imprisoned for as long as one year; the law does not define “propaganda.” The law also provides for prosecution of persons accused of instigating crimes against the state or national security or “insulting” Islam; the latter offense is punishable by death. The government severely restricted freedom of speech and of the press and used the law to intimidate or prosecute persons who directly criticized the government or raised human rights problems, as well as to bring ordinary citizens into adherence with the government’s moral code.

Freedom of Speech and Expression: The law limits freedom of speech, including by members of the press. Authorities did not permit individuals to criticize publicly the country’s system of government, supreme leader, or official religion. Security forces and the country’s judiciary punished those who violated these restrictions. They also often punished persons who publicly criticized the president, the cabinet, and the Islamic Consultative Assembly (parliament). The government monitored meetings, movements, and communications of opposition members, reformists, activists, and human rights defenders. It often charged persons with crimes against national security and insulting the regime based on letters, e-mails, and other public and private communications. Citizens also faced restrictions on social interaction and expression because authorities threatened arrest or punishment for the expression of ideas or images they viewed as violations of the legal moral code.

According to AI on June 16, officials from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security arrested retired university professor Hossein Rafiee without a warrant and transferred him to Evin Prison. Authorities did not inform Rafiee of the reasons for his arrest until one month later, when the government stated authorities had arrested him to serve a four-year prison sentence from 2004 for “membership in an illegal group.” Authorities sentenced Rafiee to additional prison sentences for “spreading propaganda against the state” and banned him from political and journalistic activities for two years. He remained imprisoned at year’s end.

Press and Media Freedoms: The government’s Press Supervisory Board issues press licenses, which it sometimes revoked in response to articles critical of the government or the regime, or did not renew for individuals facing criminal charges or incarcerated for political reasons. During the year the government banned, blocked, closed, or censored publications deemed critical of officials. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) severely limited and controlled foreign media organizations’ ability to work in the country by requiring foreign correspondents to provide detailed travel plans and topics of proposed stories before granting visas, limiting their ability to travel within the country, and forcing them to work with a local “minder.” Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, the main governmental agency in charge of audiovisual policy, directed all government-owned media. Under the constitution the supreme leader appoints the head of the audiovisual policy agency; a council composed of representatives of the president, the judiciary, and parliament oversees the agency’s activities. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance reviews all potential publications, including foreign printed materials, prior to their domestic release, and may deem books unpublishable, remove text, or require word substitutions for terms deemed inappropriate. Independent print media companies existed, but the government severely limited their operations.

According to Reporters without Borders, on August 3, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance ordered the closure of conservative publication *9 Dey* for the third time in two years for criticizing the nuclear agreement

known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). It also threatened two other publications, *Kayhan* and *Rajanews*, with closure if they continued to publish anti-JCPOA material. Authorities charged another daily newspaper, *Vatan-e Emrooz*, with “publishing secret government documents.”

On October 13, the Press Supervisory Board sued daily newspaper *Royesh Mellat* for “defamation of figures and institutions and organizations and an insult to legal persons with religious veneration” for its use of the term “death” rather than “martyrdom” in reference to deaths of IRGC soldiers fighting in Syria.

According to reformist newspaper *Roozonline*, authorities raided and closed the offices of the bilingual Kurdish-Farsi news website, *Rafangah*, in October. Earlier in the year, authorities arrested two Kurdish journalists in Mahbad for their reporting.

On April 27, the Press Supervisory Council ordered the closure of the women’s magazine, *Zanan-e Emrooz*, for “encouraging the antisocial and religiously unsanctioned phenomenon known as white marriage,” after it published an article on premarital cohabitation. The government allowed the magazine to reopen after the seven-month ban expired, and it resumed publishing in November. The government had previously closed the publication from 2006 until 2014.

Under the constitution private broadcasting is illegal. The government maintained a monopoly over all television and radio broadcasting facilities through the government agency, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. Radio and television programming, the principal source of news for many citizens (especially in rural areas with limited internet access), reflected the government’s political and socioreligious ideology. There were widespread reports of government “downlink” jamming of satellite broadcasts as signals entered the country. Satellite dishes remained illegal but ubiquitous, although police launched campaigns to confiscate privately owned satellite dishes throughout the country under warrants provided by the judiciary.

Violence and Harassment: The government and its agents harassed, detained, abused, and prosecuted publishers, editors, and journalists, including those involved in internet-based media, for their reporting (see also section 1.e.). The government also harassed many journalists’ families, and authorities often subjected journalists in prison to solitary confinement. The UN special rapporteur’s August 31 report noted the UN secretary-general’s concern over the imprisoning of journalists on vaguely defined national security charges. Reporters without Borders estimated that 37 journalists remained in prison at year’s end. International NGOs reported that authorities forced several citizen journalists into internal exile during the year, and authorities continued to close publications for political reasons.

On November 17, a court sentenced journalist Reyhaneh Tabatabaee to one year in prison and barred her from membership in political parties and the use of social media for two years on charges of “propaganda against the regime.” According to IranWire, the government arrested and released her on three previous occasions, and she spent more than six months in Evin Prison for her journalistic work and activism.

On February 15, a Tehran court sentenced Forozandeh Adibi, the editor of the monthly, *Mehrnameh*, to a fine and a two-year ban from working as a journalist for articles published in the magazine. On November 2, the IRGC arrested journalists Issa Saharkhiz, Ehsan Mazandarani, Afarin Chitsaz, and Saman Safarzaie on charges of membership in “an infiltration group connected to the United States and United Kingdom,” according to the ICHRI.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The law forbids government censorship but also prohibits dissemination of information the government considers “damaging.” During the year the government censored publications--both reformist and conservative--that criticized official actions or contradicted official views or versions of events. “Damaging” information included discussions of women’s rights and the situation of minorities, as well as criticism of the government. Officials routinely intimidated journalists into practicing self-censorship. Public officials often filed criminal complaints against newspapers, and the Press Supervisory Board referred such complaints to the Media Court for further action, including closure, suspension, and fines.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance’s censorship practice is to bar inappropriate content, including references pertaining to alcohol, describing physical contact between an unmarried woman and man, or mentions of the mass protests that occurred after the disputed 2009 presidential elections. Judiciary spokesman Golamhossein Mohseni Ejei warned journalists at a February 16 press conference that media would be banned or fined if they published information about individuals designated as “heads of sedition,” alluding to former president Khatami; former presidential candidates held under house arrest, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi; and Mousavi’s wife Zahra Rahnavaard (see section 1.d., Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees).

