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## Attacks on the Press 2007: Iran

### IRAN

Iran's troubled economy weakened President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's power at home, with protests spilling into the streets and intellectuals, activists, and students expressing dissent in the media. Silencing the uproar became essential for Ahmadinejad, prompting authorities to intensify a media crackdown that had been waged by conservative forces for a decade. Iran became the world's fourth-leading jailer of journalists in 2007, with one writer on death row and 11 other journalists imprisoned when CPJ conducted its annual census on December 1.

Journalists had to tread carefully in their reporting to avoid arrest or the closure of their publications. Most adhered to official orders banning coverage of the riots that followed the government's abrupt decision in June to restrict fuel supplies for six months. Explicit restrictions on coverage of the ailing economy, antigovernment demonstrations, and nuclear development—coupled with prevailing self-censorship—left little room for independent news reporting. Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Hossein Saffar-Harandi went so far as to accuse the press of a “creeping coup” to overthrow the regime, the Iranian Student News Agency reported.

The government imprisoned more than 20 journalists during the year, some without charge, for periods ranging from days to months. Adnan Hassanpour, former editor for the now-defunct Kurdish-Persian weekly *Aso*, faced a death sentence handed down in mid-July. A Revolutionary Court convicted him of endangering national security and engaging in propaganda against the state, one of his attorneys, Sirvan Hosmandi, told CPJ. Hosmandi said the charges against Hassanpour were not proved in court and were supported with merely a report from security officials. An appeals court upheld the conviction, finding that Hassanpour had engaged in espionage. Hassanpour's sister, Leyla, told CPJ that she believed his critical writings were the reason for the charges.

The longest detained was Mohammad Hassan Fallahiyazadeh, a reporter for the state-run Arabic-language satellite channel Al-Alam and several other Arab media outlets. Authorities arrested Fallahiyazadeh on November 1, 2006, in connection with his reports on the government's harsh treatment of Iranian Arab protestors in the Khuzestan provincial capital, Ahwaz, according to the organization Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRAI). A Revolutionary Court gave Fallahiyazadeh a three-year prison sentence in April for distributing propaganda against the Islamic regime and communicating with opposition groups abroad, according to HRAI and Amnesty International. Fallahiyazadeh, who belongs to Iran's Arab minority, was denied access to a lawyer, HRAI said.

Parnaz Azima, a journalist with the U.S.-backed Radio Farda, was among four people of dual Iranian-American citizenship who were detained during the year. Authorities confiscated her passport upon her arrival at Tehran's airport on a trip to see her ailing mother in late January. By May, the Special Security Bureau of the Revolutionary Court's Public Prosecutor's Office had charged her with disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic, Azima's lawyer, Mohammad-Hossein Aghasi, told CPJ. Radio Farda, broadcasting from Prague, Czech Republic, is jointly run by the U.S. government-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and Voice of America. Officials ordered Azima to

post US\$550,000 in bail, which the journalist paid by putting up her mother's Tehran home as collateral. Authorities unexpectedly returned Azima's passport in early September, allowing her to leave Iran later that month, according to RFE/RL.

The government retaliated against those journalists who seemingly threatened Iran's insularity with their reporting for foreign news services or their travel abroad for work-related events. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei claimed that the United States was using such journalists to overthrow the regime.

In late January, security officials at Tehran's airport arrested freelance journalists and women's rights activists Mansoureh Shojai, Talat Taghinia, and Farnaz Seifi as they waited to board a flight to India for a journalism training workshop, according to news reports. Human rights lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi said authorities charged them with acting against national security and released them on bail, Reuters reported.

All three women supported a campaign that seeks to amass a million signatures urging the reform of Iranian laws that discriminate against women. Authorities responded to such efforts with intolerance, beating and arresting women's rights activists during peaceful demonstrations. In November, an Islamic Revolutionary Court charged online journalist and women's rights activist Maryam Hosseinkhah with disturbing public opinion, engaging in propaganda against the regime, and spreading false news, according to the Web site *Change for Equality*. Defense lawyer Ebadi told *Change for Equality* that her client was jailed because of her articles on women's rights for online sites and newspapers.

The government also targeted ethnic Kurdish journalists for arrest. Along with Hassanpour, at least three others were imprisoned for their work, according to CPJ research. In July, for example, plainclothes security officials arrested journalist and Kurdish human rights activist Mohammad Seddigh Kaboudvand at his Tehran office, according to Amnesty International and CPJ sources. Authorities accused Kaboudvand, head of the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan and managing editor of the weekly *Payam-e Mardom*, with acting against national security and engaging in propaganda against the state, according to his organization's Web site. Kaboudvand had published articles about torture in Iranian jails and human rights abuses against Iran's Kurdish minority.

As dissenting Web sites and blogs continued to rise in popularity, the government was quick to shut them down. The popular conservative news Web site *Baztab* was blocked twice inside Iran for criticizing Ahmadinejad's policies, particularly his handling of the economy, Reuters reported. On September 23, a court ordered *Baztab*'s offices closed after staff continued to update the site for users abroad, according to news reports. The Iranian Labor News Agency was blocked inside Iran in July for reporting on demonstrations by workers and activists and their arrest, Reuters said. Savvy Internet users such as the group calling itself Iran Proxy have responded to the government's filtering system by providing online methods to circumvent site restrictions, RFE/RL reported.

The regime also cracked down on pro-reform student journalists. In May, authorities jailed three student journalists at Amirkabir University of Technology in Tehran following the distribution of newsletters carrying articles deemed insulting to Islam, according to news reports. The three students—Majid Tavakoli, Ehsan Mansouri, and Ahmad Ghassaban—said they had had no involvement in the publications and that a hard-line conservative student group had fraudulently used the names and logos of legitimate student publications as a dirty trick, news reports said. The students, who received sentences of two to three years following a closed court session in November, were subjected to torture during their six-month detention, according to news reports that quoted their families. The school's administration banned all student publications in the aftermath of the incident.

Critical journalists found themselves prone to violent attacks. In early November, two journalists were stabbed by unknown assailants in separate incidents. Two perpetrators stabbed Reza Avazpour, editor-in-chief of the sports weekly

*Varzeshi*, as he was leaving the paper's offices in the southeastern city of Kerman, according to news reports. Avazpour was seriously wounded and needed several hours of surgery. The attack came after he had received a number of threats made by a group identifying itself as Allah's Soldiers, according to the news agency Adnkronos International. *Varzeshi* had published investigative articles that were critical of the directors of Iran's football federation, the agency said. The attackers accused Avazpour of being a "servant of the Americans," the agency reported, and scolded him for being critical of Ahmadinejad. Assailants also stabbed Abaselat Abed, managing editor of the daily *Mardomsalari* (Democracy) in Karaj, a city west of Tehran, in front of the paper's offices, *Mardomsalari* reported.

The government continued to suspend publications because of their critical reporting or pro-reform slant. CPJ research showed that authorities closed at least 11 publications, some of them indefinitely. The Press Supervisory Board, under the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, suspended the pro-reform daily *Ham-Mihan* and revoked the license of the daily *Mosharekat* in early July. Iran's leading critical daily, *Shargh*, was shut down in August for publishing an interview with Saqi Qahreman, an exiled Iranian poet accused by the regime of supporting homosexuality, according to news reports. *Shargh* had just resumed publication in May, when a previous suspension lapsed.

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