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Attacks on the Press 2005: Iran

IRAN

Hard-liners in government and the judiciary continued a crackdown on the independent media in general and on Internet journalists in particular. In the course of the year, authorities jailed Web bloggers, banned four newspapers for publishing a letter by a reformist cleric, and closed the Tehran bureau of the Arabic-language satellite-TV channel Al-Jazeera.

Over the past few years, authorities have eviscerated the reformist print press, prompting many banned newspapers and pro-reform journalists to move to the Web. Bloggers instantly became a popular source of dissident news and opinion, drawing the ire of Iran's powerful judiciary, which launched a wave of arrests. All the bloggers detained in a 2004 crackdown were released except for Mojtaba Saminejad, who was sentenced in June 2005 to two years in prison and denied appeal. He was convicted of "insulting the supreme leader." Many of the released bloggers said they were tortured in jail. Former Iranian president Mohamed Khatami ordered an investigation into the torture claims, but the judiciary threatened those who made the complaints. Since conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took office in June 2005, little has come of the investigations. Nobel Peace Prize-winner Shirin Ebadi and other human rights activists were still pursuing the allegations.

Arash Sigarchi, a blogger and editor of the daily *Gilan-e-Emrouz* in northern Iran, was released on bail after spending two months in prison. He was convicted by a revolutionary court of espionage, propaganda against the state, and insulting leaders, and sentenced to 14 years in prison. The court revealed the verdict on February 22. Sigarchi was released on bail, and was not expected to serve his 14-year sentence. He was charged in connection with a report on the arrest of writers for a Web log called *Panhjareh Eltehab*, which is banned in Iran. Before his own arrest, Sigarchi had also given interviews to the BBC and U.S. government-funded Radio Farda.

Ailing online journalist and religious student Mojtaba Lotfi was released on August 27 after serving more than six months in jail. He was convicted in 2004 of publishing lies and harming the state, and sentenced to 46 months in prison. He wrote an article titled "Observing Human Rights in Cases Concerning the Clergy" on *Naqshineh*, a news Web site about the holy city of Qom. Lotfi suffers from lung problems that developed after he was exposed to chemicals during the Iran-Iraq war. Prison conditions caused his health to deteriorate.

Officials continued to pressure Internet service providers (ISPs) to install filters to block access to political blogs and online reformist newspapers. On January 9, the judiciary closed down one of Iran's main ISPs, Neda Rayaneh, for violating state filtering restrictions. In September, the government contracted the Iranian company Delta Global to manage a censorship system for the Internet. The head of the company, Rahim Moazemi, told the Iranian Student News Agency that he wanted to centralize the filtering system in Iran. Authorities reportedly blocked hundreds of political and reformist Web sites and blogs classified as "immoral" and sources of "propaganda against the Islamic system."

The old-guard defenders of Iran's Islamic revolution under spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei continued to use state institutions such as the judiciary to close pro-reform newspapers, prosecute independent journalists, and imprison critics.

A prominent imprisoned journalist, Akbar Ganji, drew international attention after claiming that he had been tortured in custody. Ganji was first jailed in 2000 for "taking part in an offense against national security" and promoting "propaganda against the Islamic system." In July 2001, he was sentenced to his current term of six years for "collecting confidential state documents to jeopardize state security" and "spreading propaganda."

In May, Iranian newspapers published an account Ganji smuggled from Tehran's notorious Evin prison in which he attacked Khamenei and claimed authorities used "physical and mental torture" to extract confessions from inmates. He had waged a hunger strike a month earlier to protest a lack of medical treatment.

On May 29, judicial authorities granted Ganji a one-week release from jail so he could be treated for asthma and back pain. By June 8, Tehran's hard-line chief prosecutor, Saeed Mortazavi, signed an arrest warrant claiming Ganji was on the run after the journalist failed to return at the expiration of his temporary leave. Ganji returned to Evin prison three days after the warrant was issued, telling reporters that he would resume his hunger strike.

His wife, Massoumeh Shafii, published an open letter on the *Emrouz* news Web site on October 27, claiming Ganji was tortured and mistreated by security officers while being treated in Tehran's Milad hospital. The United States and the European Union sought Ganji's release and criticized Iran for denying him medical treatment, access to his family, and legal representation.

Political unrest increased in Iran's Kurdish region following the election of Ahmadinejad, who is seen by some Kurds as hostile to their demand for greater political autonomy and cultural recognition. Clashes between ethnic Kurds and Iranian authorities resulted in the closing of the Kurdish-language daily *Ashfi* and the bilingual Kurdish and Farsi weekly *Asou* by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance on August 3.

