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Iran

Country:

[Iran](#)

Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Not Free

Political Rights:

6

Civil Liberties:

6

Aggregate Score:

17

Freedom Rating:

6.0

Overview:

In July 2015, Iran reached an agreement with the United States and other world powers to limit its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief, raising hopes that the pact would ultimately strengthen President Hassan Rouhani and allow him to fulfill promises to decrease state intervention in Iranians' lives. However, there were no significant improvements in the human rights situation during the year, as hard-liners in control of key state institutions, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the judiciary, appeared determined to prevent any attempts at reform.

With elections for the parliament and the Assembly of Experts scheduled for February 2016, hard-liners launched a new crackdown in 2015. At least four journalists were arrested, while several intellectuals, artists, and human rights activists were sentenced to lengthy prison terms. *Washington Post* correspondent Jason Rezaian, an Iranian-American, was sentenced to an unspecified prison term following a closed-door trial on widely criticized espionage charges. There was also a surge in executions during the year, with estimates indicating that the number easily exceeded the reported total for 2014.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 7 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 3 / 12

The supreme leader, who has no fixed term, is the highest authority in the country. He is the commander in chief of the armed forces and appoints the head of the judiciary, the heads of state broadcast media, and the Expediency Council—a body tasked with mediating disputes between the Guardian Council and the parliament. He also appoints six of the members of the Guardian Council; the other six are jurists nominated by the head of the judiciary and confirmed by the parliament, all for six-year terms. The supreme leader is appointed by the Assembly of Experts, which also monitors his work. However, in practice his decisions appear to go unchallenged by the assembly, whose proceedings are kept confidential. The current supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, succeeded Islamic Republic founder Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989.

Elections in Iran are not free and fair, according to international standards. The Guardian Council, controlled by conservatives, vets all candidates for the parliament, president, and the Assembly of Experts—a body of 86 clerics who are elected to eight-year terms by popular vote. The council has in the past rejected candidates who are not considered insiders or deemed fully loyal to the clerical establishment, as well as women seeking to run in the presidential election. As a result, Iranian voters are given a limited choice of candidates.

The president, the second-highest-ranking official in the Islamic Republic, is elected by popular vote for four years and can serve two consecutive terms. Ahead of the 2013 election, the Guardian Council disqualified more than 600 candidates, including former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Rahim Mashaei, an aide to incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, apparently due to political infighting. Nearly all of the eight approved candidates, including Rouhani, were deemed close to Khamenei. Only one reformist candidate, who was widely seen as lacking both charisma and significant popular support, was allowed to run. In the run-up to the election, censorship increased, the government intensified its press crackdown, and authorities restricted the already slow speed of the internet. However, Rouhani's victory—with nearly 51 percent of the vote amid 72 percent turnout—appeared to reflect the choice of the voters.

For the 2012 elections to the 290-seat, unicameral parliament, the Guardian Council disqualified one-third of the registered candidates, including incumbent members, opposition reformists, and supporters of Ahmadinejad, who had increasingly clashed with the supreme leader and rival conservative factions. Though there were no claims of systematic fraud, several sitting lawmakers accused the IRGC of rigging activities. The official results were seen as favoring Khamenei's conservative supporters.

As the country prepared for the 2016 parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections in 2015, officials renewed a debate over the role of the Guardian Council. Rouhani suggested in August that the council's proper function is to supervise rather than administer elections. His comments appeared to reflect concern that the body would bar moderate and reformist candidates from running. Hard-line officials hit back, including the IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jaafari, who warned against weakening the "pillars of the revolution."

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 2 / 16

Only political parties and factions loyal to the establishment and to the state ideology are permitted to operate. Reformist parties and politicians have come under increased state repression, especially since 2009.

In 2015, two new reformist parties—Nedaye Iranian (Voice of Iranians) and Ettehad Mellat Iran (Iranian National Unity)—were established ahead of the 2016 parliamentary elections. Hard-liners were critical of the decision to allow the two parties to operate, noting that some of their members belonged to the banned Participation Front (Mosharekat). The head of Ettehad Mellat and at least one other member of the party were summoned to court in 2015 in what was seen as a warning to the reformists.

