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Iran: Election amid repression of dissent and unrest

The Iranian presidential elections are to be held this month on 12 June. The candidates are: the incumbent President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; Mohsen Rezaei, a former commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps; Former Prime Minister, Mir Hossein Mousavi (backed by former president, Mohammad Khatami); and Mehdi Karroubi, a former parliamentary speaker.

While Amnesty International welcomes pledges from some of the candidates to address the prevailing discrimination against women in the country – an issue which has been forced to the forefront of the debate by the efforts of women’s rights activists - and ethnic minorities and to tackle economic issues to improve the welfare of the population, there are other serious human rights concerns which also need addressing. These include severe curtailments of freedom of expression, arbitrary arrests, torture and other ill-treatment, unfair trials and a high recourse to the death penalty (including against juvenile offenders) as well as incidents of people being stoned to death.

- At least 194 people have been executed so far this year in Iran, including five women and three juveniles convicted of crimes allegedly committed before they were 18, a practice strictly prohibited under international law.
- At least 140 juveniles are known to be on death row in Iran.
- At least one person has been stoned to death this year in Iran, despite a 2002 directive from the Head of the Judiciary ordering a moratorium on stonings. Amnesty International is aware of seven women and three men currently under sentence of death by stoning.

The election period has also seen increased repression, both of people expressing their opinions directly about the elections, or of those seen to be opposed to the system in some way, including students, women's rights activists, lawyers and unrecognized religious minorities, such as the Baha'is and the Ahl-e Haq.

Amnesty International is also concerned that all but four of the candidates have been excluded from standing, including all women, on the grounds of discriminatory criteria. The Council of Guardians is the body which screens all candidates for election to “ensure their suitability for the Presidency”. Article 115 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran stipulates that candidates must be from “religious and political personalities” [Persian: *rejal*] and possess: “Iranian origin; Iranian nationality; administrative capacity and resourcefulness; a good past record; trustworthiness and piety; convinced belief in the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the official religion of the country.” In previous elections, the majority of candidates registered were disqualified under these criteria, including all women. The exclusion of women appears to have been as a result of an interpretation of the word *rejal* as meaning “men”.

Amnesty International is concerned about the increasing number of arrests in recent weeks leading up to the presidential elections, which indicates worsening repression of people who want to express their opinions:

In the pre-election period, Amnesty International has received reports suggesting increased waves of arbitrary arrests and harassment targeting in particular members of Iran's religious and ethnic minority communities, including Baha'is and converts from Islam, students, trade unionists and women's rights activists.

By imprisoning people for merely expressing dissenting views, the Iranian authorities are stifling the free debate which is a pre-requisite of elections. Citizens should be able to freely express their grievances and their demands so that candidates can address them.

- Jelveh Javaheri, a member of the One Million Signatures Campaign (also known as the Campaign for Equality), which is collecting signatures to a petition demanding equal rights for women was released on bail on 7 June. She is one of around 150 people arrested on 1 May 2009. Most – including Jelveh Javaheri's journalist husband Kaveh Mozaffari who is still detained along with several others - were arrested in Laleh Park in Tehran where a celebration of International Workers' Day was being held. Jelveh Javaheri, however, was arrested at home without an arrest warrant when security officials came with her husband to search their house. She has since been charged with "acting against national security through membership in the One Million Signatures Campaign and with the aim of disrupting public order and security." At least three other women associated with the Campaign for Equality are currently imprisoned, including Alieh Aghdam-Doust who is serving a three-year prison sentence.
- The campaign of Mir Hossein Mousavi – himself a member of the Azerbaijani minority - has attracted allegations of racism after a video posted on YouTube on 14 May allegedly showed former President Mohammad Khatami (who supports Mr Mousavi) making comments belittling Iranian Azerbaijanis. Mr Khatami has since stated that the video was a fake. In the days after the video surfaced, hundreds of Azerbaijani activists held rallies and organized protests, demanding an apology from Mr Khatami. Some have been arrested and are being held in incommunicado detention.
- For example, on 22 May, in a government-organized rally in El Goli (also known as Shah Golu) Park in Tabriz, in north-west Iran, a group of Azerbaijanis protested against the Khatami video and demanded that education be made available in the Azerbaijani Turkic language. Ali Reza Farshi, a professor in the Islamic Azad University of Marand, north-west of Tabriz, along with 14 other protestors were reportedly arrested and are believed to be still detained. Four of the protestors are reported to have suffered injuries and were bleeding as they were taken away. There is no information on their health.
- On 27 May, Emad Bahavar, head of the youth wing of the Iran Freedom Party who was campaigning for the presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi, was arrested on charges of "propaganda against the system". He has since been released on bail.
- At least two university students – Abbas Hakimzadeh and Mehdi Mashayekhi remain detained without trial by the Ministry of Intelligence in Section 209 of Evin Prison in Tehran following their arrests in February 2009. Other students arrested with them who have since been released have said that they were tortured in detention. On 28 April 2009, a Revolutionary Court judge said that eight students, including those still detained, had been accused of cooperating with the People's Mojahedin Organization

of Iran, an opposition group based in exile. He added that they had intended to carry out some activities in the university during the forthcoming election.

- Following a fierce clash in April between members of the Kurdish armed opposition group, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) and security forces in which at least 18 policemen were killed, dozens of Kurds are reported to have been arrested. Others were said to be detained following the eight-day visit of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamene'i, to Kordestan Province in mid-May.
- In the run-up to the elections violent unrest has intensified in Sistan-Baluchistan province in south-eastern Iran. A member of the armed Baluch group, the People's Resistance Movement of Iran (PRMI), carried out a suicide bomb attack on a mosque in the provincial capital of Zahedan on 28 May. Up to 25 people were reported to have been killed and dozens more were injured. The PRMI said that the attack was a reprisal for the execution of several Sunni clerics in recent years. Amnesty International has condemned the attack on the mosque.
- Less than 48 hours after the bombing, three men were hanged in public near the site of the attack amid claims that they were responsible. Later comments clarified that the three men had been in detention at the time of the bombing, but they had "confessed" to providing the explosives used in the bombing. Further unrest broke out afterwards with up to ten people killed, and dozens arrested.
- Iran's Baluch minority - in common with other minorities in Iran - suffer discrimination by the state authorities leading to gross violations of their economic, social and cultural rights. They live mainly in the provinces of Sistan-Balouchistan and Kerman and are believed to constitute between one and three per cent of the country's total population of around 70 million. They are mainly Sunni Muslims, whereas the majority of Iran's population are Shi'a Muslims.

Note to editors:

For more information, please see:

Iran: Ensure free presidential election:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/046/2009/en/25d062b9-2643-4a8e-908a-d72929557665/mde130462009en.html>

Iran: Human Rights in the spotlight on the 30th Anniversary of the Islamic Revolution:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/010/2009/en/03d99921-f378-11dd-b339-21ceadf1e5ba/mde130102009eng.html>

Iran: Worsening repression of dissent as election approaches:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/012/2009/en>

Iran: Women's Rights Defenders Defy Repression MDE 13/018/2008:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/018/2008/en/63dd8933-e16d-11dc-9135-058f98b1fb80/mde130182008eng.pdf>

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