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2015 Scores

Status: Not Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6.0

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6

OVERVIEW

President Hassan Rouhani marked a year in office in August 2014 amid a power struggle with his influential conservative opponents, who object to social and cultural reforms and any easing of state repression. Rouhani's calls for increased civil liberties, a reduction of state intervention in private lives, and greater access to information came under attack from hard-liners who control key state institutions. The president's rhetoric and a few positive steps by his government failed to result in a significant improvement in the human rights situation, which has been deteriorating since a brutal 2009 crackdown following the disputed reelection of former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Executions, including public hangings, continued at an alarming rate in 2014. Among those put to death were members of Iran's Arab minority, a man accused of heresy, and several people convicted for murders they allegedly committed when they were below the age of 18.

Freedom of expression remained under attack, and the authorities continued to disrupt the free flow of information. Some 35 journalists and dozens of activists and human rights lawyers remained behind bars, while new arrests and prison sentences for media workers and online activists were reported throughout the year.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 7 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 3 / 12

The supreme leader, who has no fixed term, is the highest authority in the country. He is the commander in chief of the armed forces and appoints the head of the judiciary, the heads of state broadcast media, and the Expediency Council – a body tasked with mediating disputes between

the Guardian Council and the parliament. He also appoints six of the members of the Guardian Council; the other six are jurists nominated by the head of the judiciary and confirmed by the parliament, all for six-year terms. The supreme leader is appointed by the Assembly of Experts, which also monitors his work. However, in practice his decisions appear to go unchallenged by the assembly, whose proceedings are kept confidential.

Elections in Iran are not free and fair, according to international standards. The Guardian Council, controlled by conservatives, vets all candidates in parliamentary elections, presidential elections, and elections to the Assembly of Experts – a body of 86 clerics who are elected to eight-year terms by popular vote. The council has in the past rejected candidates who are not considered insiders or deemed fully loyal to the clerical establishment, as well as women seeking to run in the presidential election. As a result, Iranian voters are given a limited choice of candidates.

The president is the second-highest-ranking official in the Islamic Republic, though his powers are limited by the supreme leader and other unelected authorities. He is elected by popular vote for four years and can serve two consecutive terms.

Ahead of the 2012 elections to the 290-seat, unicameral parliament, the Guardian Council disqualified one-third of the registered candidates, including incumbent members, opposition reformists, and supporters of Ahmadinejad, who had increasingly clashed with supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and rival conservative factions. Members of two leading reformist political groupings, the Islamic Participation Front and the Islamic Revolution Mujahedin Organization, as well as the Freedom Movement, were barred from taking part. Though there were no claims of systematic fraud, several sitting lawmakers accused the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of rigging activities. The official results were seen as favoring the conservative supporters of the supreme leader.

In contrast to 2009, no major irregularities were reported in the 2013 presidential election. Ahead of the vote the Guardian Council disqualified more than 600 candidates, including former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and presidential aide Rahim Mashaei, apparently due to political infighting. Nearly all of the eight approved candidates, including Rouhani, were deemed close to Khamenei. Only one reformist candidate, who was widely seen as lacking both charisma and significant popular support, was allowed to run. In the run-up to the election, censorship increased, the government intensified its press crackdown, and authorities disrupted the free flow of information online by restricting the already slow speed of the internet. However, Rouhani's victory – with nearly 51 percent of the vote amid 72 percent turnout – appeared to reflect the choice of the voters.

In preparation for the 2013 presidential election, the parliament passed amendments to the election law that were largely viewed as designed to diminish the role of the executive branch in conducting elections. Under the law, a new executive board composed of representatives aligned with the supreme leader was charged with overseeing the Interior Ministry's administration of the balloting.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 2 / 16

Only political parties and factions loyal to the establishment and to the state ideology are permitted to operate. Reformist parties and politicians have come under increased pressure and state repression, especially since 2009. Iran's leading opposition figures – Mir Hussein Mousavi, his wife Zahra Rahnavard, and reformist cleric Mehdi Karroubi – have been under house arrest since February 2011 with no access to the outside world.

The parliament grants five seats to recognized non-Muslim minorities: Jews, Armenian Christians, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, and Zoroastrians. However, ethnic and especially religious

minorities are rarely awarded senior government posts, and their political presence remains weak. The Guardian Council bars women from running for president based on its interpretation of the constitution, and women's political participation in general is limited.

C. Functioning of Government: 2 / 12

The powers of the elected parliament are restricted by the unelected Guardian Council, which must approve all bills before they can become law. The council often rejects bills it deems un-Islamic. The parliament can also be limited and influenced by the supreme leader, who has final say in the Islamic Republic. Nevertheless, the parliament has been a platform for heated political debate and criticism of the government, and legislators have frequently challenged presidents and their policies.

