

## HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN: REVIEW OF 2021/22

29 March 2022 Index: MDE 13/5366/2022

# IRAN

### Islamic Republic of Iran

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

Head of government: **Ebrahim Raisi (President, replaced Hassan Rouhani in August)**

Thousands of people were interrogated, unfairly prosecuted and/or arbitrarily detained solely for peacefully exercising their human rights, and hundreds remained unjustly imprisoned. Security forces unlawfully used lethal force and birdshot to crush protests. Women, LGBTI people and ethnic and religious minorities faced entrenched discrimination and violence. Legislative developments further undermined sexual and reproductive rights, the right to freedom of religion and belief, and access to the internet. Torture and other ill-treatment, including denying prisoners adequate medical care, remained widespread and systematic. Authorities failed to ensure timely and equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines. Judicial punishments of floggings, amputations and blinding were imposed. The death penalty was used widely, including as a weapon of repression. Executions were carried out after unfair trials. Systemic impunity prevailed for past and ongoing crimes against humanity related to prison massacres in 1988 and other crimes under international law.

### BACKGROUND

The former head of Iran's judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi, rose to the presidency in June instead of being investigated for crimes against humanity related to the mass enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions of 1988, reflecting systemic impunity in Iran.<sup>1</sup>

Presidential elections were held in a repressive environment with a markedly low turnout. Authorities barred women, members of religious minorities and critics from running, and threatened to prosecute anyone encouraging election boycott.

Ongoing US sanctions, Covid-19 and corruption deepened Iran's economic crisis, characterized by high inflation, job losses and low or unpaid wages. Strikes and rallies punctuated the year as authorities failed to prioritize adequate wages, housing, healthcare, food security and education in public budgets.

Environmental experts criticized the authorities' failure to address Iran's environmental crisis, marked by loss of lakes, rivers and wetlands; deforestation; water pollution from raw sewage and industrial waste; and land sinking.

Iran continued to provide military support to government forces in the armed conflict in Syria (see Syria entry).

In February, a Belgian court sentenced Iranian diplomat Assadollah Asadi to 20 years' imprisonment for his role in a thwarted bomb attack against a rally by an exiled Iranian opposition group in France in 2018.

In March, the UN Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Iran. The authorities denied him, other UN experts and independent observers entry to Iran.

### FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSOCIATION AND ASSEMBLY

The authorities continued to heavily suppress the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. They banned independent political parties, trade unions and civil society organizations, censored media and jammed satellite television channels.

<sup>1</sup> "Iran: Ebrahim Raisi must be investigated for crimes against humanity", 19 June

In January, the authorities added Signal to the list of blocked social media platforms, which included Facebook, Telegram, Twitter and YouTube. Security and intelligence officials carried out arbitrary arrests for social media postings deemed “counter-revolutionary” or “un-Islamic”.

The authorities imposed internet shutdowns during protests, hiding the scale of violations by security forces. In July, parliament fast-tracked preparations for a bill that is expected to be adopted in 2022 and which would criminalize the production and distribution of censorship circumvention tools and intensify surveillance.

Several thousand men, women and children were interrogated, unfairly prosecuted and/or arbitrarily detained solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Among them were protesters, journalists, dissidents, artists, writers, teachers, dual nationals. Also among them were human rights defenders, including lawyers; women’s rights defenders; defenders of LGBTI people’s rights, labour rights and minority rights; environmentalists; anti-death penalty campaigners; and bereaved relatives demanding accountability, including for mass executions and enforced disappearances in the 1980s. Hundreds remained unjustly imprisoned at the end of the year.

The decade-long arbitrary house arrest of former presidential candidates Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, and the latter’s wife, Zahra Rahnavard, continued.

Dissidents and journalists based abroad faced intensified threats, and their families in Iran were interrogated and/or arbitrarily detained in reprisal for their work.<sup>2</sup> In July, US prosecution authorities charged four Iranian agents for conspiring to kidnap Iranian-US journalist Masih Alinejad from US soil. In August, intelligence officials interrogated the relatives of exiled Kurdish human rights defender Arsalan Yarahmadi and threatened him with death. Iranian-Swedish dissident Habib Chaab and Iranian-German dissident Jamshid Sharmahd, who had previously been abducted abroad and returned to Iran, remained at risk of the death penalty.

Security forces deployed unlawful force, including live ammunition and birdshot, to crush mostly peaceful protests. In July, at least 11 people were shot dead during protests over water shortages in Khuzestan and Lorestan provinces while scores were injured.<sup>3</sup> On 26 November, security forces fired metal pellets to disperse protests over water mismanagement in Esfahan, leading to scores of people, including children, being blinded or sustaining other serious eye injuries.

Over 700 petrochemical workers were unjustly dismissed for participating in nationwide strikes in June.

## **TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT**

Torture and other ill-treatment remained widespread and systematic, especially during interrogation. Torture-tainted “confessions” were broadcast on state television and consistently used to issue convictions.

Prison and prosecution authorities, working under the judiciary, held prisoners in cruel and inhuman conditions characterized by overcrowding, poor sanitation, inadequate food and water, insufficient beds, poor ventilation and insect infestation, and denied many of them adequate medical care, placing them at greater risk of Covid-19.

