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Human Rights and Democracy: The 2012 Foreign & Commonwealth Office Report - Country updates: Iran

Latest Update: 31 December 2013

There was no substantive improvement in the human rights situation in Iran between October and December 2013. The Iranian government continued to make positive public statements on civil rights issues, but there has been no sign of institutional change to improve the human rights situation, including for minority religious and ethnic groups, journalists and human rights defenders, prisoners and women.

Iran continues to have the highest execution rate per capita in the world. On 26 October, 16 convicted prisoners were executed in retaliation for the killing of 14 Iranian border guards the day before. It is reported that the prisoners were not connected to the deaths of the border guards and were executed without due process. The UK opposes the use of the death penalty as a matter of principle. On 28 October, Minister for the Middle East, Hugh Robertson, released a [statement](#) urging Iran to place a moratorium on the death penalty.

The lack of freedom of religion and belief in Iran continues to be of serious concern. In his 4 October report, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, noted the continued persecution of religious minorities. The report specifically highlights the targeting of Iranian Christian converts, the Baha'i community and Dervish Muslims.

Intimidation and censorship of journalists continues. A Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) report of 18 December confirmed Iran as having the second highest number of journalists in prison in the world. There are anecdotal reports of ongoing efforts to close down news websites and other publications, and between 16 and 24 internet bloggers and experts were arrested at the beginning of December.

There have been reports of an escalation in the persecution of Kurds and the execution of Kurdish political prisoners. On 2 November, three Kurds were sentenced to death by the 28th Branch of the Revolutionary Court for alleged connections to Salafi groups. One of the men was only 17 at the time of his arrest. On 4 November, Kurdish civil and political activist, Shirkoo Moarefi, was executed. Neither his lawyer nor his family were informed prior to his execution and his lawyer released a statement recounting how he had learnt of his client's death through media channels. Iran's law stipulates that the authorities must serve the lawyers with notice of the impending execution of their clients. This is further evidence of Iranian authorities disregarding their own laws.

Lack of medical care for prisoners and poor prison conditions also remains of great concern. On 28 November, Hootan Dolati, a prisoner in Evin prison with a chronic heart problem began a “wet” hunger strike in protest at not being allowed to receive the treatment he needs. It has been reported that he may also have been tortured following his arrest in March and held in solitary confinement for a month. He was sentenced for 18 months on national security charges including being a member of a banned political group and the “publication of statements” by them. In addition to poor prison conditions, the use of “exile” terms for political prisoners continues, placing prisoners hundreds of miles from their families.

On 20 November, Human Rights Watch released a report on the plight of Afghan migrants in Iran. It is estimated that there are almost one million Afghan citizens recognised as refugees by the Iranian government in Iran. Although Iran has played an important role in providing shelter for Afghan citizens for over thirty years, many suffer discrimination and ill treatment. A lack of due process limits opportunities for Afghans fleeing conflict in their own country to apply for asylum or even attempt to prove their right to remain in Iran. Summary deportations are common and there are reports of ill treatment such as beatings, forced labour and detention in poor, unsanitary conditions. Even where refugees are relatively settled in Iran, access to education, employment and social rights are curtailed through discriminatory laws and bureaucracy. Of particular concern are reports of the abuse of unaccompanied migrant children by Iranian security forces. These children make up large number Afghan refugees, a problem further exacerbated by forced separation of migrant families. Iran voluntarily signed up to the 1951 Refugee Convention and such policies violate the terms of this convention.

On 26 November, in line with promises made during his election campaign, President Rouhani released a draft Charter of Citizens’ Rights. Although this is a welcome exercise, without changes to the law or the approach taken by the judiciary and security forces, there is unlikely to be any real change. The Charter addresses, inter alia, cultural, ethnic and religious rights, freedom of thought and expression, and the right to privacy. However, it does not provide concrete ways to improve the rights for all Iranian citizens and places the rights it refers to “within the framework” of Iran’s current laws, which hitherto have not provided sufficient protection.

A positive development came at the end of November when the city council of Kalat in the south of Iran unanimously elected a Sunni woman as mayor. Samiyeh Balouchzehi is a 26-year-old Baluch widow with an engineering degree and a Masters in natural resources management. Although she is not the first female mayor in Iran, her election in such a strongly conservative province is encouraging.