Libel/Slander Laws: The government commonly used libel laws or cited national security to suppress criticism. According to the law, if any publication contains personal insults, libel, false statements, or criticism, the insulted individual has the right to respond in the publication within one month. If the libel, insult, or criticism involves Islam or national security, the responsible person may be charged with apostasy and crimes against national

security, respectively. The government applied the law throughout the year, often citing statements made in various media outlets or internet platforms that criticized the government, to arrest, prosecute, and sentence individuals for crimes against national security.

On February 2, a court sentenced former journalist Abbas Salimi Namin to six months' imprisonment and 74 lashes for insulting former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in a 2011 televised debate, according to the UN special rapporteur's August report.

Internet Freedom

The government restricted and disrupted access to the internet, monitored private online communications, and censored online content. Individuals and groups practiced self-censorship. The government collected personally identifiable information in connection with citizens' peaceful expression of political, religious, or ideological opinion or beliefs.

According to Internet World Stats, the internet penetration rate was 57 percent, with 41 percent of the population regularly using the internet. Reflecting the internet's importance as a source for news and forum for political expression, the government adopted technology and shaped restrictive laws enabling it to ban access to particular sites and to filter traffic based on its content.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance must approve all internet service providers. The government also requires all owners of websites and blogs in the country to register with the ministry, which, along with the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, and the Tehran Public Prosecutor's Office, compose the Committee in Charge of Determining Unauthorized Websites, the governmental organization that determines censoring criteria. The same law that applies to traditional press applies to electronic media, and the Press Supervisory Board and judiciary invoked the law to close websites during the year.

NGOs reported the government continued to filter content on the internet. On May 5, Information and Communications Technology Minister Mahmoud Vaezi announced that the government had launched the second phase of "Smart Filtering," to "protect society from immoral harm" from certain websites and social networks. In September the supreme leader renewed the mandate of the Supreme Council for Cyberspace, which formulates the country's internet policies and regulations. The renewal transferred the Supreme Council from the authority of the president to the authority of the supreme leader.

In October the government briefly blocked the online messaging service, Telegram, for "spreading immoral content." Following its return to service in November, the government blocked 20 "channels,"--platforms similar to YouTube channels--and IRGC forces arrested their administrators. The Ministry of Information and Communications Technology reviewed Telegram's operations on November 18 to determine whether to block the program and repeatedly asked the application to self-censor, according to Telegram founder Pavel Durov. The ministry's Workgroup for Discerning Criminal Content determined that the ministry would allow Telegram to operate under heavy government surveillance. While Telegram has some additional security features that make it more difficult for the content of its communications among users to be read by a third party, it was not clear whether the government was able to intercept and read content, as it has done previously with other similar applications such as WhatsApp and Viber.

Organizations, including the Basij "Cyber Council," the Cyber Police, and the Cyber Army, which was presumed to be controlled by the IRGC, monitored, identified, and countered alleged cyber threats to national security. These organizations especially targeted citizens' activities on social networking websites officially banned by the Committee in Charge of Determining Offensive Content, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr and reportedly harassed persons who criticized the government, including by raising sensitive social problems. NGOs reported that the government attempted to block internet users' access to technology that would allow them to circumvent government content filters.

Although Twitter is officially banned in the country, the government operated Twitter accounts under the names of Supreme Leader Khamenei, President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Zarif, and various other government-associated officials and entities.

Ministry of Information and Communications Technology regulations prohibit households and cybercafes from having high-speed internet access, and the government requires cybercafes to install security cameras and to collect users' personal information. The government periodically reduced internet speed to discourage downloading material; however, in general there were slight improvements to speed as the government expanded access to 3G services for mobile devices.

According to the UN special rapporteur's reports, serious difficulties persisted, including severe content restrictions, intimidation and prosecution of users, and limitations on access through the intentional slowing of service and filtering. The most heavily blocked websites were in the arts, society, politics, and news categories.

In October the government banned actress Sadaf Taherian from returning to the country after she posted photos on her social media account that showed her not wearing the “hejab” (headscarf), which is mandatory in the country for all women appearing in public. Authorities briefly arrested an unnamed man for posting photos with members of the opposite sex who were not wearing the hejab on his social media account in November, according to multiple press reports. Authorities also banned television show host and chef, Maedeh Hajari, from working after she commented disparagingly on social media sites about the death of an IRGC commander killed in Syria.

The ICHRI reported that the Center for Investigation of Organized Cyber Crimes, a branch of the IRGC Cyber Defense Command, issued a press release January 31 claiming that several Facebook users had been arrested in a surveillance project called “Operation Spider,” designed to stop the spread of corruption.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government significantly restricted academic freedom and the independence of higher education institutions. Authorities systematically targeted university campuses to suppress social and political activism by prohibiting independent student organizations, imprisoning student activists, removing faculty, preventing students from enrolling or continuing their education based on their political or religious affiliation or activism, and restricting social sciences and humanities curricula. Women were restricted from enrolling in several courses of study and faced limited program opportunities, quotas on program admission, and gender-segregated classes (see section 6, Women).

Although universities reportedly re-admitted a number of students previously expelled under a “star” system inaugurated in 2005 by then president Ahmadinejad to mark politically active students, other “starred” students reported that government authorities still prevented their university enrollment because of their political activities. In a 2013 open letter to President Rouhani, activist and former political prisoner Peyman Aref wrote that the Ministry of Intelligence and Security blocked his enrollment in a doctoral program after he provided testimony in support of Rouhani’s impeached minister of science and research, Reza Faraji-Dana. According to HRANA, Aref announced during the year that he had left the country to pursue his studies elsewhere since authorities prohibited him from studying in the country.

According to the ICHRI, a court sentenced husband and wife Peyman Koushk-Baghi and Azita Rafizadeh to five and four years in prison, respectively, for their work with the online university of the Bahai Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). The judge convicted them for “membership in the illegal and misguided Bahai group with the aim of acting against national security through illegal activities at the BIHE educational institute.” Bahai students were barred from attending university unless they renounced their faith.

The government maintained controls on cinema, music, theater, and art exhibits, and censored those deemed to transgress Islamic values. The government censored or banned films deemed to contradict Islamic values by promoting secularism, non-Islamic ideas about women’s rights, unethical behavior, drug abuse, violence, or alcoholism.

In July the Iranian Cinema Organization removed the film *Rastakhiz*, from cinemas and banned its further screening, after several conservative clerics complained about its depiction of religious figures.

