



Freedom in the World - ↓ Iran (2011)

Capital: Tehran

Population:
73,244,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Trend Arrow

Iran received a downward trend arrow due to the rising economic and political clout of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, extensive efforts by the government to restrict freedom of assembly, and the sentencing of the entire leadership of the Baha'i community to lengthy prison terms.

Overview

Intense government repression at both the street and elite levels ensured that opposition protests stemming from the flawed 2009 presidential election were significantly reduced after February 2010. Throughout the year, members of the public, journalists, political activists, ethnic and religious minorities, and high-profile politicians and their families were subjected to intimidation, arrests, and violent attacks. As the regime relied more heavily on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to maintain power, the organization continued to acquire economic concessions and political influence at the expense of civilians.

A popular revolution ousted Iran's monarchy in 1979, bringing together diverse political interests that opposed the regime's widespread corruption and misguided modernization efforts. However, the revolution's democratic and secular elements were largely subsumed under the leadership of the previously exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Although the new constitution drafted by Khomeini's disciples provided for an elected president and parliament, an unelected Council of Guardians was empowered to approve candidates and certify that the decisions of elected officials were in accord with Sharia (Islamic law). Khomeini was named supreme leader and vested with control over the security and intelligence services, the armed forces, and the judiciary. Soon after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein launched an invasion to settle a long-running border dispute. The ensuing war, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, cost over a million lives.

After Khomeini's death in 1989, the title of supreme leader passed to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a compromise candidate who lacked the religious credentials and popularity of his predecessor. The constitution was changed to consolidate his power and give him final authority on all matters of foreign and domestic policy.

Beneath its veneer of religious probity, the Islamic Republic gave rise to a new elite that accumulated wealth through opaque and unaccountable means. Basic freedoms were revoked, and women in particular experienced a severe regression in their status and rights. By the mid-1990s, dismal economic conditions and a demographic trend toward a younger population had contributed to significant public dissatisfaction with the regime. A coalition of reformists began to emerge within the leadership, advocating a gradual process of political change, economic liberalization, and normalization of relations with the outside world that was designed to legitimize, but not radically alter, the existing political system.

Representing this coalition, former culture minister Mohammad Khatami was elected president in

1997 with nearly 70 percent of the vote. Under his administration, more than 200 independent newspapers and magazines with a diverse array of viewpoints were established, and the authorities relaxed the enforcement of restrictions on social interaction between the sexes. Reformists won 80 percent of the seats in the country's first nationwide municipal elections in 1999 and took the vast majority of seats in parliamentary elections the following year, with student activists playing a major role in their success.

The 2000 parliamentary elections prompted a backlash by hard-line clerics. Over the four years after the polls, the conservative judiciary closed more than 100 reformist newspapers and jailed hundreds of liberal journalists and activists, while security forces cracked down on the ensuing student protests. Khatami was reelected with 78 percent of the vote in 2001, but popular disaffection stemming from the reformists' limited accomplishments, coupled with the Council of Guardians' rejection of the candidacies of most reformist politicians, allowed hard-liners to triumph in the 2003 municipal and 2004 parliamentary elections.

The Council of Guardians similarly rejected the candidacies of popular reformists ahead of the 2005 presidential election, though the victory of Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over other approved candidates reflected the public's desire for change. He became Iran's first nonclerical president in more than two decades, having campaigned on promises to fight elite corruption and redistribute Iran's oil wealth to the poor and middle class. Nevertheless, his hard-line administration oversaw a crackdown on civil liberties and human rights, and stricter enforcement of the regime's morality laws.

The new government also adopted a more confrontational tone on foreign policy matters, feeding suspicions that its expanding uranium-enrichment activity, ostensibly devoted to generating electricity, was in fact aimed at weapons production. In an effort to compel Iran to halt the uranium enrichment, the UN Security Council imposed trade sanctions on the regime in December 2006, and expanded them over the subsequent four years as negotiations failed to make progress.

In the December 2006 municipal and Assembly of Experts elections, voters signaled their disapproval of the government's performance by supporting far more moderate officials. Carefully vetted conservative candidates won nearly 70 percent of the seats in the March 2008 parliamentary elections, but many were considered critics of Ahmadinejad, and particularly of his economic policies.

Despite crackdowns on human and women's rights activists and restrictions on internet freedom in the months prior to the June 2009 presidential election, supporters of all candidates seemed to enjoy a relatively relaxed and politically vibrant atmosphere. The Council of Guardians approved only three of 475 potential candidates to compete against Ahmadinejad, but all three were well-known and potentially formidable figures: Mir Hussein Mousavi, a reformist former prime minister; Mohsen Rezai, a conservative former head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC); and Mehdi Karroubi, a reformist former speaker of parliament and the only cleric approved. Mousavi emerged as the main challenger, confronting Ahmadinejad in unprecedented televised debates.

