

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	420
Land:	Iran
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom of the Press 2010 – Iran
Udgivet:	1. oktober 2010
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	6. januar 2011

Title	Freedom of the Press 2010 - Iran
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Islamic Republic of Iran
Publication Date	1 October 2010
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom of the Press 2010 - Iran</i> , 1 October 2010, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ca5cc5f1e.html [accessed 20 December 2010]

Freedom of the Press 2010 - Iran

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 30

Political Environment: 36

Economic Environment: 23

Total Score: 89

In the aftermath of the June 2009 presidential election, which incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won by a large margin amid fraud allegations, conditions for press freedom reached a new low. Opposition supporters mounted a series of large and internationally publicized protests after the election results were announced, and the regime responded with a major crackdown on critical publications, journalists, and bloggers. Mass arrests led to the largest number of journalists jailed in Iran since the 1979 revolution, and by year's end, more journalists were imprisoned in Iran than anywhere else in the world. Allegations of torture, mistreatment, and other forms of abuse in detention also reached unprecedented levels. Dozens of newspapers were closed, and coverage of the opposition protests was particularly restricted, as was reporting related to dissatisfaction with the government, women's rights and ethnic issues, the ailing economy, and the development of nuclear technology. The inability of traditional media outlets to function in the repressive political environment amplified the importance of the internet. The authorities consequently amended the 2000 Press Law to clearly cover online outlets, and adopted sophisticated methods of filtering, monitoring, and persecuting online reporters.

Constitutional provisions for freedom of expression and the press are not upheld in practice. Numerous laws restrict press freedom, including the Press Law, which forbids the publication of ideas that are contrary to Islamic principles or detrimental to public rights. The government regularly invokes vaguely worded legislation to criminalize critical opinions. Article 500 of the penal code states that "anyone who undertakes any form of propaganda against the state ... will be sentenced to between three months and one year in prison"; the code leaves "propaganda" undefined. Under Article 513, offenses deemed to be an "insult to religion" can be punished by death, or prison terms of one to five years for lesser offenses, with "insult" similarly undefined. Other articles provide sentences of up to two years in prison, up to 74 lashes, or a fine for those convicted of intentionally creating "anxiety and unease in the public's mind," spreading "false rumors," writing about "acts that are not true," and criticizing state officials. Iran's judiciary frequently denies accused journalists due process by referring their cases to the Islamic Revolutionary Court, an emergency venue intended for those suspected of seeking to overthrow the regime. The Preventive Restraint Act is used regularly to temporarily ban publications without legal proceedings. In the run-up to the 2009 presidential election, the Tehran prosecutor general announced in December 2008 that a special office would be created to review crimes related to the internet and mobile-telephone text messages.

During the year, the government detained, jailed, or fined hundreds of publishers,

editors, and journalists, including those working in internet-based media. At year's end, at least 39 remained imprisoned, although some monitors reported higher numbers. Over 100 journalists were reportedly arrested between June 12 and the end of the year, although most were subsequently released, and more than 50 fled the country. About 12 journalists were arrested in connection with protests held on December 27, which marked both the major Shiite Muslim holiday of Ashura and the seventh day of mourning following the death of Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, a revered reformist cleric.

Prominent detainees included author and journalist Emadeddin Baghi, who was arrested December 28, as well as journalist and human rights lawyer Shadi Sadr, who was arrested by plainclothes agents on July 17 and released on July 28. Mohamad Atrianfar, the editor of several newspapers, was arrested on June 15 and later sentenced to six years' imprisonment for "publicity against the regime." Ahmad Zaid-Abadi, a freelance journalist and contributor to *Rooz Online*, an English- and Persian-language publication, was also arrested in June and was sentenced to six years' imprisonment, five years in exile, and a lifetime ban on "social and political activities." Charges against journalists and publications are often arbitrary. Prosecutions and sentencing procedures are drawn out, and bail sums can be substantial. Atrianfar's bail upon appeal, for example, was set at approximately US\$500,000. Editors and publishers are prohibited from hiring journalists who have previously been sentenced, and many journalists are forbidden to leave Iran. Successive arrests and closures of media outlets have led to widespread self-censorship among journalists. News regarding the presidential election or candidates was officially declared illegal by the authorities in September 2009.