On October 13, a court sentenced filmmaker Kayvan Karimi to six years in prison and 223 lashes for “insulting the sanctities” with his documentary film on political graffiti. Authorities originally arrested Karimi on these charges in 2013. According to international media reports, AI, and his family, authorities arrested filmmaker Mostafa Azizi on February 1 and sentenced him to eight years in prison for “propaganda against the state,” “acting against national security in cyberspace,” and “insulting the supreme leader.” Authorities reportedly placed him in solitary confinement at Evin Prison for several months, and he has not been provided access to medical care for chronic asthma and shingles, which he developed while incarcerated. His appeal was still pending at year’s end. On December 2, authorities detained songwriter and poet Yaghma Golrouee for the content of his work, which generally touched on love and social issues like poverty, addiction, and environmental problems. Authorities released Golrouee on bail on December 9. Charges were unknown at year’s end.

Officials continued to discourage teaching music in schools. In November authorities barred the Tehran Symphony from publicly performing due to the inclusion of female musicians. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance must officially approve a song’s lyrics and music as complying with the country’s moral values, although many underground musicians released albums without seeking such permission. Authorities considered heavy metal and foreign music religiously offensive, and police continued to repress underground concerts and music groups.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution permits assemblies and marches of unarmed persons “provided they do not violate the principles of Islam.” The government restricted this right and closely monitored gatherings to prevent anything it considered as antiregime protests. Such gatherings included public entertainment and lectures, student and women’s meetings and protests, meetings and worship services of minority religious groups, labor protests, online gatherings and networking, funeral processions, and Friday prayer gatherings. According to activists the government arbitrarily applied rules governing permits to assemble, with proregime groups rarely experiencing difficulty and groups viewed as critical of the regime experiencing harassment regardless of whether authorities issued a permit. The government sometimes slowed internet speeds or blocked e-mail or text-messaging services to disrupt potential public gatherings or demonstrations.

On November 21, the BBC reported the arrest of a group of protestors in front of Evin prison. The group, which included parents of prisoners, had gathered to protest arbitrary detentions. How many of the protestors remained imprisoned at year’s end and whether authorities filed charges against them remained unclear.

On January 27, authorities released women’s rights activist Mahdieh Golroo on bail. She was originally arrested in October 2014 after she attended a Tehran demonstration against acid attacks on women wearing “improper” hejab, according to the ICHRI.

Freedom of Association

The constitution provides for the establishment of political parties, professional or political associations, and Islamic and recognized religious minority organizations, as long as such groups do not violate the principles of freedom, sovereignty, national unity, or Islamic criteria; or question Islam as the basis of the country’s system of government. The government limited freedom of association through threats, intimidation, the imposition of arbitrary requirements on organizations, and the arrests of group leaders and members.

In January teachers went on coordinated strikes in cities across the country to protest low wages and the lack of resources in schools. Protests continued periodically throughout the year, and there were reports that security forces arrested thousands of teachers either at protests or later during raids of offices and homes, including of organizers Beheshti Langrood, Esmail Abdi, Mohammad Davari, Mohammad Reza Niknejad, Mehdi Bohlooli, and Mahmoud Bagheri. The government fired many participants for joining the strikes. Many remained in prison at the start of the school year. On June 27, authorities arrested Esmail Abdi, the general secretary of the Iranian Teachers’ Trade Association-Tehran, and charged him with “propaganda against the Islamic system” and “conspiracy to disrupt the security of the country.” Abdi reportedly did not have access to a lawyer. According to the ICHRI, a court sentenced teachers’ activist Rassoul Boghdadi to an additional three years in prison for “insulting Imam Khomeini and the supreme leader” and “propaganda against the state,” after Boghdadi had already served a six-year prison sentence for “attending gatherings with the intent to disrupt national security,” and “propaganda against the state.”

According to Committee to Protect Journalists by year’s end President Rouhani had not reinstated the Association of Iranian Journalists, which was closed in 2009. During his presidential campaign, he promised to reinstate the group.

The government continued to exert significant pressure on members of human rights organizations, including the Defenders of Human Rights Center (see section 1.d.). The government also restricted groups advocating for women’s or minority groups’ rights (see section 5), recognized and unrecognized minority religious groups, trade unions, and other labor-related groups (see section 7.a.).

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The constitution provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation. The government placed some restrictions on these rights. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) with regard to refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq.

In-country Movement: Judicial sentences sometimes included internal exile after release from prison. Women often required the supervision of a male guardian or chaperone to travel and faced official and societal harassment for traveling alone.

Refugees faced restrictions on in-country movement. According to UNHCR, 28 of 31 provinces imposed residency restrictions on foreigners, including refugees; in some cases the restrictions apply only to certain parts of the province.

Foreign Travel: The government required exit permits for foreign travel for all citizens. Some citizens, particularly those whose skills were in demand and who were educated at government expense, had to post bond to obtain an exit permit. The government restricted the foreign travel of some religious leaders, members of religious minorities, and scientists in sensitive fields. Several journalists, academics, opposition politicians, human and women's rights activists, and artists remained subject to foreign travel bans and had their passports confiscated during the year. Married women were not allowed to travel outside the country without prior permission from their husbands. For example, authorities initially prohibited Niloufar Ardalan, captain of the country's national indoor women's futsal team, from traveling to a tournament in Malaysia in September because her husband refused to grant her permission. After filing an appeal, a court granted her a one-time-use exit visa.

Exile: The law does not provide for forced exile abroad. Many dissidents, activists, journalists, academics, artists, members of recognized and unrecognized religious or ethnic minority communities, and LGBTI persons practiced self-imposed exile to express their beliefs freely or escape government harassment. The government did internally exile civil, religious, and ethnic activists from certain cities or provinces.

Protection of Refugees

The government had a mixed record in providing support for refugees, mostly from Afghanistan and some from Iraq. The government is responsible for refugee registration and status determination, and it undertook an annual reregistration of refugees under a system known as "Amayesh," through which authorities provided refugees with Amayesh cards. The cards enabled refugees to access basic services, and facilitated the issuance of work permits to refugees. There were 950,000 Afghan and 28,000 Iraqi Amayesh cardholders. Additionally, approximately 1.4 million "nonrefugee" Afghans held visas under a Joint Action Plan for formerly undocumented Afghans. Also a large number--some estimating more than one million--undocumented Afghans, largely economic migrants, lived in the country. According to anecdotal but consistent reports, authorities subjected Afghans, even including Amayesh cardholders, to abuse.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status to qualified applicants. While the government reportedly has a system for providing protection to refugees, UNHCR did not have information regarding how the country made asylum determinations.

Refoulement: According to minority activist groups, authorities routinely arrested Afghan refugees and sometimes threatened them with refoulement. According to HRANA, on August 15, authorities arrested 250 Afghans in Golshahr and deported them to Afghanistan.

