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World Report 2021 - Iran

Iranian authorities continued to repress their own people. The country's security and intelligence apparatus, in partnership with Iran's judiciary, harshly cracked down on dissent, including through excessive and lethal force against protesters and reported abuse and torture in detention. President Rouhani and his administration have shown little inclination to curb or confront these serious rights violations perpetrated by Iran's security agencies, while Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei continues to greenlight these rampant abuses. Broad United States sanctions also impacted the country's economy and Iranians' access to essential medicines and harmed their right to health.

Right to Peaceful Assembly and Expression

Over the past three years, Iranian authorities have responded to repeated widespread protests across the country with excessive and lethal force and the arbitrary arrests of thousands of protesters.

In one of the most brutal crackdowns, in November 2019, security forces used excessive and unlawful lethal force against massive protests across the country, particularly against protesters blocking roads, or in some cases throwing stones and attempting to take over public buildings.

During the crackdown, authorities ordered the near-total shutdown of the global internet across the country. According to [Amnesty International](#), at least 304 people were killed during these protests. On June 1, Mojtaba Zonoor, the head of Iran's parliamentary national security committee, [said](#) that 230 people had been killed during the protests. He claimed 7 percent of those killed died in direct confrontation with law enforcement and 16 percent in attacks against military places. Authorities have not published any detailed investigations into, or held anyone accountable for, these abuses.

The judiciary and intelligence agencies continue to use several overly broad articles of the penal code, such as “propaganda against the state,” “assembly and collusion to act against national security,” “insulting the supreme leader,” and “establishing or membership in a group to disrupt national security” to prosecute activists, dissidents, and human rights defenders.

Authorities have prosecuted at least 20 people who participated in protests against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) downing of a Ukrainian airliner on January 8 and the government's initial false denial of responsibility. The IRGC shot down the airliner amid heightened military tensions between Iran and the US, after the US killed the commander of the IRCG's elite Quds force, Qassim Suleimani, and several others in a drone strike in Baghdad on January 3. Among other cases, the court of first instance sentenced two prominent activists, Bahareh Hedayat and Mehdi Mahmoudian, to four years and eight months and five years in prison, respectively, for their participation in the protests and posting about it on their Twitter accounts.

On May 23, the media center of the judiciary [reported](#) that Ayatollah Khamenei had agreed to clemency or a reduction of prison sentences against several “national security convicts.” According to lawyers and family members, those included: Ismael Bakhshi, Ali Nejati, and Mohamad Khanifar, labor rights activists who participated in the Hafttappeh Sugar cane company labor strike in 2018; Marzieh Amiri, Atefeh Rangriz, and Neda Naji, activists arrested during the 2019 [May Day protests](#) in front of parliament; and Leila Hosseinzadeh and Soheil Aghaei, student activists.

Other labor activists, however, still face imprisonment. On August 26, Keyvan Samimi, a veteran journalist, wrote in his Telegram channel that authorities had suspended the three-year prison sentence that he had received after his arrest during the 2019 May 1 (“May Day”) protests on the charge of “assembly and collusion to act against national security.” On June 21, authorities arrested Sepideh Gholian, another labor activist, who was sentenced to five years in prison on the charge of “assembly and collusion to act against national security,” after she was arrested during the Hafttappeh strike in November 2018. Gholian [alleged](#) that authorities tortured her and Bakhshi during their detention in November 2018.

On March 31, lawyer Mohammad Hossein Aghasi [announced](#) that his clients Hashem Khastar, Mohammad Nourizad, Mohammad Hossein Sepehri, and Fatemeh Sepehri—four civil society activists who signed a 2019 letter asking Ayatollah Khamenei to resign—had been sentenced to 16, 15, 6, and 3 years in prison, respectively. On September 6, authorities arrested Giti Fazel, a retired lawyer, and sentenced her to 3 years and 6 months’ prison sentence for charges that stemmed from signing the letter requesting the resignation of Ayatollah Khamenei.

Death Penalty and Inhumane Treatment

Iran continues to be one of the leading [implementers of the death penalty](#). According to rights groups, Iran had executed at least 233 people as of November 19. These include four people on vaguely defined national security crimes of *moharebeh* (“enmity against God”), *ifsad fil arz* (“sowing corruption on earth”), and *baghi* (“armed rebellion”) and two people on espionage charges.

As of September 21, authorities executed two people who were convicted of allegedly killing security forces during the protests. Despite domestic and international outcry, on September 13 authorities in Shiraz executed Navid Afkari, a 27-year-old wrestler who was convicted of murdering a security guard. Authorities did not investigate the serious allegations of torture he had raised repeatedly throughout the court proceedings.

