

Amnesty International Annual Report 2013 (January-December 2012)

IRAN

Islamic Republic of Iran

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

Head of government: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (President)

The authorities maintained severe restrictions on freedoms of expression, association and assembly. Dissidents and human rights defenders, including minority rights and women's rights activists, were arbitrarily arrested, detained incommunicado, imprisoned after unfair trials and banned from travelling abroad. There were scores of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners. Torture and other ill-treatment were common and committed with impunity. Women, religious and ethnic minorities, and members of the LGBTI community were subject to discrimination in law and practice. The cruel judicial punishments of flogging and amputation continued to be used. Official sources acknowledged 314 executions, but a total of 544 were recorded. The true figure may be considerably higher.

Background

Iran's nuclear programme continued to cause international tension. The UN, EU and some governments, including the USA, maintained and in some cases imposed additional sanctions, including travel bans on suspected human rights violators. Food insecurity and economic hardship grew.

Thousands of prospective candidates for parliamentary election in March were disqualified.

Also in March, the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur investigating human rights in Iran was renewed for one year. Both he and the UN Secretary-General issued reports identifying widespread human rights violations, including failure to adhere to the rule of law and impunity.

Amendments to the Penal Code passed by parliament in February continued to allow cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment, and punishments not based on codified law, and provided impunity in some circumstances for rape. They neither prohibited the death penalty for juvenile offenders nor executions by stoning. The amended Penal Code was not in force at the end of the year.

In December, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution urging the government to improve human rights in Iran.

Freedoms of expression, association and assembly

The authorities maintained tight restrictions on freedoms of expression, association and assembly. They took steps to create a controlled, national internet, routinely monitored telephone calls, blocked websites, jammed foreign broadcasts and took harsh action against those who spoke out. Media workers and bloggers were harassed and detained. Student activists and members of minority groups were imprisoned or harassed, with some barred from higher education. Scores of prisoners of conscience arrested in previous years remained in prison and more were sentenced to prison terms in 2012.

* Shiva Nazar Ahari, a journalist, human rights activist and member of the Committee of Human Rights Reporters, began serving a four-year prison term in September. In October, she and eight other women prisoners of conscience went on hunger strike in protest at their alleged abuse by guards at Tehran's Evin Prison.

* Abbas Khosravi Farsani, a student at Esfahan University, was arrested on 21 June for criticizing the authorities in a book and his blog, and forced to "confess" to charges including "acting against national security by publishing lies and causing public unease", "insulting the Supreme Leader" and "membership of an opposition group with links to Israel". He was released after 20 days but prevented from continuing his university studies. He was awaiting trial at the end of the year.

Dozens of independent trade unionists remained imprisoned for their peaceful trade union activities.

* Reza Shahabi, treasurer of a bus workers' union detained since 2010, learned in February that he had been sentenced to six years' imprisonment for "gathering and colluding" against "state security" and "spreading propaganda against the system". He was reported to be in poor health following torture and denial of prompt medical care.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

Government critics and opponents were arbitrarily arrested and detained by security forces. They were held incommunicado for long periods and denied medical care. Many were tortured or otherwise ill-treated. Tens were sentenced to prison terms after unfair trials.

Dozens of peaceful government critics detained in connection with mass protests in 2009-2011 remained in prison or under house arrest throughout the year. Many were prisoners of conscience.

* Opposition leaders Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi and the latter's wife Zahra Rahnavard remained under house arrest imposed without a warrant in February 2011.

* Mansoureh Behkish, a member of the human rights NGO Mothers of Laleh Park, was sentenced on appeal in July to six months in prison after being convicted of threatening national security "by establishing the Mourning Mothers group" and "spreading propaganda against the system". She also received a 42-month suspended prison term. She remained free at the end of the year.

* Blogger Hossein Ronaghi Maleki was among dozens of relief workers and human rights activists arrested at a camp for earthquake victims in East Azerbaijan province in August. A former prisoner of conscience serving a 15-year prison term imposed in 2010, he had been released on medical grounds seven weeks earlier, after paying a substantial bail. He said he was tortured after his rearrest at a Ministry of Intelligence facility in Tabriz. He was released in November.