Employment: Only refugees with government-issued work permits as part of the Amayesh system were able to work. NGO sources reported that cards were difficult to renew and were often prohibitively expensive for refugees to maintain due to steep annual renewal fees.

Access to Basic Services: The government sometimes imposed fees for children of registered refugees to attend public schools. The children of unregistered refugees were completely barred from attending schools, while Amayesh cardholders have access to primary education. Amayesh cardholders received primary health care including vaccinations, prenatal care, maternal and child health, and family planning from the Ministry of Health. While the supreme leader announced in May that all Afghans, regardless of status, should have access to school, unregistered Afghans continued to have difficulty gaining access to education.

There were many barriers to marriage between citizens and irregular migrants, whom authorities often required to obtain documentation from their embassy to register their marriage in the country, according to activist reporting. Furthermore, authorities only considered the children born from such unions eligible for Iranian citizenship if the child's father is a citizen and registers the child as his, leaving many such children without a birth certificate and access to basic services. Most provinces' residency limitations on refugees effectively denied them access to public services, such as public housing, in those provinces.

Stateless Persons

Women may not transmit citizenship to their children or to a noncitizen spouse. According to media reports during the year, between 400,000 and one million persons lacked Iranian nationality despite having a citizen mother, due to limitations of citizenship transmission. More than 32,000 children were without refugee identification cards in 2013, making them effectively stateless and subjected to inconsistent government policies. Charities, principally domestic, provided medical care. Authorities prohibited stateless persons from receiving formal government support or travel documents.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution provides citizens the ability to choose the president, as well as members Assembly of Experts and Islamic Consultative Assembly peacefully through elections based on universal and equal suffrage, but candidate vetting conducted by unelected bodies and often based on arbitrary criteria severely abridged this right in all instances. The Assembly of Experts, which is composed of 86 popularly elected clerics who serve eight-year terms, elects the supreme leader, who acts as the recognized head of state and may be removed only by a vote of the assembly. The Guardian Council vets and qualifies candidates for all legislative and presidential elections based on criteria that include candidates' allegiance to the state and Islam. The council consists of six clerics, who are appointed by the supreme leader, and six jurists, who are nominated by the head of the judiciary and approved by parliament. There is no separation of state and religion, and certain clerics had significant influence in the government.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In 2013 voters elected Hassan Rouhani president. The Interior Ministry announced that Rouhani won 50.88 percent of the votes with a 72-percent turnout of eligible voters. Although the government did not allow outside observers to monitor the election, several organizations observed that, while turnout was high and the official results appeared to be consistent with voter sentiment, the country's electoral system continued to fall short of international standards for free and fair elections because of the Guardian Council's preeminent roles in the political process, including selecting which individuals could to run for office.

The UN secretary-general reported that "open and critical" debates preceded the election but noted reports of intimidation of activists, journalists, and trade unionists, as well as allegations of restrictions on freedom of expression in the period preceding the election, including the shutdown of internet traffic, the sporadic blocking of text messages, and the censoring of opposition websites.

The Guardian Council approved eight candidates for president from 686 individuals who registered as candidates. It did not approve any female registrants. The UN special rapporteur reported that several candidates were apparently excluded because of their involvement in postelection protests in 2009. The Guardian Council also excluded 78-year-old, former two-term president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani on the grounds he was too old.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The constitution provides for the formation of political parties, but the Interior Ministry granted licenses only to parties with ideological and practical adherence to the "velayat-e faqih" system of government embodied in the constitution. Registered political organizations that adhered to the system generally operated without restriction, but most were small, focused around an individual, and without nationwide membership. Members of political parties and persons with any political affiliation that the regime deemed unacceptable faced harassment, violence, and sometimes imprisonment.

The government maintained bans on several opposition organizations and political parties. Security officials continued to harass, intimidate, and arrest members of the political opposition and some reformists (see also section 1.e.). On September 1, authorities briefly detained Ali Shakourirad, leader of the newly formed Islamic Iranian National Union Party, for appearing to support opposition figures no longer in government.

Participation of Women and Minorities: Women faced significant legal, religious, and cultural barriers to political participation. According to the Guardian Council's interpretation, the constitution bars women and persons of foreign origin from serving as supreme leader or president, as members of the Assembly of Experts, the Guardian Council, or the Expediency Council, as well as certain types of judges. In 2013 the Guardian Council disqualified all 30 women who registered as presidential candidates. Of the 290-member parliament, nine women held seats during the year. Women served in senior government positions during the year, including the vice president for legal affairs, the minister of environmental protection, the minister of women and family affairs, and the foreign ministry's spokesperson.

Practitioners of religions other than Shia Islam are barred from serving as supreme leader or president and from membership in the Assembly of Experts, the Guardian Council, or the Expediency Council. The law reserves five seats in parliament for members of recognized minority religious groups, although they can also be elected to nonreserved seats. In the assembly elected in 2012, members of religious minorities (two Zoroastrians, one Jew, and nine Christians) held 12 of the 290 seats. There were no non-Muslims in the cabinet or on the Supreme Court.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, but the government did not implement the law effectively, and corruption was a serious and ubiquitous problem. Officials in all three branches of government frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. Many officials expected bribes for providing routine service. Individuals routinely bribed officials to obtain permits for illegal construction.

Corruption: Endowed religious charitable foundations, or “bonyads,” accounted for a quarter to a third of the country’s economy according to some experts. Government insiders, including members of the military and clergy, ran these tax-exempt organizations, which are defined under law as charities. Members of the political opposition and international corruption watchdog organizations frequently accused bonyads of corruption. Bonyads received benefits from the government, but no government agency must publicly approve their budgets.

Numerous companies and subsidiaries affiliated with the IRGC engaged in trade and business activities, sometimes illicitly, in the telecommunications, mining, and construction sectors. Other IRGC entities reportedly engaged in smuggling pharmaceutical products, narcotics, and raw materials. The domestic and international press similarly reported that individuals with strong government connections had access to foreign currency at preferential exchange rates, allowing them to exploit a gap between the country’s black market and official exchange rates.

According to multiple news sources, authorities arrested former vice presidents Mohammad Reza Rahimi and Hamid Baqai on corruption charges in February and June, respectively. A court sentenced Rahimi to five years in prison for financial corruption and embezzlement, and Baqai awaited sentencing at year’s end.

According to media reports, businessman Babak Zanjani, originally arrested in 2013, had his first hearing on corruption charges related to missing funds from the Oil Ministry in October. Authorities charged him with money laundering, fraud, and “corruption on earth.”

