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Status: Not Free
Total Score: 85/100 (0 = Best, 100 = Worst)
Population: 81,162,788
Internet Penetration: 60.4%
Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked: Yes
Political/Social Content Blocked: Yes
Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested: Yes
Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Key Developments, June 1, 2017 – May 31, 2018

- In January, at the height of antigovernment protests across the country, authorities slowed down internet connections and at times completely blocked access to servers and data outside Iran (see Restrictions on Connectivity).
- Telegram and Instagram were blocked by authorities in response to the protests. While both blocks were lifted by mid-January, Telegram was permanently blocked in April for being a threat to national security (see Blocking and Filtering).
- New regulations entitled "Policies and Actions Regarding the Organization of Social Media Messaging Applications" released in August 2017 outline legal activities for messaging apps operating in Iran and formalize previous demands that foreign messaging apps work with Iranian authorities to obtain licenses and move their data centers inside Iran (see Legal Environment).
- Though prosecutions for online activities led to shorter prison sentences compared to previous years, six admins of reformist-aligned Telegram channels were sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to five years in August 2017. Several other Telegram admins were arrested for various activities, using charges such as encouraging protests or promoting homosexuality (see Prosecutions and Arrests for Online Activities).

Introduction:

Internet freedom remained highly restricted in Iran over the past year due to the disrupting of internet connectivity and blocking of social media platforms in response to antigovernment protests.

In late December 2017, protesters took the streets in the city of Mashhad to vocalize discontent with the country's flagging economy and the soaring prices of basic goods. Within a week, the protests spread to several other cities, becoming the largest expression of dissatisfaction with the government since the nationwide protests against the 2009 presidential election results.

In response, authorities throttled and at times shut down mobile and internet networks; they also blocked access to the messaging app Telegram and photo-sharing platform Instagram for at least one week. Later in April 2018, the government blocked Telegram completely under the pretext of national security; hard-liners within the Islamic regime argued that the platform supported terrorists and other dangerous groups. Telegram was then the most widely used social media and messaging app in the country, with an estimated 40 million users. Iranians employed the app to follow popular "channels," including those of local and foreign news organizations whose websites are blocked in the country. Following the ban, Iranian authorities pursued a policy to promote and financially support domestic messaging apps. Meanwhile, the long-standing filtering of the Chinese messaging app WeChat was reportedly lifted.

Authorities continued to arrest numerous individuals for their online activities in the past year, though convictions led to shorter prison sentences compared to previous years. Four Telegram admins were arrested in September 2017 in Baneh, Kurdistan Province, for allegedly encouraging protests. Six other Telegram admins were reportedly charged in September for "promoting homosexuality." Separately, six admins of reformist-aligned Telegram channels who were arrested around the May 2017 presidential election were sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to five years in August 2017.

Obstacles to Access:

Most improvements to internet freedom since the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 relate to access and the information and communication technology (ICT) market. The ICT Minister announced in July 2017 new plans for the country's national information network (SHOMA) to include the development of a national wireless network and an expansion of IP backbone projects, among other plans. Authorities slowed down internet connections and at times completely blocked access to servers and data outside Iran during antigovernment protests in January 2018.

Availability and Ease of Access

Internet penetration, bandwidth, and speeds have increased markedly in recent years due to immense investment in ICTs. Both the Iranian government and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimated internet penetration at approximately 60 percent in 2017.^[1] According to Iran's ICT minister, internet bandwidth increased from 724 to 4,000 Gbps during President Rouhani's first term. The ICT Ministry set a target of 12,000 Gbps by the end of 2017.^[2]

Both Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, and the parliament have warned the administration against increasing bandwidth before the country's national information network (SHOMA) is ready.^[3] SHOMA was defined in a 2011-16 development plan as "an IP-based internet supported by data centers that are completely undetectable and impenetrable by foreign sources and allow the creation of private, secure intranet networks."^[4] In addition to protecting against foreign cyberattacks like the "Stuxnet" malware virus, identified in 2010,^[5] SHOMA is

meant to improve internet access while moving much of the content and websites visited by Iranian users to domestic servers, where traffic can be closely monitored and censored by the authorities.

