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ARTISTIC
FREEDOM
INITIATIVE

VOICES
UNBOUND

**Joint Submission by Artistic Freedom Initiative & Voices
Unbound to the Fourth Cycle of the Universal Periodic
Review of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review 48th Session

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ABOUT ARTISTIC FREEDOM INITIATIVE

Led by immigration and human rights attorneys, Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) has provided pro bono immigration representation and resettlement assistance for international artists at risk since its establishment in 2017. AFI directly assists artists who have experienced persecution, censorship, or other restrictions on their freedom of expression, and supports artists committed to advancing social change and fundamental human rights. We work with immigrant artists to champion art produced in exile and improve conditions for artists in their home countries. At the United Nations, AFI seeks to draw international attention to the persecution of artists and to the suppression of the right to artistic expression.

ABOUT VOICES UNBOUND

Founded in 2023 by a group of human rights defenders, journalists, and activists, Voices Unbound (VU) was established with the goal to provide safe haven and support for journalists and activists at risk. VU facilitates humanitarian aid, making connections to pro bono legal service providers, and services aimed at social, civic, and economic integration in the United States. Dedicated to safeguarding the rights of journalists and activists at risk, VU was born on the notion that activists and journalists are uniquely situated to positively and powerfully effect change, provided their voices can be unbounded. At the United Nations, VU aims to expose systematic attacks on journalists and activists and to shine a spotlight on threats to freedom of expression around the world.

INTRODUCTION

In preparation for the UPR review of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the UPR Working Group's 48th session, this submission evaluates artistic freedom in Iran from 2019 to present. The current situation is characterized by systematic and widespread violations of Iranians' rights to freedom of expression, as well as state-led harassment, censorship, intimidation, arbitrary arrest and detention of artists and cultural workers critical of the government.

FOLLOW UP TO THE PREVIOUS REVIEW

1. In the previous UPR cycle, Iran received 329 recommendations, of which it supported 143.¹ Iran supported recommendations related to the legal and general framework of implementation, universal and cross-cutting issues, civil and political rights, economic, social, and cultural rights, women's rights, and rights of other vulnerable groups and persons.²

2. The Islamic Republic of Iran supported four recommendations related to freedom of opinion and expression³ and noted 12 such recommendations.⁴ In addition, Iran supported five recommendations to protect human rights defenders, journalists, and media workers and the right to fully exercise freedom of expression⁵ and noted 11 such recommendations.⁶
3. Despite the concern raised by civil society organizations and other UN member states over the poor state of freedom of expression and the situation of human rights defenders, the Islamic Republic of Iran has made no progress on implementing the recommendations it received on these points during the third UPR Cycle. On the contrary, repression and restrictions intensified since the tragic death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 and the subsequent *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement. In response to the protests, the government responded with violence and redoubled their efforts to repress Iranian's rights.
4. The Islamic Republic of Iran continued to impose a mandated dress code, including a hijab on Iranian women and girls despite widespread, enduring protests against it. The State continued to employ the task force known as the "Morality Police" to enforce the mandate, despite allegations that morality police officers use violence and coercive tactics to punish those who reject or protest the dress code.
5. For decades, artists and cultural workers in the Islamic Republic of Iran have faced systemic repression for expressing criticism of the regime. While dissident women and girls were the primary targets of the regime during the protests, other dissident groups and human rights defenders, including artists and cultural workers, also suffered violence at the hands of the authorities because of the prominent role they played in the proliferation of *Woman, Life, Freedom*.
6. Iran maintains several laws that are incompatible with international standards on freedom of expression. These noncompliant laws are embedded in both the constitutional framework and the Iranian Penal Code. Consequently, the restrictive legal environment and weak constitutional protections effectively criminalize a wide range of protected expressions.
7. Additionally, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) strengthened its efforts to suppress freedom of expression since the third UPR cycle. The Ministry makes use of bureaucratic practices to limit artistic freedom, such as surveillance, censorship, work bans, and cyber-policing.
8. Iran supported only two recommendations related to arbitrary arrest and detention.⁷ One of these recommendations urged the government to ensure that human rights defenders, amongst other at risk groups, were not subjected to intimidation or arbitrary arrest in connection with their work.⁸ Iran noted eight additional recommendations related to arbitrary arrests and detention.⁹ However, arbitrary arrests and detention remain a widely used tool to silence dissent, and to intimidate the Iranian population, including artists and cultural workers, into self-censorship.