Human rights defenders

Human rights defenders, including lawyers, trade unionists, minority rights activists and women's rights activists, continued to face harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention, and imprisonment after unfair trials. Many, including some sentenced after unfair trials in previous years, were prisoners of conscience. The authorities persistently harassed activists' families.

* Mohammad Sadiq Kabudvand, a journalist and founder of the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan, continued serving a 10-and-a-half-year prison term because of his journalism and human rights activities. He went on hunger strike in May and July to protest against the authorities' refusal to allow him access to his gravely ill son, causing his own health to deteriorate. He was denied appropriate medical treatment.

* Nasrin Sotoudeh, a lawyer who formerly represented Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi, continued serving a six-year prison term imposed in 2011 for "spreading propaganda against the system" and "membership of an illegal group aiming to harm national security". A prisoner of conscience since 2010, she ended a 49-day hunger strike in December when the authorities agreed to lift restrictions against her 13-year-old daughter.

* Lawyers Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, Abdolfattah Soltani and Mohammad Seyfzadeh, co-founders of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders (CHRD), which was forcibly closed at the end of 2008, were held as prisoners of conscience at the end of the year. The CHRD's Executive Chair Narges Mohammadi was granted temporary medical leave from prison in July.

In November, Abdolfattah Soltani's wife received a suspended sentence of one year and was banned from leaving Iran for five years in connection with a human rights award received by her husband.

Unfair trials

Political and other suspects continued to face grossly unfair trials before Revolutionary and Criminal Courts. They often faced vaguely worded charges that did not amount to recognizably criminal offences and were convicted, sometimes in the absence of defence lawyers, on the basis of "confessions" or other information allegedly obtained under torture. Courts accepted such "confessions" as evidence without investigating how they were obtained.

* Mohammad Ali Amouri and four other members of the Ahwazi Arab minority were sentenced to death in July on vague capital charges, including "enmity against God and corruption on earth". They had already been in custody for up to a year because of their activism on behalf of the Ahwazi Arab community. At least four were reported to have been tortured and denied access to a lawyer. An appeal had not been heard by the end of the year.

Torture and other ill-treatment

The security forces continued to torture and otherwise ill-treat detainees with impunity. Commonly reported methods included beatings, mock execution, threats, confinement in small spaces and denial of adequate medical treatment.

* Saeed Sedeghi, a shop worker sentenced to death for drug offences, was tortured in Evin Prison after his scheduled execution was postponed following international protests. He was hanged on 22 October.

At least eight deaths in custody may have resulted from torture, but none were independently investigated.

* Sattar Beheshti, a blogger, died in the custody of the Cyber Police in November after lodging a complaint that he had been tortured. Contradictory statements by officials called into question the impartiality of a judicial investigation. His family were pressured by security forces to keep silent.

Discrimination against women

Women faced discrimination in law and practice in relation to marriage and divorce, inheritance, child custody, nationality and international travel. Women breaching a mandatory dress code faced expulsion from university. Some higher education centres introduced gender segregation, or restricted or barred women from studying certain subjects.

A Family Protection Bill that would increase discrimination remained under discussion. The draft Penal Code failed to address existing discrimination, maintaining, for example, that a woman's testimony holds half the value of that of a man.

* Bahareh Hedayat, Mahsa Amrabadi and seven other women held at Evin Prison went on hunger strike in October to protest against humiliating body searches and the removal of personal possessions by guards. Subsequently, 33 women political prisoners signed an open letter calling body cavity searches a form of sexual abuse and demanding an apology from prison officials and an undertaking that they would not be subjected to further abuses.

Rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people

LGBTI people continued to face discrimination in law and practice.

Discrimination – ethnic minorities

Members of ethnic minorities, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijanis, Baluch, Kurds and Turkmen, were discriminated against in law and practice, being denied access to employment, education and other economic, social and cultural rights on an equivalent basis with other Iranians. The use of minority languages in government offices and for teaching in schools remained prohibited. Activists campaigning for the rights of minorities faced official threats, arrest and imprisonment.

* Jabbar Yabbari and at least 24 other Ahwazi Arabs were arrested in April during demonstrations commemorating a 2005 demonstration against discrimination.