Iran's leading opposition figures—Mir Hossein Mousavi; his wife, university professor Zahra Rahnavard; and reformist cleric Mehdi Karroubi—have been under house arrest since February 2011 with no access to the outside world. Mousavi and Karroubi were presidential candidates in the disputed 2009 election, and the three are seen as the leaders of the reformist Green Movement, whose mass protests were brutally suppressed following that vote.

The parliament grants five seats to recognized non-Muslim minorities: Jews, Armenian Christians, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, and Zoroastrians. However, ethnic and especially religious minorities are rarely awarded senior government posts, and their political presence remains weak. In September 2015, Iranian media reported that the government had for the first time appointed a Sunni Muslim to serve as an ambassador.

C. Functioning of Government: 2 / 12

The elected president's powers are limited by the supreme leader and other unelected authorities. The powers of the elected parliament are similarly restricted by the supreme leader and the unelected Guardian Council, which must approve all bills before they can become law. The council often rejects bills it deems un-Islamic. Nevertheless, the parliament has been a platform for heated political debate and criticism of the government, and legislators have frequently challenged presidents and their policies.

Corruption remains endemic at all levels of the bureaucracy, despite regular calls by authorities to tackle the problem. Powerful actors involved in the economy, including the IRGC and bonyads (endowed foundations), are above scrutiny. In its 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index, Transparency International ranked Iran 130 out of 168 countries and territories.

Civil Liberties: 10 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 2 / 16

Freedom of expression and access to information remain severely limited both online and offline. However, some journalists and citizens say the situation improved slightly after Rouhani took office. The state broadcasting company is tightly controlled by hard-liners and influenced by the security apparatus. News and analysis are heavily censored, while critics and opposition members are rarely, if ever, given a platform on state-controlled television, which remains a major source of information for many Iranians. State television has a record of airing confessions extracted from political prisoners under duress, and it routinely carries reports aimed at discrediting dissidents and opposition activists.

Satellite dishes are banned, and Persian-language broadcasts from outside the country are regularly jammed. Authorities periodically raid private homes and confiscate satellite dishes.

Newspapers and magazines face censorship and warnings from authorities about which topics to cover and how. Journalists state that they are often forced to practice self-censorship when working on sensitive issues. In late July 2015, the government allegedly instructed newspaper editors to praise the nuclear agreement and avoid publishing content that would suggest a rift among officials. In August, a hard-line daily was suspended over its coverage of the nuclear talks, while two other hard-line media outlets received warnings.

Since Rouhani became president, several new dailies and magazines have been granted publishing licenses, but a number of publications and websites have been closed or suspended. In January 2015, the daily *Mardom-e Emrouz* was shut down after it published a cover photo of American actor George Clooney expressing solidarity with the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, the target of a terrorist attack the previous week. In April, a magazine dedicated to women's issues and run by prominent editor Shahla Sherkat was temporarily banned over coverage of cohabitation outside of marriage.

Nineteen journalists were behind bars in Iran as of December, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The year's most high-profile case was that of *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian, in detention since July 2014. He was tried on espionage charges in four closed hearings between May and August. In November, Iran's judiciary said Rezaian had been sentenced to an unspecified jail term. The espionage accusations have been widely described as baseless.

Tens of thousands of websites remain filtered, including news sites and social media, which have otherwise become a relatively free platform of expression for many Iranians. The government has said it is pursuing "smart filtering" for social-networking sites such as Instagram, allowing it to block certain content without obstructing the entire service.

Authorities continue to target online activists. In September, reports emerged that well-known internet activist and founder of the popular Weblogina portal Arash Zad had been detained since the previous month on unknown charges. Facebook activist Soheil Arabi, who had been arrested in 2013 and sentenced to death in 2014 for "insulting" the prophet Muhammad, had his death sentence commuted by the Supreme Court in June, though he still faced seven and a half years in prison, with two years of supervised theological study. Reporters Without Borders said in September that more than 100 online activists and bloggers had been arrested since Rouhani took office, in most cases by the intelligence branch of the IRGC.

