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Iran: Anniversary demonstrations on 14 February must be allowed to take place peacefully

Amnesty International is calling on the Iranian authorities to respect freedom of assembly and allow peaceful demonstrations in Tehran and elsewhere in Iran on 14 February 2012, amid fears that the authorities may once again use excessive use of force to quell protests, as has happened in previous years.

The demonstrations - called by the Coordination Council of the Green Path of Hope - mark the one year anniversary of demonstrations called by opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, in support of the people of Egypt and Tunisia which were brutally repressed and left at least two people dead.

Amnesty International also reiterated its call for the immediate release of Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, who have been held under unofficial house arrest since 10 and 14 February 2011 respectively. Mir Hossein Mousavi's wife, Zahra Rahnava, is also held, while Mehdi Karroubi is currently held on his own and has been denied any contact with his family since the day after he told his wife in December 2011 that he believed the upcoming parliamentary elections would be fraudulent.

In its call for demonstrations, the Coordination Council of the Green Path of Hope referred to worsening economic conditions and governmental mismanagement of Iran's resources as a reason why people in Iran should protest, referring to it as "the human, legal and legitimate right of Iranians to show their protest against the state of their lives and their country".

Amnesty International said that it was deeply concerned at increasing repression in the country in advance of the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2 March 2012 and called for the immediate and unconditional release of anyone held solely for the peaceful expression of their right to freedom of expression, association or assembly or in connection with their beliefs.

A wave of arrests targeting members of Iran's ethnic and religious minorities, journalists, and individuals with alleged links to foreign media appears to be part of a strategy to restrict free public debate and to warn people not to protest ahead of the elections.

Reports have emerged that around 49 members of the Ahwazi Arab minority have been arrested since 10 January 2012, in at least three cities in the southwestern province of Khuzestan.

A family member of Nasser Derafshan Alboshokeh, aged 19, told Amnesty International how his relative and Mohammad al-Ka'bi, aged 34, both members of the Ahwazi Arab minority, died in Ministry of Intelligence detention facilities in Ahvaz and Shush. Both men – arrested on 26 January and 21 January respectively – were reported to have been tortured before they died.

The family of Nasser Derafshan Alboshokeh has not yet been permitted to bury him. They have reportedly been told by the local Iranian authorities to keep the memorial service private as a condition

of the funeral taking place. Nasser Derafshan Alboshokeh's family learned of his death on 30 January 2012. He is said not to have had access to legal representation nor been permitted any contact with his family during his four day detention.

Amnesty International is also concerned at reports of the arrest of at least 12 members of the Baha'i religious minority in the southern city of Shiraz. During the morning of 3 February 2012, security forces in Shiraz are said to have simultaneously entered over 30 homes belonging to members of Iran's Baha'i community and arrested at least 11 individuals. On the evening of 6 February, security forces arrested another Baha'i. They may all be held in Detention Centre 100 in Shiraz. There are reported to be over 80 members of the Baha'i religious minority currently imprisoned or detained on account of their faith or identity as Baha'is.

Many writers, bloggers and social commentators have also been arrested in recent weeks. On 17 January 2012, Iranian authorities arrested the sister of an employee of BBC Persian - the BBC's Persian language news service - and held her in solitary confinement in Tehran's Evin Prison. Though she was eventually released on bail, she was forced to "confess" on camera. On 3 February, Mark Thompson, the Director General of the BBC, said that other family members of BBC Persian staff had had their passports confiscated, preventing them from leaving the country. In a report carried by the Mehr news agency on 7 February 2012, an unnamed source said that, "a number of people deceived by the lie-spreading BBC Persian network" had been arrested in Iran and accused them of having "the mission of gathering news and information, producing content in various formats, recruiting, training and preparing for the departure of Iran's elite media workers from the country". BBC Persian denied having any staff in Iran.

