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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Iran

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 30

Political Environment: 37

Economic Environment: 24

Total Score: 91

The crackdown against the press in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election continued into 2010 as journalists were arrested, imprisoned, threatened, and abused. Waves of censorship led to an increasing number of closed outlets and revoked licenses. The government arrested or interrogated journalists en masse ahead of planned opposition protests; in all, more than 100 journalists have been detained since the protests began in June 2009. Tactics of intimidation and harassment, unfair trials, and the lack of financial means to establish free and fair media outlets continued to severely hinder the media landscape in Iran. Moreover, the increased targeting of online media throughout 2010 exacerbated the restrictive environment in which journalists and bloggers operate.

Constitutional provisions and laws restrict what can be covered in the press and fail to provide protections for the media. In addition, the government regularly invokes vaguely worded legislation to criminalize dissenting opinions. The Press Law forbids the publication of ideas that are contrary to Islamic principles or detrimental to public rights. 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, but 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. In 2010, the government broadened the definition of the crime of *moharebeh*, or "enmity against God," in order to convict activists and journalists. 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, though many prison sentences have been arbitrarily harsh, ranging from 6 to more than 10 years.

Iran's judiciary frequently denies accused journalists due process by referring their cases to the Islamic Revolutionary Court (IRC), an emergency venue intended for those suspected of seeking to overthrow the regime. Cases against journalists before the IRC have featured closed-door hearings, denial of access to an attorney, and denial of a fair jury to defendants. In July 2010, Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani, a member of the Assembly of Experts, forbade lawyers from defending political suspects, putting pressure on lawyers not to assist arrested journalists. In addition to intimidation, lawyers in such cases are often disqualified or kept uninformed of proceedings.

Amid strict censorship rules, officials continued to shut down newspapers and publications, especially if they covered the opposition, women's rights, ethnic issues, or any topic the government deemed unacceptable. In March 2010, the government shut down the publications *Etemad* and *Irاندokht*, both linked to opposition leader Mehdi Karrubi, and blocked former president Mohammad Khatami's website in October. The reformist weekly *Chelcheragh*, which covered culture, art, satire, and cartoons, was shuttered in November. The government arrested three editorial staff members of *Shargh* newspaper, along with the paper's financier, without charges, and proceeded to close the outlet in December 2010. The authorities reinforced such actions with statements to the effect that publications carrying news about the opposition or failing to support the regime would be considered illegal. In order to remain in business, many outlets and journalists practice self-censorship and abide by official restrictions. In addition to print media, the government has targeted journalists' associations and civil society organizations that support freedom of expression. The authorities also use official or loyalist media outlets to propagate false claims about activists. Fars News Agency, for example, often published fabricated confessions or resignations during 2010. Meanwhile, the official Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) continued to monitor articles produced by the network prior to publication to ensure that they did not violate its rules or contain prohibited information.

Iran remains among the worst countries in the world with respect to the imprisonment of journalists. Waves of arrests occurred around the dates of planned opposition protests in 2010. At the beginning of February, for example, 60 journalists and internet activists were detained. At year's end, 34 journalists were imprisoned and 31 were on short-term releases, though sometimes with six-figure bonds and instructions to remain silent. Numerous accounts of abuse in custody have been recorded, and many prisoners were tortured to extract confessions. The crackdown has prompted an exodus of journalists from Iran. According to a June 2010 report by the Committee to Protect Journalists, of the 85 journalists who had fled from their home countries in the past year, 29 were from Iran. The government responded to the phenomenon by announcing a special court to try Iranians living abroad.

In addition to arresting large numbers of journalists, the government continued to impose excessive sentences during the year, including lengthy prison terms and professional bans. For example, Jila Baniyaghoob, a women's rights activist and journalist, was sentenced to a 30-year ban from media activities. The IRC handed a six-year prison sentence and a five-year ban on press activities to Badressadat Mofidi, a journalist and secretary general of the Iranian Journalists' Association, without any legal basis. Though her prison term was later lifted, the professional ban remained in place. Canadian-Iranian blogger Hossein Derakhshan was forced to confess to conspiring with foreign intelligence services, and despite retracting his confession in front of a judge, he was sentenced to more than 19 years in prison.

International media are unable to operate freely, have been accused by the authorities of fomenting the unrest surrounding the presidential election, and are often punished for airing criticism of the government. In November 2010, Iranian authorities charged two reporters from *Bild am Sonntag*, a German tabloid, with espionage for their stories on a woman who had been convicted of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning. The government requires foreign correspondents to provide detailed itineraries and proposed stories before visas are granted, and visas are regularly denied to foreign reporters who have previously been critical of the regime.

Because of the limited distribution of print media outside large 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. Article 175 of the constitution forbids private broadcasting; the government maintains a monopoly on all domestic broadcast media and presents only the official political and religious viewpoints. The newspapers with the widest circulation and influence report from a conservative editorial position or are directly operated by the government. A state-run English-language satellite station, Press TV, was launched in 2007. Leaders of the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have 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. An increasing number of people own satellite dishes and access international news sources, though this is technically forbidden and confiscation of satellite dishes is known to occur. The IRGC reportedly has a budget of \$10 million dedicated to establishing 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.

Approximately 13 percent of the population regularly accesses the internet. However, the regime imposes systematic controls on the internet and other digital technologies. According to the OpenNet Initiative, 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 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). The government is also taking steps to restrict access to the internet: connection speeds have been slower, and authorities cut off service during critical moments in 2010, such as the anniversary of the 1979 revolution in February. In addition, the government carefully monitors social-media websites such as YouTube and Twitter, and now regularly restricts access to the social-networking site Facebook before any protest.

Blogs and online news websites – particularly those in the Persian language – were increasingly targeted for censorship during the year; authorities in 2009 had amended the 2000 Press Law to include online outlets. Blogging platforms such as Blogger and Persianblog were often blocked. Censors continued to regulate online publications, such as *Zanestan*, that deal with women's rights issues, and filter Iranian news sites including *Emrouz*, *Ruydad*, and *Roos Online*. Meanwhile, independent or antigovernment bloggers were subject to harassment. In February 2010, blogger Mohammad Esmaealzadeh was sentenced to 91 days in prison for publishing insulting comments about the country's supreme leader. Hamed Saber was detained in June for publishing photographs of Tehran protests online. Another blogger, student Navid Mohebbi, was arrested in September for a variety of alleged crimes, including acting against national security. Although subject to a more aggressive range of threats and restrictions in 2010, the internet still provided a key platform for informing the Iranian public, and online media remained a source of diverse news coverage and analysis. In an acknowledgment of its inability to completely silence online dissent, the regime has stepped up its efforts to hack sites – including those based abroad – that it cannot disable by other means, and to foster the large-scale creation of progovernment blogs, commentary, and news content.

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