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## Attacks on the Press 1999: Iran

The Iranian press was again the main battleground in a bitter power struggle between reformist president Muhammad Khatami and Iran's conservative clerical establishment, led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, supreme leader of the Islamic Republic. With crucial parliamentary elections slated for February 2000, the conservative-controlled judiciary pressed ahead with a steady campaign of repression against reformist newspapers and journalists in an attempt to stifle support for the president's agenda of political and social liberalization. The year was marked by a wave of newspaper suspensions and closures along with the arrest and prosecution of journalists under various vaguely worded statutes governing the press.

Since President Khatami took office in August 1997, after promising greater press freedom, the Iranian press has flourished. Dozens of new publications have been licensed, with many tackling controversial social and political topics that would have been unthinkable in previous years. In the absence of legal opposition parties, the press has increasingly functioned as a platform for political debate among opposing factions within the Islamic regime.

As the judiciary flexed its muscle against reformist papers and journalists throughout the year, the press found itself at the center of dramatic political events. On July 6, the Iranian Parliament approved a harsh draft press law granting authorities enhanced powers to punish dissenting journalists. On July 7, the Special Court for Clergy closed down the popular pro-Khatami daily *Salam*, triggering student demonstrations of a magnitude not seen since the 1979 revolution. The closure followed the paper's publication of an alleged secret memo by a former intelligence agent, urging authorities to tighten restrictions on the press.

Other prominent publications were similarly targeted. In September, a court shut down the daily *Neshat*--the most recent incarnation in a series of pro-Khatami titles with the same management that judicial authorities have closed successively over the past two years--because of two articles it published criticizing capital punishment in Iran. The paper's director, Latif Safari, was later convicted of "insulting the sanctity and tenets of Islam" and given a suspended sentence of 30 months in prison. A few months later, *Neshat* editor Mashallah Shamsolvaezin was convicted of forgery and offending Islam in connection with the articles and sentenced to three years in prison.

Although reformist papers received the lion's share of harassment, a number of conservative papers also suffered adverse judicial attention. In July, for example, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (controlled by allies of President Khatami) filed suit against the conservative papers *Kayhan*, *Javan*, and *Jumhuri-e-Islami* over their publication of a letter from Revolutionary Guards commanders to President Khatami, criticizing the president's handling of the student unrest in July.

Authorities deployed an array of statutes to prosecute outspoken journalists. The press law, for example, proscribes the publication of information deemed "harmful to Islamic principles" and the publication of "false information," giving courts wide berth to punish dissident journalists. Offenses are punishable by stiff prison sentences and fines.

The controversial draft press bill that Parliament approved in July would, if passed, expand official powers to sanction the press. The draft bill gives conservatives a greater say on the influential Press Supervisory Board, which has the power to close newspapers and send journalists to court. It also empowers exceptional revolutionary courts to try journalists and requires journalists to reveal their sources if taken to court.

The judiciary's steady clampdown on the press climaxed with the high-profile trial of former interior minister and vice president and Khatami ally Abdullah Nouri, who was charged by the Special Court for Clergy with religious dissent for articles published in his daily newspaper, *Khordad*. He was subsequently convicted and sentenced to five years in prison. During the trial, Nouri transfixed the nation with a poignant self-defense in which he sharply criticized the clerical establishment and called for greater freedoms in Iranian society.

While print media grew increasingly bold, television and radio remained under the firm control of the conservative establishment. With their limited circulation throughout the country, newspapers were at a great disadvantage in competing with broadcast media's ability to reach wide audiences. However, satellite television offered an important alternative source of news and information for many Iranians. Despite an existing government ban on satellite dishes, they were widely available, and authorities appeared unwilling or unable to take active measures to enforce the ban. Nonetheless, there was concern in May when Ayatollah Khamenei declared his opposition to eliminating the government ban and urged tougher measures against the use of dishes. Press reports quoted him as saying that authorities "should identify ways to prevent ...satellite transmissions [that are] proportional with the advance of technology."

January 23

**Zan** CENSORED

**Faezah Hashemi, Zan** LEGAL ACTION

A Teheran court imposed a two-week suspension on the reformist women's daily *Zan* for allegedly defaming police intelligence chief Gen. Muhammad Naghdi.

Naghdi filed a complaint after the newspaper implicated him in a physical attack on former vice president Abdullah Nouri and Culture Minister Ataollah Mohajerani outside Tehran University in September 1998. The court also fined *Zan's* publisher, Faezah Hashemi, about 1,500,000 rials (US\$500).

