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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA CENSORSHIP AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

SHARE

## Iran's 'year of shame': More than 7,000 arrested in chilling crackdown on dissent during 2018

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The Iranian authorities carried out a shameless campaign of repression during 2018, crushing protests and arresting thousands in a wide-scale crackdown on dissent, said Amnesty International, a year after a wave of protests against poverty, corruption and authoritarianism erupted across the country.

The organization has today revealed staggering new figures showing the extent of the Iranian authorities' repression during 2018. Over the course of the year, more than 7,000 protesters, students, journalists, environmental activists, workers and human rights defenders, including lawyers, women's rights activists, minority rights activists and trade unionists, were arrested, many arbitrarily. Hundreds were sentenced to prison terms or flogging and at least 26 protesters were killed. Nine people arrested in connection with protests [died in custody](#) under suspicious circumstances.

"2018 will go down in history as a 'year of shame' for Iran. Throughout the year Iran's authorities sought to stifle any sign of dissent by stepping up their crackdown on the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and carrying out mass arrests of protesters," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Research and Advocacy Director.

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Philip Luther, MENA Research and Advocacy Director at Amnesty International

Throughout the year and particularly during the months of January, [July](#) and [August](#), the Iranian authorities violently dispersed peaceful demonstrations, beating unarmed protesters and using live ammunition, tear gas and water cannons against them. Thousands of people were arbitrarily arrested and detained.

Some of those swept up in the wave of arrests during the January protests were students, human rights defenders and journalists. Also targeted were the managers of channels on the popular mobile messaging application Telegram, which was used to disseminate news about the protests and to mobilize demonstrators.

Overall in 2018, whether in the context of protests or as a result of their work 11 lawyers, 50 media workers and 91 students were detained arbitrarily.

At least 20 media workers were sentenced to harsh prison or flogging sentences after unfair trials. One journalist, Mohammad Hossein Sodagar, from the Azerbaijani Turkic ethnic minority, was flogged 74 times in the city of Khoy in West Azerbaijan province after being convicted of “spreading lies”. Another media worker, Mostafa Abdi, who is an administrator of the Majzooban-e-Noor website, which reports on human rights abuses against the Gonabadi Dervish religious minority, was sentenced to 26 years and three months in prison, 148 lashes, and other punishments.

In addition, at least 112 women human rights defenders were arrested or remained in detention in Iran during 2018.

## Women's rights defenders

Throughout 2018, brave women's rights defenders across the country joined an unprecedented protest movement against the abusive and discriminatory [forced hijab \(veiling\) laws](#) in Iran. Women took to the streets and stood on top of raised structures in public places, silently waving their headscarves on the ends of sticks. In response, they suffered a bitter [backlash](#) from the authorities, facing violent assault, arrest and torture and other ill-treatment. Some were sentenced to prison terms after grossly unfair trials.





*A woman peacefully protesting against forced hijab in the city of Karaj, Alborz Province. © White Wednesdays Campaign*

Shaparak Shajarizadeh was sentenced to 20 years in prison, 18 of which were suspended, for her peaceful protest against forced *hijab*. She fled Iran after she was released on bail and has since described in media interviews how she was subjected to torture and other ill-treatment in solitary confinement and denied access to her lawyer.

[Nasrin Sotoudeh](#), a prominent human rights lawyer and women's rights defender, who represented Shaparak Shajarizadeh, was herself arrested on 13 June 2018 for defending protesters against forced *hijab*. She faces several national security-related charges which could see her sentenced to more than a decade in prison, in addition to the five-year sentence she is already serving for her work against the death penalty.

"Throughout 2018, the Iranian authorities waged a particularly sinister crackdown against women's rights defenders. Instead of cruelly punishing women for demanding their rights, the authorities should put an end to the rampant and entrenched discrimination and violence they face," said Philip Luther.

## Workers' rights and trade unionists

The year 2018 also saw Iran engulfed in a deepening economic crisis which triggered numerous strikes and spurred workers to take to the streets in their thousands to call for better working conditions and protections by the government. Delays and non-payment of wages amidst high levels of inflation, skyrocketing living costs and poor working conditions also provoked protests.