Mr Robertson [welcomed the UN 3rd Committee resolution](#) that was passed on 19 November calling on Iran to improve its human rights record. The resolution was later passed at the UN General Assembly Plenary vote on 19 December with 86 votes in favour, 36 votes against and 61 abstentions. This is the tenth consecutive year that the Third Committee has passed a resolution in support of human rights in Iran, and is a clear statement by the international community that Iran must live up to its international obligations and take concrete steps to improve the human rights situation of all its citizens. While welcoming some developments, including President Rouhani’s pledges to eliminate discrimination against ethnic minorities and to promote freedom of expression, the resolution expressed deep concern at the ongoing human rights violations in Iran. It referred specifically to Iran’s high execution rate and use of corporal punishment; the use of torture and lack of due process; Iran’s treatment of human rights defenders and journalists; and the systematic persecution of religious minorities, particularly those of the Baha’i faith and evangelical Christians. It also called for substantive improvements to the rights of women and minority ethnic and linguistic groups in Iran.

Update: 30 September 2013

The period of July to September of 2013 continued to show no substantive improvement in Iran’s poor human rights record. However, President Rouhani’s election in July has brought a degree of optimism. During his election campaign he called for social equality and said “discrimination among men and women will be eliminated.” He also stated that “All Iranian people should feel there is justice. Justice means equal opportunity. All ethnicities, all religions, even religious minorities, must feel justice.” These words are encouraging, and we have seen small signs of improvement, such as the release in September of some prominent political prisoners. However, we remain deeply concerned about the situation, and have yet to see any institutional change.

Iran continues to have the highest execution rate per capita in the world, second only to China in terms of overall numbers. The UK opposes the use of the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle. From July to September there were no fewer than 100 executions. In just one week in August, at least 35 people were executed, with reports suggesting that several of these executions were carried out in public. Many of these executions were for drug-related charges; these do not constitute the “most serious of crimes” which, according to international consensus, are the only crimes for which death sentences may be imposed. On 26 September, Minister for the Middle East, Alistair Burt, spoke publicly about the imminent execution of six Iranian Kurds who were sentenced to death for vaguely-worded charges including “enmity against God” and “corruption on earth”.

On 10 July, the head of the Iranian Coroner’s Office announced the closure of the coroner’s investigation into the death of blogger Sattar Beheshti who was killed whilst in custody. They concluded that the mistreatment endured by Beheshti was not lethal in nature and could not lead to death. They added that none of the blows he received were to vital parts of the body nor was there any trace of lethal toxins in his body. There are yet to be

any convictions in this case, once again highlighting the level of impunity that regime officials are afforded in Iran.

July marked the 25th anniversary of the 1988 prison massacres where thousands of political prisoners were executed across Iran over a period of five months. Reports vary, but Amnesty International list 4,842 deaths with some suggesting as many as 30,000. It has been described as one of the worst single human rights abuses since World War 2, yet no one has been held responsible for this massacre.

We continue to be concerned about poor prison conditions, with many prisoners resorting to hunger strikes in protest. In July we received reports that Arash Sadeghi, an imprisoned student activist, had been on a hunger strike for 47 days after being subjected to almost 20 months of solitary confinement. In late July, another imprisoned activist, Abolfazl Abedini, who had given a testimony on Sattar Beheshti's case, was transferred to Ahwaz prison with no clear explanation. In protest against this decision, Abedini went on a hunger strike.

Another concerning trend is the denial of proper medical care to those in prisons. For example, despite his long-term ill health and lack of adequate medical equipment in the prison infirmary, authorities refused for over a week to grant medical leave to detained blogger and activist Hossein Ronaghi Maleki.

This period saw the continuation of persecution against minorities in Iran, including against religious minority groups; the UK continues to urge Iran to stop the systematic persecution of the Baha'i community and the repression of any group on the grounds of their religion or belief. In late July, Mostafa (Mohammadhadi) Bordbar, a Christian convert who had been arrested at a Christmas ceremony in Tehran in December 2012, was sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment for charges of "gathering to conspire through participation at meetings held in home-churches". 26 September marks *one year since Pastor Saeed Abedini was incarcerated in Tehran's Evin prison. He was sentenced to eight years because of his Christian faith.*

On 13 July, seven Dervishes involved in running a website dedicated to news about Sufi orders as well as human rights-related stories were collectively sentenced to over 56 years of imprisonment, after originally being arrested in 2011 for "insulting the Supreme Leader," "assembly and collusion against national security," "propagating falsehoods," and "membership of a deviant group". Hamidreza Moradi Sarvestani (website manager) was sentenced to 10 years and six months; Reza Entesari (website photographer) was sentenced to eight years and six months; Mostafa Daneshjoo, Farshid Yadollahi, Amir Eslami, Omid Behrouzi, Afshin Karampour (lawyers) were sentenced to seven years and six months each.

