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Attacks on the Press 2009: Iran

Top Developments

- Dozens of journalists are detained in massive post-election crackdown.
- Numerous critical newspapers, Web sites censored or shut down.

Key Statistic

23: Journalists imprisoned as of December 1, 2009.

Amid the greatest national political upheaval since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran launched a full-scale assault on the media and the opposition. In mid-June, mass protests erupted in response to official election results showing incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad winning by a large margin against his main opposition challenger, reformist Mir-Hossein Mousavi. The government responded with a wide-ranging and cruel campaign to suppress dissent. As protests against perceived electoral fraud spiraled into mass demonstrations, Iranian authorities threw dozens of journalists behind bars (where many were reportedly tortured), shuttered and censored news outlets, and barred foreign journalists from reporting. During the protests and crackdown, blogs and social media sites became front-line news sources. The crackdown increased the level of repression in a regime already hostile toward the press, and followed the months-long imprisonment of an Iranian-American freelance journalist, Roxana Saberi.

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Saberi's detention, as well as the arrests of three American hikers who strayed across the Iraqi border in July, played out against a backdrop of international diplomatic wrangling over Iran's nuclear program, leading some to surmise that Iran's authorities might see U.S. detainees as useful tools in negotiations. While Iranian officials have long argued that the country's nuclear program is for civilian electricity generation only, and that uranium enrichment is Iran's right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, international policy-makers have grown increasingly concerned that Iran's enrichment program is aimed at weapons production. The U.S. administration of President Barack Obama has alternated diplomatic overtures to Iran with threats of punitive measures such as tighter international sanctions.

Signs that Iranian authorities would seek to stifle the free flow of information about the presidential election emerged nearly immediately. SMS text message service was disrupted starting hours before the polls opened on June 12, and mobile phone service was shut down on June 13, the day election results were released. In the days after the disputed vote, Iranian security forces and members of the paramilitary Basij militia assaulted and harassed journalists attempting to cover escalating public demonstrations. Authorities clamped down on foreign media coverage, jamming the BBC's Persian television and radio service and the U.S. government-funded Radio Farda, and shutting

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the Tehran bureau of Dubai-based, pan-Arab Al-Arabiya television indefinitely after accusing the station of bias.

Foreign journalists were ordered not to cover the protests or any “news events” not announced by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Several journalists working for foreign media were detained and their tapes, equipment, and other work products were confiscated. Press cards were declared invalid, and Iranian authorities rejected requests by foreign journalists to extend their one-week visas. Foreign journalists who had been invited by the government to cover the elections left the country as their visas expired, or were expelled even before this could happen.

Restricting the foreign press appeared to serve the dual purpose of limiting coverage of internal upheaval and the graphic abuse of protesters, while pinning the unrest on Western interference in Iran’s internal affairs. On June 19, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called foreign media “evil” and accused them of attempting to divide the people of Iran. These accusations fed into wider official allegations that protests stemmed from a conspiracy abetted by the CIA, Britain, Israel, and exiled Iranian groups.

Five days after the vote, two Tehran-based newspapers were barred from publishing by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The daily *Hayat e No* had planned to run a front-page article about the protests, and the daily *Aftab e Yazd* would have had a front-page picture of defeated reformist candidate Mousavi. At least three other local newspapers didn’t appear on newsstands; newspaper staff cited technical problems, but it was unclear whether self-censorship played a role. The following week, the Association of Iranian Journalists reported that security agents were visiting printing houses to censor newspapers. (The association itself was later shut down.) According to the BBC Persian Service, 180 Iranian journalists signed a petition calling censorship “unprecedented” and stating that “even during wartime there was not this much pressure on publications.” Sporadic newspaper censorship continued through year’s end. In October, authorities revoked the licenses of three reformist papers: Tehran-based dailies *Farhang-e Aashti* and *Arman*, and the Shiraz-based daily *Tahleel-e Rooz*.

Iranian bloggers have long been regional trailblazers in using the Internet to get around official censorship. Even so, online journalists have frequently been targeted by the authorities; in April, CPJ named Iran one of the world’s 10 Worst Countries to Be a Blogger. During the elections, Iranian authorities recognized that Internet-based media could pose a threat. Authorities blocked social networking sites inside Iran such as Twitter, DailyMotion, and Facebook, as well as reformist Web sites and YouTube, where international visitors could glimpse raw digital footage—some recorded by cell phone—of security forces and militia members shooting at and assaulting protesters. Some news reports said authorities also imposed bandwidth restrictions that made it difficult to upload materials such as pictures or videos of the protests. In spite of these efforts and the imprisonment of many Iranian bloggers in the aftermath of the elections, Internet journalism continued to build momentum. Writing on the CPJ Blog in October, Nikahang Kowsar, an Iranian blogger living in Canada, described an explosion of Iranian Web sites where critical information was being shared. He noted: “If in 2003 people enjoyed blogging to share ideas and thoughts, today it’s a war. It’s a struggle.”

In the weeks after the protests, thousands of activists and supporters of reformist candidates were detained by the Iranian security apparatus. So were more than 90 journalists and media workers, according to CPJ research. Those detained included bloggers, photographers, newspaper editors, reporters, filmmakers, media activists, cartoonists, producers, and editorialists who had been critical toward the regime or supportive of reformist candidates. Many were

seized by intelligence agents who raided and searched their houses. *Kamaeh Sabz*, a reformist newspaper owned by Mousavi, saw much of its staff rounded up by authorities during the crackdown.

