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Iran: Dire human rights situation persists two years after disputed election

Two years after the disputed election of 12 June 2009 which saw President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad returned to power, the human rights situation in Iran remains dire.

The security forces continue to use violence against peaceful protestors and have carried out thousands of arrests. Many detainees have been tortured or otherwise ill-treated and hundreds have been sentenced to prison terms and in some case death after grossly unfair trials. Prison conditions are harsh.

Opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, who stood against President Ahmadinejad in the June 2009 election, have been held under house arrest, together with their wives, Zahra Rahnavard and Fatemeh Karroubi, for more than 100 days without any legal order.

Some of those who have sought to expose human rights violations and the all pervasive climate of impunity that prevails, such as Mehdi Mahmoudian who compiled information about torture of detainees, have been imprisoned while lawyers who have defended those targeted by the state have themselves been targeted for legitimately pursuing their profession.

Meanwhile, there has been a further increase in the use of the death penalty and executions, which some interpret as part of a government attempt to deter expressions of popular dissent in the aftermath of the protests which brought down the governments of Tunisia and Egypt earlier this year. Human rights violations continue in a climate of virtually total impunity in which those responsible for abuses are almost never held accountable.

Over the past year Amnesty International has been campaigning intensively on behalf of those imprisoned for political reasons since the 2009 election, bearing in mind the words said by journalist Maziar Bahari on his release: "the prisoner's worst nightmare is the thought of being forgotten". Amnesty International is determined that this nightmare should never become a reality.

However, despite the campaign which focused on seven particular prisoners as emblematic of so many more, these seven prisoners continue to be held or, in one case, conditionally released, and there has been no significant improvement in their situation. Rather, some have been sentenced to further prison terms after unfair trials in which they faced vaguely-worded charges arising from their peaceful exercise of freedom of expression while in prison.

Standards in the administration of justice have plunged to new depths, marked by a succession of grossly unfair trials, and new measures further limiting the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly have been implemented by the Iranian judiciary since the June 2009 election. Senior judiciary officials have openly rejected the criticism of United Nations (UN) human rights bodies as well as that of other governments and human rights NGOs.

Amnesty International is calling on the Iranian government to end its persecution of women's rights and other human rights activists, trade unionists, students and others and to adhere to its obligations under international human rights, including by ending impunity for human rights violations by its forces.

Amnesty International is also calling for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience and for all other detainees to be released without delay unless they are convicted on recognizable criminal charges in fair trials and without recourse to the death penalty.

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. Anyone responsible for torture or other serious human rights violations must be brought to justice

In March, the UN Human Rights Council made clear its concern about the serious and deteriorating human rights situation in Iran by deciding to establish a United Nations Special Rapporteur (SR) for the human rights situation in Iran. Its role will be to monitor and report regularly to the HRC on human rights conditions in Iran. It remains to be seen whether the Iranian authorities, including the judiciary, will permit the SR to visit Iran and cooperate with the SR: Amnesty International urges them to do so.

Background

From 19 June through December 2009, mass, mainly peaceful, demonstrations were met by a ruthless backlash by the intelligence, security and judicial forces, after the Supreme Leader appeared to authorize the security forces to use whatever force they considered necessary to crush the demonstrations.

Riot police and armed, plain-clothed, Basij were deployed in urban centres, and killed dozens of people and injured hundreds of others. Those shot dead included Neda Agha Soltan, a young woman whose death on 20 June 2009 came to stand as a symbol of the oppression. Two years on, no-one has been held to account for her killing.

By January 2010, the authorities had acknowledged over 6,000 arrests, although the true figure was probably much higher. Many were tortured or otherwise ill-treated – with credible accounts of rape of both men and women.

At least four men died in custody in the Kahrizak detention centre, including the son of an adviser to one of the defeated candidates, leading the Supreme Leader to order the closure of the prison. Subsequently, several low-ranking officials of the prison were tried and convicted, two of them to death. Reports that the two had been executed were later denied and it remains unclear what has become of those reportedly convicted in connection with abuses against detainees held there. No action has been taken against more senior officials who were implicated by a parliamentary investigation.

Mass 'show trials' staged in August 2009 and January 2010 constituted a grotesque parody of justice, violating both Iranian and international human rights law at every level. Hundreds of others since have also been sentenced to prison terms - and some even to death - after unfair trials. At least four people have been executed in connection with the post-election unrest; the authorities hanged Ja'far Kazemi and Mohammad Ali Haj Aghaei in January 2011 because they were said to have "orchestrated demonstrations". .

Sentenced political prisoners are often held in appalling and severely overcrowded conditions and are reported to be at risk of violence, including rape by criminal inmates. Necessary medical

treatment is often denied them or delayed; such practices are said to have hastened some prisoners' deaths.

Since the disputed election, the Iranian authorities have made increased use of the death penalty and there has been a spike in executions, mostly of people convicted of committing drugs offences.

A summary of the current status of the seven individuals featured in Amnesty International's year-long campaign is set out below:

* **Ziauddin (Zia) Nabavi** (see: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/041/2010/en>), a student expelled from university, is serving a 10-year prison sentence reduced from 15 years on appeal after conviction on the vague charge of "enmity against God". In September 2010 he was "exiled" to Karoun Prison, in Ahvaz, south western Iran. Following publication of his protests in May 2011 about the extremely poor prison conditions there, he was moved to another prison in Khuzestan province.

* **Abolfazl Abedini Nasr**, (see: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/039/2010/en>), a journalist and human rights activist, was sentenced in April 2011 to a further one year in prison for "propaganda against the system", bringing his total sentence to 12 years. He was already serving an 11-year sentence comprising five years for "contacts with enemy states", five years for "membership of an illegal organization" in relation to his involvement with the organization Human Rights Activists in Iran and one year for "propaganda against the system" for talking to foreign media.

* **Hengameh Shahidi**, (see: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/040/2010/en>), a journalist and political activist, continues to serve her six-year prison sentence in Tehran's Evin Prison. She was released temporarily for medical treatment in November 2010, but had to return to prison before her treatment was completed.

* **Majid Tavakkoli** (see: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/044/2010/en>), a prominent student leader, was sentenced to a further six months' imprisonment on 30 April 2011 for "propaganda against the system" in connection with a statement that he wrote from prison with other detained on the occasion of Iran's Student Day anniversary in December 2010., He is now serving a total of nine years in prison in Raja'i Shahr Prison in Karaj, west of Tehran. He has undertaken a hunger strike on at least two occasions, one at the time of writing.

* **Ahmad Zeidabadi**, (see: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/042/2010/en>), a journalist and spokesperson for the Graduates' Association, which has promoted reform and greater respect for human rights, He continues to serve a six-year prison sentence in Reja'i Shahr Prison and faces a ban on writing.. In May 2011, he was awarded the 2011 UNESCO / Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize in recognition of his outstanding contribution towards press freedom in Iran, despite the personal cost to himself.

* **Shiva Nazar Ahari** (see: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/049/2010/en>) a journalist, blogger and member of the Committee of Human Rights Reporters (CHRR), was released on bail on 13 September 2010. Sentenced to 74 lashes and a six year prison term, this was commuted to a fine and four years' imprisonment, some of which must be served in exile. At the time of writing, she remained at liberty awaiting a summons to begin serving her sentence.

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