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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Iran

2012 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 92

Legal Environment: 30

Political Environment: 38

Economic Environment: 24

The government crackdown that followed the disputed 2009 presidential election continued in 2011, as scores of journalists were arrested, imprisoned, threatened, and beaten. The government continued the use tactics such as intimidation and harassment, unfair trials, and limits on means to establish independent outlets to restrict the media environment in Iran, which remained one of the most repressive in the world.

Constitutional provisions and laws restrict what can be covered in the press and fail to provide protections for the media. In addition, the government regularly invokes vaguely worded legislation to criminalize dissenting opinions. The Press Law forbids the publication of ideas that are contrary to Islamic principles or detrimental to public rights. Article 500 of the penal code states that anyone who undertakes any form of propaganda against the state will be sentenced to between three months and a year in prison, but the code leaves "propaganda" undefined. Under Article 513, certain offenses deemed to be an "insult to religion" are punishable by death, or prison terms of one to five years for lesser offenses, with "insult" similarly undefined. In 2010, the government broadened the definition of the crime of *moharebeh*, or "enmity against God," in order to convict activists and journalists. Other articles provide sentences of up to 2 years in prison, up to 74 lashes, or fines for those convicted of intentionally creating "anxiety and unease in the public's mind," spreading "false rumors," writing about "acts that are not true," and criticizing state officials; however, many prison sentences have been arbitrarily harsh, ranging from 6 to 10 years or more.

The Iranian judiciary frequently denies accused journalists due process by referring their cases to the Islamic Revolutionary Court (IRC), an emergency venue intended for those suspected of seeking to overthrow the regime. Cases against journalists before the IRC have featured closed-door hearings and denial of access to an attorney or a fair jury. In July 2010, Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani, a member of the powerful Assembly of Experts, forbade lawyers from defending political suspects, making it difficult for members of the legal profession to assist arrested journalists. Several prominent human rights lawyers who have defended political activists, including journalists, have themselves been prosecuted in recent years.

Amid strict censorship rules, officials in 2011 continued to shut down newspapers and other publications, especially if they covered the opposition, women's rights, ethnic issues, or any other topic the government deemed unacceptable. In September, two Iranian publications that printed articles critical of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's policies were closed. *Shahrvand-e Emrooz*, a weekly reformist news magazine, was shut down for violating press laws, while a leading reformist daily, *Rouzegar*, was temporarily closed for publishing antiregime propaganda. *Etemad*, the leading reformist newspaper, was banned in November for two months after publishing an interview with Ahmadinejad's press adviser, Ali Akbar Javanfekr. In the interview, Javanfekr – who was also the chief executive of the official Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) – criticized hardliners who opposed the Iranian president. The authorities said the paper had been shut down for "publishing falsehoods and insulting public officials." In order to remain in business, many news outlets and journalists practice self-censorship and abide by official restrictions. In addition to the print media, the government has targeted journalists' associations and civil society organizations that support freedom of expression. The authorities also use official or loyalist media outlets to propagate false claims about activists. The semiofficial Fars News Agency often publishes fabricated confessions or resignations, while IRNA continues to monitor articles produced by Fars prior to publication to ensure that they do not violate its rules or contain prohibited information.

International media are unable to operate freely, have been accused by the authorities of fomenting the unrest surrounding the presidential election in 2009, and are often punished for airing criticism of the government. In February 2011, two German reporters from *Bild am Sonntag* were released from prison after having been charged with espionage for reporting on the case of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani, an Iranian woman sentenced to death by stoning for allegedly committing adultery. The government requires all foreign correspondents to provide detailed itineraries and proposed stories before visas are granted, and visas are regularly denied to foreign reporters who have previously been critical of the regime. On February 18, Mohammad Javad Aghajari, who is in charge of foreign press in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, said his ministry monitors the foreign press and warned foreign reporters about dispatching what he called "negative news" on a daily basis.

According to a December 2011 report by the Committee to Protect Journalists, Iran has more journalists behind bars than any other country in the world. Of the 179 writers, editors, and photojournalists imprisoned worldwide, 42 are in Iran. Arrests and detentions soared after opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi called for street marches in solidarity with other protest movements in the region in 2011. The government reacted by clamping down on the media and placing both opposition leaders under house arrest. Kouhyar Goudarzi, a veteran journalist for the Committee of Human Rights Reporters (CHRR) who had completed a one-year prison term in December 2010, was seized by suspected government agents in July 2011 and taken to an undisclosed location. By October, Goudarzi was supposedly being held by the Intelligence Ministry. In addition, on October 5, authorities arrested four reformist journalists – Medhi Afsharnik, Ali Akrami, Mohamed Heydari, and Mohsen Hakim – on charges of disseminating "propaganda against the regime." All four were reportedly released on bail several weeks later, and their cases were pending at year's end. Numerous accounts of abuse in custody have been recorded, and many prisoners were said to have been tortured to extract confessions. The crackdown has prompted an exodus of journalists from Iran.

