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Iran's woeful human rights record

Informed sources

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Earlier this month, Islamic Republic of Iran authorities announced that Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi's organization, the Centre of Human Rights Defenders, would be banned. An official statement warned that any activity under the name of the Centre -- one of Iran's leading human rights organizations -- was "illegal" and that "violators will be prosecuted accordingly."

The Centre's stated mission is reporting human rights abuses and providing legal representation to political prisoners and support to their families. Its advocates, at significant risk to their own safety, have taken on high-profile cases of violations.

This ban is deeply disturbing -- all the more so because it is just one of numerous human rights violations in Iran this year:

- In January, hundreds of bus drivers were detained in response to a planned strike. The bus drivers had planned the strike to protest the detention of their union leader, Mansour Osanloo, who was being detained by Iranian security agents without charge or access to lawyers.
- In May, a group of 54 Baha'i youths who were tutoring underprivileged youths in Shiraz were arrested. None was officially charged with a crime, but a number of them were released only after their families paid high amounts of bail. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief announced in March that she had received a copy of a confidential memo stating that Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, had instructed the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces to identify members of the Baha'i community and monitor their activities. The Baha'i community has a long history of official religious persecution in Iran.
- In June, police beat hundreds of women's rights activists with batons during a peaceful demonstration in Tehran and took at least 70 people into custody. The demonstration followed a call by hundreds of women's rights activists for reforms to Iran's legal code and the removal of discriminatory clauses against women.
- Student activist Akbar Mohammadi recently died in custody in Tehran's Evin prison. Iranian authorities had arrested Mohammadi in 1999 following his participation in student protests at Tehran University. He was originally sentenced to death, but that sentence was later commuted to 15 years in

prison. In 2004 Mohammadi was released on medical leave, but was later rearrested.

The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center has recently released a report, *Impunity in Iran: The Death of Photojournalist Zahra Kazemi*, examining systemic, structural problems in Iran's law enforcement and justice systems that contribute to impunity for violators. The report found that Iran's judiciary, particularly when it works in conjunction with security officials, itself becomes a primary violator. When the judiciary itself is implicated in violations, the chances of seeking redress through the court system become increasingly slim.

Moreover, a number of known human rights violators have been awarded prominent roles in Iran's government. The presence in high-ranking government positions of individuals implicated in serious and systematic violations -- such as the Minister of Interior, Mustafa Pour-Mohammadi, and the Minister of Information, Gholamhussein Mohseni Ezhei -- along with Saeed Mortazavi, still in the influential position of Tehran Chief Prosecutor, provide little reason to hope that the situation will improve soon.

While current events in the Middle East have put a spotlight on the foreign policies and practices of the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, including its support for Hezbollah and its nuclear program, Iran's domestic policies will also play an important role in defining (or eroding) its legitimacy among its 69.4 million citizens. As the human rights situation inside Iran continues to deteriorate, the international media must keep sight of the fact that the legitimacy of its actions should also be evaluated through its domestic policies, and in particular its human rights record vis-a-vis its own citizens.

- Mora Johnson is the executive director of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, a Connecticut-based organization documenting the human rights situation in Iran. For more information please visit www.iranhrdc.org or email info@iranhrdc.org.

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