

## HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN: REVIEW OF 2019

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# IRAN

## Islamic Republic of Iran

Head of state: **Sayed Ali Khamenei (Supreme Leader)**

Head of government: **Hassan Rouhani (President)**

The authorities heavily suppressed the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Security forces used lethal force unlawfully to crush protests, killing hundreds, and arbitrarily detaining thousands of protesters. The authorities arbitrarily detained over 200 human rights defenders and imposed sentences of imprisonment and flogging against many of them. A new law allowed Iranian women married to men with foreign nationality to pass on Iranian citizenship to their children, but women continued to face discrimination and the authorities intensified their crackdown against women's rights defenders campaigning against forced veiling laws. Ethnic and religious minorities faced entrenched discrimination. Torture and other ill-treatment, including through the denial of medical care, remained widespread and systematic; they were committed with impunity. Cruel, inhuman and degrading judicial punishments were carried out. Scores of people were executed, sometimes in public; several were under the age of 18 at the time of the crime. There were systematic violations of fair trial rights. The authorities committed the ongoing crime against humanity of enforced disappearance by systematically concealing the fate and whereabouts of several thousand political dissidents extrajudicially executed in secret in the 1980s.

## Background

Flash floods in March and April affected millions of people and left at least 77 people dead and thousands displaced, according to officials. The authorities were criticized for failing to allocate sufficient resources for relief and reconstruction.

Sanctions imposed by the USA continued to negatively impact Iran's economy, with detrimental consequences for the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights.

Iran provided military support to government forces and militias in the armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

Iran remained closed to independent human rights observers. Amnesty International and multiple UN human rights bodies, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, whose mandate was renewed in March by the UN Human Rights Council, were unable to visit the country.

## Freedom of expression, association and assembly

The authorities heavily suppressed the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Security forces used unnecessary or excessive force to disperse protests and arbitrarily detained peaceful demonstrators.

In November, security forces crushed nationwide protests, killing over 300 people, including children, according to credible sources; many died from gunshot wounds to vital organs. Thousands of protesters were arbitrarily detained. Many were subjected to enforced disappearance, torture or other ill-treatment including through being punched, kicked, flogged and beaten. Authorities implemented a near-total internet shutdown during the protests to prevent people from sharing images and videos of the lethal force used by security forces.<sup>1</sup>

Hundreds of others were arbitrarily detained in relation to the peaceful exercise of their rights, generally on spurious national security charges. At least 240 were human rights defenders, including lawyers, labour rights activists, environmental activists, minority rights activists, women's rights activists, anti-death penalty campaigners and those

<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International, Iran: *Thousands arbitrarily detained and at risk of torture in chilling post-protest crackdown* ([Press Release](#), 16 December 2019).

seeking truth, justice and reparation for the mass extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances of the 1980s. Several family members of human rights defenders were subjected to interrogation and other forms of harassment. Media workers and political dissidents were also among those arbitrarily detained.

Independent civil society and human rights groups remained banned. Censorship of all forms of media and jamming of foreign satellite television channels continued.

Authorities raided private mixed-gender parties, arresting and prosecuting scores of men and women for violating “public decency”. Their sentences included flogging.

Facebook, Telegram, Twitter and YouTube remained blocked. Authorities summoned for questioning some Instagram users with large followings, including models, musicians and dancers, and, in some cases, detained them and took over their accounts.

In April, the prosecutor general of Iran announced that publication of “fake news” related to the floods was a national security issue. Subsequently, Iran’s cyberpolice announced the arrest of 24 social media users in Khuzestan province for “spreading distorted news and rumours” and “disturbing public opinion” in relation to the floods.

### **Human rights lawyers**

Authorities cracked down on human rights lawyers, prosecuting some in relation to their peaceful human rights work, including their defence of clients facing spurious national security charges. In March, Nasrin Sotoudeh was sentenced to 33 years and six months in prison and 148 lashes. She is required to serve 12 years of this sentence in addition to five years from a separate case.<sup>2</sup> In June, lawyer Amirsalar Davoudi was sentenced to 29 years and three months in prison, of which he will serve 15, and 111 lashes.

### **Workers and labour rights activists**

Thousands of workers staged peaceful demonstrations and strikes throughout the year in protest at unpaid wages and pensions, poor working conditions and living standards, the privatization of public sector companies leading to sub-standard conditions of employment, and other grievances. Authorities arrested scores of protesting workers on national security related charges and sentenced over two dozen to prison terms and flogging.

On International Workers’ Day, security forces used unnecessary force to disperse a peaceful demonstration in Tehran, beating and arbitrarily arresting dozens of workers. They included labour rights activists Atefeh Rangiz and Neda Naji, who were sentenced, respectively, to five years and five and a half years in prison for participating in the protest.

In September, jailed labour rights activists Sepideh Gholian and Esmail Bakhshi were sentenced to, respectively, 18 years and 13 and a half years in prison and 74 lashes in relation to their participation in peaceful protests over unpaid wages at Haft Tappeh sugar cane company in Khuzestan province and to public statements in which they said they were tortured in detention. State television broadcast their forced “confessions” months before their trial.<sup>3</sup> In December, Sepideh Gholian’s sentence was reduced to five years in prison and Esmail Bakhshi’s to five years in prison and 74 lashes.

