

Doc_Number: GDE00020

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> [Home](#) > Iran: Journalists under siege

IRAN: JOURNALISTS UNDER SIEGE

30 April 2010

"Around 70 journalists are now in the prisons of the Islamic Republic and many others, like me, are free on bail, lacking any security. We are afraid that anything that we write may be used as evidence of "propaganda against the system" or "conspiracy against national security". My colleagues and I try to write as little as possible."

Open letter from journalist Zhila Bani Ya'qoub to the Head of Iranian Judiciary

Iranian journalists and bloggers are increasingly under siege in one of the biggest crackdowns on independent voices and

Embed:

Iranian journalists arrested since June 2009
© Amnesty International



The authorities intensified their media crackdown after last year's election protests
© Javad Montazeri



Activists and protestors were prosecuted in mass 'show trials'
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dissent in Iran's modern history.

The killing of Neda Agha Soltan during a demonstration was reported worldwide
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Since last year's disputed presidential election, which brought millions of protesters onto the streets, the authorities have intensified their long-standing suppression of both the traditional Iranian media and the rising number of "citizen journalists" who use new technology to expose human rights violations.

Iran has been described by press freedom organizations as the biggest jailer of journalists in the world.

Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa said: "Since the protests, the government's growing bunker mentality has led to mounting waves of repression aimed at suppressing any criticism of the authorities or independent reporting on the human rights situation in the country.

"Dozens of newspapers and websites have been closed, and scores of journalists and bloggers have been arrested and are held as prisoners of conscience or have had to flee the country for their own safety.

"Contact with some foreign media has been criminalized and a new 'Cyber-Crimes Law' is already having major implications for freedom of expression. The authorities must urgently relax both the long standing and new sweeping restrictions and immediately release those held as prisoners of conscience."

The Association of Iranian Journalists was closed by the authorities in August 2009 and a number of its officials arrested, including Secretary Badrolsadat Mofidi who by April 2010 had spent four months in detention without charge or trial.

Blogging, once an effective way around Iran's draconian press censorship, is now a risky business. The once-thriving blogosphere is under fire, with those involved subjected to arbitrary arrest or harassment. Some have had to flee the country for their own safety.

Aida Saadat, a freelance journalist and human rights campaigner, active with the One Million Signature Campaign and the Committee of Human Rights Reporters was repeatedly interrogated; and beaten up while walking home. Fearing for her life, she eventually fled Iran.

She told Amnesty International: "I could not find any human

rights or other organization to defend me, as a journalist. They had been silenced. The men who attacked me said 'this is just a warning. Next time we will kill you for your activities against the people of our country...' This is what we have been facing. I and so many others had to leave. Our lives were at stake."

Many of the detainees and those who fled worked for papers or online publications which supported or could have been perceived as supporting the defeated reformist candidates in the presidential elections, or are freelancers, some of whom who had lost jobs with previously-banned publications while others provided an independent voice, often about the human rights situation. At one point officials arrested the entire staff of *Kalameh Sabz*, a newspaper established by opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi.

Prisoner of conscience Isa Saharkhiz, a prominent journalist working with reformist candidate Mehdi Karroubi, was arrested in July 2009 during the post election unrest; by April 2010 he had yet to be charged with any offence. His son, Mehdi, a US-based blogger, explains: "What happened is at one point they realized that the media is playing a big role at getting the news out and getting the truth out. So what they did was they arrested well known journalists, so other journalists who are working will learn from this... and they will write just what the state wants them to write."

Other targets included journalists writing on human rights issues, such as the internationally-acclaimed Emadeddin Baghi, founder of the Association for the Defence of Prisoners' Rights. Some journalists have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms after conviction in mass "show trials".

Detainees have faced human rights violations ranging from torture and other ill-treatment, including beatings, solitary confinement for lengthy periods, to grossly unfair trials. Many have been held incommunicado for weeks or months without charge or trial.

