

You've selected the U.S. Edition. Would you like to make this your default edition? Yes | No

Close

EDITION: U.S. | INTERNATIONAL | MEXICO

Sign up | Log in

Set edition preference



SEARCH

Home Video NewsPulse U.S. World Politics Justice Entertainment Tech Health Living Travel Opinion iReport Money Sports

Iran's attacks on human rights lawyers

By Gissou Nia, Special to CNN
December 21, 2010 10:30 a.m. EST



Editor's note: Gissou Nia is a researcher and legal analyst at the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. Before her tenure at the center, she worked on war crimes trials at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, The Netherlands. See [more information](#) about the Iranian government's treatment of human rights lawyers.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Gissou Nia: Women's rights activists to protest Iran's jailing of human rights lawyer

Nia: Nasrin Sotoudeh in solitary for taking cases of politically motivated injustice

Arrests of attorneys who defend minorities, opposition figures is increasing, she writes

Nia: Lawyers the last refuge in rights cases; without them, door opens to repression

(CNN) -- Starting this week, several of Iran's most prominent women's rights activists, including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi, will stage a sit-in in front of the U.N. Human Rights Council offices in Geneva, Switzerland, to protest Iran's imprisonment of their colleague Nasrin Sotoudeh.

Iranian authorities arrested Sotoudeh, one of Iran's most well-known criminal defense attorneys, on September 4 for a range of "security" offenses, including her legal representation of Ebadi.

She has spent months in solitary confinement and has waged a hunger strike that has seriously debilitated her and made her husband, friends and colleagues fear for her life. The Iranian legal system, whose injustices Sotoudeh fearlessly championed against during the course of her career, has cruelly denied her the ultimate legal right: a fair trial.

Sadly, Iran's attack on Sotoudeh is not unique. In the past year, the arrests of defense attorneys who represent repressed minorities, opposition figures and other targeted people have spiked alarmingly. The Iranian government, which seeks to suppress human rights progress, finds lawyers such as Sotoudeh compelling targets.

Since the 2009 election in Iran, the focus has sharpened on the country's human rights situation. But the deterioration in human rights in Iran began much earlier. One of the most salient features of the government's tactics has been its continued and intense targeting of criminal defense lawyers who represent defendants in politically motivated cases.

During the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, Iran introduced human rights reforms, albeit limited, that were unprecedented since the Iranian Revolution. Although significant problems persisted, this period was characterized by the growth of a more independent press, the creation of nongovernmental organizations and increased transparency.

An independent judiciary and its lawyers often function as the last refuge for the

Since the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, however, much of this progress has been repealed. Newspapers and NGOs were censored and shut down. As the repressive government under Ahmadinejad methodically rolled out its campaign of suppression of civil society, lawyers continued to challenge the government in the only remaining legal forum: the courts.

Recommend

Be the first of your friends to recommend this.



Helping set opportunity in motion for our customers, communities and economy.

Bank of America

LEARN MORE

ADVERTISEMENT

NewsPulse

Most popular stories right now

'Barney Miller' star Steve Landesberg dies

'Spider-Man' performer injured in fall

Lunar eclipse a colorful show

Human Factor: At 26, a young mind disabled by stroke

Watch lunar eclipse in under a minute

Explore the news with NewsPulse >

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

OVER 80% off

PLUS 2 WEEKS FREE!

>> CLICK HERE TO START YOUR FREE TRIAL NOW

ADVERTISEMENT

protection of human rights.

—Gissou Nia



Nobel laureate leads protest

RELATED TOPICS

[Iran](#)
[Human Rights](#)
[Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#)
[Shirin Ebadi](#)

Iran's human rights lawyers worked tirelessly, despite severe limits to representing their clients. Those working on politically motivated cases are often barred from speaking with or visiting their clients until the date of trial. They also are denied copies of documents in evidence and are seldom provided with a written verdict in their client's trial from which to construct a proper appeal.

Despite these restrictions, the advocacy efforts of these attorneys provided a means to secure human rights gains. Savvy lawyers who were familiar with the system could mitigate punishment for their clients by securing lower sentences or avoiding an execution sentence on death penalty cases.

death penalty cases.

Although these advocates worked within the system, they became the direct targets of the government.

As journalists, bloggers, activists, academics, unionists and others who work to combat human rights abuses were deemed "anti-revolutionaries" and tried in "Revolutionary" courts by the Iranian government, their legal counsels were correspondingly labeled as opposition. Sometimes, they were considered accomplices to the alleged illegal activities of their clients.