Various forms of art face restrictions in Iran. All books must be approved by the Ministry of Culture in order to receive a publishing license. Scores of books have been banned, while authors have been accused of subversion, though there were reports in 2015 that book censorship had slightly eased and that some previously banned books were allowed to be published. Filmmakers also face censorship and official pressure. In June, artist and activist Atena Farghadani was sentenced to 12 years and nine months in prison for a cartoon that criticized members of parliament. It emerged in October that two poets, Fatemeh Ekhtesari and Mehdi Mousavi, had been sentenced to 11.5 and nine years in prison, respectively, as well as 99 lashes each, on charges that included “insulting sanctities.” Filmmaker Keywan Karimi was sentenced that month to six years in prison and 223 lashes on similar charges.

Iran is home to a majority Shiite Muslim population and Sunni, Baha’i, Christian, and Zoroastrian minorities. The constitution recognizes only Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as religious minorities, and they are relatively free to worship. The regime cracks down on Muslims who are deemed to be at variance with the state ideology and interpretation of Islam. Popular spiritual leader Mohammad Ali Taheri was sentenced to death in June 2015 for “spreading corruption on earth,” but the Supreme Court rejected the sentence in December; Taheri, in detention since 2011, was already serving a five-year prison sentence on related charges. At least 30 of his followers have also been sentenced to prison. Sunni Muslims complain that they have been prevented from building mosques in major cities and face employment discrimination for government jobs. In recent years, there has been increased pressure on the Sufi Muslim order Nematollahi Gonabadi, including destruction of their places of worship and the jailing of some of their members.

The government also subjects some non-Muslim minorities to repressive policies and discrimination. Baha’is are systematically persecuted, sentenced to prison, and banned from access to higher education; some 70 Baha’is were in prison as of December 2015 due to their religious beliefs. The Baha’i International Community has also reported the destruction of cemeteries and the closure of Baha’i-owned businesses in recent years. There is an ongoing crackdown on Christian converts. In the past three years, a number of informal house churches have been raided and their pastors detained. Pastor Saeed Abedini, a dual Iranian-American national and a convert to Christianity, is among those in jail.

Academic freedom remains limited in Iran, despite attempts by Rouhani’s government to ease the harsh repression universities have experienced since 2009. In the past two years, about a dozen student associations that had been suspended under the previous administration were allowed to renew their work. Several new student groups also received permits to operate. However, Khamenei has warned that universities should not be turned into centers for political activities. Amnesty International estimates that hundreds of students have been prevented from continuing their studies for political reasons or because they belong to the Baha’i community.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 1 / 12

The constitution states that public demonstrations may be held if they are not “detrimental to the fundamental principle of Islam.” In practice, only state-sanctioned demonstrations are typically permitted, while other gatherings have in recent years been forcibly dispersed by security personnel, who detain participants. In what appeared to be a softening of the government’s stance, police did not disrupt protests by animal rights activists in Shiraz in April 2015, or a months-long protest by prominent lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh against a decision to ban her from practicing law. Sotoudeh said she and her supporters received threats but were allowed to continue their picketing outside the Iranian Bar Association in Tehran.

Nongovernmental organizations that work on nonpolitical issues such as poverty and the environment are allowed to operate relatively freely. Reports suggest that their number has increased in the past two years. Other groups, especially those that have highlighted human rights violations, have been suppressed. They include the Center for Human Rights Defenders, which remains closed with several of its members in jail, and the Mourning Mothers of Iran (Mothers of Laleh Park), which had been gathering in a Tehran park to bring attention to human rights abuses. In May 2015, Narges Mohammadi of the Center for Human Rights Defenders was arrested, apparently to serve a six-year prison term handed down in 2011 that she had not been able to serve because of health problems. Also in May, anti–death penalty activist Atena Daemi was sentenced to 14 years in prison on charges that included “gathering and colluding against national security” and “spreading propaganda against the system,” partly due to her critical social-media posts.