At least 23 journalists were still being jailed on December 1, when CPJ conducted its annual worldwide census of imprisoned journalists, making Iran the world's second-worst jailer of the press. (Only China imprisoned more.) Even as the government released a trickle of journalists, others continued to be arrested, among them former International Press Freedom Award recipient Mashallah Shamsolvaezin and the prominent writer Emadeddin Baghi.

Journalists were among the 100 detainees who faced a mass, televised judicial proceeding in August on vague antistate accusations, including "endangering national security" and "involvement with foreign powers in order to topple the regime." The mass hearings were riddled with procedural irregularities, CPJ research indicated, and were open only to state-owned media. On August 25, about 20 of the defendants, including at least four journalists, were accused in a Revolutionary Court in Tehran of attempting "a soft coup d'état," and of "lying" and spreading "rumors of fraud in the election," Iranian state broadcaster Press TV reported. Four defense lawyers said they had been barred from attending one hearing; one reported being threatened with arrest when attempting to enter the hall.

CPJ expressed deep concern about the health of the detained journalists and the conditions in which they were being held. Iranian authorities released "confessions" by several of the detained journalists that appeared to have been coerced. The journalists' lawyers were denied access to their clients in prison, while police chief Gen. Ismail Ahmadi Moghaddam publicly admitted that detainees had been tortured in custody. The wife of one detainee, Ahmad Zaid-Abadi, was allowed to see her husband only after he had spent 53 days in custody, during which he had gone on a 17-day hunger strike. Speaking to the German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle, Zaid-Abadi's wife described the 1-by-1.5-meter room in which he was held, alone, during his hunger strike as "a place like a grave." In November, Zaid-Abadi was convicted on antistate charges and sentenced to six years in prison, five years in exile in Khorasan province, and a lifetime ban on social and political activity.

Nearly all of the journalists detained in the aftermath of the elections were working for local media outlets, including Web sites and newspapers affiliated with reformist candidates, according to CPJ research. A handful, however, were working for international media. These included a freelance photographer for Getty Images, Majid Saeedi, who had worked in Iran for years, and Iason Athanasiadis, a Greek freelance journalist who had been covering the elections and their aftermath for *The Washington Times*. A third was *Newsweek's* Tehran correspondent, Maziar Bahari, a Canadian-Iranian national arrested on June 21. Security agents also took Bahari's laptop and several videotapes, the newsweekly reported. The three were eventually released: Athanasiadis in early July, Saeedi in August, and Bahari in October. CPJ and others campaigned vigorously for the release of these and all detained journalists, leading petition efforts and publicity campaigns, and working behind the scenes through diplomatic channels.

The journalists arrested in the crackdown were added to the ranks of at least six who were already in Iranian jails at the time of the election. One of the six, freelance journalist Massoud Kurdpour, was released from Mahabad Central Prison in northwestern Iran in early August after completing a one-year jail term for "propaganda against the regime." Another, Canadian-Iranian blogger Hossein Derakhshan continued to be held in late year. Known in Iran as the "Blogfather" for his pioneering Internet commentary, Derakhshan was detained in November 2008, ostensibly for comments he made about a key cleric. Derakhshan's whereabouts and legal status were unknown in late year.

In late January, Iran jailed an Iranian-American journalist, Roxana Saberi, at Tehran's notorious Evin Prison, where political prisoners are often held. Saberi, 32, had worked inside Iran for National Public Radio, the BBC, ABC News, and other international media outlets since 2003, until her press credentials were revoked in 2006. According to NPR,

Saberi continued to file short news items with government permission. In April, she was convicted of espionage and sentenced after a closed, one-day trial to eight years in prison. In early May, after a five-hour hearing, an appeals court reduced her punishment to a two-year suspended sentence (and a five-year ban on reporting from Iran). Saberi's espionage sentence was overturned, although the court upheld her conviction for "having classified information," defense lawyer Saleh Nikbakht told CPJ. Nikbakht said the appeals hearing focused on a research paper on U.S. tactics, produced in early 2003 by a center for strategic studies within the Iranian government, which officers found during a search of Saberi's apartment in Tehran. Defense lawyers rejected prosecutors' contention that the paper was classified; Saberi told judges she had picked up the paper at a public conference in Tehran. Saberi's legal team also maintained that Saberi's "confession," a basis of the prosecution's case, had been coerced and not put in writing, Nikbakht said. CPJ's vigorous international advocacy on Saberi's behalf included a petition signed by more than 10,000 people worldwide.

In July, a Revolutionary Court in Tehran convicted local journalist Saeed Matin-Pour on a charge of having "relations with foreigners and propagating against the regime." He was initially arrested in May 2007 after visiting Turkey but was released on bail. He was rearrested amid the 2009 crackdown, sentenced to eight years in jail, and sent immediately to Evin Prison. CPJ condemned the sentence and the vagueness of the charge.

At least two journalists have died at Evin Prison in the last six years under circumstances that have not been fully explained, CPJ research shows, including Omidreza Mirsayafi, a blogger who died in March while serving a 30-month sentence on a charge of insulting Iran's religious authorities. In 2003, Iranian-Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi died of a brain hemorrhage that resulted from a beating while behind bars.

On July 31, Iranian forces detained three young Americans who strayed over the border into Iran while hiking in a resort area on the Iraqi Kurdistan border. Sarah Shourd is a writer and teacher; Joshua Fattal is an environmentalist; and Shane Bauer is a freelance journalist based in Damascus, Syria. On November 11, Iranian authorities announced they would be charged with espionage. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton publicly criticized the hikers' arrests, stating the charges against them were baseless. Some news reports speculated the Americans might be held for diplomatic bargaining purposes.

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