In July 2017, then ICT minister Mahmoud Vaezi – who later became the president's chief of staff – unveiled plans for the next phase of SHOMA at an event in the Tehran offices of the Mobile Telecommunication Company of Iran (MCI). The plans included development of the national wireless network, including 4.5G service in 710 cities; expansion of IP (internet protocol) backbone projects and fiber networks; expansion of the content delivery network (CDN) in Iran; and an agreement with Nokia for research and delivery of 5G mobile service.^[6]

The Rouhani administration has demonstrated a consistent commitment to developing SHOMA as part of its overall drive to boost connectivity. The deputy ICT minister claimed that domestic traffic accounted for 40 percent of all internet usage as of March 2017, up from only 10 percent one year earlier.^[7] The country's proposed ICT budget for 2017-18 was cut by 2 percent from the previous year, though the 2016-17 budget had increased by 113 percent. Similarly, the amount devoted to SHOMA rose by 1 percent, having increased the previous year by 44 percent.^[8]

Another welcome consequence of investment in ICT infrastructure through SHOMA is the expansion of internet connectivity to rural areas. The ICT Ministry reported that over 27,000 villages were connected to high-speed internet during the first four years of the Rouhani administration. Official figures claim that no rural villages were previously connected to high-speed internet.^[9] Vaezi noted in 2017 that there were plans to connect a further 18,000 villages to the internet.^[10]

Iranian private and state-backed companies have also been seeking foreign investment. In May 2017 it was announced that South Africa's MTN would invest US\$295 million to bring fiber-optic networks to the cities of Tehran, Karaj, Qom, Tabriz, Shiraz, Isfahan, Ahvaz, and Mashhad.^[11] MTN would control 49 percent of the Iranian Net Company, a consortium established in 2011 to deliver fiber-optic upgrades.^[12]

However, a move to prioritize local content through differential pricing threatens net neutrality, the principle that providers should not discriminate against certain types of content or services. In January 2017, Vaezi ordered internet service providers (ISPs) to implement a new "National Information Network Tariff" whereby certain domestic traffic is priced at a 50 percent discount.^[13] The discount initially applied when users accessed a list of 500 websites compiled by the Communications Regulatory Authority (CRA). The nongovernmental organization Small Media noted that the list favored semiofficial and government-run news sites at the expense of other, more popular news sites. Some ISPs also discounted access to websites that did not feature on the list.

As of May 2017, most providers of fixed-line internet service had reportedly implemented the discount, although only one mobile provider had done so.^[14] MTN Iran Cell clarified that customers using virtual private networks (VPNs) would not be eligible for the discount, even when browsing local traffic through a VPN.^[15]

In December 2017, Iran's new ICT minister, Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi, announced that the 50 percent discount would be extended to all domestic websites, not just those on the previously selected list.^[16]

Restrictions on Connectivity

The development of SHOMA and the state's control over the internet backbone provides the government with the ability to throttle foreign connection speeds during politically sensitive periods without crippling critical services.

At the height of antigovernment protests across the country in the first few days of January 2018, authorities slowed down internet connections and at times completely blocked access to servers and data outside Iran. The network monitor BGPmon noted in a tweet that international traffic temporarily dropped by nearly 50 percent on January 1.^[17] Small Media's *Filterwatch* found that "although the incident only lasted for 12 minutes, the timing of the event does suggest that traffic was being intentionally throttled, and that the state has the capacity to limit international traffic as it chooses."^[18] Iranian internet users during the same period reported major disruptions in access to servers hosted by the New York-based hosting company DigitalOcean, apparently caused by ISPs inside Iran.^[19]

The Telecommunications Infrastructure Company (TIC), a state-owned enterprise controlled by the ICT Ministry, retains a monopoly on internet traffic flowing in and out of Iran.^[20] In addition, the heavy influence of the Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI) in the ISP market grants the security apparatus the ability to control third-party ISPs and monitor online activities, since TCI's majority shareholder is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), an important branch of the security forces that also controls large portions of the economy.^[21] In January 2018, the supreme leader ordered the IRGC and other security forces to reduce any economic activities that are not related to their core missions,^[22] but the corps had made no move to withdraw from TCI as of May. In October (after the report's coverage period), the IRGC announced that it was selling its stake in the telecommunications giant.^[23]

ICT Market

The telecommunications industry is tightly controlled by the government or related entities. Direct access to the internet via satellite is only permitted for certain institutes and is prohibited for personal use. TCI owns the Data and Communication Company (DCC), the country's main ISP.