Increasingly, the authorities transferred women prisoners of conscience to squalid conditions in prisons far from their families in reprisal for continuing to denounce human rights violations while imprisoned.

Leaked surveillance footage from Tehran’s Evin prison in August showed prison officials beating, sexually harassing and otherwise torturing or ill-treating prisoners.<sup>4</sup>

At least 24 prisoners died in suspicious circumstances involving allegations of torture or other ill-treatment, including the denial of adequate medical care.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [Iran: Rights Groups: Iranian Dissidents Remain at Risk Worldwide Without International Action \(Index: MDE 13/4480/2021\)](#), 19 July

<sup>3</sup> [“Iran: Security forces use live ammunition and birdshot to crush Khuzestan protests”](#), 23 July; [“Iran: Security forces use ruthless force, mass arrests and torture to crush peaceful protest”](#), 11 August

<sup>4</sup> [“Iran: Leaked video footage from Evin prison offers rare glimpse of cruelty against prisoners”](#), 25 August

<sup>5</sup> [“Iran: A decade of deaths in custody unpunished amid systemic impunity for torture”](#), 15 September

The Penal Code retained punishments violating the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment, including flogging, blinding, amputation, crucifixion and stoning. In February, Hadi Rostami was flogged 60 times in Urumieh prison in reprisal for his hunger strikes against repeated threats that his amputation sentence would be implemented.

Hadi Atazadeh died in Ahar prison in September after being flogged.

In October, a court in Tehran sentenced a man to be blinded in one eye under the principle of “retribution-in-kind” (qesas) for assault.

At least 152 people were sentenced to flogging, according to Abdorrahman Boroumand Center.

## **DISCRIMINATION**

### **Women and girls**

Women faced discrimination in law and practice, including in relation to marriage, divorce, employment, inheritance and political office.

Discriminatory compulsory veiling laws led to daily harassment, arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, and denial of access to education, employment and public spaces. At least six women’s rights defenders remained imprisoned for campaigning against compulsory veiling.

Parliament further undermined the right to sexual and reproductive health by adopting the bill “Youthful population and protection of the family” in November which, among other things, bans state-funded facilities from providing birth control free of charge; requires pharmacies to sell contraception only with a prescription; bans vasectomy and tubectomy except when pregnancy would endanger a woman’s life or lead to serious physical harm or unbearable hardship during pregnancy or after labour; and suppresses access to prenatal screening tests.

The parliamentary Social Commission approved the long-standing bill “Defending dignity and protecting women against violence” in July after regressive amendments by the judiciary. The bill, which awaited final approval, contains welcome provisions, including the establishment of special police units, safe houses and a national working group to devise strategies to tackle violence against women and girls. However, it fails to define domestic violence as a separate offence, criminalize marital rape and child marriage, or ensure men who murder their wives or daughters face proportionate punishments. In cases of domestic violence, the bill prioritizes reconciliation over accountability.

The legal age of marriage for girls stayed at 13, and fathers could obtain judicial permission for their daughters to be married at a younger age. According to official figures, between March 2020 and March 2021, the marriages of 31,379 girls aged between 10 and 14 were registered, representing a 10.5% increase over the previous year.

### **LGBTI people**

The murder in May of Alireza Fazeli Monfared, who self-identified as a non-binary gay man, highlighted how the criminalization of consensual same-sex sexual conduct and gender non-conformity with punishments ranging from flogging to the death penalty perpetuated violence and discrimination against LGBTI people.<sup>6</sup>

State-endorsed “conversion therapies” amounting to torture or other ill-treatment remained prevalent, including against children.

Gender non-conforming individuals risked criminalization unless they sought a legal gender change, which required gender reassignment surgery and sterilization.

The military continued to characterize homosexuality as a “perversion”. Military exemption cards issued to gay and transgender individuals indirectly disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity without their consent, putting them at risk of violence.

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<sup>6</sup> Iran: Murder of 20-year-old Gay Man Highlights Urgent Need to Protect LGBTI Rights (Index: MDE 13/4129/2021), 17 May

## Ethnic minorities

Ethnic minorities, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds and Turkmen, faced discrimination, curtailing their access to education, employment and political office. Despite repeated calls for linguistic diversity, Persian remained the sole language of instruction in primary and secondary education.

Ethnic minorities remained disproportionately affected by death sentences imposed for vague charges such as “enmity against God”. The authorities secretly executed those convicted of such charges and refused to return their bodies to their families, as in the cases of four Ahwazi Arab men in March and a Kurdish man, Heidar Ghorbani, in December.<sup>7</sup> At least 20 Kurdish men remained on death row after being convicted of such charges.

The authorities refused to cease and provide accountability for the unlawful killing of scores of unarmed Kurdish cross-border couriers (kulbars) between the Kurdistan regions of Iran and Iraq and unarmed Baluchi fuel porters (soukhtbar) in Sistan and Baluchestan province.<sup>8</sup>

More than 200 Kurds, including dissidents and civil society activists, were swept up in two waves of arbitrary arrests in January and July-August.<sup>9</sup> Most were released after weeks or months of being forcibly disappeared or detained incommunicado, while several remained in prison and several others were sentenced to imprisonment.

