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## Attacks on the Press 2002: Iran

Liberal newspapers that have emerged in Iran since reformist president Muhammed Khatami took office six years ago serve as an important platform for his agenda of social and political reform. But the reformist media continue to face repression from the conservative-controlled judiciary, which has closed publications, prosecuted and arrested journalists, and fostered a climate of intimidation and fear in the press.

Iran's conservatives, backed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, used their control over key state institutions, especially the courts, to target the media and block the president's reforms. The Press Court suspended or closed at least eight publications during 2002 on charges including publishing "propaganda" or "lies."

Overall, 55 publications have been closed since a conservative crackdown began in April 2000, according to CPJ research. In July, for example, an appellate court upheld a May decision banning leading reformist daily *Norooz* for six months and sentencing the paper's editor to six months in jail. Both were accused of publishing lies and insulting the state and Islamic institutions.

Throughout 2002, officials barred coverage of explosive or embarrassing political issues. In May, after reformist papers alleged that Iranian officials were secretly negotiating with U.S. diplomats to re-establish formal relations between the two countries, the judiciary warned that journalists who expressed support for such talks would face criminal prosecution. In July, the Supreme National Security Council banned press commentary about the resignation of prominent cleric Ayatollah Jaleleddin Taheri as the leader of the Friday prayers in the southern city of Isfahan. Taheri had cited the failure and corruption of the Islamic Republic as his reasons for quitting. A few days later, the Press Court suspended the pro-reform daily *Azad* for violating the ban.

The government also detained, questioned, and charged several journalists for their work. In late September, the Press Court questioned Abdolah Naseri, managing director of the state news agency, IRNA, after the agency ran a story about a poll indicating that most Iranians support resuming relations with the United States. At year's end, it was unclear whether a formal indictment would be issued against Naseri, but the three men involved in conducting the poll, including well-known reformist Abbas Abdi, were arrested in October and November and are being prosecuted on several charges, including publishing false information and "espionage."

Meanwhile, some journalists have been physically attacked with impunity. Said Asghar, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 2000 for attempting to assassinate reformist and journalist Saeed Hajjarian, was inexplicably freed in 2002. Hajjarian, publisher of the newspaper *Sobh-e-Emrooz* and an important Khatami adviser who had printed investigative articles linking Intelligence Ministry officials to the late 1998 murders of several leading intellectuals and dissidents, was shot twice in the face outside the offices of the Tehran City Council in March 2000. Today, Hajjarian is severely disabled and, though active in the reform movement, is no longer a journalist.

In November, amid public frustration with reformists' inability to overcome conservative resistance to change, the pro-Khatami Parliament passed two laws designed to weaken conservative authority. The first law empowers the president to overrule the judiciary if he deems their decisions unconstitutional, which could allow Khatami to reverse

future newspaper closures. The second law reduces the influence of the Guardians Council, a conservative clerical body charged with approving electoral candidates and parliamentary legislation, by limiting its veto power over candidates for elected office. Both laws are currently awaiting council approval, but observers say that the council may not accept the laws since the second one restricts council authority.

In recent years, several jailed journalists have been released on parole. But at year's end, at least two remained behind bars for their work: investigative reporters Akbar Ganji and Emadeddin Baghi, who were both imprisoned in 2000. In October, Ayatollah Khamenei pardoned prominent Iranian journalist and reform politician Abdullah Nouri, editor of the now defunct daily *Khordad*, who had been imprisoned in 1999 for religious dissent. Numerous other prison sentences against editors and writers are pending appeal, though the journalists remain free.

State television and radio remains under conservative control, but satellite dishes are available, allowing many to access international news and programming. In a brief show of force in 2001, authorities confiscated hundreds of dishes after secular, U.S.-based Iranian opposition groups aired anti-government broadcasts on their satellite channels. But authorities soon stopped pursuing dish owners, and the use of dishes remains widespread. In mid-December, Parliament passed a bill overturning a largely ignored 1995 ban on satellite dishes and permitting their regulated use. The conservative Guardians Council has not yet approved the law.

Today, the Internet in Iran is censorship-free and has become increasingly popular among youth. The Web is available at universities, in a number of high schools, and in hundreds of cybercafés across the country. According to the government, Iran had 400,000 Internet users in 2001. Because the Web has become a popular forum to discuss sensitive social and political issues, conservative officials have issued warnings about the need to regulate or censor immoral or "political" content. However, no concrete actions have yet been taken.

Iranian students have fervently supported President Khatami, particularly his bid to expand press freedom. For several days in November, students across the country protested ongoing state restrictions on freedom of expression after a scholar convicted of apostasy for challenging clerical rule was sentenced to death. More broadly, the protests revealed popular disappointment with the ongoing conservative crackdown and the president's failure to effect reform.

## April 16

Ali-Hamed Imam, *Shams-e Tabriz*

**LEGAL ACTION** *Shams-e Tabriz*

**CENSORED**

Imam, editor of the local weekly *Shams-e Tabriz*, was sentenced to 74 lashes and seven months in prison by a court in Tabriz, 350 miles (560 kilometers) northwest of the capital, Tehran. According to Iran's state news agency, IRNA, the court also revoked Imam's publishing license and suspended the paper. Although it was impossible to verify which articles may have prompted the ruling, IRNA reported that 17 charges had been filed against Imam stemming from "repeated press offenses."