Numerous government agencies existed to fight corruption, including the Anticorruption Headquarters, the Anticorruption Task Force, the Committee to Fight Economic Corruption, and the General Inspection Organization. Authorities also authorized parliament’s Article 90 Commission to investigate complaints of corruption within the government. Information was unavailable regarding these organizations’ specific mandates, their collaboration with civil society, and whether they operated effectively, independently, and with sufficient resources.

Financial Disclosure: Regulations require government officials, including cabinet ministers and members of the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council, and the Assembly of Experts, to submit annual financial statements to the government inspectorate. No information was available on whether the government effectively implemented the law, officials obeyed the law, or financial statements were publicly accessible. There was also no information available on whether there were public outreach activities or public official training to encourage effective use of the financial statements.

Public Access to Information: The law does not provide for public access to government information although websites of parliament and other government agencies share some public records on voting and other activity.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

The government restricted the work of human rights groups and activists and often responded to their inquiries and reports with harassment, arrests, and monitoring of individual activists and organization workplaces.

The government restricted the operations of and did not cooperate with local or international human rights NGOs investigating alleged violations of human rights. By law NGOs must register with the Interior Ministry and apply for permission to receive foreign grants. Independent human rights groups and other NGOs faced continued harassment because of their activism as well as the threat of closure by government officials following prolonged and often arbitrary delays in obtaining official registration.

During the year the government prevented some human rights defenders, civil society activists, journalists, and scholars from traveling abroad. Human rights activists reported intimidating telephone calls, threats of

blackmail, and property damage from unidentified law enforcement and government officials. Government officials sometimes harassed and arrested family members of human rights activists. Courts routinely suspended sentences of human rights activists. This form of sentencing acted effectively as probation, leaving open the option for authorities to arrest or imprison individuals arbitrarily later.

In a March 4 report, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders expressed concern at the arrest, arbitrary detention, and sentencing of human rights defenders, student activists, journalists, and lawyers. He noted acts of intimidation and reprisals in detention, including torture and mistreatment. He also expressed concern over the denial of adequate medical care for human rights defenders in prison, and regarding reports of reprisals against human rights defenders for engagement with the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran and for cooperation with other UN mechanisms.

The government continued to imprison lawyers and others affiliated with the Defenders of Human Rights Center advocacy group, such as Abdolfattah Soltani, who was serving a 13-year prison sentence for alleged “propaganda against the system” and “colluding and conspiring against national security.” According to an August 17 report by the ICHRI, prison authorities denied Soltani family visitation and adequate medical treatment. Founding member of the center and attorney for several political activists, Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, also remained in prison after receiving a nine-year sentence in 2011 for “plotting a soft revolution,” “propaganda against the system,” and illegally owning a satellite dish.

The government denied all requests from international human rights NGOs to establish offices in or to conduct regular investigative visits to the country. The most recent visit by an international human rights NGO was by AI’s in 2004 as part of the EU’s human rights dialogue with the country.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: During the year the government ignored or denied repeated requests for visits from UN special rapporteurs; but in 2014 it participated in the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council’s quadrennial universal periodic review of its record and met with the special rapporteur in Geneva during the year. According to NGO sources, including HRW and AI, the government’s rights record and its level of cooperation with international rights institutions remained poor. The most recent visit by a UN human rights agency was in 2005.

During the year the UN Human Rights Commission renewed the resolution establishing the mandate for a human rights rapporteur for the country and reappointed Ahmed Shaheed as the special rapporteur. Shaheed officially commenced work in 2011, but the government continued to deny his repeated requests to visit the country. The UN secretary-general encouraged full cooperation with the special rapporteur in his August 31 report.

On November 18, for the 13th consecutive year, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution expressing deep concern about the country’s “serious ongoing and recurring human rights violations.” The resolution also noted with concern the government’s lack of cooperation with UN mechanisms, including its poor implementation of the recommendations it accepted during the universal periodic review and its continued failure to allow the UN special rapporteur into the country to investigate human rights abuses. The resolution also cited the government’s failure to approve any request from a UN thematic special procedures mandate holder to visit the country in nearly a decade.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The High Council for Human Rights, headed by Mohammad Javad Larijani, is part of the judicial branch of the government and lacks independence. The council continued to defend the imprisonment of high-profile human rights defenders and political opposition leaders, despite domestic and international pressure. There was no information available whether the council challenged any laws or court rulings during the year.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, and social status “in conformity with Islamic criteria,” but the government did not effectively enforce these prohibitions, and many discriminatory provisions are built into the law.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is illegal and subject to strict penalties, including death, but it remained a problem, and the government did not enforce the law effectively. There were reports of government forces raping individuals in custody (see section 1.c.). The law considers sex within marriage consensual by definition and, therefore, does not address spousal rape, including in cases of forced marriage.

Cases of rape were difficult to document due to nonreporting. Most rape victims likely did not report the crime, because they feared retaliation or punishment for having been raped, including charges of indecency, immoral behavior, or adultery for being in the presence of an unrelated man while unaccompanied, the latter of which carries the death penalty. They also feared societal reprisal or ostracism. For a conviction the law requires four Muslim men or a combination of three men and two women to have witnessed a rape. A woman or man found making a false accusation of rape is subject to 80 lashes.

The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence. The Census Bureau, the government agency responsible for data collection, does not permit international organizations to study domestic violence in the country and has never published any statistics regarding violence against women. Authorities consider abuse in the family as a private matter and seldom discussed it publicly. Some nongovernmental shelters and hotlines assisted victims during the year, but such services were virtually nonexistent outside major cities.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law does not address FGM/C but does punish mutilation of the body. Whether there were prosecutions for FGM/C during the year is unknown. The practice was reportedly most prevalent in Kurdish provinces in the northwest and the Persian Gulf province of Hormozgan. If individuals performed the procedure, it was usually performed on girls under the age of 10. A 2012 study on Kermanshah Province suggested that FGM/C was a common practice among women there, with more than 55 percent of girls circumcised before the age of seven. In July, Tehran University held the first publicized conference in the country on the subject.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: There were no official reports of killings motivated by “honor” or other harmful traditional practices during the year, although human rights activists reported they occurred, particularly among rural and tribal populations.

Sexual Harassment: The law addresses sexual harassment in the context of physical contact between men and women, but the law is biased against women. The law prohibits physical contact between unrelated men and women, and punishes it by flogging. There was no reliable data on the extent of sexual harassment, although it was reportedly widespread. Media reports indicated that unwanted physical contact and verbal harassment occurred, but there were no known government efforts to combat and address these acts.

Reproductive Rights: The law recognizes the basic right of married couples to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing, and timing of their children. Couples are entitled to reproductive healthcare, free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. While government healthcare used to include full free access to contraception and family planning for married couples, the budget has been reduced to zero in recent years. According to the UN secretary-general’s August report, the government’s budget allocated to the family and population program remained zero in the 2014-15 budget.

