

Amnesty International Annual Report 2012 (January-December 2011)

Iran

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Islamic Republic of Iran

Head of state: Ayatollah Sayed 'Ali Khamenei (Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran)

Head of government: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (President)

Death penalty: retentionist

Population: 74.8 million

Life expectancy: 73 years

Under-5 mortality: 30.9 per 1,000

Adult literacy: 85 per cent

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Freedom of expression, association and assembly were severely restricted. Political dissidents, women's and minority rights activists and other human rights defenders were arbitrarily arrested, detained incommunicado, imprisoned after unfair trials and banned from travelling abroad. Torture and other ill-treatment were common and committed with impunity. Women as well as religious and ethnic minorities faced discrimination in law and in practice. At least 360 people were executed; the true total was believed to be much higher. Among them were at least three juvenile offenders. Judicial floggings and amputations were carried out.

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Background

The security forces, including the paramilitary Basij militia, continued to operate with near total impunity and there was virtually no accountability for the unlawful killings and other serious violations committed at the time of mass, largely peaceful protests following the 2009 presidential election and in earlier years.

In March, the UN Human Rights Council appointed a Special Rapporteur to investigate human rights in Iran; the government refused to allow him to visit the country. In October, the UN Human Rights Committee considered Iran's record on civil and political rights. In December, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution condemning human rights violations in Iran.

Iranian troops attacked bases of PJAK (Free Life Party of Kurdistan), an armed group that advocates autonomy for Iran's Kurds, in Iraqi Kurdistan; at least two civilians were killed and hundreds of families in Iraqi Kurdistan were displaced. PJAK's combatants reportedly include people recruited as child soldiers.

International tensions over Iran's nuclear programme heightened in November when the International Atomic Energy Agency reported that Iran could be secretly constructing a nuclear weapon; the government denied this. The government accused Israel and the USA of being behind several murders of Iranian scientists possibly linked to Iran's nuclear programme including physicist Dariush Rezaeienejad, killed in July by an unidentified gunman

in Tehran. The government denied allegations by the US authorities implicating senior Revolutionary Guards officials in a plot to kill Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the USA.

Freedom of expression, association and assembly

The authorities maintained the tightened restrictions on freedom of expression, association and assembly imposed before, during and following the 2009 mass protests and sought to impose further restrictions. Parliament discussed draft laws that would further restrict freedom of expression, association and assembly, including the activities of NGOs and political parties.

*Mohammad Seyfzadeh, arrested in April to serve a prison sentence, and Abdolfattah Soltani, arrested in September, both lawyers and founder members of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders, whose offices were forcibly closed by the government in 2008, were still held at the end of 2011.

*In December, Zhila Karamzadeh-Makvandi, a member of the group Mothers of Park Laleh, which campaigns against unlawful killings and other serious human rights violations, began serving a two-year prison sentence for "founding an illegal organization" and "acting against state security". Fellow member Leyla Seyfollahi faced implementation of a similar prison term.

The authorities refused permission for demonstrations on 14 February called in solidarity with the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, and conducted pre-emptive arrests. However, demonstrations went ahead in Tehran, Esfahan, Kermanshah, Shiraz and elsewhere. They were violently dispersed by security forces, who arrested scores and killed at least two people. Subsequent demonstrations were also forcibly dispersed.

*Prisoner of conscience Haleh Sahabi, a political activist, died on 1 June while on leave from prison to attend the funeral of her father, Ezatollah Sahabi, a prominent dissident. She was reported to have been hit by security forces before collapsing.

The security forces clamped down on provincial demonstrations, reportedly using excessive force, and arrested scores, possibly hundreds, of protesters. In Khuzestan, dozens of members of the Ahwazi Arab minority were said to have been killed before and during demonstrations in April to commemorate protests in 2005. Scores of environmental protesters calling for government action to halt the degradation of Lake Oroumieh were arrested in East Azerbaijan province in April, August and September.

The government maintained close control over the media, banning newspapers, blocking websites and jamming foreign satellite television channels. Scores of journalists, political activists and their relatives, film-makers, human rights defenders, students and academics were harassed, banned from foreign travel, arbitrarily arrested, tortured or jailed for expressing views opposed to those of the government. Some arrested in previous years were executed following unfair trials.

*Five documentary film directors, and a producer/distributor were detained in September after their films were sold to the BBC. All were released by mid-December.

*Student activists Majid Tavakkoli, Behareh Hedayat and Mahdieh Golrou, all serving prison terms for their peaceful student and human rights activities, were sentenced to new six-month prison terms because of a Students' Day declaration they jointly wrote from prison in 2010.

*Women's rights activist and journalist Faranak Farid was reportedly beaten severely after her arrest on 3 September in Tabriz in connection with the Lake Oroumieh protests. She was released on bail in October.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

Security officials continued to arrest and detain government critics and opponents arbitrarily, often holding them incommunicado and without access to their families, lawyers or medical care for long periods. Many were tortured or ill-treated. Scores were sentenced to prison terms after unfair trials, adding to the hundreds imprisoned after unfair trials in previous years.