INTERNATIONAL, REGIONAL, AND DOMESTIC HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS

9. Iran has committed to protecting and respecting the rights and freedoms included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.^{[10](#)}
10. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (*hereafter* Iranian Constitution) contains several provisions related to the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms:
11. Article 23 states that “investigation into one’s ideas is forbidden. No one can be subjected to questioning and aggression for merely holding an opinion.”^{[11](#)}
12. Article 24 states that “publications and the press are free to discuss issues unless such is deemed harmful to the principles of Islam or the rights of the public. The law shall determine the details of this exception.”^{[12](#)}

CENSORSHIP AND SURVEILLANCE OF ARTISTS

The Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) is the Iranian government body responsible for regulating and policing the arts and cultural sector in Iran. The MCIG uses their oversight authority to suppress speech and expression that does not align with the Islamic Republic of Iran’s strict religious and moral standards.

Since the outbreak of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests, the MCIG has employed increasingly repressive measures to censor Iranians and control the public narrative, including through surveillance, blacklisting, and other punitive measures.

13. In September 2022, the MCIG created a "Celebrity Task Force" to surveil artists on social media with the aim of identifying and punishing those who expressed disapproval of the death of Mahsa Amini, protested compulsory hijab, or voiced support for the *Woman, Life, Freedom* demonstrations.^{[13](#)} The task force ordered "restrictions" to be placed on more than 141 writers, actors, filmmakers, poets, and musicians, among other artists.^{[14](#)}
14. During the review period, Iran's parliament mandated that the MCIG maintain a close eye on Iranian citizens' internet use and punish expressions that do not adhere to the principles of the Islamic Republic. Through online surveillance, authorities were able to locate and target a number of music groups that shared videos of their performances on social media. The authorities notified the musicians that their Instagram accounts were suspended due to “criminal content” and informed them that the individuals identified in the video would face legal action from the State.^{[15](#)}

SUBSTANTIVE VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHT TO FREE EXPRESSION

State authorities in Iran regularly use the law as a tool to persecute dissident artists, a trend that has been acute since Mahsa Amini's death in police custody and the subsequent outbreak of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests.

The recent spate of arrests and prosecutions of Iranian artists have been made pursuant to a series of overbroad and vague laws that are incompatible with international standards on freedom of expression. The artists convicted under these laws have faced severe and disproportionate sentences, including restrictions on their mobility, incarceration, and the death penalty.

AFI highlights several laws that the Islamic Republic of Iran has used to limit artistic expression and cites examples of artists who were wrongfully convicted and sentenced during the review period:

15. Article 500: Propaganda against the regime

- a. The Islamic Republic employs the term “propaganda” as a blanket category capturing any speech or expression they deem as a threat to their rule. Article 500 has been widely used to criminalize Iranian dissidents, including many artists.
- b. In October 2022, poet **Atefeh Chaharmahalian** was detained for taking part in the *Woman, Life, Freedom* demonstrations. While being held by the authorities, she was charged with multiple offenses, one of which was “propaganda against the government”.^{[16](#)}
- c. In August 2023, filmmakers **Saeed Roustayi** and **Javad Noruzbegi** were sentenced to six months in prison for creating and distributing “propaganda against the government” following their Cannes Film Festival premiere of “Leila’s Brothers” – which won the coveted FIPRESCI award – without the approval of the MCIG.^{[17](#)}
- d. In March 2024, the grammy-award winning singer **Shervin Hajirpour** was charged with disseminating “propaganda against the government” under Article 500 for his song “Baraye”, which was created in support of *Woman, Life, Freedom*.^{[18](#)} He was later sentenced to three years and eight months in prison.^{[19](#)}
- e. In January 2024, **Mehdi Yarrahi**, the Iranian musician received a sentence of two years in prison and more than 70 lashes for his song “Roosarito” (Your Head Scarf).^{[20](#)} The court found Yarrahi guilty of several offenses pertaining to morals and political crimes, such as “producing and distributing obscene and immoral content online” and disseminating “propaganda against the government.”^{[21](#)}

16. Articles 501 and 508: Espionage, collusion, and conspiracy against the State

- a. This series of laws are wrongfully used to punish those who seek to form connections with international arts and cultural institutions and/or to develop critical works in safe spaces abroad, outside of the immediate scope of surveillance of the Iranian government.
- b. On September 26, 2022, writer **Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee** was detained at her residence in Tehran under mysterious circumstances as part of the State’s

crackdown on protestors following Mahsa Amini's death. As of July 2023, Iraee is sentenced to five years in prison for "collusion" as well as "propaganda against the government."²²