However, there have been some positive signs of change. On 29 August, Iran's Foreign Ministry appointed career diplomat Marzieh Afkham as its new spokesperson, the first time the Islamic Republic has appointed a woman in this role. The Islamic Republic has also committed to appointing its first female Ambassador overseas.

On 12 September, Iran's House of Cinema was allowed to re-open, almost two years after it was closed down by the previous government. It is the main film industry guild which has supported a series of internationally acclaimed Iranian films.

Perhaps the most welcome change was on 19 September when 80 political prisoners were released from prison. One of the most prominent people released was human rights lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh. Sotoudeh was arrested in September 2010 on charges of 'spreading propaganda and conspiring to harm state security'. The Foreign Secretary [welcomed her release](#) and called for the release of all political prisoners in Iran.

The release of political prisoners and positive statements from the new President are welcome. The UK wants to see further systematic concrete steps for the improvement of the rights of all Iranian citizens, including Iranian cooperation with UN human rights mechanisms. Until such time the UK will not stop urging Iran to uphold its international obligations and will continue to highlight cases of concern.

Update: 30 June 2013

The period of April to June of 2013 saw no improvement in Iran's deplorable human rights record. There have been open-source reports of around 77 executions during this period, many of which were for crimes, such as drugs offences, that do not meet the internationally recognised threshold for application of the death penalty.

On 30 May 2013, the Guardian Council reinserted a clause into the revision of the Penal Code which although reduces the occasions on which stoning can be used in Iran, failed to remove the use completely. The Penal Code was also amended to introduce the death penalty, by way of hanging, for those convicted of adultery. The Penal Code has not yet been formally implemented and the UK, along with the UN and international human rights organisations, has serious concerns about its implementation.

In April, the Iranian Parliament drafted a new bill that criminalises emerging and unauthorized religions and spiritualities. Under the new bill, those involved in religious or spiritual sects could be sentenced to between 2 – 10 years imprisonment as well as face lashing, depending on their role in the groups. The bill also states that in confronting such new and deviant spiritualities, it is essential to refrain from considering any "secular human

rights" values. The bill is co-signed by some MPs representing religious minorities, including Yunatan Betkliya (Assyrian Christian MP) but has yet to be formally adopted.

On 7 May the [UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights released a report](#) that questioned the protection of religious minorities in Iran. In particular, the report expressed concerns about Iran's lack of protection of the rights of the Baha'i community. The Iranian delegation to the UN admitted that the Baha'i faced social challenges, but said that the community would not receive any "special protection". The Committee also raised concerns about domestic violence, discrimination of women, Afghan refugees and the right to health for transgender persons in Iran.

14 May marked the fifth anniversary of the incarceration of seven leaders of the Baha'i faith. Their 20-year sentence, implemented on baseless charges, are among the longest given to any prisoners of conscience in Iran. Foreign Office Minister for the Middle East, Alistair Burt, received an open letter on behalf of the Foreign Secretary from a delegation of UK interfaith leaders. [He urged Iran](#) to release the seven Baha'i leaders and to take immediate steps to stop the systematic persecution of the Baha'i community and the repression of any group on the grounds of their religion or belief.

Other religious minorities continue to be persecuted in Iran. This includes Christian converts. In May 2013, Christian Pastor, Farshid Fathi Malayeri, started his third year of a six-year prison sentence. He was convicted of "being the chief agent of foreign organisations in Iran and of administrating funds for foreign organisations". Pastor Malayeri was initially detained for 14 months in 2011 before eventually being tried on 5 March 2012. He was sentenced to six years in prison on 5 March 2012 and has spent no fewer than 100 days in solitary confinement. Minister Burt [called again for his release](#) on 15 April 2013.

The treatment of those in prison remains a concern. We are aware of numerous reports regarding the ill treatment of prisoners, such as the death of Afshin Osanlu, a political prisoner and labour activist, on 22 June 2013. Mr Osanlu died of a heart attack in the political-security wing of Raja'i-Shahr prison at the age of 42. As a result, nine political prisoners wrote to the Supreme Leader blaming his death on prison conditions including lack of proper medical care and bad physical conditions inside prisons. We also note that many prisoners have resorted to hunger strikes in protest of their situation. According to a report from the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, on 6 June, Mohammad Hossein Rezaei, a Kurdish prisoner at Minab prison sewed his lips shut in protest at the conditions that he was being kept in. After his protest, Rezaei was transferred to solitary confinement.

