



Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

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Iran (2006)

Polity:

No polity available

Political Rights:

6

Civil Liberties:

6

Status:

Not Free

Population:

69,500,000

GNI/Capita:

\$2,010

Life Expectancy:

70

Religious Groups:

Shia Muslim (89 percent), Sunni Muslim (9 percent), other (2 percent)

Ethnic Groups:

Persian (51 percent), Azeri (24 percent), Gilaki and Mazandarani (8 percent), Kurd (7 percent), Arab (3 percent), other (7 percent)

Capital:

Tehran

Additional Info:

[Freedom in the World 2005](#)

[Freedom of the Press 2005](#)

[Nations in Transit 2004](#)

[Countries at the Crossroads 2005](#)

Overview

Political and civil liberties in Iran continued to deteriorate in 2005. The ruling clerical establishment engineered the election of a conservative president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, setting in motion a purge of reformers throughout the executive branch. Meanwhile, tensions between Iran and the West increased substantially due to Tehran's refusal to suspend its efforts to develop advanced nuclear technologies, suspected to be part of a covert nuclear weapons program.

In 1979, Iran witnessed a tumultuous revolution that ousted a hereditary monarchy marked by widespread corruption and brought into power the exiled cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The constitution drafted by Khomeini's disciples provided for a president and parliament elected through universal adult suffrage; however, an unelected clerical body, the Council of Guardians, was empowered to approve electoral candidates and certify that the decisions of elected officials are in accord with Sharia (Islamic law). Khomeini was named Supreme Leader and invested with control over the security and intelligence services, armed forces, and judiciary. After his death in 1989, the role of Supreme Leader passed to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a middle-ranking cleric who lacked the religious credentials and popularity of his predecessor. The constitution was changed to consolidate his power and give him final authority on all matters of foreign and domestic policy.

Beneath its veneer of religious probity, the Islamic Republic gave rise to a new elite that accumulated wealth through opaque and unaccountable means. By the mid-1990s, dismal economic conditions and a demographic trend toward a younger population had created widespread hostility to clerical rule. A coalition of reformers began to emerge within the ruling elite, advocating a gradual process of political reform, economic liberalization, and normalization with the outside world that was designed to legitimize, not radically alter, the current political system.

Representing this coalition, former culture minister Mohammed Khatami was elected president in 1997 with nearly 70 percent of the vote. Khatami's administration made considerable strides over the next few years in expanding public freedom. More than 200 independent newspapers and magazines representing a diverse array of viewpoints were established, and the authorities relaxed the enforcement of strict Islamic restrictions on social interaction

between unmarried men and women. Reformists won 80 percent of the seats in the country's first nationwide municipal elections in 1999 and took the vast majority of seats in parliamentary elections the following year, gaining the power to legislate major reforms.

The 2000 parliamentary elections prompted a backlash by hard-line clerics that continues to this day. Over the next four years, the conservative-controlled judiciary closed more than 100 reformist newspapers and jailed hundreds of liberal journalists and activists, while security forces cracked down ruthlessly on student protests against these measures. Significant political and economic reforms were overwhelmingly approved by parliament, only to be vetoed by the Council of Guardians.

Despite being reelected with 78 percent of the vote in 2001, Khatami did not use his popular mandate to challenge the country's ruling theocrats, ignoring recurrent pleas by reformist members of parliament to call a national referendum to approve vetoed reform legislation and repeatedly imploring citizens to refrain from demonstrating in public. Within the broader reform movement, Khatami was accused of not just being ineffective, but also of willingly serving as a democratic façade for an oppressive regime. Many Iranians abandoned hopes that the political system could be changed from within. Record low turnout for the February 2003 municipal elections resulted in a landslide victory by hard-liners and showed that the ability of reformist politicians to mobilize the public had deteriorated markedly.

Hard-liners triumphed in the February 2004 parliamentary elections after the Council of Guardians rejected the candidacies of most reformist politicians, including scores of incumbents. Emboldened by this electoral triumph, the clerical establishment quickly moved to further restrict public freedom. Several major reformist newspapers were closed, while dozens of journalists and civil society activists were arrested during the year as the authorities attacked the country's last refuge of free expression-the internet. In October, the head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahrudi, announced that "anyone who disseminates information aimed at disturbing the public mind through computer systems" would be jailed. The government also launched a crackdown on "social corruption," sending thousands of morality police and vigilantes into the streets to enforce Islamic dress codes and prevent public mingling of men and women.

The June 2005 presidential election swept away the last bastion of reformist political power in Iran. While the Council of Guardians ensured a reactionary outcome by rejecting the candidacies of popular reformers, the victory of Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over other approved candidates in a two-round runoff election reflected popular desires for a change in the status quo. The son of a blacksmith, Ahmadinejad dresses modestly and lives in a working-class neighborhood. As Iran's first nonclerical president, he campaigned on promises to fight elite corruption and redistribute Iran's oil wealth to the poor and middle class.