January 25

**Khordad** ATTACKED, THREATENED

Two unidentified men on motorbikes hurled a percussion grenade at the Tehran office of the reformist daily *Khordad*. The grenade shattered windows and slightly wounded two people. After the incident, the paper's staff received an anonymous phone call threatening further attacks.

February 27

**Mohsen Kadivar, Khordad** IMPRISONED

On April 21, Kadivar, a reformist cleric and academic, was sentenced to 18 months in prison by Iran's Special Court for Clergy for "disseminating lies" and "misleading public opinion." The charges stemmed from articles, interviews, and public

lectures in which he criticized the Islamic Republic. In one article, published in the now defunct daily *Khordad* on February 14, Kadivar attacked Iran's ruling clerics, comparing their authoritarian rule to that of the shah.

Kadivar's conviction was upheld on appeal in July. He has been in jail since February 27, when he was first arrested.

April 6

**Zan** CENSORED

An Islamic revolutionary court banned the reformist daily *Zan* after it published a New Year's message from Farah Diba, wife of the late Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, along with a satirical cartoon about the practice of making murderers pay so-called blood money. The cartoon depicts a man begging an armed criminal to spare him and kill his wife instead, since less blood money is demanded for a woman's life than for a man's.

Hojatoleslam Gholamhossein Rahbarpour, head of the revolutionary court, was quoted as saying that "publishing a caricature in which blood money, one of the main judicial and religious principles of Islam, is ridiculed [must be viewed as a] direct insult." Rahbarpour added that the publication of Diba's message was a "blatant anti-revolutionary act."

For his part, Iranian judiciary head Ayatollah Muhammad Yazdi referred to Faezah Hashemi, *Zan*'s publisher, a member of Parliament and the daughter of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, as a "counter-revolutionary," adding, "That's why the revolutionary court is in charge of her case."

June 16

**Heshmatollah Tarbarzadi**, *Hoveyat-e-Khish* IMPRISONED **Hussein Kashani**, *Hoveyat-e-Khish* IMPRISONED  
*Hoveyat-e-Khish* CENSORED

Tarbarzadi, a student leader and the editor of the biweekly student newspaper *Hoveyat-e-Khish*, and Kashani, the paper's director, were detained on or about June 16 by order of an Iranian revolutionary court. The two journalists were accused of "issuing an anti-establishment communiqué" and "spreading propaganda against the Islamic system," according to Iranian officials. Authorities did not release further details.

*Hoveyat-e-Khish* was also ordered suspended; the paper remained closed at year's end.

Kashani was released later that month and Tarbarzadi five months later, on November 4. It is unclear whether formal charges were ever brought against either journalist.

July 7

**Salam** CENSORED

**Mohamed Musavi-Khoeiniha**, *Salam* LEGAL ACTION

The Special Court for Clergy ordered the indefinite closure of the reformist daily *Salam*, one day after it published an alleged secret memo written by a former intelligence agent.

In the putative memo, Said Emami (also known as Said Eslami) advised his superiors to crack down on the Iranian press. In June, Emami died in prison, reportedly a suicide. He had been jailed in connection with the assassinations of

several dissidents and writers in late 1998.

The closure of *Salam*, coupled with Parliament's preliminary approval of a restrictive press bill on July 6, triggered a wave of student protests and riots unparalleled since the Islamic revolution of 1979.

On July 25, the Special Court for Clergy convicted *Salam*'s publisher, Musavi-Khoeiniha, of defamation and spreading false information in connection with the alleged memo. He was sentenced to three years in prison and a lashing. However, the court suspended this sentence and instead ordered Musavi-Khoeiniha to pay a fine of 23 million rials (US\$13,000).

On August 4, the Special Court for Clergy imposed a five-year ban on *Salam* and banned Musavi-Khoeiniha from practicing journalism for three years. The court ruled that the journalist was "guilty of disseminating untruthful and distorted news aimed at harming public opinion."

CPJ protested the crackdown on *Salam* and other independent media in a July 28 letter to supreme Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

July 20

**Kazem Shukri, *Sobh-e-Emrouz* IMPRISONED**

Shukri, an editor for the reformist daily *Sobh-e-Emrouz*, was arrested by order of Iran's Press Court for allegedly insulting Islamic principles. The charge stemmed from a July 8 article entitled "Two Parallel Lines Do Not Cross Unless God Wills So."