Some of those freed still remain under pressure, having had to give up the deeds to their – or their relatives' – houses to raise bail. Detainees' families have been harassed or temporarily detained; some have been warned their loved ones won't be freed if they speak to the media about their plight.

Criminalizing contacts with foreigners: The 'Velvet Coup'

With Iran's media limited in their reporting by government

ensorship and fearful of crossing the "red line" over the decades, many Iranians have in the past tuned in to foreign radio stations, or watched international TV networks via illegal, though previously largely tolerated, satellite dishes. Since the first election of President Ahmadinejad in 2005, Iranian security forces have conducted an increasing number of raids to seize such dishes.

The authorities have also reduced the number of foreign correspondents based in Iran; when political unrest erupted in mid-2009, those remaining were barred from covering mass opposition rallies.

International media broadcasting in Persian were singled out and their Iranian contributors targeted. The BBC's Tehran correspondent was expelled. Maziar Bahari, working for Newsweek, - one of two international journalists arrested at the time - was released only after making a dubious public "confession" following weeks of physical and psychological torture.

Prosecutors in mass "show trials" accused foreign broadcasters like the BBC and the Voice of America (VOA) of stage-managing the protests and planning a "soft coup". Some of the accused were charged with working with foreign channels in order to "incite and provoke public opinion".

In January, both the BBC and VOA were included on a list of "subversive" organizations which Iranians were banned from contacting. Both networks have had their satellite transmissions into Iran blocked but the truth is that now any contribution to any overseas Persian-language broadcaster is regarded as suspicious if not seditious.

From cassettes to Twitter

After decades of repression, Iranians are adept at finding a way around state censorship. In the 1970s, Ayatollah Khomeini, then an exiled opponent of the former Shah, used cassette tapes of his sermons smuggled in from abroad to denounce the Shah's increasingly autocratic rule. Those cassettes played an important part in the subsequent Islamic Revolution.

In 1999, the closure of *Salam* newspaper led to mass student-led protests - and eventually to violent confrontations between them and the security forces. Over the next few years, the media became a focal point in the power struggle between conservative and reformist factions.

More than a hundred newspapers and periodicals were

closed. There was an explosion of internet use as Iranian writers increasingly turned to it as virtually the only remaining forum for free expression. Internet usage in Iran in recent years has grown faster than in any other Middle Eastern country.

But the authorities have been hot on the bloggers' heels, filtering and blocking access to many sites, ranging from those considered "immoral" or "anti-Islamic" to political websites or blogs critical of the government.

At one stage, an Iranian official claimed that five million sites were being blocked. Facebook and Twitter - used to spread information about last year's demonstrations - were briefly shut down and other internet sites such as social networking site Badoo have been banned.

Last February, the authorities announced that access to Google's email service was to be permanently blocked. Some tech savvy Iranians continue to find their way around the system, using filter-busting software, encryption services or "proxy" internet servers outside Iran, although they have been hampered by speed slowdowns, or even brief blockages of internet access.

The latest salvo in the battle came when the Cyber-Crimes Law came into effect in July 2009; human rights groups say it could help the authorities track down government critics. But images of the killing of Neda Agha Soltan during a demonstration in July 2009, captured by mobile phone camera and almost instantly distributed across the world, became the symbol of the futility of attempts by the authorities to conceal the truth and control new media and social networks.

It's all led to what Mehdi Saharkhiz describes as "a cat and mouse game," with Iranians trying to circumvent official filters as soon as they are set up. He also points to a huge rise in the number of "citizen journalists" many of whom have managed to send news or videos for posting on his US-based website.

During the 2009 protests, he says the amount of video material coming in was "staggering". Some contributors, he says, are professional journalists who now prefer to work anonymously in order to keep under the official radar. Others may be friends or neighbours of political prisoners, or just individuals who see something they want to share with others.

"Every person has become a media," he said. "Even taking pictures of this stuff is extremely dangerous for them. But they

want to do this because they want to be heard. You can't control 70 million people."

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