Previously, in January 2010, the Iranian authorities banned contact with over 60 foreign institutions, including the BBC and some other media outlets, as well as some human rights organizations. Anyone making contacts with these institutions is at risk of prosecution and imprisonment – as reiterated in the 7 February 2012 Mehr article. Such a ban appears designed to hide from the world the truth of events in Iran and to obstruct reporting from the country, including on the human rights situation.

Amnesty International calls on the Iranian authorities to release all those detained unless they are promptly charged with a recognizably criminal offence and tried in accordance with international fair trial standards. From the moment of arrest, all detainees must be permitted prompt and regular access to lawyers of their choosing, contact with their families and all necessary medical treatment, and protected from torture or other ill treatment. Independent, impartial and transparent investigation into all deaths in custody must be conducted, and anyone found responsible for abuses brought to justice, without recourse to the death penalty.

The organization is also urging the Iranian authorities to ensure that all individuals are guaranteed effective exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and assembly, both before and during the parliamentary elections. Any investigation into alleged election-related misconduct must be conducted in a full and transparent manner and must not be used as justification for preventing the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, association, and assembly in the run up to and during the elections.

Amnesty International is also concerned that the Iranian authorities may, ahead of the parliamentary elections, execute individuals convicted of political offences who are held on death row in part in order to instil fear and further repress dissent in Iran. An official Iranian news agency has reported that the Supreme Court has upheld the death sentences of Zaniar (or Zanyar) Moradi and Loghman (or Loqman) Moradi, members of Iran's Kurdish minority. They had been convicted of "enmity against God" (*moharebeh*) and "corruption on earth" for allegedly murdering the son of a senior cleric in Marivan, Kordestan province, north-eastern Iran, on 4 July 2009. They have also been convicted of participating in armed activities on behalf of Komala, a Kurdish armed opposition group. The two

were shown “confessing” on state TV to the murder, but subsequently said their “confessions” had been made under duress after they had been tortured.

The Iranian authorities have a history of executing individuals convicted of political offences in advance of elections, anniversaries of unrest or other times of tension. Amnesty International opposes the death penalty unconditionally as the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment and violation of the right to life and is calling for all death sentences in Iran to be commuted.

Background

In the lead-up to the February 2011 demonstrations, the authorities imposed severe restrictions on freedom of expression, including the right to receive and impart information, by blocking access to phone services, including SMS messages, foreign media and various internet and social media sites.

Over the days before the rally and on the day itself, as many as 1500 arrests were reported, along with dozens injured and two demonstrators killed and the largely peaceful demonstrations were forcibly dispersed. Another individual was killed a week later during further protests at the authorities’ repressive measures.

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is a state party, protects the right to freedom of expression. In November 2011, the UN Human Rights Committee, which oversees implementation of the ICCPR, expressed concern about restrictions in Iran on the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly in its Concluding Observations. The Committee stated that the Iranian authorities should ensure that, “the right to freedom of assembly and association is guaranteed to all individuals without discrimination and release immediately and unconditionally anyone held solely for the peaceful exercise of this right”.

On 9 February 2012, the Council of Guardians announced that 3,320 out of 5,395 individuals who registered for the 2012 elections would be permitted to stand. The Human Rights Committee also expressed concern about the requirements for registration in election campaigns, including the right of the Council of Guardians to reject parliamentary candidates on discriminatory grounds. It further highlighted concerns about the conduct of the 2009 presidential election, including the denial of access to international election monitors, the blocking of cell phone signals and access to social networking and opposition websites, the harassment and arbitrary arrest of political activists, members of the country’s religious and ethnic minority communities, students, trade unionists and women’s rights activists, as well as the arrest of political opposition members in February 2011, and the closure by court order of two pro-reform political parties. The committee urged the Iranian authorities to reform the election law and to “take adequate steps to guarantee that elections are conducted in a free and transparent manner, in full conformity with the Covenant, including through the establishment of an independent electoral monitoring commission”.

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