Corruption remains endemic at all levels of the bureaucracy, despite regular calls by authorities to tackle the problem. Many state service providers engage in corrupt practices, including bribery, with impunity. Powerful actors involved in the economy, including the IRGC and bonyads (endowed foundations), are above scrutiny. In its 2014 Corruption Perception Index, Transparency International ranked Iran 136 out of 175 countries and territories.

Civil Liberties: 10 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 2 / 16

Freedom of expression and access to information continue to be severely limited both online and offline. The state broadcasting company is tightly controlled by hard-liners and influenced by the country's security apparatus. News and analysis are heavily censored, while critics and opposition members are rarely, if ever, given a platform on state-controlled television, which remains a major source of information for many Iranians. State television has a record of airing confessions extracted from political prisoners under duress, and it routinely carries reports aimed at discrediting dissidents and opposition activists.

Newspapers and magazines face censorship and warnings from authorities about which topics to cover and how. Journalists state that they are often forced to practice self-censorship when working on sensitive issues. Since Rouhani became president, several new dailies and magazines have been given publishing licenses, including a women's magazine run by prominent female editor Shahla Sherkat. At the same time, a number of publications and websites have been closed following orders by authorities. In September 2014, Sherkat was summoned to the Press Court for publishing pictures of women "considered as objects." Several journalists were arrested during the year, including *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian and reformist journalist Seraj Mirdamadi. In February, a Tehran court shuttered the reformist daily *Aseman* (Sky) over an article that criticized the Islamic law of retribution. Satellite dishes continue to be banned, and Persian-language broadcasts from outside the country are regularly jammed, especially during politically sensitive times.

In a rare positive development, the government granted high-speed internet licenses to two major mobile operators in September 2014, despite hard-liner opposition. The government also permitted internet providers to increase bandwidth for home connections. However, tens of thousands of websites remain filtered, including news sites and social media, which have otherwise become a relatively free platform of expression for many Iranians. In the fall, authorities announced the arrest of 12 individuals for sharing jokes about the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, on social-media platforms, including Viber. The judiciary in September gave the government 30 days to block Viber and other instant-messaging applications that are popular among Iranians. Authorities also continue to target online activists. In July, a revolutionary court sentenced eight Facebook activists to prison for terms ranging from 8 to 21

years. The individuals were charged with acting against national security and insulting Iranian leaders.

Various forms of art and artists face restrictions in Iran. All books must be approved by the Ministry of Culture in order to receive a publishing license. Scores of books have been banned, while authors have been accused of subversion. Filmmakers also face censorship and official pressure. In May 2014, six young men and women who had been arrested over a music video posted on YouTube were reportedly forced to appear on state television and repent for their actions. They were later sentenced to suspended prison terms and floggings.

Iran is home to a majority Shiite Muslim population and Sunni, Baha'i, Christian, and Zoroastrian minorities. The constitution recognizes only Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as religious minorities, and they are relatively free to worship and perform their religious obligations. Meanwhile, the regime cracks down on Muslims who do not agree with the state ideology and interpretation of Islam. Sunni Muslims complain that they have been prevented from building mosques in major cities and face employment discrimination for government jobs. According to an October 2014 report by the UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran, at least 150 Sunnis were in detention for their religious activities. In recent years, there has been increased pressure on the Sufi Muslim order Nematollahi Gonabadi, including destruction of their places of worship and the jailing of some of their members. Currently, at least nine Sufi dervishes are in Iranian prisons. The government also subjects some non-Muslim minorities to repressive policies and discrimination. Baha'is are systematically persecuted, sentenced to prison, and banned from access to higher education; at least 136 Baha'is were in prison in 2014 due to their religious beliefs. The Baha'i International Community reported in April that the IRGC had been excavating and destroying a historic Baha'i cemetery in Shiraz. There is also an ongoing crackdown on Christian converts. In the past three years, a number of informal house churches have been raided and their pastors detained. Some of them reportedly face serious charges that carry the death penalty, including "spreading corruption on earth" and "enmity with God."

Academic freedom remains limited in Iran, despite attempts by Rouhani's government to ease the harsh repression universities have experienced since 2009. In 2014 about a dozen student associations that had been suspended under the previous administration were allowed to renew their work. Several new student groups also received permits to operate. However, Khamenei has warned that universities should not be turned into centers for political activities. In August, the conservative-dominated parliament impeached Minister of Science, Research, and Technology Reza Faraji-Dana, who had lifted some of the restrictions placed on universities and allowed more than 100 students who had been expelled over their political activism to resume their studies. Amnesty International estimates that hundreds of students have been prevented from continuing their studies for political reasons or because they belong to the Baha'i community. In March, a court sentenced student Maryam Shafipour to seven years in prison for "spreading propaganda" and "gathering and colluding" against the Iranian establishment. More than 10 student activists are in jail, including well-known activist Majid Tavakoli, who has reportedly been subjected to torture. The government has also worked to reduce the number of female students in medicine and other subjects in which women have outnumbered men.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 1 / 12

The constitution states that public demonstrations may be held under the condition that they are not "detrimental to the fundamental principle of Islam." In practice, only state-sanctioned demonstrations are permitted, while other gatherings, including several peaceful protests by women's rights activists, have in recent years been forcefully disrupted by security personnel, who have detained participants. In June 2014, a group of women who had attempted to watch a volleyball game and protest the ban on female spectators at a sports stadium in Tehran were

dispersed by authorities, who briefly detained more than a dozen of them. One, British-Iranian citizen Ghoncheh Ghavami, was reportedly rearrested several days later and transferred to Evin prison.