The mobile phone market is under similar state influence. MCI, a subsidiary of TCI, is the largest mobile provider.^[24] The second largest, MTN Irancell, is 49 percent owned by South Africa's MTN and 51 percent by Iran Electronics Industries, a subsidiary of the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics.^[25]

Regulatory Bodies

There is no independent regulatory body for ICTs in Iran. The CRA, which falls under the ICT Ministry, is responsible for telecommunications licensing. Its head is appointed by the ICT minister.^[26] The CRA has taken several actions to improve the quality of service and reduce prices for Iranian users. For example, it has awarded licenses that allowed new ISPs to enter the market, increasing consumer choice.^[27] In December 2015, the CRA compelled ISPs to implement quality-control measurements on the services they offer to customers.^[28] It has also pushed for internet infrastructure development, including an increase in the number of IP addresses available in Iran,^[29] and sought to expand internet access to thousands of rural villages.^[30]

The country's top internet policy body is the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC). The council was established through a 2012 decree from the supreme leader and is composed of 17 representatives from government institutions and 10 members appointed by Khamenei.^[31] It is intended to provide a centralized point for policymaking and the regulation of Iran's virtual space, effectively minimizing the roles of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the

government and bringing internet policy under Khamenei's direct control. Observers believe this reflected his dwindling trust in then president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to lead such an important policy area.

The SCC has been routinely criticized for being disorganized,^[32] not holding enough meetings,^[33] and not doing enough to encourage Iranians to use the internet in a "clean" and Islamic fashion.^[34] In September 2015, Khamenei consolidated the SCC's power over internet policy and made some personnel changes to the council. In April 2016, he dissolved the High Council of Informatics, the Supreme Council of Information, and the Supreme National Security Council of Information Exchange (AFTA), incorporating their responsibilities into the SCC.^[35]

Limits on Content:

Significant restrictions on content have been in place since 2009. Major international platforms like Facebook and Twitter remain blocked, and although newer social media and communication applications have generally been accessible, Telegram and Instagram faced government blocking efforts during the coverage period. Censorship decisions remain highly politicized, with both conservative and reformist news sites suffering censorship for failure to adhere to strict guidelines on coverage of sensitive political, social, and international issues. Self-censorship is pervasive, and overt digital activism is limited, though it has increased since the electoral campaigns of 2017.

Blocking and Filtering

The Iranian authorities restrict access to tens of thousands of websites, particularly those of international news services, the political opposition, ethnic and religious minority groups, and human rights organizations.^[36] Websites are also blocked if they differ from the official doctrine of the state regarding Islam, or from its chosen narrative on domestic or international politics. Frequently censored topics include friction among Iranian political institutions and the 2015 deal with world powers to limit Iran's nuclear program in exchange for eased economic sanctions.

Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Google are all blocked, in addition to major blog-hosting platforms like WordPress, Blogspot, and Blogger.^[37] Conservative leaders have repeatedly exerted pressure on the CDICC to block other prominent social media platforms, while President Rouhani has used his administration's six seats on the committee to push back. Apps and websites have been blocked over links to foreign countries, particularly the United States and Israel. For example, the navigation app Waze and messaging app Viber were first blocked in 2017 and 2014, respectively, for being developed in Israel.^[38] After authorities blocked Viber, Telegram became the most widely used messaging app in the country, with an estimated 40 million monthly users in 2017.^[39]

However, after Telegram launched free encrypted voice calling in April 2017, the feature was immediately blocked by all ISPs on an order from the prosecutor general.^[40] Other voice-over-IP services have not been blocked. Telegram messaging functions still worked after the incident, but security forces increasingly arrested reformist Telegram channel administrators and claimed to have removed thousands of "illegal" channels every week (see Content Removal, and Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).