There are at least eight other people who have received the death penalty on vaguely defined national security charges in connection to their participation in widespread protests. After a popular social media campaign using the hashtag #Don’tExecute, on July 10, lawyers representing three defendants facing the death penalty announced that the judiciary had halted the executions of Amirhossein Moradi, Saeed Tamjidi, and Mohammad Rajabi. They had been convicted and sentenced to death for their role in the November 2019 protests on charges of “taking part in destruction and burning aimed at countering the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

The judiciary also executed at least two individuals who were sentenced to death for crimes they allegedly committed as children. Under Iran’s current penal code, judges can use their discretion not to sentence to death individuals who committed their alleged crime as children. However, several individuals who were retried under the penal code for crimes they allegedly committed as children have then been sentenced to death again.

Iranian law considers acts such as “insulting the prophet,” “apostasy,” same-sex relations, adultery, drinking alcohol, and certain non-violent drug-related offenses as crimes punishable by death. The law also prescribes the inhumane punishment of flogging for more than 100 offenses, including “disrupting public order,” a charge that has been used to sentence individuals for their participation in protests.

According to the Norway-based NGO, Iran Human Rights, on July 8, authorities in Mashhad executed a man convicted of drinking alcohol repeatedly.

Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society Activists

Scores of human rights advocates, including Atena Daemi and Farhad Meysami, remain behind bars for their peaceful activism. On October 8, authorities released prominent human rights defender Narges Mohammadi after reducing her 10-year prison sentence to eight-and-a-half years.

Over the past two years, authorities have also prosecuted several lawyers, including Mohammad Najafi, Payam Derafshan, and Amirshah Davoudi, for their human rights activism. On November 7, authorities temporarily released prominent human rights defender and lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh who was currently serving a 12-year prison sentence in Evin prison.

In February, a court of appeal upheld prison sentences ranging from 4 to 10 years against 8 members of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, a local NGO focused on preserving biodiversity, on the charge of “collaborating with the hostile state of the US.” Iranian authorities have failed to produce any evidence to support their charges nor have they investigated allegations of torture against them.

Due Process Rights, Fair Trial Standards, and Torture in Prison

Iranian courts, and particularly revolutionary courts, regularly fall far short of providing fair trials and use confessions likely obtained under torture as evidence in court. Authorities have failed to meaningfully investigate numerous allegations of torture against detainees. Authorities routinely restrict detainees’ access to legal counsel, particularly during the initial investigation period.

The IRGC’s Intelligence Organization continues to arrest [Iranian dual and foreign nationals](#) on vague charges, such as “cooperating with a hostile state.” Over the past year, authorities have released: Michael White and Xiyua Wang, American citizens; Roland Marchal, a French academic; and two Australian bloggers in apparent prisoners’ exchanges with their respective countries.

Several others, including Siamak Namazi, an Iranian-American dual national who was sentenced in unfair trials to 10 years in prison—remain behind bars. Baquer Namazi, Siamak’s father, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, an Iranian-British dual national, and Fariba Adelkhah, a French-Iranian academic, have been granted temporary releases but are not allowed to leave the country. On November 26, Iranian authorities released Kylie Moore-Gilbert, an Australian academic who was convicted to 10 years in prison, in exchange for three Iranian prisoners in Thailand, two of whom had been reportedly convicted in connection with the 2012 Bangkok bomb plot.

In April, after the country’s first confirmed cases of Covid-19 in early March, Iran’s judiciary [announced](#) that it had temporarily released or pardoned up to 100,000 prisoners and implemented measures to enable social distancing within prisons. Several human rights defenders, including Shahnaz Akmal, Masoud Kazemi, Abdolreza Kouhpayeh, and Mahmoud Beheshti Langroodi, were among those released under the judicial order. In many other cases, despite the health risks, authorities have refused to grant human rights defenders temporary releases.

Authorities also have opened new cases against human rights defenders who were serving time in prison. On May 28, Ismael Abdi, a prominent member of Iran’s Teachers Union on a furlough from serving a 6-year sentence he received for his activism, was detained again after authorities reimposed another previously suspended 10-year prison sentence, without his prior knowledge.

Women’s Rights, Children’s Rights, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity

Iranian women face discrimination in personal status matters related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and decisions relating to children. A married woman may not obtain a passport or travel outside the country without the written permission of her husband. Under the civil code, a husband is accorded the right to choose the place of living and can prevent his wife from having certain occupations if he deems them against “family values.” Iranian law allows girls to marry at 13 and boys at age 15, as well as at younger ages if authorized by a judge.