Nongovernmental organizations that work on nonpolitical issues such as poverty are allowed to operate relatively freely. Other groups, especially those that have highlighted human rights violations, have been suppressed. They include the Center for Human Rights Defenders, which remains closed with several of its members in jail, and the Mourning Mothers of Iran group (Mothers of Laleh Park), which had been gathering in a Tehran park to bring attention to human rights abuses.

Iran does not permit the creation of labor unions; only state-sponsored labor councils are allowed. In recent years labor rights groups, including the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, have also come under pressure, and more than a dozen representatives have been sentenced to prison. On May 1, 2014, several labor activists were briefly detained in Tehran as they gathered to observe International Workers' Day.

F. Rule of Law: 3 / 16

The judicial system is used as a tool to silence critics and opposition members. The head of the judiciary is directly appointed by the supreme leader for a five-year term. Under the current head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani, human rights advocates and political activists have been subjected to unfair trials, and judges have reportedly been increasingly influenced by the security apparatus. In August 2014, Larijani was reinstated for a second term.

Iran, along with China, has the highest number of executions in the world, and the annual total, including public hangings, has increased under Larijani. Iran is one of the few countries that executes individuals for crimes they committed when they were less than 18 years old. According to the UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran, at least 852 individuals were executed between July 2013 and June 2014. In September 2014, psychologist Mohsen Amir-Aslani was reportedly hanged in a prison near the city of Karaj after being convicted of charges including heresy and insulting the prophet Jonah. Amir-Aslani had reportedly been offering a different interpretation of the Koran in his classes.

Lawyers taking up sensitive political cases have been jailed and banned from practicing, including prominent human rights lawyer Abdolfatah Soltani. A number of lawyers have been forced to leave the country to escape prosecution.

Activists are routinely arrested without warrants and held for indefinite periods of time without formal charges. They are denied access to legal counsel and prevented from any contact with the outside world. Many are later convicted on vague security charges in trials that sometimes last only a few minutes. Activists say they have been beaten during interrogation and subjected to psychological pressure, including threats that their relatives will be arrested. Many have been forced into false confessions dictated by their interrogators.

Parallel security bodies pressure activists and keep them in detention centers that are reportedly not under the control of the state prisons organization. Many activists have been held in solitary confinement for several months, in violation of Iranian laws. Some have been denied access to adequate medical care. Judges often set extremely high bails for the release of activists.

Security forces are seldom held responsible for human rights violations.

Ethnic minorities complain of various forms of discrimination, including restrictions on the use of their languages. Some of the provinces with large ethnic minorities remain underdeveloped.

Activists campaigning for more ethnic rights and greater autonomy have come under pressure from authorities, and some have been jailed.

The penal code criminalizes all sexual relations outside of traditional marriage, and Iran is among the few countries where individuals can be put to death for consensual same-sex conduct. Members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community face harassment and discrimination, though the problem is underreported due to the criminalized and hidden nature of these groups in Iran.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 4 / 16

Freedom of movement is restricted, particularly for women and perceived opponents of the regime. Women are banned from certain public places, such as sports stadiums, and can obtain a passport to travel abroad only with the permission of their fathers or husbands. Many journalists and activists have been prevented from leaving the country to attend international events, and in some cases their passports have been confiscated. In June 2014, prominent reformist journalist Mashaollah Shamsolvaezin was charged with "propaganda against the state" and banned from travelling. Shamsolvaezin had also been banned from leaving the country in 2009.

Iranians have the right to own property and establish private businesses. High housing costs are a major obstacle to adequate housing for the poorer segments of society. Bribery is said to be widespread in the business environment, including for registration and obtaining business licenses.

The government interferes in most aspects of citizens' private lives. Home parties are often raided and citizens detained or fined for drinking alcohol or mingling with members of the opposite sex. Women are regularly harassed and detained by the police for not fully observing the obligatory Islamic dress code. In June 2014, the parliament described skin-tight leggings that have become popular among Iranian women as a threat to society. There is also pressure on young men over certain forms of dress or appearance, such as wearing pony tails or clothing deemed Western.

Women remain significantly underrepresented in politics and government, though Rouhani has appointed three women among his vice presidents. In addition, four women have been appointed as governors.

Women are denied equal rights in divorce, child custody, and inheritance. A woman's testimony in court is given only half the weight of a man's, and the monetary compensation awarded to a female victim's family upon her death is half that owed to the family of a male victim.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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