Shukri was freed on August 11 on US\$50,000 bail and awaits trial. CPJ protested the incident in a July 28 letter to Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

July 28

**Camelia Entekhabi-Fard, *Zan* IMPRISONED**

On or about July 28, authorities arrested Entekhabi-Fard, a journalist who formerly worked for the now defunct women's newspaper *Zan*. She was arrested soon after returning from a six-month visit to the United States and Europe. According to Iranian press reports, the journalist was accused of "cooperation with American media."

During her trip, Entekhabi-Fard interned with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), which broadcasts in Persian to Iran, and attended a journalism training program sponsored by RFE/RL in Prague.

Entekhabi-Fard was released in early October. At year's end, it was unclear whether there were still charges pending against her.

September 5

***Neshat* CENSORED**

Iran's Press Court ordered the closure of the popular reformist daily *Neshat* for "insulting the sacred decrees of Islam

and the supreme leader," the latter a reference to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, supreme leader of the Islamic Republic.

The closure followed the publication of two items in previous issues of *Neshat*. The first was an article that questioned the use of capital punishment in Islam. The second item was a letter from an opposition figure who challenged the authority of Ayatollah Khamenei and urged him to distance himself from hard-liners in the Iranian regime.

CPJ condemned the closure of *Neshat* in a September 21 letter to Ayatollah Mahmud Shahrudi, head of the Iranian judiciary.

September 20

**Latif Safari, *Neshat* LEGAL ACTION, CENSORED**

Iran's Press Court convicted Safari, director of the reformist daily *Neshat*, on several charges including "insulting the sanctity and tenets of Islam." The main charge probably came in response to *Neshat's* publication of an opinion piece challenging the use of capital punishment in Iran. The article is believed to have triggered the September 5 closure of the newspaper by order of the Press Court.

Safari was also reportedly convicted of inciting unrest and defaming officials. The former charge apparently arose from *Neshat's* coverage of student riots that shook the country in July. On September 25, Safari was given a suspended sentence of 30 months in prison and was banned from working as a journalist for five years. The court also closed *Neshat*.

CPJ condemned Safari's conviction and *Neshat's* closure in a September 21 letter to Ayatollah Mahmud Shahrudi, head of the Iranian judiciary.

October 11

**Jaleh Oskoui, *Panjshanbeha* IMPRISONED, LEGAL ACTION  
*Panjshanbeha* CENSORED**

Oskoui, managing editor of the weekly *Panjshanbeha*, was arrested by order of the Press Court for publishing allegedly false and "unethical" material.

The charges stemmed in part from the paper's coverage of a controversial play that had been published in a student newsletter. Authorities deemed the play blasphemous. They were apparently also unhappy about a story quoting a government official on the closure of a number of acting schools.

*Panjshanbeha* was suspended pending the conclusion of all legal proceedings against Oskoui. The journalist was released on bail on or about October 18. Her trial in Iran's Press Court began on November 15.

November 27

**Abdullah Nouri, *Khordad* IMPRISONED, LEGAL ACTION  
*Khordad* CENSORED**

In a trial that gripped the nation, Iran's Special Court for Clergy tried and convicted Nouri, publisher of the reformist daily

*Khordad* and a former interior minister, of religious dissent.

The charges, which included defaming "the system," disseminating false information and propaganda against the state, and insulting religious leaders, were based on news articles published in *Khordad*.

Nouri was sentenced to five years in prison and barred from practicing journalism for five years. *Khordad* was ordered to close. Nouri was subsequently jailed at Tehran's Evin Prison. In a November 30 letter to Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, CPJ called for Nouri's immediate release and urged authorities to lift the ban on *Khordad*.

Nouri's appeal was pending at year's end.

November 27

**Mashallah Shamsolvaezin, *Neshat*, *Asr-e-Azadegan* IMPRISONED, LEGAL ACTION**

A Tehran court convicted Shamsolvaezin, editor of the reformist daily *Asr-e-Azadegan*, of insulting Islam and committing forgery.

The case against Shamsolvaezin was based on two articles published in the now defunct newspaper *Neshat*, which he edited until judicial authorities closed the paper in September, that criticized capital punishment in Iran. One article was written by Hossein Baqerzadeh, an Iranian human-rights activist and writer based in the United Kingdom. The court accused Shamsolvaezin of forging Baqerzadeh's article, despite the fact that Baqerzadeh has publicly acknowledged writing the piece.

On November 2, Shamsolvaezin was arrested in connection with the case and held for 15 days until he posted bail of US\$166,000 on November 17. Shamsolvaezin was sentenced to three years in prison and ordered to pay a fine of 12 million rials. His appeal was pending at year's end; meanwhile he remained free on bail.

In a November 30 letter to Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, CPJ condemned Shamsolvaezin's conviction.

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