The authorities accused several journalists of having ties to foreign governments, including Iranian American freelance journalist Roxana Saberi. Initially arrested in January 2009 on charges of purchasing wine, she was convicted of espionage in April after a short trial and sentenced to eight years in prison. She was released in May amid intense international pressure. Iranian Canadian journalist Maziar Bahari, the Iran correspondent for *Newsweek* and a prominent filmmaker, was arrested in June on charges of espionage. Like other prominent detainees, he was forced to issue a televised confession; he was then released for unknown reasons in October and subsequently left the country. Iranian Canadian blogger Hossein Derakhshan remained in prison at year's end following his November 2008 arrest on suspicion of being a spy for Israel, although no formal charges have been filed.

The government continued to intimidate and persecute journalists who covered the country's ethnic minority issues. Kurdish journalist Adnan Hassanpour, whose 2007 death sentence was overturned in 2008, was awaiting retrial on espionage charges at the end of 2009 and faced up to 20 years in prison. Another Kurdish reporter, Abdolvahed Boutimar, was still on death row in 2009; his 2007 death sentence was initially overturned on procedural grounds, but he was sentenced to death again in 2008. In July 2009, Mohammad Sadegh Kaboudvand, founder of the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan and the regional weekly *Payam Mardom*, faced another trial for circulating antigovernment propaganda. He has been serving a 10-year prison sentence since May 2008 for starting an illegal organization, among other charges.

Journalists fell victim to violent attacks again in 2009, particularly in the weeks after the presidential election and again in December during the Ashura holiday. In November, days after questioning the government's handling of a gas shortage in Takab, journalist Mohammed Khaleghi was stabbed by two men on a motorcycle. Separately, the authorities closed the offices of the Association of Iranian Journalists (AIJ) in August 2009, following years of government harassment and a June 2008 threat to shut down the organization.

International media are unable to operate freely and have been accused of fomenting the controversy surrounding the presidential election. The government requires foreign correspondents to provide detailed itineraries and proposed stories before visas are granted. Foreign journalists were issued renewable one-week visas prior to the presidential election. After it became clear that the postelection protests and related media coverage could not be easily controlled, foreign journalists were confined to their hotels, banned from reporting on the demonstrations, and told that their press cards

were no longer valid. The government refused to renew visas as they expired and forcibly removed reporters from the country. The Tehran bureau of Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya television, one of the largest media outlets in the Arab world, was reportedly closed by the authorities for one week in June without explanation. *Washington Times* reporter and dual British-Greek citizen Iason Athanasiadis-Fowden was arrested on June 17 and accused of being a spy for Britain; he was detained for three weeks before being released.

In 2008 there were some 20 major print dailies in circulation, but about 10 dailies were permanently banned in 2009, and many others were censored or temporarily banned. The newspapers with the widest circulation and influence are those that espouse conservative viewpoints or are directly run by the government, such as the dailies *Jaam-e Jam* and *Kayhan*. Owing to limited distribution of print media outside larger cities, radio and television serve as the principal sources of news for many citizens, with more than 80 percent of residents receiving their news from television. Under Article 175 of the constitution, which forbids private broadcasting, the government maintains a direct monopoly on all domestic broadcast media and presents only official political and religious viewpoints. A government-run, English-language satellite station, Press TV, was launched in July 2007. Leaders of the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) also announced their intent to launch a trilingual (Persian, Arabic, and English) news agency modeled on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) or the Associated Press. The IRGC already largely controls the semiofficial Fars News Agency.