On December 31, 2017, Telegram and Instagram were blocked by authorities in response to antigovernment street protests that began a few days before. Although the services were unblocked on January 13 and January 4, respectively,^[41] on April 26 it was announced that the SCC had ordered the closure of local CDN servers that hosted Telegram content.^[42] On April 30, a

prosecutor sitting on Iran's Media Court issued an order to filter Telegram, and eventually all normal access to Telegram was obstructed by ISP and mobile operators.^[43] Following the ban, Iranian authorities pursued a policy of financial support and promotion of domestic messaging apps.^[44] Meanwhile, long-standing filtering of the Chinese messaging app WeChat was reportedly lifted.^[45]

Internet censorship is highly politicized, often reflecting tensions between conservatives and reformists in the country. Instagram's live video feature was temporarily blocked in April 2017.^[46] Pro-Rouhani and reformist figures had been using the platform to broadcast nightly debates and cover campaign rallies in support of Rouhani's reelection the following month.^[47] No government body took responsibility for the blocking order. In November 2017, a website close to former president Ahmadinejad, *Dolat-e Bahar* ("Government of Spring"), was blocked by authorities.^[48]

Domestic news sites are frequently blocked for criticizing the government. In August 2016, *Memari News* was blocked on the order of the public prosecutor of Tehran after it published a letter from a judicial body to the Tehran municipality exposing corruption.^[49] In September of that year, *Borna News*, *Moj News*, and *Nasim News* were similarly blocked.^[50] In February 2017, the news website *Tadbir 24* had its filtering lifted, having been blocked in November 2016 for unclear reasons.^[51]

Censorship decisions are made by the Committee to Determine Instances of Criminal Content (CDICC), a government body headed by the prosecutor general and consisting of representatives from 12 state institutions. In theory, decisions are made on the basis of the 2009 Computer Crimes Law (CCL), which outlines a broad range of banned content, from insulting religious figures and government officials to distributing pornographic content and the use of illegal circumvention tools.^[52] In practice, little information is available about the inner workings of the committee, and censorship decisions are often arbitrary and not transparent.

Iranian authorities currently employ a centralized filtering system that can effectively block a website within a few hours across the entire network in Iran. Private ISPs are forced to either use the bandwidth provided by the government or route traffic containing site-visit requests through government-issued filtering boxes developed by software companies inside Iran. The filtering boxes inspect URL requests submitted by users for banned text strings – either keywords or domain names – and block access accordingly. This method only limits access to content retrieved through unencrypted HTTP connections. Individual pages remain available over an encrypted connection (HTTPS), which disguises the banned text, requiring censors to block the entire site in order to restrict access to specific content.

Officials continue to call for an "intelligent filtering" system, using deep-packet inspection (DPI) to allow them to block specific pages, but more services have enabled HTTPS browsing, making them resilient to keyword filtering. This has done little to dampen the enthusiasm for intelligent filtering, with Vaezi announcing a further investment of US\$66 million in the program in 2015-16.^[53] He also suggested that the country may transfer more censorship authority to ISPs as part of the next phase of SHOMA development.^[54] The move to empower ISPs may actually result in more repressive policies, given that the IRGC is a dominant owner in the ISP market, whereas reformists have some representation in the existing state policymaking structure for content management.

Content Removal

Iranian authorities employ administrative measures to remove unwanted content from the web. Content removals featured prominently during the 2017 presidential election period. According to

the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, hours after the Rouhani campaign published a video in which reformist former President Mohammad Khatami declared his support for Rouhani's reelection bid, campaign officials were told by the judiciary to delete the video from social media or face arrest.^[55]

The IRGC routinely arrested Telegram group administrators in order to coerce them to remove content or delete their channels from the platform (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities). This was prevalent in the months prior to the presidential election, when the reformist-aligned Telegram channels operated by *Eslahtalaban News*, *Eslahaat News*, *Majmeye Eslahtalaban*, and *Haamiyan Dolat* were either deleted or stopped publishing due to the arrest of their admins.^[56] Iran's prosecutor general stated in 2017 that the judiciary issued orders to block tens of thousands of Telegram channels every week, but company representatives denied accusations that they complied with censorship beyond the removal of terrorist content.^[57]

On December 30, 2017, ICT minister Azari Jahromi took to Twitter to directly ask Telegram chief executive Pavel Durov to remove the channel of the website *Amad News*, which he accused of promoting violence among protesters. Durov responded by saying that if the claims were confirmed, the channel would be removed. Within hours it was removed temporarily, until it assured Telegram that its terms of use would not be violated.^[58] Iranian authorities later moved to ban Telegram entirely in April 2018 (see Blocking and Filtering).