## Religious minorities

Religious minorities, including Baha'is, Christians, Gonabadi Dervishes, Jews, Yaresan and Sunni Muslims, suffered discrimination in law and practice, including in access to education, employment, child adoption, political office and places of worship, as well as arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment for professing or practising their faith.

People born to parents classified as Muslim by the authorities remained at risk of arbitrary detention, torture or the death penalty for “apostasy” if they adopted other religions or atheist beliefs.

Members of the Baha'i minority suffered widespread and systematic violations, including arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, enforced disappearance, forcible closure of businesses, confiscation of property, house demolitions, destruction of cemeteries, and hate speech by officials and state media, and were banned from higher education. In April, authorities prevented Baha'is from burying their loved ones in empty plots at a cemetery near Tehran, insisting they bury them between existing graves or at the nearby Khavaran mass grave site related to the 1988 prison massacres; authorities lifted the ban after a public outcry.<sup>10</sup> In June, security forces demolished around 50 Baha'i homes in the village of Ivel in Mazandaran province as part of a long-standing campaign to expel them from the region.

In January, parliament further undermined the right to freedom of religion and belief by introducing two articles to the Penal Code that prescribe up to five years' imprisonment and/or a fine for “insulting Iranian ethnicities, divine religions or Islamic denominations” or for engaging “in deviant educational or proselytizing activity contradicting... Islam”. In July, three Christian converts were sentenced to lengthy imprisonment on this basis.

Several Gonabadi Dervishes remained unjustly imprisoned, including in connection with a peaceful protest that authorities violently quashed in 2018. One of them, Behnam Mahjoubi, died in custody on 21 February following months of torture and other ill-treatment, including deliberate denial of adequate medical care.

Authorities continued to raid house churches.

## RIGHT TO HEALTH

The authorities' response to Covid-19 was marked by a lack of transparency and failure to address shortages of vaccines, hospital beds, oxygen supplies and nurses.

<sup>7</sup> [Iran: Four Ahwazi Arab men secretly executed \(Index: MDE 13/3864/2021\)](#), 18 March

<sup>8</sup> [“Iran: Unlawful killings of destitute fuel porters must be independently investigated”](#), 2 March

<sup>9</sup> [Iran: Joint Statement: Urgent International Action Needed to Secure Release of Kurdish Activists and Others Arbitrarily Detained in Iran \(Index: MDE 13/3624/2021\)](#), 3 February

<sup>10</sup> [“Iran: Stop destruction of mass grave site and allow dignified burials of persecuted Baha'is”](#), 29 April

Iran launched its Covid-19 vaccination programme in February, but given the Supreme Leader's January decision to ban vaccines produced in the UK and USA, by August less than 6% of the population had been vaccinated. The ban was lifted in August and over 80% of the population had received the first dose of the vaccine by the end of the year.

The authorities failed to devise a national strategy to ensure timely and equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines for thousands of undocumented Afghan nationals, with local officials in some provinces establishing special vaccination centres for this group from October.

In some cities, mobile vaccination teams were dispatched to informal settlements and areas where people experiencing homelessness were living, but outreach remained uneven nationally.

The vaccination of prisoners did not start until August.

Six people were arbitrarily arrested in August and tried for spurious national security charges in October solely for meeting to discuss possible legal action over the authorities' failure to ensure access to Covid-19 vaccines.

## **DEATH PENALTY**

The death penalty was imposed after unfair trials, including for offences not meeting the threshold of the "most serious crimes" such as drug-trafficking and financial corruption, and for acts not internationally recognized as crimes. Death sentences were used as a weapon of repression against protesters, dissidents and ethnic minorities.

Yousef Mehrdad and Saadollah Fazeli in Arak were sentenced to death for "insulting the Prophet".

Sajad Sanjari, arrested when aged 15, and Arman Abdolali, arrested when aged 17, were executed in August and November, respectively. Over 80 people remained on death row for offences that occurred when they were children.

## **IMPUNITY**

The authorities continued to cover up the number of those killed during November 2019 protests, dismissed complaints by victims' families, and praised security forces for the crackdown. Throughout the year, security forces dispersed peaceful gatherings of relatives seeking justice and beat and temporarily detained them. Manouchehr Bakhtiari, the father of a killed protester, was detained in April and sentenced to imprisonment in July for denouncing impunity.

The trial of Hamid Nouri, arrested in Sweden for alleged involvement in prison massacres in 1988, began in August under the principle of universal jurisdiction. Consistent with long-standing patterns of denial and distortion, Iran's Foreign Affairs Ministry described the trial as a "plot" concocted by "terrorists" that relied on "fake documentation and witnesses".

The authorities continued to conceal the truth surrounding the January 2020 shooting down of Flight 752 by the Revolutionary Guards, which killed 176 people, and harassed, arbitrarily detained, tortured or otherwise ill-treated bereaved relatives for seeking justice. In November, the prosecution of 10 low-ranking officials before a military court in Tehran started behind closed doors amid grievances by victims' relatives about the impunity afforded to top military and executive officials.