Instead of addressing their complaints, however, the Iranian authorities arrested at least 467 workers, including teachers, truck drivers and factory workers, summoned others for questioning and subjected many to torture and other ill-treatment. Dozens were sentenced to prison terms. Iranian courts also handed down flogging sentences amounting to a total of nearly 3,000 lashes against 38 workers.

On 10 May, the Iranian authorities violently dispersed a peaceful protest by teachers in Tehran, who were calling for higher wages and better funding of the country's public education system. By

the end of the year, the authorities had arrested at least 23 teachers following nationwide strikes in October and November. Eight were sentenced to between nine months and 10 and a half years in prison, 74 lashes each, and other penalties.

Throughout the year, at least 278 truck drivers were arrested and some threatened with the death penalty after they took part in nationwide strikes demanding better working conditions and higher wages. Following strikes in February and November, dozens of striking workers from the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane Company in Shush, south-west Iran, were arrested.

**“ From underpaid teachers to factory workers struggling to feed their families, those who have dared to demand their rights in Iran today have paid a heavy price ”**

Philip Luther, MENA Research and Advocacy Director at Amnesty International

“From underpaid teachers to factory workers struggling to feed their families, those who have dared to demand their rights in Iran today have paid a heavy price. Instead of ensuring workers’ demands are heard, the authorities have responded with heavy handedness, mass arrests and repression,” said Philip Luther.

## Ethnic and religious minorities

During 2018, Iran also intensified its discriminatory crackdowns against religious and ethnic minorities by arbitrarily arresting and imprisoning hundreds, and curtailing their access to education, employment and other services.

Members of Iran’s largest Sufi order, the Gonabadi Dervish religious minority, faced a particularly vicious crackdown after a peaceful protest they held in February 2018 was violently quashed. Hundreds were arrested and more than 200 were sentenced to a total of 1,080 years in prison, 5,995 lashes as well as internal “exile”, travel bans, and bans on joining political and social groups. One person, Mohammad Salas, was sentenced to death after a grossly unfair trial and swiftly executed.

At least 171 Christians were arrested in 2018 solely for peacefully practising their faith, according to the organization Article 18. Some received sentences of up to 15 years in prison.

The authorities also continued their systematic persecution of the Baha’i religious minority, arbitrarily detaining at least 95, according to the organization Baha’i International Community, and committing other abuses against them.

Hundreds of people from ethnic minority groups including Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds and Turkmen have also faced human rights abuses including discrimination and arbitrary detention.

Hundreds of Ahwazi Arabs were rounded up after protests in April over a state TV broadcast which excluded Ahwazi Arabs from a map showing the location of Iran's ethnic minorities. In October, following a deadly armed attack on a military parade in Ahvaz the previous month, more than 700 Ahwazi Arabs were detained incommunicado according to activists outside Iran.

Hundreds of Azerbaijani Turks, including minority rights activists, were also violently arrested in connection with peaceful cultural gatherings throughout the year, including in July and August, when at least 120 people were arrested. Some activists were sentenced to prison terms and flogging. Minority rights activist Milad Akbari was flogged in the city of Tabriz, East Azerbaijan province, after he was convicted of "disrupting public order" through "taking part in illegal gatherings and singing eccentric songs" at a cultural gathering.

**"Governments which are engaged in dialogue with Iran must not stay silent while the net of repression rapidly widens"**

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## Environmental rights activists

At least 63 environmental activists and researchers were arrested in 2018, according to media reports. The Iranian authorities accused a number of them, without providing any evidence, of collecting classified information about Iran's strategic areas under the pretext of carrying out environmental and scientific projects. At least five were charged with "corruption on earth", which carries the death penalty.

"Throughout 2018 the Iranian authorities have sought to crush the spirits of protesters and human rights defenders demanding respect for human rights by carrying out mass arrests and even grotesque flogging sentences," said Philip Luther.

"Governments which are engaged in dialogue with Iran must not stay silent while the net of repression rapidly widens. They must speak out in the strongest terms against the crackdown and forcefully call on the Iranian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all those jailed for peacefully expressing their right to freedom of expression, association and assembly, including through their human rights activism."

## Topics

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

IRAN

CENSORSHIP AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

WOMEN AND GIRLS

## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND ACTIVISTS