Website owners must register their sites with the Ministry of Culture and are then subject to requests to remove particular posts deemed unacceptable by the government. The 2009 CCL makes service providers, such as blogging platforms, responsible for any content that appears on their sites. This has led to the suspension of blogs or shuttering of news websites hosted on platforms inside Iran, under orders from government officials. News websites are consistently warned on how to cover sensitive political or social topics, such as the 2015 nuclear deal or controversial former presidents like Khatami.^[59]

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

As part of the development of SHOMA, authorities introduced regulations that essentially signaled the end of net neutrality in Iran. By splitting domestic and international traffic and creating price incentives for users to browse domestic content, Iran has created barriers to media diversity and innovation (see Availability and Ease of Access).^[60] In May 2017, MTN Irancell announced that consumers using VPNs would not receive the 50 percent discount when accessing domestic content, further discouraging the use of circumvention tools to reach restricted content.^[61]

Self-censorship is extensive, particularly on political matters. Widespread arrests and harsh sentences meted out to journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens, as well as perceptions of pervasive surveillance, serve to deter unfettered expression online. Many journalists and bloggers abandoned their online activities or used pseudonyms after the crackdown on 2009 protests linked to that year's disputed presidential election, resulting in a palpable drop in the amount of original content produced by users based inside the country. The situation slightly improved after Rouhani assumed the presidency in 2013, especially among reformist journalists. Nevertheless, the same restrictions remain in place, and journalists continue to be prosecuted.

In addition to filtering, censorship, and intimidation, the state counters critical content and online organizing efforts by extending regime propaganda into the digital sphere. The regime has backed numerous initiatives to promote blogging among its supporters and members of the Basij paramilitary group.^[62] For example, an Iranian cultural center sponsors an annual "National Cyber

Jihad Festival" for expert bloggers to promote conservative religious values online.^[63] Iranian authorities also actively support the creation of Iranian social networks and mobile apps by offering free bandwidth and hosting to local developers.^[64] There have been reports of automated "bot" accounts spreading Iranian military propaganda on Twitter to reach foreign audiences.^[65]

The majority of independent content producers lack the financial resources to operate in such a hostile environment. The online advertising market in Iran is exclusively limited to apolitical and progovernment websites. Although the United States adjusted its sanctions against Iran after the 2015 nuclear deal to enable American internet companies to provide services to Iranian users, Google still does not allow an advertising campaign to target Iran as a country,^[66] disadvantaging domestic content producers as well as content producers in the diaspora seeking to cultivate an audience inside Iran. Any Iranian-linked company or individual that wishes to use Google AdSense to monetize content must apply for a specific license in a process that is onerous for the majority of Iranian content producers.

The ICT Ministry and Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) – the state broadcaster whose head is appointed directly by the supreme leader – appear to be at odds on the right to license internet protocol television (IPTV) services. The ministry has sought to capitalize on expanded bandwidth by promoting IPTV as a new avenue for media diversity. However, in November 2016, IRIB notified all private IPTV providers that licenses issued to them by the ICT Ministry were invalid, insisting that only IRIB has the power to issue licenses.^[67] The broadcaster issued licenses of its own in January 2017.^[68] The conflict had yet to be resolved as of May 2018.^[69]

Digital Activism

Despite formal blocks on Facebook and Twitter, Iranians use social media to communicate, raise awareness of societal issues, and even engage in political debates. In the lead-up to the May 2017 presidential election, all of the main candidates used the internet, social networking platforms, and messaging apps, particularly Instagram and Telegram. Even conservative candidates who had once railed against social media used such applications during the campaign, demonstrating their importance for political activism in Iran.^[70]