Discrimination: The constitution provides for equal protection for women under the law and for all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights in conformity with its interpretation of Islam. The government did not enforce the law, however, and provisions in the Islamic civil and penal codes, particularly sections dealing with family and property law, discriminate against women. Discrimination restricted women’s economic, social, political, academic, and cultural rights. According to UN reporting, the government renamed the Center for Women and Family and elevated it to the Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs. The entity continued to maintain a conservative position and suggested only reforms that were aligned with the government’s existing policy and interpretation of Islam.

Women may not transmit citizenship to their children or to a noncitizen spouse. The government does not recognize marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men, irrespective of their citizenship. The law states that a virgin woman or girl wishing to wed needs the consent of her father or grandfather or the court’s permission, even if she is over the age of 18.

The law permits a man to have as many as four wives and an unlimited number of “temporary wives” (sigeh), based on a Shia custom under which a woman may become the time-limited wife of a man after a religious ceremony and a civil contract outlining the union’s conditions. The law does not grant temporary wives and any resulting children rights associated with traditional marriage, but the contract is enforceable, and recognized children can obtain documentation and have limited rights.

A woman has the right to divorce only if her husband signs a contract granting that right, cannot provide for his family, has violated the terms of their original marriage contract, or is a drug addict, insane, or impotent. A husband is not required to cite a reason for divorcing his wife. Traditional interpretations of Islamic law recognize a divorced woman’s right to part of shared property and to alimony. These laws were not always enforced, and the ability of a woman to seek divorce was limited. In 2011 the Supreme Court ruled that a woman could withhold sex from her husband if the husband refused to pay a personal maintenance allowance. By law such an allowance may be requested during the marriage as well as after a divorce. According to the Islamic Students’ News Agency, if the allowance is not paid, the wife may “reject all legal and religious

obligations" to her husband. If the allowance is not paid after the divorce, the woman may sue her former husband in court.

The law provides divorced women preference in custody for children up to age seven. After the child reaches age seven, the father is entitled to custody unless he is proven unfit to care for the child. Divorced women who remarry automatically lose custody of their children from previous marriages. Courts determine custody in disputed cases.

Women sometimes received disproportionate punishment for crimes such as adultery, including death sentences (see sections 1.a. and 1.e.). Discriminatory laws against women continued to be introduced. The 2013 revised Islamic penal code retains provisions that value a woman's testimony in a court of law as half that of a man's, and a woman's life as half that of a man's. The blood money paid to the family of a woman who is killed is half the sum paid for a man in most cases. In November parliament passed a new law equalizing the amount of blood money paid by insurance companies to men and women of all religious groups in deaths resulting from car accidents.

According to 2012 UN statistics, the female youth literacy rate was 98.5 percent, and the adult female literacy rate was 90.3 percent of the men's. Women had access to primary and advanced education, although the percentage of female students entering universities decreased from 62 percent in 2007-08 to 48 percent in 2012-13, following 2012 gender-rationing policies. Quotas and other restrictions, which varied across universities, limited women's university admissions to certain fields, as well as to certain master's and doctoral programs. According to the UN special rapporteur's August report, universities continued gender-rationing policies, restricting women's enrollment in some fields.

Social and legal constraints limited women's professional opportunities (see section 7.d.). Women were represented in many fields, including in parliament, on municipal councils, on police forces, and as firefighters, but the law requires a woman to obtain her husband's consent before working outside the home. Despite the high proportion of women in universities, the unemployment rate for women was nearly twice that for men. The law does not provide that women and men must be paid equally for equal work. According to a survey for the year's World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report*, women earned on average 58 percent as much money as their male counterparts for similar work. Women may not serve in many high-level political positions or as judges, except as consultants or research judges without the power to impose sentences. In November the country appointed its first female ambassador since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Women faced discrimination in home and property ownership, as well as access to financing. The government enforced gender segregation in many public spaces, including for patients during medical care, and prohibited women from mixing openly with unmarried men or men not related to them. On April 4, the deputy minister for sports announced women would be permitted to enter sports stadiums and attend some sporting events; but authorities reportedly did not fully implement the new policy by year's end. Women must ride in a reserved section on public buses and enter some public buildings, universities, and airports through separate entrances.

The law provides that a woman who appears in public without appropriate attire (hejab), such as a cloth scarf over the head and a long jacket, or a large full-length cloth called a "chador," may be sentenced to flogging and fined. Absent a clear legal definition of "appropriate hejab" or the punishment, however, women were subjected to the opinions of disciplinary forces, police, security forces, or judges. Police announced that, between March and November, they had impounded tens of thousands of cars because women in the vehicles were not properly covered.

Children

Birth Registration: Only a child's father conveys citizenship, regardless of the child's country of birth. Birth within the country's borders does not confer citizenship, except when a child is born to unknown parents. The law requires that all births be registered within 15 days.

Education: Although primary schooling until age 11 is free and compulsory for all, the media and other sources reported lower enrollment in rural areas, especially for girls. According to UN statistics, the ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education increased from 79.2 percent in 1990 to 98 percent in 2012. UNHCR stated that school enrollment among refugees was generally higher outside camps and settlements, where greater resources were available.

Child Abuse: There was little information available to reflect how the government dealt with child abuse, which was largely regarded as a private family matter.

The law permits executions of individuals who have reached puberty, defined as age nine for girls and age 13 for boys, if a judge determines the individual understood the nature and consequences of the crime. According

to AI more than 160 juveniles were at risk of execution, and authorities executed four during the year (see section 1.a.).

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age of marriage for girls is 13, but girls as young as nine may be married with permission from the court and their father. The law requires court approval for the marriage of boys younger than 15. According to the newspaper *Shahrvand*, there were more than 40,000 registered marriages for girls under the age of 15 in 2014. The number may be higher because NGOs reported that many families did not register underage marriages. On October 13, authorities executed juvenile offender Fatemeh Salbehi for the killing of her husband, whom she was forced to marry at 16.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: See information for girls under 18 in women's section.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The legal age requirements for consensual sex are the same as those for marriage, and sex outside of marriage is illegal. The law prohibits all forms of pornography, including child pornography. There was no information available about penalties for sexual exploitation of children.

Displaced Children: There were thousands of Afghan refugee children in the country, many of whom were born in the country but could not obtain identification documents. These children were often unable to attend schools or access basic government services.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. For country-specific information see the Department of State's website at travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/en/country/iran.html.

Anti-Semitism

According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, approximately 9,000 Jews lived in the country, while media estimated there were between 18,000 and 20,000. The law recognizes Jews as a religious minority and provides representation in parliament. Samiak Moreh Sedgh is the only Jewish member of parliament.

