

HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN: REVIEW OF 2020/21

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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 unlawful force to crush protests. The authorities continued to arbitrarily detain hundreds of protesters, dissidents and human rights defenders, and sentenced many to imprisonment and flogging. Women, as well as ethnic and religious minorities, faced entrenched discrimination as well as violence. Enforced disappearances, torture and other ill-treatment were committed with impunity on a widespread and systematic basis. Judicial corporal punishments amounting to torture, including floggings and amputations, were imposed. Fair trial rights were systematically violated. The death penalty was used as a weapon of political repression. Executions were carried out, one in public and some others in secret. Those executed included people aged under 18 at the time of the crime. The authorities continued to commit crimes against humanity by systematically concealing the fate and whereabouts of several thousand political dissidents forcibly disappeared and extrajudicially executed in secret in 1988. Mass graves believed to contain their remains were subject to ongoing destruction.

BACKGROUND

On 8 January, amidst heightened tensions following a US drone strike in Iraq that killed Revolutionary Guards Commander Ghasem Soleimani, the Revolutionary Guards fired missiles at a Ukrainian passenger plane in Iranian air space, killing all 176 people on board. After an initial cover-up, the Iranian authorities blamed “human error”.

Iran continued to provide military support to government forces in the armed conflict in Syria.

The health care system was overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic; at least 300 health care workers reportedly died of the disease.

US-imposed sanctions continued to negatively impact the economy, with detrimental consequences for the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights.

In March, the UN Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran. The authorities did not grant him and other UN experts or independent human rights observers entry to the country.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSOCIATION AND ASSEMBLY

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

The Ministry of Interior as well as security and intelligence bodies continued to ban independent political parties, and human rights and civil society groups. Censorship of media and jamming of foreign satellite television channels continued. Facebook, Telegram, Twitter and YouTube remained blocked.

Hundreds of people remained arbitrarily detained for peacefully exercising their human rights. Among them were protesters, journalists, media workers, political dissidents, artists, writers and human rights defenders, including lawyers, women’s rights defenders, labour rights activists, minority rights activists, conservationists, anti-death penalty campaigners and those demanding truth, justice and reparation for the mass extrajudicial executions in the 1980s.

Hundreds of prisoners of conscience were excluded from pardons and temporary releases. Political dissidents Mehdi Karroubi, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Zahra Rahnavard remained under arbitrary house arrest without charge or trial.

Throughout the year, the authorities unlawfully closed the businesses or froze the bank accounts or assets of numerous journalists working with independent media outlets outside Iran, and of human rights defenders and their families. They also subjected the children, older parents and other family members of protesters, journalists and human rights defenders to intimidation, interrogation or arbitrary arrest and detention in reprisal for their relatives' journalistic or human rights work or their participation in protests.

In January, security forces used unlawful force, including firing pointed pellets from airguns, rubber bullets and tear gas, and using pepper spray, to disperse peaceful protesters demanding justice for the Ukrainian plane crash victims. They also kicked, punched and beat protesters and carried out scores of arbitrary arrests.¹

In January and February, to quash independent reporting in the run-up to parliamentary elections, the authorities targeted journalists for arbitrary arrest and detention, house searches and interrogations.

The authorities took measures to stop independent reporting on COVID-19 and silence criticism about their handling of the pandemic. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance ordered media and journalists to use only official sources and statistics in their reporting. Cyber police established a special task force to tackle "cyber rumours" and "fake news" related to COVID-19 on social media; and scores of journalists, social media users, health care workers and others were arrested, summoned for questioning or given warnings. In April, Rahim Yousefpour, a doctor from Saqqez, Kurdistan province, was charged with "spreading propaganda against the system" and "disturbing public opinion" for his Instagram posts about COVID-19.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture and other ill-treatment remained widespread and systematic, especially during interrogation.

Iran's police, intelligence and security forces, and prison officials subjected detainees to prolonged solitary confinement, beatings, floggings, stress positions, forced administration of chemical substances and electric shocks.² Prison and prosecution authorities also deliberately denied prisoners of conscience and other prisoners held for politically motivated reasons adequate health care.³

The Penal Code continued to provide for corporal judicial punishments amounting to torture, including flogging, blinding, amputation, crucifixion and stoning.

At least 160 people were sentenced to flogging, according to the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center, for theft and assault as well as for acts that are protected under international human rights law, such as participating in peaceful protests, engaging in extramarital or consensual same-sex relationships and attending mixed-gender parties. In many cases, flogging sentences were carried out.

In one prison alone in Urumieh, West Azerbaijan province, at least six people were at risk of amputation.

