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Iran - the state of media freedom

Iran, of the most repressive countries in the world in terms of freedom of the press, is ranked 173rd of 180 countries in the 2014 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders.

Since the last review of Iran four years ago, the state of press freedom has worsened considerably with the crackdown on the protest movement that followed the disputed re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in June 2009. After the polls, more than 300 journalists and netizens were arrested and almost 200 forced into exile.

The June 2013 presidential election and the hope for change

Iranians used the June 2013 presidential election to vote en masse against Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's policies, which are blamed for the arbitrary arrest of more than 300 journalists and netizens and their torture by the intelligence services.

A moderate conservative backed by Iran's reformists, Hassan Rouhani was declared the first round's outright winner on 15 June.

Rouhani repeatedly said during his campaign that "all political prisoners should be released." He also said on several occasions that he wanted a change "in favour of free speech and media freedom." These promises encouraged progressively-minded Iranians, especially young people and women, to give him their vote and make him the Islamic Republic's seventh president.

Nonetheless, only a few prisoners of conscience have been released and Iran continues to be one of the world's biggest prisons for journalists and netizens, with around 50 currently detained. More disturbingly, at least 40 journalists and bloggers have been arrested in the six months since Rouhani took office.

At least 10 others have been sentenced to a combined total of 72 years in prison and at least five newspapers have been closed or forced to suspend publication under pressure from the authorities.

Suspension and closure of news organizations

Among the publications closed by the Press Licensing and Surveillance Commission, run by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and revolutionary courts, were the conservative weekly *Yalasarat Hossien* in January this year, *Saymareh*, an influential weekly based in the western province of Lorestan, and the reformist daily *Bahar* in October 2013 and another reformist daily *Aseman* in February this year. In late October two banned dailies, *Neshat* and *Tosseh*, were forced to suspend their relaunch under the threat from the country's justice authorities.

Censorship

Despite the recent agreement on Iran's nuclear programme, it should be remembered that, since Iran's nuclear activities first came to light more than a decade ago, coverage of the issue has been banned by the government bodies that monitor and regulate the media.

Journalists are constantly censored by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Orientation and its censorship wing, the Press Authorization and Surveillance Commission, as well as by the ministry of intelligence, the Revolutionary Guards, the public prosecutor and the High Council for National Security.

After the Geneva interim agreement was signed in November 2013, under which Iran agreed to curb some of its nuclear activities in return for sanctions relief, the High Council issued a directive reiterating the media ban on coverage of nuclear issues such as the signature of an International Atomic Energy Agency protocol, talks about Iran's nuclear programme with the "5+1" group (the United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom and Germany) representing the international community, the environmental impact of nuclear energy and the cost of building nuclear power plants. The High Council also banned any reporting of the subsequent talks between Iran and the United States.

The website *Entekhab* (the Choice) could not be accessed for a week from 1 February this year as a result of a complaint by the Tehran public prosecutor and a closure order issued by the Tehran media court.

Entekhab editor *Mstafa Faghihi* told the government news agency *Irna* that the site was blocked for publishing a letter in which a university academic, Sadeq Zibakalam, criticized Iran's nuclear policy as well as other sensitive issues such as public health and education.

Zibakalam wrote: "Even if the United States and 199 other countries reach agreement on our nuclear policy ... this policy is economically not beneficial for Iran. It is a complete mistake. We have lost millions of dollars for nothing.

Zibakalam appeared in court on 5 February and was charged with anti-government propaganda, circulating false information designed to disturb public opinion, insulting the justice system and defamation. He was released on bail of 50 million toman (about 50,000 euros) pending trial.

Inhumane treatment of jailed journalists and netizens

While some jailed journalists and netizens have been granted temporary paroles since July, there has been no significant change in the inhumane treatment of prisoners of conscience in Iran, especially in Evin and Raja'i Shahr prisons. Many detainees are still denied medical treatment despite being physically and psychologically ravaged by their illnesses.

Reporters Without Borders is particularly concerned about Mohammad Sadegh Kaboudvand, Arash Honarvar Shojai, Abolfazl Abedini Nasr, Hossein Ronaghi Malki, Said Madani, Kivan Samimi Behbani, Said Matinpour, Afshin Karampour and Mohammad Reza Pourshajari.

All have multiple ailments needing urgent treatment that cannot be given in prison but the judicial and prison authorities refuse to allow their transfer to hospital although this is recommended by the prison doctors and the regulations established by the judicial body that oversees the prison system.

Threats against journalists in Iran and abroad

Journalists are still being harassed and threatened, and the intelligence ministry continues to pressure the families in Iran of journalists who are abroad, working for media based outside the country.

Close relatives of several journalists working for international media such as *Radio Farda* (an offshoot of *Radio Free Europe*) or *Voice of America* have been summoned since June and interrogated at length by intelligence ministry officials.

At the same time, journalists in Iran are being summoned and questioned by the intelligence ministry and Revolutionary Guards. Speaking on condition of anonymity, one of them said he was told: "Don't believe in any revolution. It was an election controlled by the regime. You voted and now it is over.

You are still under surveillance and control. No critical articles, not even ones about art or history. And no meetings.”

End to impunity?