Officials continued to question the history and uniqueness of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism remained a pervasive problem. A cultural institute organized a second international Holocaust cartoon contest in May (authorities held the first in 2005). The supreme leader issued a statement in September in which he questioned whether Israel would exist in 25 years.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law generally prohibits discrimination by government actors against persons with disabilities. No information was available regarding authorities' effectiveness in enforcing the law. The law does not apply to private actors, and electoral law prohibits blind and deaf persons from running for seats in parliament. While the law provides for government-funded vocational education for persons with disabilities, according to domestic news reports, vocational centers were located in urban areas and unable to meet the needs of the entire population.

The law provides for public accessibility to government-funded buildings, and new structures appeared to comply with the standards in these provisions. There were efforts to increase the access of persons with disabilities to historical sites. Nevertheless, government buildings that predated existing accessibility standards remained largely inaccessible, and general building accessibility for persons with disabilities remained a widespread problem. Persons with disabilities had limited access to information, education, and community activities.

The Welfare Organization of Iran is the principal governmental agency charged with protecting the rights of persons with disabilities.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

While the constitution grants equal rights to all ethnic minorities and allows minority languages to be used in the media, minorities did not enjoy equal rights, and the government consistently denied their right to use their languages in school. IRGC forces allegedly controlled security in two provinces, Sistan-va Baluchistan and Kordestan, due to large ethnic minority Baluch and Kurdish communities, respectively.

The government disproportionately targeted minority groups, including Kurds, Arabs, Azeris, and Baluchis, for arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention, and physical abuse (see also section 1.e.). These groups reported political and socioeconomic discrimination, particularly in their access to economic aid, business licenses, university admissions, job opportunities, permission to publish books, and housing and land rights. The law, which requires religious screening and allegiance to the concept of “velayat-e faqih” not found in Sunni Islam, impaired the ability of Sunni (many of whom are also Baluch, Arab, or Kurdish) to integrate into civic life and to work in certain fields. Human rights organizations, including the ICHRI and the IHRDC, observed that the government’s application of the death penalty disproportionately affected ethnic minorities. In pretrial detention in Evin Prison, authorities reportedly repeatedly subjected members of minority ethnicities and religions to more severe physical punishment or torture than other prisoners, regardless of the type of crime accused.

The estimated eight million ethnic Kurds in the country frequently campaigned for greater regional autonomy. The government continued to use security law, the media law, and other legislation to arrest and prosecute Kurds for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association. The government reportedly banned Kurdish-language newspapers, journals, and books and punished publishers, journalists, and writers for opposing and criticizing government policies. Authorities suppressed legitimate activities of Kurdish NGOs by denying them registration permits or bringing security charges against persons working with such organizations. The government did not allow Kurds to register most Kurdish names for their children in official registries. Authorities did not prohibit speaking the Kurdish language, but authorities prohibited most schools from teaching it, although President Rouhani announced in August the first Kurdish language higher education program at the University of Kurdistan.

According to a Kurdish news organization, on January 6, authorities charged a Kurdish man, Sabir Moklid Moane, with “moharebeh,” for his membership in the Democratic Kurdish Party after holding him without trial in Urumia Prison for two years in cells with violent criminals.

According to online activists, Ghasem Ahmadi, a Kurdish journalist and editor of the previously banned Tehran University publication *Rozhaf*, started his two-year sentence in Mahabad Prison in January.

International human rights observers, including the IHRDC, stated that the country’s estimated two million Ahvazi Arabs faced continued oppression and discrimination. The UN special rapporteur’s August report stated that authorities arrested and later released approximately 1,000 persons on March 17 for protesting the plight of Younes Asakere, an Arab from Khorramshahr, who set himself on fire in response to harassment by local authorities and who allegedly died after being denied medical treatment. Authorities also arrested nearly 100 Ahvazi Arabs, including activists and several minors, in the spring following peaceful protests in the period prior to the 10th anniversary of the Ahvazi uprising.

Ethnic Azeris, who numbered approximately 13 million persons, or 16 percent of the population, were well integrated into government and society and included the supreme leader among their numbers. Azeris reported the government nevertheless discriminated against them by prohibiting the Azeri language in schools, harassing Azeri activists or organizers, and changing Azeri geographic names. IRGC forces announced the arrest of 170 residents of Gilan Province on November 10, for “inciting Azeri-language speakers,” but did not release their identities or any additional information.

Local and international human rights groups alleged serious economic, legal, and cultural discrimination during the year against the predominantly ethnic Baluchi minority, estimated to be between 1.5 and two million persons. Areas with large Baluchi populations were severely underdeveloped and had limited access to education, employment, health care, and housing. The law limited Sunni Baluchis’ employment opportunities and political participation and caused them to be underrepresented in government positions. Baluchi journalists and human rights activists faced arbitrary arrest, physical abuse, and unfair trials.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The law criminalizes consensual same-sex sexual activity, which is punishable by death, flogging, or a lesser punishment. The law does not prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Security forces harassed, arrested, and detained individuals they suspected of being gay or transgender. In some cases security forces raided houses and monitored internet sites for information on LGBTI persons. Those accused of sodomy often faced summary trials, and evidentiary standards were not always met. Punishment for same-sex sexual activity between men was more severe than for such conduct between women.

The government censored all materials related to LGBTI problems. There were active, unregistered LGBTI NGOs in the country, but most activities to support the LGBTI community occurred outside the country. Hate crime laws or other criminal justice mechanisms do not exist to aid in the prosecution of bias-motivated crimes against members of the LGBTI community. International LGBTI NGOs reported that many young gay men faced harassment and abuse from family members, religious figures, school leaders, and community elders.

Authorities reportedly expelled some persons from universities for alleged same-sex sexual activity. Those dismissed from mandatory military service due to their sexual orientation received special exemption cards indicating the reason for their dismissal, which became the basis for later discrimination.

On September 17, police arrested several dozen persons in Shiraz after a raid on a social gathering. LGBTI rights organizations reported that police forced several individuals to undergo rectal examinations while in custody and that prison authorities beat many of them while incarcerated.