Over the past two years, authorities have prosecuted several women’s rights activists, including Yasaman Ariayi, Saba Kordafshari, Mojghan Keshavarz, Monireh Arabshahi, and Farhad Meysami for their peaceful protests against compulsory hijab laws. On July 15, Saeed Dehghan, the lawyer of Alireza Alinejad, posted on Twitter that a revolutionary court has sentenced his client to eight years in prison on charges of assembly and collusion act against national security, insulting the supreme leader, and propaganda against the state. The sentencing appears to be a retaliatory act to silence Alinejad’s sister, Massih Alinejad, a prominent political activist based abroad campaigning against compulsory hijab laws.

Iranian authorities and women’s rights activists reported an increase in domestic violence during Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. Iran has no law on domestic violence to prevent abuse and provide protections to survivors. There was a national outrage following the gruesome [beheading](#) of 14-year-old Romina Ashrafi, allegedly by her father, on May 21, and [several government officials](#) called for expediting the approval of a bill to “support children and adolescents.”

On June 7, 2020, the Guardian Council, the body responsible for ensuring the compatibility of the legislation passed by Iran’s parliament with the constitution and Iranian authorities’ interpretation of Sharia, approved this bill. It includes new penalties for certain acts that harm a child’s safety and well-being, including physical harm and preventing access to education. The law also allows officials to relocate a child in situations that seriously threaten their safety. But the law fails to address some of the most serious threats against children in Iran, such as child marriage and imposition of the death penalty.

In early August, dozens of Iranian women took to social media in their own #MeToo moment to report their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. On August 25, the Tehran police chief announced they had arrested a man accused of rape by multiple women on social media. Women face barriers reporting sexual violence. Iranian law criminalizes consensual sexual relationships outside marriage, which are punishable by flogging, leaving women at risk of being prosecuted for reporting rape if the authorities do not believe her. Moreover, the criminal law has a limited and problematic definition of rape as “forced *zina*” (sex outside of wedlock), explicitly excludes marital rape, and the mandatory punishment for rape is the death penalty.

Authorities have long prosecuted hundreds of people for the vaguely defined acts against morality, as well as for consensual extramarital sex.

Under Iranian law, same-sex conduct is punishable by flogging and, for men, the death penalty. Although Iran [permits and subsidizes sex reassignment surgery for transgender people](#), no law prohibits discrimination against them.

Iran closed schools and universities in early March due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Education Ministry banned teachers from using foreign-made smartphone apps to teach classes and launched an online learning platform in April, as well as televised lessons. The disparity in quality of material produced by different schools across the country and levels of students’ access to online education appear to vary across pre-existing socioeconomic disparities. For instance, more than 50 percent of families in some areas, like Sistan and Baluchistan, did not have internet access.

Treatment of Minorities

Iranian law denies freedom of religion to Baha’is and discriminates against them. Authorities continue to arrest and prosecute members of the Baha’i faith on vague national security charges and close down or suspend licenses for businesses owned by them. Iranian authorities also systematically refuse to allow Baha’is to register at public universities because of their faith. On June 30, a court in Bushehr convicted seven Christians who converted from Islam on the charge of propaganda against the state. According to the rights group Hrana, the charge stemmed from activities such as organizing “house churches” and being in contact with missionaries outside the country.

The government also discriminates against other religious minorities, including Sunni Muslims, and restricts cultural and political activities among the country’s Azeri, Kurdish, Arab, and Baluch ethnic minorities.

Key International Actors

Following the United States withdrawal from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement on Iran’s nuclear activities, the US has increasingly targeted Iran with broad economic sanctions. While the US government has built exemptions for humanitarian imports into its sanction regime, banking restrictions have drastically constrained the ability of Iranian entities to finance such humanitarian imports, including vital medicines and medical equipment, causing serious hardships for ordinary Iranians and harming their right to health, particularly as the Covid-19 pandemic has increased the burden on the healthcare system.

In January, the United States killed Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran’s IRGC Quds Force in a drone strike in Iraq. In response, Iranian forces carried out a ballistic missile attack against two US bases in Iraq. In the days following the strike, US President Donald Trump tweeted that the US had prepared targets of Iranian sites, including sites of cultural importance. Attacks during an armed conflict deliberately targeting sites of cultural importance are war crimes.

In September, following the United Nations Security Council’s refusal to renew an arms embargo that had come to an end as part of the JCPOA, the US argued that it could trigger the “snapback” provision of the agreement to reimpose UN sanctions suspended as a result of the JCPOA. Other permanent members of the Security Council and parties to the JCPOA, as well as the UN secretary-general, refused to accept the US’s position, arguing that the US cannot use the provision after already withdrawing from the agreement.

On numerous occasions, the head of the European Union External Action Service, as well as the European Parliament, condemned violations of human rights in Iran, including the crackdown against protests and use of the death penalty.

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