Several men died in custody in suspicious circumstances, with photo and video evidence indicating that at least two of them were tortured before their deaths, including a juvenile offender who died in April.

RIGHT TO HEALTH

Prisoners

Conditions in many prisons and detention facilities remained cruel and inhuman. Prisoners suffered from overcrowding, limited hot water, unsanitary conditions, inadequate food and drinking water, insufficient beds and bathrooms, poor ventilation and insect infestations, placing them at greater risk of COVID-19.

Between February and May, the authorities temporarily released around 128,000 prisoners and pardoned another 10,000 in response to COVID-19. Official letters leaked in July revealed that the Ministry of Health ignored repeated requests from the Prisons Organization for additional resources, including disinfectant products and medical and protective equipment. Some prisoners complained about the authorities' improper use of bleach to disinfect surfaces, exacerbating poor air quality and leading to severe coughs, chest tightness and asthma attacks.

In March and April, prisoners across the country waged hunger strikes, protests and riots to protest the authorities' failure to protect them from COVID-19. Authorities responded with unlawful force, resorting to beatings and firing live ammunition, metal pellets and tear gas to suppress protests. As a result, on 31 March, in Sheiban prison in Ahvaz, Khuzestan province, several Ahwazi Arab prisoners were killed and many others were injured.

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

Authorities subjected many detainees, including prisoners of conscience, to enforced disappearance, holding them in undisclosed locations and concealing their fate and whereabouts from their families. The authorities continued the pattern of executing members of ethnic minorities on death row in secret and concealing the whereabouts of their bodies, thereby subjecting their families to the ongoing crime of enforced disappearance.

Several Ahwazi Arab prisoners remained forcibly disappeared.

The authorities continued to commit the crime against humanity of enforced disappearance by systematically concealing the fate and whereabouts of several thousand political dissidents who were forcibly disappeared and extrajudicially executed in secret in 1988 and destroying unmarked mass gravesites believed to contain their remains.

Security and intelligence forces threatened victims' families with arrest if they sought information about their loved ones, conducted commemorations or spoke out.

UNFAIR TRIALS

Fair trial rights were systematically violated in the criminal justice system.

Authorities continued to systematically deny individuals facing national security-related charges access to a lawyer at the investigation stage. In some cases, access was even denied at trial. Some defendants were tried in their absence because authorities failed either to notify them of their trial dates or transfer them from prison to court.

Many trials took place behind closed doors. Revolutionary Court judges showed hostility towards defendants during court proceedings and treated the accusations of intelligence and security bodies as preestablished facts.

Forced "confessions" obtained under torture and other ill-treatment were broadcast on state television prior to trials and were consistently used as evidence by courts to issue convictions, even when defendants retracted them.

Convictions and sentences were often upheld on appeal without hearings taking place.

Courts frequently refused to provide those convicted of national security charges with a copy of written judgments.

DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Women continued to face entrenched discrimination in law, including in relation to marriage, divorce, employment, inheritance and political office.

The "morality" police and vigilantes, enforcing the country's discriminatory and degrading forced veiling laws, continued to subject millions of women and girls to daily harassment and violent attacks amounting to torture and other ill-treatment. Several women's rights defenders remained in prison for campaigning against forced veiling.

The authorities failed to criminalize domestic violence, marital rape, early and forced marriage and other gender-based violence against women and girls, which remained widespread.

The legal age of marriage for girls stayed at 13, and fathers and grandfathers could obtain permission from courts for their daughters to be married at a younger age. According to official figures, about 30,000 girls under the age of 14 are married every year.

The authorities failed to take steps to end impunity for men who kill their wives or daughters and to ensure accountability proportionate to the severity of these crimes.

In June, the Guardian Council approved a new law for the protection of children, but which did not contain protections against so-called honour killings, child marriage and marital rape.

The government continued its review of the long-standing bill aimed at protecting women against violence. The delay was attributed to changes made by the judiciary during its review, which considerably weakened protections.

DISCRIMINATION

Ethnic minorities

Ethnic minorities, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds and Turkmen faced entrenched discrimination, curtailing their access to education, employment, adequate housing and political office. Continued under-investment in minority-populated regions exacerbated poverty and marginalization. Despite repeated calls for linguistic diversity, Persian remained the sole language of instruction in primary and secondary education.

Members of minorities who spoke out against violations or demanded a degree of regional self-government were subjected to arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment. The authorities criminalized peaceful advocacy of separatism or federalism and accused minority rights activists of threatening Iran's territorial integrity.

Several Azerbaijani Turkic activists were sentenced to imprisonment and flogging in connection with the November 2019 protests and peaceful activism on behalf of the Azerbaijani Turkic minority, and two had their flogging sentences carried out.

