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Middle East/North Africa - Iran - 2008

Iran

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Annual Report 2008

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Iran's leaders still accuse the independent media of being in the pay of the United States or the European Union, which has resulted in long prison terms for journalists from a cowed and complicit judiciary. Reporters based in Teheran and Kurdistan were targeted in 2007, with dozens of arrests, convictions and closures of newspapers.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad hit the world's headlines in 2007 with his diatribes against the West and his talk of nuclear development, saying it was "the country's greatest battle" and using it to hide Iran's economic and social problems. Several journalists protected by the regime's hardliners strongly criticised him in print and some papers, with bogus liberalism, opposed government policies. Freelance journalists who did the same, however, were punished and the country remained the Middle East's biggest prison for journalists, with more than 50 journalists jailed in 2007. Ten of them were still in prison at the end of the year.

When asked abroad about human rights violations and imprisonment of dissidents and members of religious and sexual minorities, Ahmadinejad insists that Iranians are "the freest people in the world." But the regime's persecution of journalists and human rights activists continued in 2007.

The March 2008 parliamentary elections are expected to see further restrictions on the free flow of information. Many reformist papers were closed and news websites blocked during the last elections in 2004.

Journalist condemned to death

Hundreds of people were executed in 2007 and the supreme court confirmed in November a death sentence on freelance journalist Adnan Hassanpour, accused of "undermining national security," "spying," "separatist propaganda" and being a mohareb (fighter against God). He was arrested on 25 January and has been in Sanandaj prison, in Kurdistan, since 18 July and has refused to sign any confessions. He was probably arrested because of his contacts with journalists working for the US-funded radio stations Radio Farda and Voice of America.

Media under pressure

More than 50 journalists were prosecuted in 2007 and the independent and opposition media were targets of the usual financial and bureaucratic harassment. The ministry of culture and Islamic guidance, which is responsible for the media, ordered at least four publications to shut down permanently. A dozen papers, including the well-known Shargh and Madarreseh, were temporarily closed pending a court decision and news websites were also targeted. Iran has the biggest number of threatened cyber-dissidents in the Middle East and dozens of websites are shut down each year.

The Press Authorisation and Surveillance Commission cancelled the publishing licence of the bilingual Kurdish-Persian weekly Karfto in December for "failing to publish regularly." The paper has only been able to bring out 62 issues since it was founded in 2005 because of frequent temporary suspensions by the regime and constant official summoning of senior staff, two of whom were still in prison at the end of 2007. One of them, Kaveh Javanmard, was sentenced at a secret trial on 17 May to two years in prison for "incitement to rebellion" and "undermining

national security." The other, Ako Kurdnasab, was given a six-month sentence at the end of the year by the appeals court in Sanandaj for "trying to overthrow the government through journalistic activities."

The managing editor of the Kurdistan weekly Payam-e mardom-e Kurdistan, Mohammad Sadegh Kabovand, was arrested in July and at the end of the year was still in Teheran's Evin prison awaiting trial for "undermining national security." One of the paper's journalists, Ejlal Ghavami, also arrested in July, was sentenced to three years imprisonment for "incitement to rebellion" and "undermining national security" for covering a peaceful demonstration in 2005, and is being held in Sanandaj prison. The paper was suspended in 2004.

Most journalists jailed in Teheran are held in Evin prison's section 209, which is controlled by the intelligence services, and are often put in solitary confinement and have limited medical care. Emadoldin Baghi had a double heart attack on 26 December because of his poor conditions of detention and the stress of being interrogated. He was only allowed one night in hospital before being returned to his cell but was provisionally released on 18 January to continue his convalescence. Said Matinpour, of the Azeri-language Teheran weekly Yarpagh, was arrested at his home in the northwestern town of Zanjan on 28 May and sent to Evin prison, more than 300 km from his family.

Women take action

The Internet has become a battleground between the rigid regime and increasingly active militant feminists demanding abolition of discriminatory laws. Two "cyber-feminists" were held for more than a month at Evin prison in December for writing articles calling for equal rights with men. Thirty-three women journalists and activists were arrested in the spring while demonstrating for their rights and four of them were given prison sentences of between six months and a year. When journalist Jila Baniyaghoob was released, she told of very bad conditions of detention, in a filthy cell and being woken up several times at night to be interrogated blindfold. She spent over a week in the notorious section 209.

Two journalists with double nationality were arrested in 2007. The Iranian-American correspondent for Radio FreeEurope / Radio Liberty, Parnaz Azima, had her passport seized when she arrived in Teheran in January and only got it back nine months later. She was able to leave the country but charges of "undermining national security" are pending against her because she works for a US-funded media outlet.

A French-Iranian journalism student, Mehrnoushe Solouki, was arrested on 17 February and freed on bail a month later but banned from leaving the country. She was able to return to France in January 2008 after the court lifted the bail on her parents' house. She was accused of "trying to make a propaganda film" in the form of a documentary on the aftermath of the 1988 ceasefire in the Iran-Iraq war. The regime refused to return her notes and the film footage she had shot.