The government continued to ban independent trade unions.

### **Environmental activists**

Dozens of environmental activists were arrested. Eight conservationists were sentenced to between four and 10 years in prison in relation to their conservation activities, including carrying out research into Iran’s endangered wildlife. They were convicted of charges including “co-operating with hostile states against the Islamic Republic”.

### **Media workers**

A number of journalists were prosecuted and received prison and/or flogging sentences in relation to their work.

In June, journalist Masoud Kazemi was sentenced to four years and six months in prison and a two-year ban on working in journalism, in connection with social media posts in which he alleged government corruption.

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<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International, *Iran: Shocking 33-year prison term and 148 lashes for women’s rights defender Nasrin Sotoudeh* ([Press Release](#), 11 March 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, *Iran: Abuse of jailed activist must stop: Sepideh Gholian and Esmail Bakhshi* (Index: [MDE 13/1295/2019](#)).

In May, journalist Marzieh Amiri was arrested while covering the International Workers' Day protest. In August, she was sentenced on charges including "spreading propaganda against the system" to 10 years and six months in prison and 148 lashes, reduced to five years' imprisonment on appeal.

In October, the Revolutionary Guards announced they had arrested Rouhollah Zam, editor of AmadNews, a popular channel on a messaging application that authorities accused of inciting the protests of December 2017 and January 2018. Iran's state television broadcast his "confession" in a propaganda video days following his arrest.

### **Political dissidents**

Authorities detained at least 16 people who signed open letters in July demanding fundamental changes to the country's political system; some were charged with "insulting the Supreme Leader".

Political dissidents Mehdi Karroubi, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Zahra Rahnava remained under house arrest without charge or trial.

### **Women's rights**

In May, the parliament approved a bill amending the civil code to allow Iranian women married to men with foreign nationality to pass on Iranian citizenship to their children. The new law came into force after the Guardian Council ratified it in October. However, while the children of Iranian men are automatically granted Iranian nationality, the new law requires women to apply for citizenship for their children and their children to undergo security screening by the ministry of intelligence before citizenship is granted.

More broadly, women continued to face entrenched discrimination in family and criminal law, including in relation to marriage, divorce, employment, inheritance and political office. Authorities failed to criminalize gender-based violence against women and girls, including domestic violence and early and forced marriage, which remained widespread. The judiciary watered down a long-standing bill aimed at protecting women against violence that it was reviewing and sent it to the government's bills committee for its review in September.

The authorities intensified their crackdown against women's rights defenders campaigning against discriminatory forced veiling laws, sentencing some to prison and flogging for charges including "inciting and facilitating corruption and prostitution" through promoting "unveiling". In July, Yasaman Aryani and Monireh Arabshahi were each sentenced to 16 years in prison and Mojgan Keshavarz to 23 and a half years in prison. All three must serve 10 years. In September, authorities arrested three family members of prominent US-based Iranian journalist and activist Masih Alinejad as retribution for her activism against forced veiling. In April, police sent text messages to female drivers who had allegedly removed their hijabs while driving, summoning them to receive official warnings that their cars would be impounded if they did so again.

Authorities continued to impose a discriminatory ban on women entering football stadiums for domestic games and arrest those who defied it, charging them with criminal offences. In October, they allowed 3,500 women to watch a World Cup qualifying match in the national stadium. This followed the death of Sahar Khodayari, who set herself on fire outside a court where she was being tried on charges related to her attempt to enter a stadium.<sup>4</sup>

### **Discrimination against ethnic minorities**

Ethnic minorities, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds and Turkmen, faced entrenched discrimination, curtailing their access to education, employment and adequate housing. Economic neglect of minority-populated regions exacerbated poverty and marginalization. Persian remained the sole language of instruction in primary and secondary education.

Members of minorities who spoke out against violations of their rights were subjected to arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, unfair trials and imprisonment. Intelligence and security bodies frequently accused minority rights activists of supporting "separatist currents" threatening Iran's territorial integrity.

Azerbaijani Turkic minority rights activist Abbas Lesani was sentenced to 15 years in prison in October on charges including "spreading propaganda against the system" in relation to his advocacy for the rights of Azerbaijani Turks. He must serve 10 years.

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<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, *Iran: Shocking death of football fan who set herself on fire exposes impact of contempt for women's rights* (Press Release, 10 September 2019).

Dozens of Ahwazi Arab relief volunteers providing aid to victims of the floods in Ahvaz were reported to have been arbitrarily arrested in relation to their relief efforts.

Authorities used the November protests to target ethnic minority groups and arbitrarily arrest scores of Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis and Kurds, including minority rights activists.