Instagram has stormed into the foreground of Iran's digital media landscape over the last two years, becoming a key tool for political communications. In addition to serving as a platform for debate among citizens, Instagram's Live feature was heavily used by both Rouhani and his main conservative opponent, Ebrahim Raisi, but it proved particularly vital for the former's campaign.^[71] IRIB favored Raisi in its coverage, but Rouhani supporters live-streamed their candidate's campaign events and nightly talk shows about his policies.^[72]

Telegram played a significant role in the presidential election, with both major campaigns deploying sophisticated tools including automated "bot" accounts that were set up to disseminate political messages and push back against the other side's rhetorical attacks. In addition to videos of campaign rallies and events, both campaigns shared short audio clips of key passages in the candidates' speeches. The campaigns were also professionally integrated across platforms, using Telegram to direct followers toward relevant content on Instagram and other services.^[73]

Iranians have used the internet in innovative ways to shape public opinion. The online graphic novel *Jensiat* was shortlisted for the 2017 Digital Activism Award by London-based Index on Censorship. The novel, which was the result of a collaboration between activists, researchers, designers, and technologists, tackled issues related to digital security in Iran. It also discussed taboos around gender roles and sexuality.^[74]

Twitter continues to be employed by Iranian activists to raise the profile of political prisoners, minorities facing discrimination, and human rights issues. On December 30, 2016, over 30,000 Twitter users from around the world used the hashtag #SaveArash to voice their support for imprisoned civil rights advocate Arash Sadeghi, who was 68 days into a hunger strike.^[75] He remained behind bars as of 2018.

On December 27, 2017, one day before a series of antigovernment protests began in Iran, US-based Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad posted an image of a woman engaging in a solitary protest against the mandatory hijab (headscarf) on social media. This was part of two growing social media campaigns – My Stealthy Freedom and White Wednesdays – in which Iranian women posted images of themselves protesting the compulsory hijab.^[76] The image shared by Alinejad was widely circulated as the larger antigovernment street demonstrations gained momentum, though they focused on a variety of other issues, including corruption and economic hardship. Information shared on social media helped to extend those protests in cities across the country through the first week of January 2018, despite violent clashes with security forces, and further waves of demonstrations occurred later in the year. Meanwhile, dozens of women were arrested in the first two months of 2018 specifically for individual protests against compulsory hijab that were inspired by the White Wednesdays campaign.^[77]

Violations of User Rights:

Despite hopes that the 2015 nuclear agreement might lead to a more open climate for internet users, hard-liners in the regime have responded to the deal by cracking down on criticism and "Western infiltration." Authorities have stepped up their monitoring of social media and technical attacks against opposition voices. While President Rouhani's cabinet has had some success in shielding certain mobile apps from censorship, there have been no changes to legal restrictions on internet freedom, and users continue to be sentenced to long prison terms for political speech on social media.

Legal Environment

Iran remains an extremely dangerous environment for internet users. Numerous laws tightly restrict online speech and allow harsh punishments for those who deliberately flout these constraints or inadvertently draw the ire of authorities. The constitution provides for limited freedom of opinion and expression, but a variety of haphazardly enforced statutes limit these rights in practice. The 2000 Press Law, for example, forbids the publication of ideas that are contrary to Islamic principles or detrimental to public rights, none of which are clearly defined. The government and judiciary regularly invoke this and other vaguely worded legislation to criminalize critical opinions.

The 2009 CCL outlines punishments for spying, hacking, piracy, phishing, libel, and publishing materials deemed to damage "public morality" or result in "dissemination of lies." Punishments are severe and include the death penalty for offenses against public morality and chastity, as well as long prison sentences, draconian fines, and other penalties for service providers that fail to enforce government content restrictions.^[78]

In December 2016, President Rouhani launched the "Citizens' Rights Charter," a nonbinding document.^[79] Article 26 features a commitment to freedom of speech and expression "within the limits prescribed by the law,"^[80] while Article 37 states that online privacy should be respected.^[81]

