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Iran: Independent Civil Society Organizations facing obliteration

Two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) - Amnesty International and Arseh Sevom – today called on the Iranian Parliament to scrap a draft law which would effectively deregister all NGOs currently operating in Iran.

The Bill requires all NGOs which wish to continue, or to commence, work to register via a new supervisory structure which will allow bodies affiliated to the Intelligence Ministry and the Basij, a volunteer paramilitary force controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, to make key decisions on the operation of all NGOs.

Amnesty International and Arseh Sevom said that the Bill on the Establishment and Supervision of NGOs was a setback which would be yet one more nail in the coffin of the right to freedom of association in Iran.

A wide range of civil society organizations in Iran – ranging from environmental and women's organizations, through charities and organizations for the disabled, to employers' and professional associations – are opposed to the Bill and have been actively calling on parliamentarians not to pass it in its current form.

The Bill's general aspects have been passed following two readings in the Islamic Consultative Assembly, Iran's parliament, which took place less than six months apart, in contravention of the ICA's own procedures. Consideration of the details is scheduled to resume now that the Iranian New Year Holiday has ended.

The Bill was analyzed in detail in a November 2010 report entitled *Legalizing the Murder of Civil Society*¹ by Arseh Sevom, which found that the power to issue and revoke permits for all civil society organizations would be transferred

¹ Available at <http://www.arsehsevom.net/2010/11/legalizing-the-murder-of-civil-society/>

to a new and unaccountable body – the Supreme Committee Supervising NGO Activities.

This body, presided over by the Ministry of the Interior, will include representatives from the Judiciary, the Intelligence Ministry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Organization of Charity and Devotion, and Mosque Affairs and the Basij, with only one member representing NGOs. The Supreme Committee will also have ultimate authority over the boards of directors of NGOs, control the distribution of resources to them, grant permission for demonstrations, and prohibit public scrutiny and criticism of the government and other state authorities. Any NGOs wishing to join international organizations or undertake any involvement in international activities will be required to obtain prior authorization from this Committee.

Amnesty International and Arseh Sevom said that the Bill would sound the death knell for civil society in Iran, which has been under considerable pressure from the authorities since the election of President Ahmadinejad in 2005. Civil society activists have faced harassment, threats and arrest in connection with their work, and their organizations have been closed down, often without a court order. Some have been sentenced to prison terms or flogging, and many have taken the reluctant decision to flee the country, fearing for their safety.

The two organizations said that it was deeply regrettable that at the same time that the international community had recognized the importance of freedom of association by creating a United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association at the 15th session of the UN Human Rights Council, the Iranian authorities were doing their utmost to limit the exercise of this basic right.

Background

Freedom of association is guaranteed by Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Iran is a State Party and which states that: “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests”.

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than three million supporters, members and activists in more than 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights. Its vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards. Independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, it is funded mainly by its membership and public donations.

Arseh Sevom (Third Sphere) is a non-governmental organization established in 2010 in Amsterdam, aiming to promote peace, democracy, and human rights.

The organization's objective is to help build the capacity of organizations and encourage the development of a vigorous third sphere of civil activities. Cooperation among civil society organizations is key to building a strong and coherent civil rights movement that can thrive and succeed. Arseh Sevom aims to become a hub for organizations and individuals working together towards the common goal of free, open, and peaceful Persian-speaking communities. Arseh Sevom seeks partnerships with existing organizations and also seeks to increase the vibrancy of civil society by encouraging its development.

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