*In February, opposition leaders Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, and their wives, were placed under house arrest, without a warrant, after calling for demonstrations on 14 February; they remained under house arrest at the end of the year with the exception of Mehdi Karroubi's wife Fatemeh Karroubi.

*Mohammad Tavassoli, arrested in November, was one of at least five members of the banned Freedom Movement detained in 2011. He was held in connection with a letter sent by 143 political activists to former President Khatami in October warning that forthcoming parliamentary elections would be neither free nor fair. Five others were banned from leaving Iran.

*Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal, two US nationals who had been detained for more than two years and accused of spying after they allegedly strayed into Iran while hiking in Iraq, were released after payment of hefty bail in September and allowed to leave Iran.

Human rights defenders

Repression intensified against human rights defenders, including lawyers. Many were arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned or harassed. Others remained in prison after unfair trials in previous years; they included women's and minority rights activists, trades unionists, lawyers and students. Many were prisoners of conscience. Independent trade unions remained banned and several union members remained in prison.

*In September, the 11-year prison sentence imposed in April on human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh after she was convicted of "acting against national security" for her legal defence work, was reduced to six years on appeal. Her 20-year ban on practising law or leaving Iran was halved.

*Reza Shahabi, treasurer of the independent Union of Workers of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company (Sherkat-e Vahed), remained held at Evin Prison in Tehran without completion of his trial. Arrested in June 2010, he was a prisoner of conscience, as was the union's leader, Mansour Ossenlu, who was conditionally released for medical treatment in June.

*Human rights activist Kouhyar Goudarzi disappeared for several weeks after his arrest in July until discovered to be in solitary confinement at Evin Prison, where he remained at the end of 2011. Behnam Ganji Khaibari, arrested with him and apparently tortured, committed suicide after release.

*Prominent human rights activist Emadeddin Baghi was released in June after serving two concurrent one-year prison sentences for "propaganda against the state" relating to his human rights and media activities. He remained banned from any political or media activity for five years.

Unfair trials

Political suspects continued to face grossly unfair trials often involving vaguely worded charges that did not amount to recognizably criminal offences. They were frequently convicted, sometimes in the absence of defence lawyers, on the basis of “confessions” or other information allegedly obtained under torture during pre-trial detention. Courts accepted such “confessions” as evidence without investigating how they were obtained.

*Omid Kokabi was arrested at Tehran airport in February on his return from studying in the USA. Charged with “espionage” and other offences, he went on trial in October. He said he had been forced to “confess” in detention. His lawyer said he had been denied access to him.

*Zahra Bahrami, a Dutch-Iranian national, was executed without warning on 29 January, only 27 days after she was sentenced to death for alleged drug-smuggling. She was arrested at the time of demonstrations in December 2009 and first charged with *moharebeh* (enmity against God) for alleged contact with a banned opposition group, but not tried on this charge. Her lawyer said there was no right of appeal against the death sentence.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment in pre-trial detention remained common and committed with impunity. Detainees were beaten on the soles of the feet and the body, sometimes while suspended upside-down; burned with cigarettes and hot metal objects; subjected to mock execution; raped, including by other prisoners, and threatened with rape; confined in cramped spaces; and denied adequate light, food, water and medical treatment. Up to 12 people reportedly died in custody in suspicious circumstances, including where medical care may have been denied or delayed; their deaths were not independently investigated. At least 10 others died during unrest at Ghezel Hesar Prison in Karaj near Tehran in March. No allegations of torture or ill-treatment were known to have been investigated by the authorities; those who complained of torture faced reprisals. Harsh prison conditions were exacerbated by severe overcrowding.

*At least four Ahwazi Arabs – Reza Maghamesi, Abdol Karim Fahd Abiat, Ahmad Riassan Salami and Ejbareh Tamimi – were reported to have died in custody in Khuzestan province between March and May, possibly as a result of torture.

*Journalist Issa Saharkhiz; Zahra Jabbari; Azerbaijani minority rights advocate Sa’id Metinpour; and dissident cleric Hossein Kazemeyni Boroujerdi were among many political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, with serious health problems who were denied adequate health care. Political activist Hoda Saber died in prison in June after going on hunger strike in protest at Haleh Sahabi’s death. Other prisoners said that prison officials had beat him and denied him adequate medical care.

Cruel, inhuman or degrading punishments

Sentences of flogging and amputation continued to be imposed and carried out. Sentences of blinding were imposed.

*Somayeh Tohidlou, a political activist, and Peyman Aref, a student activist, were flogged 50 and 74 times respectively in September after they were separately convicted of “insulting” President Ahmadinejad.

*Four men convicted of theft were said to have had the four fingers of their right hands amputated on 8 October.

*Majid Movahedi, who blinded Ameneh Bahrami in an acid attack in 2004 and was sentenced to be blinded by acid himself, was reprieved shortly before the punishment was to be carried out at a hospital on 31 July when his victim agreed to accept compensation.

