

Doc Number: EU000345

The New York Times

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October 13, 2009

Iranian Journalists Flee, Fearing Retribution for Covering Protests

By NAZILA FATHI

TORONTO — For two months Ehsan Maleki traveled around [Iran](#) with a backpack containing his cameras, a few pieces of clothing and his laptop computer, taking pictures of the reformist candidate [Mir Hussein Mousavi](#) during the presidential campaign. He did not know that his backpack and his cameras would soon become his only possessions, or that he would be forced to crawl out of the country hiding in a herd of sheep.

Mr. Maleki, 29, is one of dozens of reporters, photographers and bloggers who have either fled Iran or are trying to flee in the aftermath of the disputed June presidential election. Reporters Without Borders, a Paris-based organization that promotes press freedom and monitors the safety of journalists, said the number of journalists leaving Iran was the largest since the years after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The wave of departures reflects the journalists' anxiety over the retribution many of them have faced for reporting on the government's violent suppression of the post-election protests. As bloody clashes unfolded in the streets of Tehran, the government went to great lengths to restrict the flow of information to the outside world. Foreign journalists were banned, and local reporters and photographers were warned to stay at home.

A number of Iranian journalists defied those orders, disseminating information in phone interviews, on Internet sites and through pictures sent to photo agencies. Now, they say, they are paying the price.

Many journalists in Tehran, including a [Newsweek](#) reporter, [Maziar Bahari](#), who is also an independent filmmaker, were among the hundreds of Iranians arrested and jailed. Some are defendants in the mass trials the government is conducting. The wife of one journalist, Ahmad Zeidabadi, said he had been tortured while in prison.

The editors of some opposition blogs, which reported the killings and the mass burial of protesters, have gone into hiding, and their whereabouts are not clear. The homes of some journalists, like Mr. Maleki, have been ransacked.

Mahmoud Shamsolvaezin, a veteran journalist and media expert in Tehran, estimated that 2,000 Iranian journalists had lost their jobs recently. He said about 400 of them had approached him for reference letters so they could get work abroad. "Journalists are leaving more than other groups because the government has closed newspapers and it has intimidated and terrorized them," he said in an interview.

The government, which has closed at least six newspapers in the past three months, has accused the media

of lying about the protests. Last week, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called the media a major weapon, [“worse than nuclear weapons,”](#) in the hands of Western countries, according to the Fars news agency. Almost all news agencies in Iran are affiliated with the government and rely on it for financing. The state news agencies IRNA and Fars are run by arms of the government.

Mr. Maleki was covering a demonstration on June 20 when he and dozens of protesters were chased by members of the [Basij](#) paramilitary force. They fled to an apartment building, where Mr. Maleki had enough time to hide his camera inside a chimney before members of the militia arrested them. He was jailed with hundreds of others for a day. Without his camera, authorities could not identify him as a photographer, but they recorded his national identity number.

Mr. Maleki never went home. A few days later a neighbor told him that his house had been ransacked and that his computer and personal documents, including his passport, had been taken. “They found out that I was sending pictures to [Sipa](#),” he said, referring to an international photo agency.

He said he slept in a different place every night and continued to take photos of the protests, but finally decided it was too risky to stay. He paid \$150 to a smuggler who drove him to Kheneryeh, near the border with Turkey and Iraq. Accompanied by a Kurdish guide, he crawled among a large herd of sheep for half an hour until they crossed the Iranian border and reached a steep cliff.

“It took us seven hours to climb down and reach a road in northern Iraq,” he said in a telephone interview from Iraq. He would not disclose which city he was in for security reasons.

The journalists leaving Iran come from a range of news organizations, not just those sympathetic to the opposition. A Web site supportive of Mr. Ahmadinejad, [Parcham.ir](#), reported last week that two journalists for state-run television had defected to Italy and Britain. At least two photographers who worked for Fars have also left. Among the journalists who have left is this reporter, who covered the election and subsequent protests before leaving Iran in early July because she felt her safety was threatened.

The exact number of journalists who have left is not clear. Some worry that their families could be harassed if the government learns they are gone. Others are reluctant to reveal their locations in neighboring countries like Turkey and Iraq, fearing that government agents might find them and return them to Iran. Javad Moghimi, a photographer who worked for Fars, acknowledged that he became emotionally invested in the protests.

“The protesters were young, just like me,” Mr. Moghimi, 24, said in a telephone interview from Turkey. “It was impossible to be indifferent. I felt it was my duty to take pictures and reflect their voices abroad.”

With the camera given to him by Fars he began taking pictures every day. He said one of his pictures appeared on the cover of [Time](#) magazine anonymously, but he never told anyone he had taken it.

Mr. Moghimi said his fear increased after he saw a former colleague, [Majid Saeedi](#), who was jailed for a month. Mr. Moghimi said he looked terrorized.

A few days later the director of Fars delivered a stern warning. “We have learned two of our photographers have been taking pictures secretly and sending them to foreign media,” he said. “We are just waiting for

more information and will confront them soon.”

Mr. Moghimi got on the first plane to Turkey the next day and has applied for asylum.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: October 19, 2009

An article last Monday about the emigration or attempted emigration of dozens of Iranian reporters, photographers and bloggers in the aftermath of the disputed June presidential election in Iran misstated the given name of a photographer who applied for asylum in Turkey. He is Javad Moghimi, not Reza.

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