Ahwazi Arabs reported that the authorities restricted expressions of Arab culture, including dress and poetry.

Iran's border guards continued to unlawfully shoot scores of unarmed Kurdish *kulbars* who work, under cruel and inhumane conditions, as cross-border porters between the Kurdistan regions of Iran and Iraq, killing at least 40 men and injuring dozens of others, according to Kurdish human rights organizations.

Many Baluchi villagers in the impoverished province of Sistan and Baluchestan were denied their right to sufficient, physically accessible and safe water due to particularly poor infrastructure. They were forced to rely on unsafe sources of water such as rivers, wells, ponds and water pits inhabited by crocodiles for drinking and domestic use. Several people, including children, drowned while fetching water, including an eight-year old girl from Jakigoor village where the water supply was cut for a week in August. Some local officials blamed victims for failing to take precautions. Many residents in the province also experienced poor access to electricity, schools and health facilities due to under-investment.

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, as well as atheists, codes of public conduct rooted in a strict interpretation of Shi'a Islam. The authorities refused to recognize the right of those born to Muslim parents to convert to other religions or become atheists, with individuals seeking to exercise this right risking arbitrary detention, torture and the death penalty for "apostasy."

Only Shi'a Muslims were allowed to hold key political positions. Members of religious minorities, including Baha'is, Christians, Gonabadi Dervishes, Yaresan (Ahl-e Haq) and converts from Shi'a Islam to Sunni Islam or Christianity faced discrimination, including in education and employment, as well as arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, torture and other ill-treatment for practising their faith.

In October, a Christian man was flogged 80 times in Bushehr province for drinking Holy Communion wine.

Followers of the Erfan-e Halgheh spiritual doctrine were arbitrarily detained. The authorities continued to commit widespread and systematic human rights violations against members of the Baha'i minority, including forcible closure of businesses, confiscation of property, bans on employment in the public sector, denial of access to higher education and hate speech campaigns on state media.

Raids on house churches persisted.

Sunni Muslims continued to face restrictions on establishing their own mosques.

DEATH PENALTY

The death penalty was increasingly used as a weapon of political repression against protesters, dissidents and members of minority groups.⁴

Scores of protesters were charged with “enmity against God” (*moharebeh*) and “spreading corruption on earth” (*efsad f'il arz*), which carry the death penalty. Several protesters were sentenced to death following unfair trials which relied on torture-tainted “confessions.”

In December, dissident and journalist Ruhollah Zam was executed in connection with his anti-establishment social media news channel, Amad News.

Executions were carried out after unfair trials. One victim was executed in public and others were in secret. Those executed included people who were under 18 at the time of the crime.

A disproportionate number of those executed were members of Iran’s Kurdish and Baluchi minorities.

The death penalty was maintained for consensual same-sex sexual conduct.

Stoning remained a method of execution for those convicted of adultery.

IMPUNITY

No public official was investigated or held accountable for crimes of unlawful killings, torture and enforced disappearance or other grave human rights violations.

Judicial authorities failed to conduct independent and transparent investigations into the use of lethal force by law enforcement officials against individuals who posed no imminent threat to life or serious injury.

Impunity prevailed for past and ongoing crimes against humanity related to the 1988 prison massacres, with many of those involved continuing to hold top judicial and government positions, including the current Head of the Judiciary and the Minister of Justice.

In May, Iran’s border guards detained dozens of Afghan nationals, including children, who had crossed the border into Iran to find work, beat them and forced them at gunpoint into the Hariroud river, which flows along the border with Afghanistan. Several drowned as a result.

The authorities denied any responsibility. The authorities continued to cover-up the real death toll of people killed during the November 2019 protests, and publicly praised security and intelligence forces for their role in the crackdown. In May, the authorities announced, for the first time, that around 230 people were killed during the protests, including six members of the security forces. Amnesty International documented the details of 304 men, women and children who were killed by security forces during the protests, but the real number of deaths is likely to be higher.⁵

¹ [Iran: Scores injured as security forces use unlawful force to crush protests \(Press release, 15 January\)](#)

² [Iran: Trampling humanity – Mass arrests, disappearances and torture since Iran’s November 2019 protests \(MDE 13/2891/2020\)](#)

³ [Iran: Tortured prisoners in need of medical care \(MDE 13/2237/2020\)](#)

⁴ [Iran: Two Kurds executed amid increasing use of death penalty as weapon of repression \(Press release, 15 July\)](#)

⁵ [Iran: Details of 304 deaths in crackdown on November 2019 protests \(MDE 13/2308/2020\)](#)