## April 29

Ahmad Zaid-Abadi, *Hamshahri*

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**LEGAL ACTION**

Zaid-Abadi, a reformist journalist for the newspaper *Hamshahri*, was sentenced to 23 months in prison. On April 29, The Associated Press quoted Zaid-Abadi's wife as saying that he was originally charged in August 2000 with "insulting Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei and publishing lies against the Islamic establishment for the purpose of disturbing public opinion." The charges came after he gave a series of critical lectures at several Iranian universities, according to a CPJ source. He was not convicted in the original case but spent seven months in prison before being released on bail. Authorities did not pursue the case against him until late April 2002.

The verdict seemed prompted by a recent interview that Zaid-Abadi had given in the daily newspaper *Bonyan*, in which he condemned Palestinian suicide bombings. He also said that he supported U.N. Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, the so-called land-for-peace resolutions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which the Iranian government opposes, a local source told CPJ. Zaid-Abadi has previously written for the reformist daily *Azad*, which was closed in April 2000, and the newspaper *Ettelaat*. He appealed the court's verdict and remained free at year's end.

**May 4***Iran***CENSORED**

The daily *Iran*, which is published by the official Islamic Republic News Agency, was banned by Tehran's conservative Press Court after the paper ran an article in April saying that the Prophet Mohammed enjoyed listening to female singers. The ban was lifted the next day.

*Bonyan***CENSORED**

Iran's Press Court banned the daily *Bonyan*. According to a CPJ source, the court cited the Precautionary Measures Law, a prerevolutionary statute that allows courts to seize "instruments used for committing crimes." The court said that *Bonyan*, widely known for its critical reporting, had stolen its name and logo from a provincial weekly. But a source told CPJ that the charge appeared to be a pretext to punish the paper for its reformist editorial stance.

**May 8****Mohsen Mirdamadi, Norooz****LEGAL ACTION***Norooz***CENSORED**

Mirdamadi, a member of Parliament and director of leading reformist daily *Norooz*, was convicted by Iran's conservative Press Court of insulting the state, publishing lies, and insulting Islamic institutions in articles the paper had published. The court sentenced Mirdamadi to six months in prison, banned him from practicing journalism for four years, and ordered him to pay a 2 million riyal (US\$1,150) fine. The court also banned *Norooz* from publishing for six months.

The prosecutor general had originally filed the charges against the paper in December 2001. Mirdamadi appealed the decision, and the paper continued to publish until July 24, when a Tehran appeals court confirmed the earlier sentences.

Mirdamadi remained free at year's end.

## July 11

### *Azad*

#### **LEGAL ACTION**

The pro-reform daily *Azad* was ordered by Tehran's conservative Press Court to cease publishing indefinitely because the paper had violated a government directive banning media commentary about the resignation of prominent cleric Ayatollah Jalaeddin Taheri. Iran's Supreme National Security Council, which is headed by President Muhammad Khatami and includes other top government officials, had issued the directive a day earlier, on Wednesday, July 10, instructing publishers not to take a position "for or against" Taheri.

On Thursday, July 11, *Azad* published a front-page story discussing Taheri's resignation and supporting critical statements the cleric had made about the government. The paper was banned later that day and has not appeared on newsstands since.

Taheri, a prominent cleric and associate of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution, resigned on July 9 as the leader of the Friday prayers in the city of Isfahan, about 250 miles (400 kilometers) south of the capital, Tehran. In his resignation letter, published in some reformist newspapers on July 10, Taheri accused the government of corruption and said that the promises of the revolution had not been realized.

## August 8

### *Ayineh-e-Jonoub*

#### **CENSORED**

The newly launched daily *Ayineh-e-Jonoub* (formerly a weekly) was banned by Tehran's conservative Press Court, which cited a dozen unspecified complaints in its ruling. In addition, Press Court judge Said Mortazavi pointed to a recent Appeals Court ruling that had convicted the paper's publisher, reformist member of Parliament Mohammed Dadfar, of anti-regime "propaganda" as another reason for the ban.

### *Rouz-e-No*

#### **CENSORED**

Publication of the new daily *Rouz-e-No* which was to hit newsstands the week of August 12, was barred by Tehran's conservative Press Court. The court ruled that the paper was a continuation of the recently banned *Norooz*. In July, a court had upheld a six-month suspension of reformist-leaning *Norooz*, which remained closed at year's end.

## September 15

### *Golestan-e-Iran*

### *Vaqt*

#### **LEGAL ACTION**

The *Golestan-e-Iran* daily newspaper was closed by Tehran's conservative Press Court for

allegedly publishing lies and rumors. In the same ruling, the court also announced the suspension of the weekly *Vaqt*. A source in Iran said that the paper was accused of publishing photos and articles considered to be "immoral." Both papers have small circulations and are reformist-leaning.

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