Although it is forbidden, an increasing number of people own satellite dishes and access international news sources. Confiscation of satellite dishes is known to occur; in June 2009, police ordered residents in select Tehran neighborhoods to take down their dishes and returned shortly thereafter to confiscate those that remained. The IRGC reportedly has a budget of US\$10 million to create jamming stations in Tehran and other cities. Foreign-based satellite radio stations such as Radio Farda and the Dutch-funded Radio Zamaneh provide news and information to a large part of the population. In January 2009, a new BBC Persian-language television service began broadcasting eight hours of daily programming, reaching a reported six to eight million Iranian viewers by late June. The regime heavily criticized the service's coverage of the presidential election. Satellites transmitting the BBC, Voice of America's Persian News Network, and other Persian-language news media based in Europe and the United States were jammed throughout the year.

The regime imposes systematic controls on the internet and other digital technologies. According to the OpenNet Initiative (ONI), the Iranian government has become one of the most sophisticated and pervasive filterers of online content in the world. It now has the technological capability to produce its own monitoring and filtering software. According to a parliamentary commission investigating Iran's privatization process, a private corporation linked to the IRGC bought 51 percent of the Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI) in October 2009 with little outside competition. The government retains direct ownership of the remaining portion. The transaction gave the IRGC control over Iran's telephone systems - both the fixed-line network and the two mobile-phone companies - and internet-service providers (ISPs).

In April, the government successfully pressured the parliament to adopt an amendment that extends the Press Law's regulations and restrictions to "domestic news sites and domestic websites." Under the amendment, "all internet publications," which critics argue includes blogs and private websites as well as more formal online media outlets, are required to obtain licenses. As with print publications, charges against unregistered online publications may result in harsher penalties than for those that are licensed, including the death penalty or extended prison sentences for content-based crimes like "insults to religion." The timing of the amendment's passage indicates that it was intended to diminish the effectiveness of reformist presidential candidates' extensive online campaigns.

The authorities censor online content by forcing ISPs to block access to a growing list of "immoral sites and political sites that insult the country's religious and political leaders." The government boasted in late 2008 that it was blocking access to five million

websites. Under a law ratified in November 2008 but still under review at the end of 2009, ISPs that refuse to enforce filtering or monitoring regulations will be subject to fines, suspension, or permanent closure. Access to international news websites and the sites of international organizations is increasingly restricted. Social-networking and content-sharing sites such as Facebook, Orkut, and YouTube were regularly blocked throughout the year, particularly in the weeks before and after the presidential election, but remained popular. The Twitter microblogging service became vital to the dissemination of information about the postelection protests once traditional forms of reporting were cut off. In late 2009, a group calling itself the Iranian Cyber Army hacked Twitter, redirecting users to a message that appeared to support the regime. In another tactic, the government created "mirror websites" of YouTube and others that tracked users who uploaded coverage of the protests.

Censors continued to regulate online publications such as *Zanestan* that deal with women's rights issues, as well as filter Iranian news sites including *Emrouz*, *Ruydad*, and *Rooz Online*. Conservative news sites were also subject to censorship, including *Farda*, which was blocked in 2008 after revealing that the newly appointed interior minister had lied about his academic credentials.

Nearly 38 percent of the population regularly accesses the internet. Blogging websites such as Blogger and Persianblog are often blocked, but ONI argues that the Persian-language blogosphere is one of the world's largest and most vibrant. Unable to entirely silence online dissidents, the regime announced in late 2008 that it intended to create thousands of progovernment blogs. This amounted to recognition of the power of Iran's hundred-thousand-strong blogging community. Blogs have been harnessed by the large youth population as a medium for expressing frustration about the regime as well as commenting on a variety of social and cultural issues. Blogger Omidreza Mirsayafi allegedly committed suicide in Tehran's Evin prison in March 2009; critics argue that prison authorities ignored his severe depression. At year's end, seven bloggers remained imprisoned. Nevertheless, websites continue to communicate opinions that the country's print media would never publish, with both reform advocates and conservatives promoting their political agendas. Iran's most popular blogs oppose the regime, and many bloggers publish anonymously. The internet has also provided a key platform for international information portals - such as Article 19's *Persianimpediment.org*, Freedom House's *Gozaar*, and *Rooz Online* - that promote freedom of expression and inform the Iranian public on human rights issues.

Copyright notice: © Freedom House, Inc. · All Rights Reserved