## **Freedom of religion and belief**

Freedom of religion and belief was systematically violated in law and practice. The authorities continued to impose on people of all faiths and atheists codes of public conduct rooted in a strict interpretation of Shi'a Islam. Only Shi'a Muslims were allowed to hold key political positions. The right to change or renounce religious beliefs continued to be violated. Those who professed atheism remained at risk of arbitrary detention, torture and the death penalty for "apostasy".

Widespread and systematic attacks continued against the persecuted Baha'i minority, including arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, forcible closure of businesses, confiscation of property and bans on employment in the public sector. Dozens of Baha'i students were denied access to universities through expulsion for peacefully practising their faith.

Other religious minorities not recognized under the Constitution such as Yaresan (Ahl-e Haq) and Erfan-e Halgheh were persecuted for practising their faith and faced systematic discrimination.

Dozens of Gonabadi Dervishes remained imprisoned on charges including "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security" in connection with a peaceful protest that was violently quashed in 2018.

Dozens of Christians, including converts, were subjected to harassment, arbitrary detention and prison sentences for practising their faith. Raids on house churches continued.

## **Torture and other ill-treatment**

Torture and other ill-treatment, including prolonged solitary confinement, remained widespread and systematic, especially during interrogations. Authorities consistently failed to investigate torture allegations and hold those responsible to account.

Torture may have caused or contributed to the death in custody of several people. In September, Javad Khosravianian's family was informed he had died in custody following his arrest several days earlier in Khorrambid, a county in Fars province. He was reported to be fit and well prior to his arrest. The head of the provincial justice department ordered an investigation into his death. There were reports that several people died in custody following their arrests during the November protests.

Prisoners of conscience were deliberately denied adequate medical care, often as punishment. Human rights defender Arash Sadeghi continued to be tortured through denial of cancer treatment. In a new punitive measure, authorities forced prisoners of conscience in Tehran's Evin prison to pay for medical care received outside prison and severely limited family visitation rights.

Conditions in many prisons and detention facilities remained cruel and inhuman, including overcrowding, limited hot water, inadequate food, insufficient beds, poor ventilation and insect infestations.

The Islamic Penal Code continued to provide for corporal judicial punishment amounting to torture, including flogging, blinding and amputation. Scores of individuals were sentenced to flogging for theft and assault as well as for acts that, under international human rights law, should not be criminalized. These acts included participating in peaceful protests, engaging in extramarital relationships, attending mixed-gender parties and drinking alcohol. In July, Kurdish singer Peyman Mirzazadeh was subjected to 100 lashes after being convicted on charges including "drinking alcohol". In October, a prisoner's hand was amputated for theft in a prison in Sari, Mazandaran province.

## **Death penalty**

Scores of people were executed after unfair trials, some in public. They included several individuals who were under 18 at the time of the crime.

The death penalty was maintained for conduct protected under international human rights law including some consensual same-sex sexual conduct and sexual extramarital relationships, as well as for vaguely worded offences such as "insulting the Prophet", "enmity against God" and "spreading corruption on earth".

The Islamic Penal Code continued to provide for stoning as a method of execution.

## Unfair trials

There were systematic violations of fair trial rights.

Forced “confessions” obtained under torture and other ill-treatment were broadcast on state television and used by courts to issue convictions. In August former prisoner Mazyar Ebrahimi said that ministry of intelligence authorities had arrested him and others in 2012 in connection with the killing of several Iranian nuclear scientists and repeatedly tortured them to extract “confessions” that were broadcast on state television. Subsequently, member of parliament Mahmoud Sadeghi introduced a bill criminalizing the filming and broadcasting of forced confessions, but it is unlikely to become law. In November, state media broadcast the forced “confessions” of protesters arrested during the nationwide protests that month.

Defendants tried before special courts dealing with financial corruption were denied the right to appeal against prison sentences and were given only 10 days to appeal death sentences. In July, the judiciary announced that, since their inception in mid-2018, these courts had issued 978 verdicts, including nine death sentences and 161 flogging sentences.

Authorities continued to deny individuals facing some charges, including those related to national security, access to independent lawyers at the investigation stage. Some individuals were refused access to their lawyer even at trial.

## Ongoing crimes against humanity

The authorities committed the ongoing crime against humanity of enforced disappearance by systematically concealing the fate and whereabouts of several thousand political dissidents who were forcibly disappeared during a wave of secret mass extrajudicial executions in Iran between July and September 1988. The continued suffering inflicted on victims’ families violated the absolute prohibition on torture and other ill-treatment.

Many of the officials who are suspected of being involved in the enforced disappearances and mass extrajudicial executions of 1988, including individuals linked to the “death commissions”, continued to hold positions of power.<sup>5</sup> Alireza Avaei remained Iran’s minister of justice; in March; Ebrahim Raisi was appointed as the head of the judiciary; and, in July, Mostafa Pour Mohammadi, advisor to Iran’s head of the judiciary and a former minister of justice, threatened individuals advocating for truth and accountability with prosecution for “terrorism” and “collusion” with Iran’s enemies.

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<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International, *Iran: Shocking statements by senior official highlight impunity for 1988 prison massacres* (Index: [MDE 13/0815/2019](#)).