Iran does not permit the creation of labor unions; only state-sponsored labor councils are allowed. Labor rights groups have come under pressure in recent years, and more than a dozen activists have been sentenced to prison. In April 2015, the secretary general of the Teachers Organization of Iran and five prominent members of Iran’s Teachers Association were detained for their union activities. Thousands of workers marched on May Day in Tehran and other cities for the first time in eight years, though a number of activists were reportedly detained in the days ahead of the event. Jailed trade unionist Shahrokh Zamani died in September, apparently of a stroke, while serving an 11-year prison sentence he received in 2011. His death renewed concern over the denial of proper medical care to prisoners.

F. Rule of Law: 3 / 16

The judicial system is used as a tool to silence critics and opposition members. The head of the judiciary is appointed by the supreme leader for a five-year term. Under the current head, Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, human rights advocates and political activists have been subjected to unfair trials, and the security apparatus’s influence over judges has reportedly grown.

Iran, after China, carries out the largest number of executions in the world each year, and the annual total has increased under Larijani. Convicts can be executed for offenses other than murder, such as drug trafficking, and for crimes they committed when they were less than 18 years old. According to the UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran, at least 694 individuals were reportedly executed in the first seven months of 2015,

compared with 753 for all of 2014. Others put the total for 2015 at nearly 1,000. As in previous years, Iran refused to allow a visit to the country by the UN special rapporteur.

Lawyers taking up sensitive political cases have been jailed and banned from practicing, including prominent human rights lawyer Abdolfatah Soltani. A number of lawyers have been forced to leave the country to escape prosecution.

Activists are routinely arrested without warrants, held indefinitely without formal charges, and denied access to legal counsel or any contact with the outside world. Many are later convicted on vague security charges in trials that sometimes last only a few minutes. Activists say they have been beaten during interrogation, forced into false confessions, and subjected to psychological pressure, including threats that their relatives will be arrested. In the past two years, the IRGC's intelligence unit appears to have increased its involvement in political repression. The unit reportedly controls a section of Tehran's Evin prison.

Security forces are seldom held responsible for human rights violations.

Ethnic minorities complain of various forms of discrimination, including restrictions on the use of their languages. Some provinces with large minority populations remain underdeveloped. Activists campaigning for more ethnic rights and greater autonomy have come under pressure from authorities, and some have been jailed. Kurdish activist Behrouz Alkhani was executed in August 2015 for alleged involvement in the 2010 killing of a prosecutor. Amnesty International called his trial "grossly unfair" and said he was put to death while his appeal was still before the Supreme Court.

The penal code criminalizes all sexual relations outside of traditional marriage, and Iran is among the few countries where individuals can be put to death for consensual same-sex conduct. Members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community face harassment and discrimination, though the problem is underreported due to the criminalized and hidden nature of these groups in Iran.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 4 / 16

Freedom of movement is restricted, particularly for women and perceived opponents of the regime. Women are banned from certain public places, such as sports stadiums, and can obtain a passport to travel abroad only with the permission of their fathers or husbands. Many journalists and activists have been prevented from leaving the country.

Iranians have the legal right to own property and establish private businesses. However, powerful institutions like the IRGC play a dominant role in the economy, and bribery is said to be widespread in the business environment, including for registration and obtaining business licenses.

The government interferes in most aspects of citizens' private lives. Home parties are often raided and citizens detained or fined for drinking alcohol or mingling with members of the opposite sex. Women are regularly harassed and detained by the police for not fully observing the obligatory Islamic dress code. An increasing number of women defy the

state by wearing tight clothes and short coats. In September 2015, a police official in Tehran warned that women drivers could have their cars impounded if they are caught “poorly veiled” or without a veil. The authorities also attempt to restrict certain forms of dress or appearance among men, such as long hair or clothing deemed Western.

Women remain significantly underrepresented in politics and government, though Rouhani has appointed three women among his vice presidents. In addition, four women have been appointed as governors. Women are denied equal rights in divorce, child custody, and inheritance. A woman’s testimony in court is given only half the weight of a man’s, and the monetary compensation awarded to a female victim’s family upon her death is half that owed to the family of a male victim.

The government provides no protection to women and children forced into sex trafficking, and both Iranians and foreign nationals are subject to forced labor and debt bondage. Officials have been complicit in sex trafficking, including some who operate shelters for runaway girls.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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