In August 2017, the SCC released new regulations entitled "Policies and Actions Regarding the Organization of Social Media Messaging Applications." The regulations outline what is viewed as legal for messaging apps operating in Iran and formalize previous demands that foreign messaging

apps work with Iranian authorities to license themselves and move their data centers inside Iran. The new rules also task the ICT Ministry with forming a committee to suggest a licensing process for domestic and foreign messaging apps.^[82]

In February 2018, Azari Jahromi, the ICT minister, published drafts of five bills meant to codify the legal regime governing ICT policy in Iran.^[83] The five bills cover the following subjects: eGovernment, electronic identification, and the responsibilities of ICT service providers, electronic financial transactions, and data protection. Despite their broad reach, none of the proposed bills deal with the restrictions on internet users' human rights stemming from the CCL.^[84]

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Authorities arrested numerous individuals for their online activities in the past year, though convictions led to shorter prison sentences compared to previous years.

As Telegram grew in prominence in Iran, security forces turned their attention toward the administrators of the communication app's various channels, which allow users to post public messages to large groups. This was particularly notable around the May 2017 presidential election, when security forces arrested 12 admins of reformist-aligned Telegram channels; six of them were charged and sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to five years in August 2017.^[85] Security forces also coerced admins into deactivating or deleting their channels.

Among other such incidents during the year, four Telegram admins were arrested in September in Baneh, Kurdistan Province, for allegedly encouraging protests.^[86] One of them, Shoja Hussainzadeh, was apparently arrested again in January 2018.^[87] Also in September 2017, six Telegram admins were reportedly charged with "promoting homosexuality."^[88]

Mobile phone repairman and Telegram admin Hamidreza Amini was arrested in Tehran in December 2017 on charges including insulting the Prophet Muhammad and Shia Muslim imams, insulting the supreme leader, disturbing public opinion, and acting against national security. Authorities were reportedly holding him responsible for what others posted on his channel. He was held in solitary confinement and interrogated without access to a lawyer. Amini was awaiting trial at the end of the coverage period and faced a possible death sentence.^[89]

In June 2018, journalist and political activist Hengameh Shahidi was arrested after criticizing government policies on social media and participating in interviews with foreign media.^[90] She was detained upon leaving a hospital where she had been treated for a heart attack. She had previously been imprisoned for five months in 2017 as part of a government crackdown on dissidents and reformists ahead of the presidential election.^[91]

Also in June 2018, poet and filmmaker Baktash Abtin was sentenced to three months of community service and about US\$1,200 in fines for "propaganda against the state," having posted a photo to his Instagram account of Mazdak Zarafshan, a man who was attacked and injured by police in December 2016. Zarafshan was the son of a lawyer who had represented the families of murdered dissidents.^[92]

Amid domestic political tensions between reformists and conservatives, hard-liners within the judiciary and IRGC have conducted a campaign against perceived "infiltration" by Western ideas, individuals, and companies. Numerous foreigners or Iranians with dual nationality who were active in journalism, human rights, or ICT development work have been imprisoned by the authorities, often with little explanation.^[93]

For example, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a journalist with Iranian-British dual citizenship, was arrested in April 2016 at the Tehran airport by the IRGC. She was sentenced that September to five years in prison for supposedly spying and designing websites that support secession.^[94] Although she became eligible for early release in November 2017, she remained in prison and faced new charges of propaganda against the state in May 2018. Two months later, a judge declared that she would not be released until Britain settled a US\$394 million debt that Iran claimed it was owed under a 1976 deal involving military equipment.^[95]

Istanbul-based Iranian tech entrepreneur Arash Zad, an editor and contributor at the online magazine *Weblogina* and the technology websites *Arashzad* and *Ladybug*, was arrested by the IRGC in July 2015 as he prepared to return home to Turkey. After being held for more than two years, he was released without explanation in December 2017. Phishing emails from his account were reportedly sent to his contacts while he was in custody.^[96]

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

The online sphere in Iran is heavily monitored by the state. In January 2017, it was announced that the administrators of Telegram channels with more than 5,000 members would be offered incentives to register with Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. There was no punishment for noncompliance. Admins who registered were required to provide their channel name, full legal name, home address, and national identification number. In addition, they had to give "temporary co-administration" privileges to an "iransamandehibot" bot.^[97] The presence of a government bot monitoring all channel discussions would pose a serious threat to the privacy and personal security of channel admins and members, particularly in channels sharing content deemed to be politically, religiously, or culturally sensitive. In April 2017, it was reported that 8,000 Telegram channels and 1,000 Instagram pages had registered.^[98]

