

Doc_Number: GDE00071



Attacks on the Press in 2008: Iran

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's economic policies and human rights record drew widespread criticism from academics, activists, and journalists. In response, Ahmadinejad sought to suppress independent media by manipulating government subsidies, exerting censorship, and using the punitive tools of detention and harassment.

Iran's official inflation rate surpassed 25 percent, an increase analysts said was fueled by government spending of surging oil revenue. On human rights, Ahmadinejad's government cracked down on free expression online and in traditional media, pressured and mistreated minority groups, and, according to Human Rights Watch, executed seven juveniles in 2008 alone.

Since Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, the government has used official subsidies as a weapon against critical newspapers and magazines, according to analysts and news accounts. Reformist and critical newspapers reported losing subsidies for imported paper and equipment that remained widely available to pro-government news media. The newspaper *Aftab Yazd Daily* said it faced a 60 percent drop in government subsidies after the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the agency in charge of monitoring the press, identified the newspaper in a 2007 report as a leading government critic.

"The government is leading the press into a crisis with its adopted policies," Mahmoud Shamsolvaezin, a prominent Tehran journalist, told the Aftab News Agency. "The government is striving to make the cultural products identical; that's why private institutions are hurting and becoming passive."

The administration used behind-the-scenes tactics as well, urging government institutions to withhold advertising from critical publications, CPJ sources said. With the economy largely government-based, publications relied heavily on ad revenue from government companies, banks, and agencies. Authorities also sought to control news coverage by quietly pressuring publications. Saeed Mortazavi, the powerful Tehran prosecutor, directed editors what to cover and how, using the threat of suspension as leverage, according to news accounts.

Since he came to power, Ahmadinejad has directed a tough offensive against Iran's civil society. Dozens of civil organizations have been dissolved or barred from activity. In July, the Iranian Ministry of Labor threatened to disband the Association of Iranian Journalists, the country's only nongovernmental journalistic organization, citing supposed irregularities in the election of the group's leadership. In late year, after the association held new board elections, the government appeared to back away from its threat. With a membership of more than 4,000, the association has provided important support to local journalists.

More than 30 journalists were investigated or arrested or spent time in prison during the year, according to human rights and press groups. Numerous published reports accused authorities of denying prisoners basic human rights. In many cases, detention locations were unknown, trials were held in secret, and access to defense attorneys was withheld. Though some imprisoned journalists had serious physical ailments, timely medical attention was not routinely made

available.

Journalists defending women's rights faced a particularly strong backlash from the government. At least seven well-known women's rights writers were summoned to court during the year. Parvin Ardalan, who wrote for the *Change for Equality* Web site, faced two sets of charges, including accusations of endangering national security. The Sixth Branch of Islamic Revolutionary Court sentenced her to a six-month prison term, although she was free on appeal in late year. Ardalan received Sweden's Olof Palme Prize for human rights in 2007.

The government continued to crack down on Kurdish, Azeri, and Arab publications, along with journalists who sought to cover the regime's treatment of ethnic minorities.

At least five Iranian writers and editors were imprisoned when CPJ conducted its annual census on December 1, making the country the world's sixth-leading jailer of journalists. Four of those jailed had reported for critical ethnic outlets or sought to detail the government's treatment of minorities. All five were accused of various forms of antistate activity.

The imprisoned included Mohammad Hossein Fallahiyazadeh, a television reporter serving a three-year term after recounting the government's harsh treatment of Iranian-Arab protesters in Khuzestan province. Adnan Hassanpour, editor of the now-defunct Kurdish-Persian weekly *Aso*, faced pending charges of espionage in late year. (Hassanpour's original 2007 conviction and death sentence were overturned in September.)

The roster of those jailed also included Mohammad Seddigh Kaboudvand, head of the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan and managing editor of the weekly *Payam-e Mardom*, who was serving 11 years on antistate charges. Massoud Kurdpour, a freelance journalist in West Azerbaijan province, was sentenced in October to a year in prison on charges of "propaganda against the regime" after doing interviews with foreign media about the government's treatment of minorities. And blogger Mojtaba Lotfi was sentenced to four years in prison in November on antistate charges related to perceived criticism of Ahmadinejad.

OpenNet Initiative, an academic partnership that studies Internet censorship issues, said in a May 2007 report that Iran engaged in "aggressive online censorship policies" and that political and social content was subject to pervasive filtering. As presidential elections approach in June 2009, the government appeared to ramp up its Internet censorship. The government issued regular bulletins to Internet service providers, identifying critical news, politics, women's rights, and human rights sites to block. The bulletins also marked a large number of personal blogs for censorship.

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