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Regime continues to close newspapers, impose jail sentences on journalists

Reporters Without Borders condemns the closure of three newspapers in the past few days and the imposition of a jail sentence on another journalist in the government's continuing crackdown on the media.

The Commission for Press Authorisation and Surveillance, the censorship arm of the ministry of culture and Islamic orientation, has suspended the business daily *Asia* and withdrawn the licences of the weeklies *Sepidar* and *Parastoo*, while **Badrolsadat Mofidi**, the secretary-general of the Association of Iranian Journalists, has been sentenced to six years in prison.

Asia's suspension was announced on 17 August by Mohammed Ali Ramin, deputy minister of culture and Islamic orientation, who said it was for "publishing images contrary to public virtues." The case has been sent to the justice ministry for judicial investigation. In reality, the newspaper has been closed for criticising the government's economic policies and the heavy involvement of the Revolutionary Guards in the economy. It is its third suspension since its launch in 2002.

Several of *Asia's* journalists have been jailed since its creation. When it was suspended in July 2003 at the behest of then Tehran prosecutor general Sayeed Mortazavi for "anti-government publicity" after publishing a photo of Maryam Radjavi of the banned People's Mujahideen, editor **Iraj Jamshidi** was arrested and held for several months. The Tehran supreme court sentenced publisher **Saghi Baghernia** to six months in prison in August 2006 for "anti-government propaganda." One of *Asia's* reporters, **Ali-Reza Ahmadi** was arrested in July 2003 and was not released until the following January, after paying 1 billion rials (100,000 euros) in bail.

The licences of *Sepidar* and *Parastoo* were withdrawn on the same grounds - "publishing images contrary to public virtues." The latest issues of *Sepidar*, which is owned by the Tehran University militia and supports radical militia members, had included articles criticising President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's controversial vice-president, Esfandiar Rahim Mashai. *Sepidar* also published a cartoon of a son of former President Hashemi Rafsanjani who was allegedly involved in the payment of bribes by a Norwegian company. These two closures are the result of in-fighting within the regime.

More than 20 newspapers have been suspended in Iran since President Ahmadinejad's reelection in June 2009. Ramin, the deputy minister of culture and Islamic orientation, is keeping his promise to do everything possible to "liquidate" the press. The country has been purged of its journalists and newspapers on the grounds of preserving "public morality."

Reporters Without Borders is dismayed to learn that a Tehran revolutionary court sentenced Badrolsadat Mofidi to six years in prison followed by a five-year ban on working as a journalist. Arrested on 28 December 2009, she was held in Section 209 of Tehran's Evin prison until released on 7 June after paying 100 million tomans (75,000 euros) in bail.

The heavy jail sentence imposed on Mofidi and the closure of the Association of Iranian Journalists for the past year are major blows for press freedom and journalists in Iran.

President Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, are on the Reporters Without Borders list of Predators of Press Freedom.