Ahmadinejad signaled his intent to further erode political and civil liberties by

awarding the powerful ministries of Information and the Interior to hard-liners who have been implicated directly in the extrajudicial killings of dissidents and other egregious human rights abuses. He quickly began a wide-ranging purge of the administration, including sacking 40 of Iran's most experienced diplomats and 7 state bank directors. The new president and many of the new faces are veterans of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), inspired more by militant anti-Western nationalism than by strictly theological dogma. His government tightened restrictions on foreign films and announced plans to impose more stringent controls on books, local films, and theater; however, it did not initiate a major rollback of the social liberalization Iran has witnessed over the past eight years. While the new president spent much time traveling around the country to meet with ordinary Iranians, he did not initiate any of the sweeping structural changes he promised during the election (such as shutting down Tehran's "ungodly" stock exchange).

The most significant impact of Ahmadinejad's ascension was felt in Iran's foreign policy. After two years of efforts by Britain, France, and Germany to convince Tehran to permanently halt its uranium-enrichment and plutonium-reprocessing programs, the new administration rejected a European Union (EU) package of economic incentives in August 2005 and resumed uranium conversion work. The following month, the International Atomic Energy Agency ruled that Iran was in "noncompliance" with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, raising the prospect that it will be censured by the UN Security Council. Rather than aiming to allay fears that Iran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons, Ahmadinejad seemed intent on enflaming them, declaring in September that Iran is "ready to transfer nuclear know-how to Islamic countries" and, in October, that Israel "must be wiped off the map." In view of Ahmadinejad's confrontation with the West, fear of appearing unpatriotic reinforced a trend toward self-censorship in the Iranian media and inhibited public criticism of the president.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Iranians cannot change their government democratically. The most powerful figure in the Iranian government is the Supreme Leader (Vali-e-Faghih), currently Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamenei; he is chosen for life by the Assembly of Experts, a clerics-only body whose members are elected to eight-year terms by popular vote from a government-screened list of candidates. The Supreme Leader is commander in chief of the armed forces and appoints the leaders of the judiciary, the heads of state broadcast media, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Expediency Council, and half the members of the Council of Guardians. Although the president and parliament are responsible for designating cabinet ministers, the Supreme Leader exercises de facto control over appointments to the ministries of Defense, Interior, and Intelligence.

All candidates for election to the presidency and the 290-seat unicameral parliament are vetted for strict allegiance to the ruling theocracy and adherence to Islamic principles by the 12-person Council of Guardians, a body of 6 clergymen appointed by the Supreme Leader and 6 laymen selected by the

head of the judiciary chief (the latter are nominally subject to parliamentary approval). The Council of Guardians also has the power to reject legislation approved by parliament; disputes between the two are arbitrated by the Expediency Council, another non-elected, conservative-dominated body, currently headed by former president Ali Akbar Rafsanjani.

The legitimacy of the June 2005 presidential election was undermined by the Council of Guardians' rejection of all but 8 of the 1,014 candidates who registered to run. Numerous irregularities, such as intimidation of voters by the military and hardline vigilantes, were reported in both rounds, but there was little evidence of systemic fraud.

Corruption is pervasive. The hard-line clerical establishment has grown immensely wealthy through its control of tax-exempt foundations (bonyads) that monopolize many sectors of the economy, such as cement and sugar production. Iran was ranked 88 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is limited. The government directly controls all television and radio broadcasting. Satellite dishes are illegal, though widely tolerated, and the authorities have had some success in jamming broadcasts by dissident overseas satellite stations. The Ministry of Culture must approve publication of all books and inspects foreign books prior to domestic distribution. The Press Court has extensive procedural and jurisdictional power in prosecuting journalists, editors, and publishers for such vaguely worded offenses as "insulting Islam" and "damaging the foundations of the Islamic Republic." The authorities frequently issue ad hoc gag orders banning media coverage of specific topics and events. The government systematically censors internet content by forcing internet service providers (ISPs) to block access to a growing list of "immoral sites and political sites that insult the country's political and religious leaders."

At least eight newspapers were suspended or closed by the authorities in 2005, and those that remained open were intimidated into practicing self-censorship. At least a dozen journalists and bloggers (writers of internet journals known as "weblogs," or "blogs") were indicted or convicted of press offenses during the year, and many more were summoned for questioning about their writings. In January, the authorities closed down one of the country's leading ISPs for violating filtering restrictions. In October, the Supreme Cultural Revolutionary Council, a body of clerics handpicked by the Supreme Leader, issued a ban on foreign films that promote immorality, violence, drug usage, liquor consumption, secularism, liberalism, anarchy, or feminism.