- c. In October 2022, **Mehdi Bahman**, the writer and illustrator was arrested for alleged espionage following his public criticisms of the government.²³ Baham is presently incarcerated on death row after the Islamic Revolutionary Court sentenced him to death.²⁴

17. Article 286: Sowing corruption on Earth

- a. The Islamic Republic uses the term "corruption on Earth" to refer to a wide slate of offenses related to national security and morality. In practice, the law has been used to criminalize speech that criticizes the government or challenges restrictive social norms.
- b. In October 2022, rapper **Toomaj Salehi** was arrested following the release of a new song that supported *Woman, Life, Freedom*. The authorities filed several charges against him for his video, including "Sowing Corruption on Earth" and "Propaganda against the government." Salehi was released on bail and later returned to prison in November 2023 after disclosing to the public that he had suffered abuse while under police custody, including spending 252 days in solitary confinement.²⁵ In April 2024, the Islamic Revolutionary Court sentenced him to execution, the maximum penalty under Article 286.²⁶ Salehi's death sentence was reversed in June 2024 following an appeal by the Supreme Court's 39th branch; nevertheless, he is still detained until the outcome of his new trial.²⁷

18. Articles 499, 500, 513, and 514: Blasphemy laws

- a. While ostensibly aimed at protecting religious sentiments, Iran has used blasphemy laws to suppress dissent and limit expression.
- b. On April 13, 2024, the cartoonist **Atena Farghadani** was arrested by intelligence agents while she was trying to hang one of her caricature artworks on a wall outside of the Presidential Palace. Farghadani told her husband and attorney that she was abused by agents at an undisclosed location prior to being sent to prison, including blows to her head and nose among other injuries. In prison, she faced multiple charges, including blasphemy for allegedly "insulting the sacred Messiah" and disseminating "propaganda against the government."²⁸ She was later released on bail, and is still awaiting a hearing.²⁹

19. Article 638: Chastity and hijab law

- a. On September 20, 2023, the Bill to Support the Family by Promoting the Culture of Chastity and Hijab was passed by the Iranian parliament. It raised the penalties under Article 638 of the Iranian Penal Code, mandating fines of up to \$720 USD, flogging, travel and internet access restrictions, or ten years in prison for women who appear in public without a hijab.³⁰ Furthermore, the law mandates that public entities refuse essential services to women who refuse to wear a hijab.

- b. The Islamic Republic of Iran employs the task force known as the “Morality Police” to enforce the mandatory dress code. The Morality Police have been accused of using violence and coercive tactics against women and girls that reject or protest the mandate.³¹ Despite strong protests against the mandated dress code and the Morality Police following the death of Mahsa Amini, the Islamic Republic of Iran ordered the Morality Police to resume their duties in mid 2023.³²
- c. Since the onset of *Woman, Life, Freedom*, prominent human rights defenders—including several artists—have faced disproportionate legal action because they utilize their platforms and large followings to criticize the government, to protest the mandated dress code, and to advocate for rights and freedoms. The State has responded to many of their peaceful protests with punitive measures.
- d. In late 2022, actress **Taraneh Alidoosti** published a picture of herself without a headscarf on her Instagram account holding a sign with the words, “Woman, Life, Freedom” on it. Soon after, she was taken into custody on allegations of “spreading falsehoods,” imprisoned for two and a half weeks, and had her Instagram account blocked.³³ In November 2023, Alidoosti was one of twenty actresses who were banned by the government from seeking employment in Iranian cinema for their protests of the mandatory dress code.³⁴

PROCEDURAL VIOLATIONS OF ARTIST'S RIGHT

- 20. Since the death of Mahsa Amini, tens of thousands of protestors have been unlawfully detained by the government as a means to punish them for taking part and to deter them from participating in further demonstrations. Iranian photojournalist **Yalda Moaiery** was one of them; she was arrested in late September 2022 for taking pictures at the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests.³⁵ She was not provided with an explanation for her arrest, and she reported being assaulted by police officers when she was initially detained.
- 21. Ms. Moaiery was held in prolonged solitary confinement - a recognized form of torture - for one month following her arrest in September 2022.³⁶ Like Ms. Moaiery, many inmates in Iranian prisons endure torture while incarcerated and are forced under duress to confess to crimes they did not commit. These confessions are frequently used as the main evidence against the defendants in court and result in wrongful convictions.³⁷
- 22. In July 2022, a few weeks after the government decided to redouble its efforts to enforce the compulsory hijab for women, Iranian writer, poet, and activist **Sepideh Rashno** was detained for non-compliance. Rashno was filmed arguing with a woman who was berating her for refusing to wear a headscarf. Soon after the video appeared online, Rashno was arrested and held in custody for several weeks until she unexpectedly made an appearance on Iranian state television to express her apologies for breaking the law. In the public broadcast, Sepideh appeared with bruises on her face and around her eyes, raising suspicion that she had been tortured until she agreed to make the statement.³⁸ Despite her statement, Sepideh was sentenced to three years and eleven months in prison for “propaganda” and “promiscuity” in January 2024.³⁹

TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION OF ARTISTS

23. The government of Iran has taken measures to repress Iranian dissidents— including several artists— internationally in an attempt to silence them, including through intimidation tactics, threats, kidnapping, and assassination attempts. The regime also regularly detains and threatens their relatives who remain in Iran.⁴⁰
24. In July 2021, the US Department of Justice notified Iranian author, journalist, and activist **Masih Alinejad** that the Iranian government was planning an operation to abduct her. The Iranian government reportedly hired a private investigator who followed Alinejad and her family throughout New York, researched kidnapping strategies, threatened her relatives, and attempted to entice her to travel to a third nation so that she could be arrested there and sent back to Iran.⁴¹ In January 2023, the US Department of Justice filed charges against three individuals in connection with an alleged murder plot against Alinejad which started in Iran, following a similar pattern of government-sponsored efforts by the Iranian regime to intimidate Iranian dissidents abroad.
25. In April 2024, **Saman Taherpour**, an Iranian artist and designer specializing in contemporary jewelry and accessories based in Gothenburg, Sweden received death threats from someone claiming to be an official from the Office of the President of Iran. The letter accused Taherpour of “committing offenses against the country's security and violating the Islamic Republic's regulations.”⁴² He was informed that he was being watched and that he would be forced to return to Iran. Taherpour's family in Iran was also threatened over the phone by Iranian security authorities.⁴³

RECOMMENDATIONS

AFI and Voices Unbound urge UN members states to call on the Islamic Republic of Iran to affirm its commitments to freedom of expression and the human rights of artists, cultural workers and other human rights defenders by:

1. Revising Iranian law to bring it into conformity with international norms and standards on freedom of expression, including by:
 - a. Repealing laws and regulations that criminalize and/or penalize “immorality” to respect individual freedom of choice and expression, including but not limited to the following:
 - i. Article 638 of the Iranian Penal Code related to the enforced dress code for women and girls.
 - ii. Book One, Chapter Nine, Article 286 of the Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran: “Sowing corruption on earth.”
 - b. Reviewing and repeal laws related to blasphemy to ensure they do not infringe upon freedom of expression and belief, including but not limited to:

- i. Book One, Chapter Two of the Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Articles 513-515: “Insulting sacred religious values and criminal attempt on national authorities.”
 - c. Clarifying vague laws, such as those related to propaganda, crimes against national security, and the press to prevent arbitrary enforcement and to ensure legal certainty, including but not limited to:
 - i. “Crimes against the national and foreign security of the State”: Book Five, Chapter One of the Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Articles 498-512.
 - ii. Book Five, Chapter Sixteen of the Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 610: Conspiracy and collusion to commit a crime.
2. As a State party to the ICCPR, uphold citizens' fundamental rights, including freedom of expression.
 - a. Refrain from arbitrary arrests, prosecutions, and sham trials, ensuring due process rights and fair treatment for all individuals within the legal system.
 - b. Immediately release individuals arbitrarily detained and abolish the death penalty, adhering to international human rights standards.
3. Enact laws and policies to protect the rights and freedoms of women and minorities, prohibiting discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, or religion.
 - a. Dissolve the Morality Police and establish mechanisms to hold law enforcement accountable for any brutality, corruption, or misconduct.
4. Cease the systematic targeting and persecution of human rights defenders, including artists, for their advocacy and activism.
 - a. Cease the bureaucratic methods employed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) that restrict artistic freedom, including censorship, surveillance, work bans, cyber policing and the deployment of Celebrity Task Forces.
 - b. Implement oversight mechanisms for intelligence agencies, such as the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), to prevent abuses of power and protect citizens' rights.
 - c. Refrain from transnational repression targeting dissidents and activists.
5. Establish mechanisms to provide justice and reparations for individuals harmed by State actions, including those affected by repression and violence.

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