The authorities failed to adequately protect Afghan refugees from attack and forced some to leave Iran. In Esfahan, local authorities banned Afghan nationals from entering a city park.

Azerbaijani activists criticized the Iranian authorities' response to the 11 August earthquake in Qaradagh, East Azerbaijan, calling it slow and inadequate, and accused them of downplaying the destruction caused and the number of lives lost while detaining some of those helping with relief efforts. In September, 16 minority activists received six-month suspended prison sentences for security-related convictions in connection with their relief work.

Freedom of religion or belief

The authorities discriminated against non-Shi'a minorities, including other Muslim communities, dissident Shi'a clerics, members of Sufi religious orders and the Ahl-e Haq faith, and certain other religious minorities and philosophical associations, including converts from Islam to Christianity. Persecution of Baha'is intensified; Baha'is were publicly demonized by officials and state-controlled media.

* Dissident Muslim cleric Sayed Hossein Kazemeyni Boroujerdi continued to serve an 11-year sentence handed down in 2007. The authorities summoned 10 of his followers for questioning in April, May and December, though none was known to have been charged.

* In August, the authorities arrested at least 19 Sunni Muslims in Khuzestan province and 13 in West Azerbaijan, apparently on account of their beliefs. Eight others were arrested in Kordestan in October. It is not known whether any were charged or faced further questioning.

* Pastor Yousef Naderkhani, arrested in 2009, was sentenced to death after a court convicted him of apostasy in 2010. The Supreme Court upheld the sentence but his conviction was overturned when the case was referred for guidance to the Supreme Leader. He was released in September, having served a three-year prison term for evangelizing Muslims.

* At least 177 Baha'is – who were denied the right to practise their faith – were detained for their beliefs. Seven community leaders arrested in 2009 continued to serve 20-year sentences imposed for “espionage for Israel” and “insulting religious sanctities”.

Cruel, inhuman or degrading punishments

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

* Siamak Ghaderi, a journalist and blogger, and 13 other political prisoners were reported to have been flogged in August in Evin Prison. He had been sentenced to four years in prison and 60 lashes for allegedly “insulting the President” and “spreading lies” in part for posting interviews with LGBTI individuals on his blog in 2007.

Death penalty

Hundreds of people were sentenced to death. Official sources acknowledged 314 executions. Credible unofficial sources suggested that at least 230 other executions were also carried out, many of them in secret, totalling 544. The true figure may have been far higher, exceeding 600.

Of those executions officially acknowledged, 71% were for drugs-related offences and followed unfair trials. Many were from poor and marginalized communities, including Afghan nationals. The death penalty remained applicable in cases of murder, rape, deployment of firearms during a crime, spying, apostasy, extra-marital relations and same-sex relations.

There were at least 63 public executions. No executions by stoning were known to have occurred but at least 10 people remained under sentence of death by stoning.

* Allahverdi Ahmadpourazer, a Sunni Muslim belonging to the Azerbaijani minority, was executed for alleged drugs offences in May. His trial may have been unfair.

* Amir Hekmati, a dual Iranian-US national, was sentenced to death in January after being convicted of espionage. His alleged “confession” was broadcast on state television. In March the Supreme Court overturned the sentence. He remained in prison awaiting a retrial.

* The family of Hamid Ghassemi-Shall, a dual Canadian-Iranian national, was told in April that his execution was imminent, though he remained on death row at the end of the year. He was held in solitary confinement for 18 months without access to a lawyer and sentenced to death in December 2008 after an unfair trial in which he was accused of “enmity against God”, “espionage” and “co-operation with an illegal opposition group”.

* Three members of the Kurdish minority were executed on 20 September in Oroumieh’s Central Prison for their political activities.

* The authorities suspended the death sentence imposed on Canadian resident Saeed Malekpour for “insulting and desecrating Islam” after software he had devised for uploading photographs online was used by others, without his knowledge, to post pornographic images. Saeed Malekpour had been held since his October 2008 arrest; his torture allegations have never been investigated.

Amnesty International visits/reports

Amnesty International has not been permitted to visit Iran to undertake human rights research since 1979. The authorities rarely responded to communications from the organization.

*“We are ordered to crush you”: Expanding repression of dissent in Iran (MDE 13/002/2012)