Discrimination against women

Women were discriminated against in law and in practice, including by a mandatory dress code. Women's rights activists, including those involved in the One Million Signatures Campaign to demand legal equality for women, were persecuted and harassed. The draft Family Protection Bill, which would exacerbate discriminatory law against women, remained before parliament pending final approval. Some universities began segregating students by gender.

*Fatemeh Masjedi and Maryam Bidgoli, activists in the One Million Signatures Campaign, each served six-month prison terms – the first members of the Campaign to be jailed for collecting signatures.

Rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people

People accused of same-sex sexual activities continued to face harassment and persecution, and the judicial punishments of flogging and the death penalty.

*On 4 September, three men identified only by their initials were reported to have been executed in Karoun Prison, Ahvaz, Khuzestan province, after they were convicted of "sodomy".

*Siyamak Ghaderi, a former journalist for the state news agency held since August 2010, was sentenced to four years' imprisonment, flogging and a fine in January after he was convicted of "publishing lies", committing "religiously unlawful acts" and other charges for, among other things, posting interviews with people from the LGBT community on his blog.

Discrimination – ethnic minorities

Iran's ethnic minority communities, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijanis, Baluch, Kurds and Turkmen, suffered ongoing discrimination in law and in practice. The use of minority languages in government offices and for teaching in schools remained prohibited. Activists campaigning for the rights of minorities faced threats, arrest and imprisonment.

*Prisoner of conscience Mohammad Sadiq Kabudvand continued serving a sentence of 10 and a half years for his role in founding the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan, and was denied adequate medical treatment.

*Mohammad Saber Malek Raisi, a Baluch youth aged 16 from Sarbaz held since September 2009, possibly to force his elder brother to surrender to the authorities, was sentenced to five years prison in exile – meaning that he must serve his sentence at a prison far from his home.

Freedom of religion

Members of religious minorities, including Christian converts, Baha'is, dissident Shi'a clerics and members of the Ahl-e Haq and Dervish communities, faced continuing persecution following repeated calls by the Supreme Leader and other authorities to combat "false beliefs" – apparently an allusion to evangelical Christianity, Baha'ism and Sufism. Sunni Muslims continued to face restrictions on communal worship in some cities and some Sunni clerics were arrested.

*At least seven Baha'is were jailed for between four and five years after they and over 30 others were arrested in raids targeting the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education. The Institute provides online higher education courses for Baha'i students, who are barred from universities. The seven were among over 100 Baha'is held in connection with their beliefs, including seven leaders who had 20-year prison terms reimposed in March, reversing a 2010 appeal court decision.

*Up to 100 Gonabadi Dervishes (a Sufi religious order), three of their lawyers, as well as 12 journalists for *Majzooban-e Noor*, a Gonabadi Dervish news website, were arrested in Kavar and Tehran in September and October. At least 11 were still detained, mostly without access to lawyers or family, at the end of 2011.

*The retrial of Yousef Nadarkhani, a Christian pastor charged with "apostasy", began in September. Born to Muslim parents, he was arrested in October 2009. He was sentenced to death in 2010 for refusing to renounce Christianity, to which he had converted, but the sentence was overturned by the Supreme Court in June.

*Sayed Mohammad Movahed Fazeli, the Sunni prayer leader of the city of Taybad, was held between January and August following protests in Taybad against his enforced resignation as prayer leader.

Death penalty

Hundreds of people were sentenced to death. At least 360 executions were reported by official sources, although other credible information suggested over 274 other executions, with many prisoners executed secretly. Up to 80 per cent of executions were for alleged drug-related offences, often imposed on people living in poverty and marginalized communities, particularly Afghan nationals. An amended Anti-Narcotics Law came into force in January; people sentenced to death under it appeared to be denied the right to appeal.

The number of public executions quadrupled; at least 50 were reported officially and a further six were recorded from unofficial sources. At least three juvenile offenders – people sentenced for offences committed when they were under 18 – were executed; a further four cases were reported by credible sources. No stoning executions were reported, but at least 15 people sentenced to death by stoning remained on death row, including Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani. Thousands of other prisoners were held awaiting execution.

*Ja'far Kazemi and Mohammad Ali Haj Aghaei were hanged on 24 January; they were convicted of *moharebeh* for having contact with the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, a banned opposition group, and "propaganda against the system" relating to the 2009 unrest.

*On 21 September, 17-year-old Alireza Molla-Soltani, convicted of murdering a popular athlete, was publicly hanged in Karaj where the killing occurred in July. He said he had stabbed Ruhollah Dadashi in self-defence after the athlete attacked him in the dark.

*In December, Kurdish political prisoner Zeynab Jalalian learned that her death sentence had been commuted.

Amnesty International visits/reports

#Amnesty International discussed its denial of access to Iran with Iranian diplomatic officials, but it remained barred from Iran. The authorities rarely responded to communications from Amnesty International.

£Determined to live in dignity – Iranian trade unionists' struggle for rights (MDE 13/024/2011)

£Iran: Submission to the Human Rights Committee (MDE 13/081/2011)

£Addicted to death: Executions for drugs offences in Iran (MDE 13/090/2011)