In addition to arresting large numbers of journalists, the government continued to impose excessive sentences during the year, including lengthy prison terms and professional bans. Saeed Jalalifar, a reporter on child labor and political prisoner issues for the CHRR, had first been arrested in December 2009. He was free on bail for more than a year before being summoned back to Evin Prison – notorious for its harsh conditions – in July 2011. The opposition website *Pars Daily News* reported that Jalalifar had been sentenced to three years in prison on charges of "assembly and collusion against the regime." Numerous journalists have been detained for varying periods of time since 2009 in connection with their work in exposing human rights violations and government malfeasance. Blogger and political activist Hossein Ronaghi Maleki, who was arrested in December 2009 and sentenced to 15 years in prison, has reportedly been subjected to severe abuse in prison.

Given the limited distribution of print media outside large cities, radio and television serve as the principal sources of news for many citizens, with more than 80 percent of residents receiving their news from television. Article 175 of the constitution forbids private broadcasting. The government maintains a monopoly on all domestic broadcast media and presents only the official political and religious viewpoints. The newspapers with the widest circulation and influence adhere to a conservative editorial position or are directly operated by the government. A state-run English-language satellite station, Press TV, was launched in 2007. Leaders of the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) also announced their intent to launch a trilingual (Persian, Arabic, and English) news agency modeled on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) or the Associated Press. The IRGC already largely controls the Fars News Agency. An increasing number of people own satellite dishes and access international news sources, though this is technically forbidden and the confiscation of satellite dishes is known to occur. In May 2011, the government tightened their control over illicit satellite dishes and confiscated more than 2,000 of them in a single day. The IRGC reportedly has a budget of \$10 million dedicated to jamming stations in Tehran and other cities. Iran has repeatedly jammed BBC Persian TV since it was founded in 2009. The channel is considered such a threat that a website identical in design to that of BBC Persian has been created to spread allegations against BBC employees. The fake site uses a .ir domain name, which cannot be used without government permission. Reporting on BBC Persian has challenged government versions of both the domestic political scene and its troubled relationship with the West. Iranian officials often cite the work of the channel as evidence of a foreign plot against the regime.

Approximately 21 percent of the population had regular access to the internet in 2011. However, the regime imposes systematic controls on the internet and other digital technologies. According to the OpenNet Initiative, the Iranian government has become one of the most sophisticated and pervasive filterers of online content in the world, and it has the technological capability to produce its own monitoring and filtering software. According to a parliamentary commission investigating Iran's privatization process, a private corporation linked to the IRGC bought 51 percent of the Telecommunications Company of Iran in October 2009 with little outside competition. The government retains direct ownership of the remaining portion. The transaction gave the IRGC control over Iran's telephone systems – both the fixed-line network and the two mobile phone companies – as well as internet service providers. The government is also taking steps to restrict access to the internet. Connection speeds have been slower, and authorities cut off service during critical moments in 2011, such as the February anniversary of the 1979 revolution. In addition, the government carefully monitors social-media websites such as YouTube and Twitter, and regularly restricts access to Facebook before any protest.

In April 2011, the government announced that it would be launching a local intranet service known as Halal Internet. According to the deputy minister for economic affairs, Ali Agha Mohammadi, the Halal Internet project is expected to be completed in 2012. Mohammadi confirmed that Halal Internet would be extensively censored and monitored by the Iranian authorities, though the government claims that Iranians will continue to have access to the internet as a whole.

Blogs and online news websites – particularly those in the Persian language – were increasingly targeted for censorship during the year, and independent or antigovernment bloggers were subject to harassment. In November 2011, blogger Rojin Mohammadi was arrested on undetermined charges. The CHRR found that Mohammadi had been arrested when she arrived at Tehran airport for a visit on November 14. She was released on bail after 24 hours, but was arrested again a few days later, and continued to be held in Evin Prison at year's end.

Although subject to a more aggressive range of threats and restrictions in 2011, the internet still provided a key platform for informing the Iranian public, and online media remained a source of diverse news coverage and analysis. In an acknowledgment of its inability to completely silence online dissent, the regime has stepped up its efforts to hack sites – including those based abroad – that it cannot disable by other means, and to foster the large-scale creation of progovernment blogs, commentary, and news content.