Following the disputed June 2009 election, in which hundreds of members of perceived government opposition were rounded up by Iranian authorities, the risks to lawyers dramatically increased.

Although representation of clients on politically motivated cases previously placed an attorney's legal career in jeopardy, now performance of these services placed lawyers in personal jeopardy.

Prominent criminal defense lawyers, including Abdolfattah Soltani, Shadi Sadr and Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, were arrested in increasing numbers and forced to terminate their legal representation of human rights and civil activists detained during the post-election unrest.

In recent months, the arrest, imprisonment and sentencing of lawyers on prominent case files including Sotoudeh, Houtan Kian, Mohammad Seifzadeh and others demonstrate that the Iranian government's targeting of lawyers shows no sign of abating.

Today, Iran is not alone in government-sanctioned attacks on lawyers. Targeting lawyers is often a catalyst for larger-scale repression.

In 2009 and 2010, governmental representatives in China, Kenya, India, Vietnam, Syria and Russia targeted human rights lawyers so as to eliminate any degree of independence that could undermine centralized authority.

This trend is dangerous, because history shows that an independent judiciary and its lawyers often function as the last refuge for the protection of human rights in civil society. Without legal recourse, the human rights situation in a country declines rapidly. In Zimbabwe, the subversion of the judicial system and targeting of human rights lawyers early this decade prompted the swift regression of human rights.

The attack on independent lawyers in Iran is the latest demonstration of this disturbing pattern. Though small in number, lawyers play a major role in promoting accountability for human rights.

As Sotoudeh's colleagues stage their sit-in in Geneva, the international community should commit itself to protecting lawyers in Iran from arrest and imprisonment -- or risk the people of Iran

The opinions in this commentary are solely those of Gissou Nia.

[Recommend](#) Be the first of your friends to recommend this.

FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

We recommend

- [End the unfair tax break for homeowners](#)
- [Why the office is the worst place to work](#)
- [Armenians denounce Kobe Bryant deal with Turkish Airlines](#)
- [Nobel Peace laureate calls for release of jailed activist](#)
- [Intoxicated passenger drops cruise ship anchor](#)

From around the web

- [Making Money from US Savings Bonds](#)
GoBankingRates.com
- [Madoff's Devilish Female Partner in Crime](#) The Daily Beast
- [Hackers bring down Mastercard for cutting off WikiLeaks](#) Naked Security
- [8 Bizarre Crimes Scenes From Around the World](#)
KoldCast TV
- [Hats Off for Florida Congresswoman-elect Frederica Wilson](#) The Root

[\[what's this\]](#)

Sponsored links

Drug Recovery Programs Drug Addiction Recovery Programs. Call for More Info: (877) 680-8223 www.TheRecoveryPlace.net/Program	SAP Crystal Reports Trial Download a Free 30 Day Trial of SAP Crystal Reports - Register Now www.CrystalReports.com	Six Sigma Certification Earn the Six Sigma Credentials That Will Set You Apart - 100% Online www.VillanovaU.com/SixSigma
--	---	---

soundoff (0 Comments)
Show: [Newest](#) | [Oldest](#) | [Most liked](#)

Post a comment
[Log in or sign up to comment](#)



There are no comments

on this story. Be the first!

[Log in or sign up to comment](#)

FOG 46° HI 56° LO 34°
Okay, OK Weather forecast

[SEARCH](#)
POWERED BY Google

[Home](#) | [Video](#) | [NewsPulse](#) | [U.S.](#) | [World](#) | [Politics](#) | [Justice](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Tech](#) | [Health](#) | [Living](#) | [Travel](#) | [Opinion](#) | [iReport](#) | [Money](#) | [Sports](#)
[Tools & widgets](#) | [RSS](#) | [Podcasts](#) | [Blogs](#) | [CNN mobile](#) | [My profile](#) | [E-mail alerts](#) | [CNN shop](#) | [Site map](#)

CNN © 2010 Cable News Network. Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of service](#) | [Privacy guidelines](#) | [Advertising practices](#) | [Advertise with us](#) | [About us](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Work for us](#) | [Help](#)

[CNN en ESPAÑOL](#) | [CNN Chile](#) | [CNN Expansion](#) | [CNN TV](#) | [HLN](#) | [Transcripts](#)