The law defines transgender persons as mentally ill, and the government provided transgender persons financial assistance in the form of grants of up to 45 million rial (\$1,506) and loans up to 55 million rial (\$1,841) to undergo gender-confirmation surgery. Additionally, the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare requires health insurers to cover the cost of gender-confirmation surgery. Individuals who underwent gender-confirmation surgery may petition a court for new identity documents with corrected gender data, which the government reportedly provided efficiently and transparently. Human rights activists and NGOs reported that authorities pressured some LGBTI persons to undergo gender-confirmation surgery to avoid legal and social consequences due to their sexual orientation or gender-identity ambiguity. The March report by the UN special rapporteur addressed concerns about the quality of the medical care in these surgeries.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Despite government programs to treat and provide financial and other assistance to persons with HIV/AIDS, international news sources and organizations reported that individuals known to be infected with HIV/AIDS faced widespread societal discrimination, including in schools and workplaces.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

There was some societal discrimination on linguistic grounds against groups whose native language was not Persian and on religious grounds against non-Shia persons, whether Sunni Muslims, Christians, Bahai, Zoroastrian, Jewish, or other heterodox religions. The existence of such discrimination, largely at the individual level, was difficult to determine.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The constitution provides for freedom of association, but neither the constitution nor labor laws specify trade union rights. The law states that workers may establish an Islamic labor council or a guild at any workplace, but the rights and responsibilities of these organizations fall significantly short of international standards for trade unions. In workplaces where workers have established an Islamic labor council, authorities do not permit any other form of worker representation. The law requires prior authorization for organizing and concluding collective agreements, and it does not provide for the right to strike. Strikes are prohibited in all sectors, although private-sector workers may conduct “peaceful” campaigns within the workplace. The law does not apply to establishments with fewer than five employees.

Authorities did not respect freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, and violations occurred. The government did not effectively enforce applicable laws. The government severely restricted freedom of association and interfered in worker attempts to organize. Antiunion discrimination occurred, and the government imprisoned, harassed, and restricted the activities of labor activists. The law does not prohibit antiunion discrimination and does not require reinstatement of workers fired for union activity.

The Interior Ministry; the Ministry of Labor, Cooperatives, and Social Welfare; and the Islamic Information Organization determined labor councils’ constitutions, operational rules, and election procedures. Administrative and judicial procedures were lengthy, and authorities subjected worker appeals to these bodies, when permitted, to lengthy delays. The Workers’ House remained the only officially authorized national labor organization. The Workers’ House leadership oversaw, granted permits, and coordinated activities with Islamic labor councils in industrial, agricultural, and service organizations with more than 35 employees. The government pressured workers to join the government-sponsored councils and banned all other labor organizations. According to the ICHRI, the labor councils, which consisted of representatives of workers and a representative of management, were essentially management-run unions that undermined workers’ efforts to maintain independent unions. The councils nevertheless sometimes could block layoffs and dismissals. Human rights organizations reported that employers routinely fired labor activists for trade union activities. There was no representative workers’ organization for noncitizen workers.

According to international media reports, security forces continued to respond to workers' attempts to organize or conduct strikes with arbitrary arrests and violence. Strikes and worker protests often prompted a heavy police response, and security forces routinely monitored major worksites. The International Trade Union Confederation expressed alarm during the year regarding increased repression of legitimate union activity.

Since April security forces detained five prominent members of the country's Teachers' Association, as well as the secretary general of the Teachers' Organization of Iran (see section 2.b., Freedom of Association).

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, but the government did not effectively enforce the law. Conditions indicative of forced labor sometimes occurred in the construction, domestic labor, and agricultural sectors, primarily among adult Afghan men. Family members and others forced children to work. The government made no significant effort to address forced labor during the year.

See also the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits employment of minors under the age of 15 and places restrictions on employment of minors under the age of 18, such as prohibiting hard labor or night work. The law does not apply to domestic labor and permits children to work in agriculture and some small businesses from the age of 12. The government did not adequately monitor or enforce laws pertaining to child labor, and child labor remained a serious problem.

Reportedly there were significant numbers of children, especially of Afghan descent, working as street vendors in major urban areas. Child labor was also reportedly used in the production of carpets. Children also worked as beggars, and there were reports that criminals forced some children into begging rings.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The constitution bars discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, and social status "in conformity with Islamic criteria," but the government did not effectively enforce these prohibitions. It further states that "everyone has the right to choose any occupation he wishes, if it is not contrary to Islam and the public interests, and does not infringe the rights of others."

The government made systematic efforts to limit women's access to the workplace. In September the Interior Ministry issued an order requiring all officials to hire only secretaries of their own gender. Women remained banned from working in coffee houses and from performing music alongside men with very limited exceptions made for traditional music. Women in many fields were restricted from working after 9 p.m. Hiring practices often discriminated against women, and the Ministry of Labor, Cooperatives, and Social Welfare issued guidelines during the year stating that men should be given preferential hiring status.

Discrimination occurred based on the above categories with respect to employment and occupation (see also section 6).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

According to the Iranian High Labor Council, the minimum wage is 7,124,240 rial (\$238) per month. This figure does not include supplemental allowances for housing, groceries, and child benefits. While the minimum wage represented a 17 percent increase over 2014, it did not keep pace with inflation, which was estimated at 35 percent for the same period. Domestic labor organizations published reports stating that workers' purchasing power eroded during the past few years, because yearly increases in the minimum wage have not kept pace with inflation since 2011.

The law establishes a maximum six-day, 44-hour workweek with a weekly rest day (normally Friday), at least 12 days of paid annual leave, and several paid public holidays. Any hours worked above that amount entitles a worker to overtime. The law mandates a payment above the hourly wage to employees for any accrued overtime. The law provides that overtime work is not compulsory. The law does not cover workers in workplaces with fewer than 10 workers, nor does it apply to noncitizens.

Many workers in the country continued to be employed on temporary contracts under which they lacked many protections available to full-time, noncontracted workers and could also be dismissed at any time without cause. Large numbers of workers employed in small workplaces or in the informal economy similarly lacked basic

protections. Low wages, nonpayment of wages, and lack of job security due to contracting practices continued to be major drivers for strikes and protests.

Employers sometimes subjected migrant workers, most often Afghans, to abusive working conditions, including below-minimum wages; nonpayment of wages; compulsory overtime; and summary deportation without access to food, water, or sanitation facilities during the deportation process. Informal employment of migrants was common in the construction, agriculture, transportation, retail, and textile sectors.

Little specific information was available regarding labor inspection and labor law enforcement. While the law provides for occupational health and safety standards, the government sometimes did not enforce these standards in the formal and informal sectors. Labor organizations inside and outside the country alleged that hazardous work environments resulted in the deaths of thousands of workers annually. Iran Human Rights reported that workplace deaths increased during the year.

Workers do not have the right to remove themselves from situations that endangered their health or safety without jeopardizing their employment. The Iranian Legal Medicine Organization reported that 650 workers died, and there were 10,109 injuries from March 21 to July 22. The security services sometimes intervened in worker strikes.

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