In an open letter to the president-elect on 18 June, Reporters Without Borders wrote: “Mr. Rouhani, you are now the Islamic Republic’s seventh president, elected thanks to massive support from Iranian reformers and progressives. Do you undertake to end arbitrary actions and impunity? The murders of dissident journalists must not go unpunished.”

The letter continued: “They include the deaths of **Ebrahim Zalzadeh, Majid Charif, Mohammed Mokhtari, Mohammed Jafar Pouyandeh** and **Pirouz Davani**, all executed by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security in November and December 1988. They also include the deaths in detention of **Zahra Kazemi** (2003), **Ayfer Serçe** (2006), the young blogger **Omidreza Mirsayafi** and **Alireza Eftekhari** (2008), the journalist and women’s rights activist **Haleh Sahabi**, and the *Iran-e-Farda* journalist **Hoda Saber** (2011) and blogger **Sattar Beheshti** (2012). Those who ordered and carried out these crimes must be brought to justice.”

Beheshti family lawyer Ghiti Pourfazel reported last December that the Tehran prosecutor’s office had told her that **Beheshti**’s death in an FTA (cyber-police) detention centre in November 2012 was no longer being investigated as a case of premeditated homicide and that the family should now request that his death be investigated as a case of “involuntary homicide by accident or negligence.”

After a year of procedural difficulties, an initial hearing on the cause of Beheshti’s death was to have been held on 27 October but was postponed until an unknown date, leaving those who tortured Beheshti to death to continue enjoying complete impunity.

Beheshti’s mother named her son’s alleged murderer in an open letter to Rouhani posted on the *Sahamnews* website on 4 November. She wrote: “My son was killed under torture by Akbar Taghizadeh, an officer in the Iranian cyber-police (FTA). For a year, I thought the Islamic Republic’s justice system would punish my son’s murderer. I ask you to respect your undertaking to enforce the constitution and respect for citizens’ rights.” According to information obtained by Reporters Without Borders, Beheshti died from cerebral bleeding caused by blows to the head.

The judicial authorities have continued to put pressure on the family and their lawyer to accept the prosecution’s classification of his death as involuntary homicide. In an open letter to Rouhani, the lawyer accused the justice system of doing everything possible to suppress the truth: “In an attempt to have the complaint withdrawn, they intimidated the mother by threatening to arrest her daughter, then they put psychological pressure on the father. Although these attempts failed and we have known for the past eight months that Sattar was killed by a police officer, the investigation has ground to a halt.”

Detained arbitrarily since 2011

Mehdi Karoubi, a dissident theologian, former parliamentary speaker and owner of the closed newspaper *Etemad Melli*, who has been under house arrest since February 2011, was taken to an unknown place of detention in January this year after undergoing two back operations – a laminectomy and discectomy – at Tehran’s Arad Hospital. Karoubi, 77, has been hospitalized five times since mid-2013 for various ailments including a heart condition, according to his wife, Fatemeh. He underwent an angioplasty on 31 July.

Karoubi’s son, Taghi, told the *Kalmeh* news website in February this year that his father had returned home but was again placed under house arrest. “Intelligence ministry officials have moved into the first floor and are controlling all movements inside the house,” he said. “They have also cut off all means of communication – phone, Internet and so on.

Like Karoubi, **Mir Hossein Mousavi**, the owner of the closed newspaper *Kalameh Sabaz*, and his wife, the writer **Zahra Rahnavard**, have also been under house arrest since February 2011 on the intelligence ministry’s orders. Mousavi and Rahnavard have also been hospitalized several times in Tehran – in August 2012, September 2013 and October 2013 – for heart problems.

Karoubi, Mousavi and Rahnavard are being held arbitrarily. There is no legal basis for their detention under Iranian or international law. Depriving them of their freedom and denying them the right to a fair trial is a flagrant violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Internet – open for the government, filtered for the people

The only significant changes since President Rohani came to office have been the Twitter and Facebook accounts of the president and some of his ministers, and the end of the quarterly statements about the launch of a “Halal” (national) Internet although this project, which would impose a “digital apartheid,” has not been abandoned.

On 23 November, Rafsanjan’s public prosecutor announced the arrest of seven men and a woman for “insulting society’s sacred beliefs and Islamic values online” without naming them or saying exactly what charges had been brought against them. He limited himself to adding: “The intelligence services are monitoring the Internet with great care and are cracking down on all possible violations.”

The arrest of “16 cyber-activists by the intelligence section of the Revolutionary Guards in the city of Kerman” was confirmed by the Kerman’s prosecutor on 4 December, according to *Farsnews*, a news website allied with the Revolutionary Guards. They are accused of “being in contact with enemy media based abroad with the aim of producing content for educational websites targeted at citizen-journalists,” *Farsnews* added.

Narenji (Orange, in Persian), a website specializing in new technology, posted a message on 22 November announcing that “the site can no longer be updated following the arrest of seven members of our staff by Revolutionary Guards.” The message was removed a few hours later. Local journalists said eight young specialists in new media were among those arrested. **Asghar Hormand, Abass Vahedi, Alireza Vaziri, Nassim Nikmehr, Malieh Nakehi, Mohammad Hossien Mossazadeh and Sara Sajad Pour** were taken to an unknown location after their homes were searched and personal effects were removed.