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Iran: Free Journalists Swept Up in Raids

At Least 14 Arrested in New Crackdown

January 29, 2013

Related Materials:

(Beirut) – Iran's judiciary should charge or immediately free more than a dozen journalists arrested in recent days. Any criminal charges would have to be based on clear evidence, and not in themselves amount to a violation of the journalists' fundamental rights, including their freedom of expression or association. The judiciary and all Iranian authorities should ensure that the rights of all journalists in Iran to freedom of expression are fully protected, particularly in the period leading up to the 2013 presidential election.

Security forces in Tehran arrested the journalists during raids on their homes and offices beginning on January 26, 2013, allegedly because they have "connections" to foreign media. The arrests appear to be part of an escalating campaign of repression to silence journalists and bloggers before the presidential election scheduled for June 14.

"Authorities are trying to scare journalists into silence as we head into June's presidential elections," said [Sarah Leah Whitson](#), Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "Iranian prosecutors have not explained why a journalist's connections to foreign media or opposition political forces would be a crime."

On January 26, security forces raided the offices of the Iranian Labour News Agency (ILNA) in Tehran, a government-run outlet, and arrested Milad Agahei-Asl, Reporters Without Borders reported. They arrested Soleyman Mohammadi, who worked for the reformist-leaning *Bahar* newspaper, at his office the same day. Both were taken to Tehran's Evin prison, according to Reporters Without Borders.

The next day, security forces conducted similar raids on five Tehran-based papers – *Etemad*, *Bahar*, *Shargh*, *Arman*, all dailies, and *Aseman*, a weekly – and arrested at least 10 journalists. They are Sasan Aghaei, Nasrin Takhayori, Javad Dalirand and Emily Amraei of *Etemad*; Motahareh Shafiee, Narges Judaki and Saba Azarpeyk (*Arman*); Pourya Alami and Pejman Mousavi of *Shargh*; and Akbar Montajabi of *Aseman*. Security forces arrested two more journalists on January 28, Keyvan Mehregan and Hossein Yaghchi, but released Shafiee, who had been arrested the day before, said Reporters Without Borders.

A member of Reporters Without Borders told Human Rights Watch that despite reports by Iran's semi-official Mehr news agency on January 29 that that authorities had released several of the 13 currently in custody, none have yet been released by authorities except for Shafiee. He also said that all 13 detainees are being held in [Section 209](#) of Evin prison, administered by the Ministry of Intelligence, and that many were able to contact their families within the past few days.

Prosecutors also have issued arrest warrants for an unspecified number of additional journalists and told them to report to revolutionary courts during the next few days, Reporters Without Borders said.

Prosecutors and judicial officials have given no reasons for the arrests. Semi-official outlets have not identified the charges against the journalists, but said they were arrested because of their alleged connections to opposition groups and foreign media outlets. The authorities claim that opposition groups and foreign media were responsible for anti-government demonstrations after the disputed June 2009 presidential election, and intend to disrupt the upcoming election.

According to various reports police took Mehrgan, one of those arrested on January 28, into custody to serve a one-year prison term for his 2012 conviction for “propaganda against the state” in connection with his journalistic activities. Authorities had previously arrested several of the others arrested in recent days for exercising their fundamental right to free speech and assembly, according to Amnesty International.O

On January 27, the Islamic Republic News Agency [reported](#) without specifying the reason that Tehran’s prosecutor had ordered the filtering of another independent news outlet. *Tabnak Tabnak* is affiliated with Mohsen Rezaei, a 2009 presidential candidate, and with conservative forces loyal to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

On January 28, the semi-official Mehr News Agency [reported](#) that authorities arrested the journalists for “cooperation with Iranian and foreign bias [sic] media by the order of judicial official[s], and added that the journalists apparently had collaborated with “some of the Persian-language foreign media.”

The same day the semi-official Fars News Agency, thought to be affiliated with Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, [confirmed](#) the arrest of at least 11 of the journalists. It described them as being “close to the seditionist and anti-revolutionary elements” and said they were arrested on warrants from Iran’s judiciary. Mohammad Hosseini, minister of culture and Islamic guidance, said on January 28 that those arrested were not detained because of their “press-related” activities.

Authorities had previously shut down several of the newspapers targeted in the recent raids for various periods, including *Shargh* and *Bahar*, which are known to be among the more reformist independent papers currently operating in Iran.

Officials have intensified pressure against both domestic journalists and those working for foreign-based Persian-language outlets. According to Reporters Without Borders, since the start of 2013, forces affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards and the Intelligence Ministry have summoned several journalists for questioning, allegedly in connection with their coverage of events related to the upcoming election.

Authorities also have stepped up harassment of foreign-based Iranian journalists for Persian-language outlets such as BBC Persian and Voice of America, including threatening, summoning, and interrogating their family members inside the country, according to the BBC Persian executive Sadeq Saba and several other journalists. In 2012 Human Rights Watch [documented](#) harassment against family members of journalists working for BBC Persian.

On December 28, 2012, the supreme leader gave a speech in which he warned journalists and others to refrain from statements saying Iran’s elections are not free. On January 21, Prosecutor General Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei [announced](#) during a news conference that he had received reliable information indicating that “certain journalists in Iran are collaborating with Westerners and counter-revolutionaries based abroad.” He suggested that security forces would soon arrest them. It is not clear whether he was referring to the journalists arrested during the past few days.

Government sensitivity toward the role of journalists and bloggers was particularly sharp in the period before the 2012 parliamentary elections. Several were [arrested](#) and the judiciary threatened that that anyone who called for a boycott would be subject to prosecution.

As of December 2012, 43 journalists and bloggers were in prison, according to Reporters Without Borders, the second largest number for any country.