We are concerned to see reports from Iran of another instance of a sentence of amputation. In mid-June 2013, a court in Shiraz ordered that the hands of six people convicted of theft should be cut off. We understand that this sentence still requires approval from the Judiciary and it is not clear when the punishments will be carried out.

Iran continues to be one of the world's worst violators of free access to information, blocking well over five million websites and personal email. In the run up to the Iranian presidential elections in June, security forces continued their campaign of intimidation and arrested a number of Iranian journalists and closed down or blocked a small number of domestic newspapers and news websites. This is a deliberate attempt to clamp down on freedom of speech and silence any opposing voices. In a further effort to restrict free speech, it is reported that the media, internet, and text messaging were all heavily censored or otherwise restricted in the weeks leading up to the election, although many reported that these restrictions were at least partially lifted before polling day. The government also refused to issue visas to a large number of international media outlets who had intended to cover the presidential elections, restricting coverage to a small number of international reporters who were closely monitored and controlled.

The successful election of Dr Hassan Rouhani to President of Iran has brought a degree of optimism to the human rights sphere. Dr Rouhani has, in both pre and post election statements, indicated that he will improve the rights of all Iranians – including those from minority groups. He has promised to create a ministry dedicated to women's issues, remove the dominance and presence of police and intelligence forces over everyday life and committed to approving freedom of expression. This was, however, with a caveat of "while considering the regime's red lines".

Update: 31 March 2013

There was no improvement in the extremely poor human rights situation in Iran between January and March 2013. The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, updated the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on 11 March. During the presentation of his report, the UK raised concerns about torture, the rights of religious and ethnic minorities and women, and condemned reported reprisals by the Iranian Government against individuals interviewed by Dr Shaheed. Iran responded to the report in writing, rejecting its contents and personally attacking the Special Rapporteur in public statements. The UK continues to support the work of Dr Shaheed and in late March we successfully lobbied UN Human Rights Council members to renew his mandate for another year.

On 11 March the EU reviewed and extended the list of Iranian individuals and entities subject to an EU-wide travel ban and asset freeze under EU human rights sanctions. The EU added nine individuals and one entity (the Cyber Police) responsible for serious human rights violations in Iran.

One of these individuals, Abdolsamad Khoramabadi, and the Cyber Police, were listed for their involvement in the death in custody of Iranian blogger Sattar Beheshti. On 13 March the Iranian Parliament's special representative for the case, Mehdi Davatgari, closed the investigation into Beheshti's death, which was attributed to "physical and mental shock", despite the 35-year-old's good health prior to his arrest.

The Iranian authorities announced in late February that interrogation of suspects in police detention centres was no longer legal and that detainees could not be held in custody by police for longer than 24 hours. However our understanding is that detainees will instead be handed to the judicial authorities about whom we also have concerns regarding mistreatment.

In January Iran's Supreme Court upheld death sentences for five members of the minority Ahwazi Arab community. We have made clear that we believe these sentences to be unjustified and part of the ongoing persecution of ethnic minorities. The UK has publicly condemned the sentences, including in the Foreign Secretary's [statement](#) of 24 August and on our [website](#) on 18 January.

On and around 27 January at least 17 journalists were arrested and many were warned against reporting about the forthcoming elections and other "sensitive" subjects. The Minister for the Middle East, Alistair Burt, condemned the arrests in a [statement](#) on 29 January. Although some of those detained were later released, reports state that extremely high amounts were set for bail and other reports suggest five more journalists were subsequently arrested in Ilam Province.

Other media-related developments include reports of the blocking of Virtual Private Networks, which many Iranians have previously used to evade the regime's filtering of the Internet. On 12 March it was reported that the deputy head of Iran's Judiciary had referred to Iran's ability to monitor mobile text messages, an alleged capacity which could be misused further to restrict freedom of expression. We are monitoring these developments closely.

The Minister for Europe participated in a House of Commons [adjournment debate](#) on human rights in Iran on 16 January. This covered a wide range of issues, including minority rights, the death penalty, controls on freedom of expression and torture.