Several prominent Kurdish human rights activists and journalists were detained on August 2, following protests in the city of Sanandaj, capital of Kurdistan province. Among them was Mohammad Sadiq Kabudvand, managing editor of the now-defunct bilingual Kurdish and Farsi *Payam Mardom Kordestan* and co-founder of the Kurdistan Human Rights Organization. A Sanandaj court found Kabudvand guilty of "inciting the population to rebel against the central state" and sentenced him to one year in prison, according to CPJ sources. The court reached its verdict on August 18 but announced it only in mid-October. Kabudvand was not sent to prison and was preparing an appeal. Kabudvand published articles on torture in jails, and he advocated a federal system of government for the Islamic republic.

The judiciary harassed journalists by frequently summoning them for questioning about their writing, a tactic used to spread fear and control news coverage. On August 13, Abolfazl Fateh, managing director of the Iranian Students News Agency, was called in by Investigation Bench 6 of the Government Employees Court to explain why the agency had published remarks by Ganji's wife and a statement by the Iranian Journalists Association, the state news agency IRNA reported. The previous week, Fateh was summoned by Tehran's chief prosecutor to respond to charges of disrupting public order by reporting remarks by Nobel laureate Ebadi, who criticized the judiciary for refusing to allow her to visit Ganji. Fateh was ordered to post bail of 100 million rials (US\$11,000) before he could go free. Journalists also suffered bureaucratic harassment. On January 12, the Passport Office banned journalist Shadi Sadr from leaving the country, without providing any explanation.

Since 2000, Iranian courts have closed more than 100 publications, most of which were pro-reform. The repression continued in 2005, as hard-line conservatives dominated all organs of government. On March 10, *Jame-e-No*, a monthly

sociopolitical magazine, was ordered closed for failing to publish in accordance with its license, which stipulates that it must be published each month. If it missed an edition, it would be in violation of its license. Fatemeh Kamal, the magazine's license holder, said she believed the real reason for the closure was her marriage to reformist political activist Emadoddin Baghi.

On June 20, Tehran's chief prosecutor banned four daily newspapers—*Eqbal*, *Aftab*, *Etemaad*, and *Hayat-e-No*—that had published an open letter from Mehdi Karoubi, a reformist-centrist cleric. Karoubi was defeated in the first round of the presidential elections. He complained of "illegal intervention" in the election by the Revolutionary Guard and the Guardians Council. The council, the most influential body in Iran, has the authority to interpret the constitution and to determine if the laws passed by the parliament are in line with the constitution. It is a criminal offense to criticize the supreme leader in Iran, and numerous publications have been shut down for doing so. *Eqbal*, the newspaper of the main reformist party, the Islamic Iran Participation Front, was suspended indefinitely; the other three dailies were allowed to resume publication the next day.

In April, Iran closed the Tehran bureau of the Arabic-language satellite-TV network Al-Jazeera for reporting that clashes between security forces and ethnic Arab protestors in the provincial capital of Ahwaz had killed three people. Arabs make up approximately three percent of Iran's population of 67 million, and most of them live in the southwest of the country. Yossef Azizi-Banitorouf, a reformist Iranian Arab journalist, was arrested on April 25 immediately after he held a news conference with foreign media on the unrest in Ahwaz and the Iranian Arab revolt against Tehran. He was released from custody on June 28. He had worked for *Hamshahri* for 12 years but was fired when conservatives took over management of the daily.

The authorities have yet to prosecute those responsible for the 2003 death in state custody of Canadian-Iranian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi. In November, an appeals court ordered the case reopened after upholding the 2004 acquittal of Iranian intelligence agent Mohamed Reza Aqdam Ahmadi, who had been charged with "semi-intentional murder." Kazemi's legal team had doubted Ahmadi's guilt all along.

An Iranian government inquiry released in late July 2003 concluded that Kazemi had died as a result of a skull fracture, likely caused by a blow to her head. On March 31, 2005, a former Iranian army doctor, Shahram Azam, alleged that he was the first to examine an unconscious Kazemi, with an armed guard, in Tehran's Baghiatollah hospital four days after her arrest. His allegations were presented at a press conference in Ottawa, Canada, where Azam was granted asylum. Iranian authorities maintained that no doctor of that name ever examined Kazemi and that he had lied to gain asylum. Azam recalled that Kazemi had a fractured skull, several broken bones, missing fingernails, and deep lacerations on her back from flogging.

Canada limited diplomatic contact with Iran because of Tehran's continued refusal to allow an international forensic team to examine Kazemi's body. Kazemi, a contributor to the Montreal-based magazine *Recto Verso* and the London-based photo agency Camera Press, was arrested on June 23, 2003, for taking photographs outside Evin prison. The government has acknowledged that Kazemi was violently beaten in prison, although the judiciary said she died after a fall. Lawyers for Kazemi's relatives believe a prison official beat her to death.

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