The SCC had announced in May 2016 that foreign messaging apps must move all data on Iranian users to servers located within the country.^[99] The order seemed to be aimed at Telegram, which had been under increased pressure from the authorities and was eventually blocked in 2018 (see Blocking and Filtering). Storing data on local servers would leave foreign companies more vulnerable to government demands to hand over data on dissidents and censor unfavorable views.^[100] In July 2017, then ICT minister Vaezi claimed that Telegram had moved its servers to Iran. Chief executive Pavel Durov denied the claims, but said Vaezi was likely referring to the fact that Telegram rented local CDN caching nodes from a global provider, as it did in many countries.^[101]

The legal status of encryption in Iran is somewhat murky. Chapter 2, Article 10 of the CCL prohibits "concealing data, changing passwords, and/or encoding data that could deny access of authorized individuals to data, computer and telecommunication systems."^[102] This could be understood to prohibit encryption, but enforcement is not common. Nonetheless, the authorities have periodically blocked encrypted traffic from entering the country through international gateways, particularly during contentious moments such as elections.^[103]

In 2015, amid preparation for elections to the parliament and the Assembly of Experts, a body of clerics that appoints the supreme leader, the deputy interior minister for security announced that a new "Elections Security Headquarters" would be established "to monitor cyberspace."^[104] Similarly, the IRGC launched a military exercise named "Eghtedare Sarallah" in September 2015, which included the monitoring of social media activities.^[105] In June 2015, the Cyber Police (FATA) created a new unit for monitoring computer games.^[106]

It remains unclear how or how thoroughly the authorities can monitor the content of messages on foreign social networks, given that some apps encrypt their messages. However, all platforms and

content hosted in Iran are subject to arbitrary requests by various authorities to provide more information on their users. Local platforms do not guarantee the kind of user protection offered by some of their international counterparts, which may explain users' hesitancy to adopt them.

The Iranian government has continued its cat-and-mouse game against the use of circumvention tools, the legal status of which is also relatively opaque. The use of VPNs does not appear to be criminalized, unlike the selling or promotion of VPN services.

Intimidation and Violence

Extralegal intimidation and violence by state authorities is common in Iran. In 2012, blogger Sattar Beheshti was killed while in prison. More recently, state agencies such as the IRGC have pressured or coerced detained activists into giving up log-in details for their social media accounts, which the authorities have then used for surveillance and phishing attacks. This seems to be part of a broader pattern, as a number of activists have reported phishing attempts that appear to have been sponsored by the Iranian government.^[107]

A survey of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) Iranians conducted by Small Media in early 2018 suggested that half had experienced online harassment, and one in five had reported being entrapped by state or nonstate actors on dating apps.^[108] This is part of a long-term campaign of harassment against LGBTQ people, with examples of threatening text messages sent to individuals going back to 2016.^[109] The free expression organization Article 19 also identified numerous cases of online harassment against LGBTQ people in a February 2018 report.^[110]

Technical Attacks

State hackers often launch cyberattacks against Iranian activists and campaigners, including those in the diaspora. In February 2017, the research group Iran Threats reported that a "macOS malware agent, named MacDownloader, was observed in the wild as targeting the defense industrial base, and reported elsewhere to have been used against a human rights advocate." The group tied the activity to hackers "believed to based in Iran and connected to Iranian security entities."^[111]

In August 2016, a prominent Iranian political activist based in Paris was the target of malware intended to gain remote access to a "wide range of content on Android smartphones including messages, photos, audio files, apps, GPS locators, and contact lists," according to the Center for Human Rights in Iran.^[112]

Various Telegram, Gmail, and social media accounts associated with the Imam Ali Popular Students Relief Society, an Iranian charity focused on combating poverty among women and children, were hacked in April 2018.^[113] The identity of the attackers was unknown, though digital security adviser Amin Sabeti noted in an *IranWire* report that links to the IRGC were likely.¹¹⁴

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