Religious freedom is limited in Iran, which is largely Shiite Muslim with a small Sunni Muslim minority. Shiite clerics who dissent from the ruling establishment are frequently harassed. Sunnis enjoy equal rights under the law, but there are some indications of discrimination, such as the absence of a Sunni mosque in Tehran and the paucity of Sunnis in senior government offices. The constitution recognizes Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as religious minorities and generally allows them to worship without interference so long as they do not

proselytize. However, they are barred from election to representative bodies (though a set number of parliamentary seats are reserved for them), cannot hold senior government or military positions, and face restrictions in employment, education, and property ownership. Some 300,000 Baha'is, Iran's largest non-Muslim minority, enjoy virtually no rights under the law and are banned from practicing their faith. Hundreds of Baha'is have been executed since 1979. In February, a military officer was discharged and sentenced to three years in prison for "deceiving the armed forces" about his conversion to Christianity.

Academic freedom in Iran is limited. Scholars are frequently detained for expressing political views, and students involved in organizing protests often face suspension or expulsion by university disciplinary committees. In the months following his election, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad replaced the heads of at least a dozen major universities. The appointment of a conservative cleric, Ayatollah Abbasali Amid Zanjani, as head of Tehran University in November touched off a protest by hundreds of students.

The constitution permits the establishment of political parties, professional syndicates, and other civic organizations, provided they do not violate the principles of "freedom, sovereignty and national unity" or question the Islamic basis of the republic. The Iran Freedom Movement was banned in 2002 on such grounds. In 2005, at least three prominent dissidents were prevented by the authorities from traveling abroad, and at least two such dissidents were attacked and severely injured by unidentified assailants. Abdolfattah Soltani, a prominent human rights lawyer and co-founder of the Center for Defense of Human Rights, was arrested in July and detained throughout the year without formal charge.

The 1979 constitution prohibits public demonstrations that "violate the principles of Islam," a vague provision used to justify the heavy-handed dispersal of assemblies and marches. Hard-line vigilante organizations unofficially sanctioned by the conservative establishment—most notably the Basij and Ansar-i Hezbollah—play a major role in dispersing public demonstrations. In July, police forcibly dispersed a demonstration protesting the continued imprisonment of dissident Akbar Ganji, beating dozens of people with batons.

Iranian law does not allow independent labor unions to exist, though workers' councils are represented in the government-sanctioned Workers' House, the country's only legal labor federation. While strikes and work stoppages were not uncommon in 2005, the authorities forcibly dispersed demonstrations that criticized national economic policies. In April, an employee of the Iran Khodro automobile plant involved in protesting its labor policies was arrested and remained in prison without charge at year's end. In September, seven leaders of a Tehran bus workers' union were arrested during a strike and charged with disturbing public order. In November, five labor activists in the city of Saqqez were sentenced to two or more years in prison for involvement in illegal union activities.

The judicial system is not independent, as the Supreme Leader directly appoints

the head of the judiciary, who in turn appoints senior judges. General Courts ostensibly safeguard the rights of defendants, but in practice suspects are frequently tried in closed sessions and without access to legal counsel. Political and other sensitive cases are tried before Revolutionary Courts, where due process protections are routinely disregarded and trials are often summary, lasting as little as five minutes. Dissident clerics are tried before the Special Court for the Clergy. The penal code is based on Sharia and provides for flogging, stoning, amputation, and death for a range of social and political offenses; these punishments are carried out in practice.

Although the constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, these practices are very common and increasingly routine. Suspected dissidents are often held in unofficial, illegal detention centers, and allegations of torture are common. Although legislation banning the use of torture in interrogations was promulgated in 2004, allegations of torture persisted in 2005.

There are few laws that discriminate against ethnic minorities, who are permitted considerable cultural and linguistic freedom. However, ethnic Kurds, Arabs, and Azeris complain of political and economic discrimination. Kurdish opposition groups suspected of separatist aspirations, such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), are brutally suppressed. In April, security forces clashed with Arab protestors in the province of Khuzestan, which resulted in more than 50 reported deaths. In July, Kurdish political activist Shivan Qaderi was shot and killed in Mahabad by Iranian security forces, who reportedly tied his corpse to a military vehicle and dragged it around the city. Protests against the murder erupted throughout the western province of Kurdistan for over three weeks. Security forces killed at least 17 people and arrested hundreds. In September, two Kurds were executed for alleged links to separatist organizations.

Although women enjoy the same political rights as men and currently hold several seats in parliament and one of Iran's vice presidencies, they face discrimination in legal and social matters. A woman cannot obtain a passport without the permission of a male relative or her husband, and women do not enjoy equal rights under Sharia statutes governing divorce, inheritance, and child custody. A woman's testimony in court is given only half the weight of a man's. Women must conform to strict dress codes and are segregated from men in most public places.