Polls indicated a close race, but Ahmadinejad was declared the winner soon after the election, credited with over 63 percent of the vote. Mousavi officially received only 33.75 percent, while Rezai and Karroubi reportedly garnered 1.73 percent and 0.85 percent, respectively. All three challengers lodged claims of fraud, and subsequent findings by independent analysts reinforced suspicions that irregularities had occurred. According to official data, the conservative vote increased by 113 percent compared with the 2005 election, and several provinces registered more votes than the number of eligible voters. In 10 provinces won by Ahmadinejad, his victory was only possible if he had secured the votes of all former nonvoters and all those who had voted for his main conservative opponent in 2005, as well as up to 44 percent of those who had previously voted for reformist candidates.

Protests broke out on a massive scale as voters rejected the official results. In a rare show of defiance, high-profile political figures publicly broke with Khamenei's validation of the election, with Khatami going so far as to publicly call for a referendum on the government's legitimacy. The security forces violently cracked down on all public expressions of dissent and tightened

government control of both online and traditional media, but protesters continued to mount periodic demonstrations for the rest of the year, using mobile-telephone cameras and the internet to document abuses and communicate with the outside world. Opposition street protests on February 11, 2010, which coincided with government-sponsored rallies to celebrate the 31st anniversary of the revolution, were met with rigorous security measures and represented a turning point in the protest movement. Backed by a sophisticated security and surveillance infrastructure, the government effectively crippled the opposition's ability to mount large-scale demonstrations for the rest of the year.

The postelection confrontations created a new political landscape, in which a loosely knit alliance of Revolutionary Guards and other hard-liners faced off against an increasingly frustrated Shiite clergy and politicians ranging from reformists to mainstream conservatives. The shift also included a deterioration of basic freedoms and a growing militarization of political affairs. In a sign of the hard-line leadership's concerns about dwindling popular and elite support, the parliament passed legislation in July 2010 that postponed local elections scheduled for the end of 2010 until 2013.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Iran is not an electoral democracy. The most powerful figure in the government is the supreme leader (*Vali-e-Faghih*), currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He is chosen by the Assembly of Experts, a body of 86 clerics who are elected to eight-year terms by popular vote, from a vetted list of candidates. The supreme leader, who has no fixed term, is head of the armed forces and appoints the leaders of the judiciary, the chiefs of state broadcast media, the commander of the IRGC, the Expediency Council, and half of the Council of Guardians. Although the president and the parliament, both with four-year terms, are responsible for designating cabinet ministers, the supreme leader exercises de facto control over appointments to the Ministries of Defense, the Interior, and Intelligence.

All candidates for the presidency and the 290-seat, unicameral parliament are vetted by the Council of Guardians, which consists of six clergymen appointed by the supreme leader and six civil law experts selected by the head of the judiciary, all for six-year terms (the latter are nominally subject to parliamentary approval). The Council of Guardians also has the power to reject legislation approved by the parliament; disputes between the two are arbitrated by the Expediency Council, another unelected, conservative-dominated body. Both it and the Assembly of Experts are currently headed by former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who has at times sided with the reformist camp to curb the influence of his rival, current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Opposition politicians and party groupings have faced especially harsh repression since the 2009 presidential election, with many leaders—including former lawmakers and cabinet ministers—facing arrest, prison sentences, and lengthy bans on political activity. In April 2010, a court banned two major reformist parties, the Islamic Action Participation Front and the Islamic Revolution Mujahedeen Organization, for violating Article 16 of the Parties Law, whose vague language bars collusion with foreign powers.

The IRGC's influence within Iran continues to grow, as it now wields military, political, and economic power. Former members of the IRGC, including Ahmadinejad, hold key positions within the government, and its commercial arms have been awarded the right of first refusal for government contracts, some of which have been extremely lucrative.

Corruption is pervasive. The hard-line clerical establishment has grown immensely wealthy through its control of tax-exempt foundations that monopolize many sectors of the economy, such as cement and sugar production. In 2008, Abbas Palizdar, a member of the parliament's Investigative Committee, accused high-ranking officials and senior clerics of corruption and nepotism, but he and his staff were subsequently arrested and charged by a court in 2009 with "spreading falsehoods, disclosing government secrets, and endangering national security. In May 2010, Palizdar's jail sentence was commuted from ten to six years in prison. Meanwhile, the Ahmadinejad government's wealth-redistribution projects have effectively catered almost exclusively to military and paramilitary groups. The administration has also reduced the independence of state financial

watchdogs and the Central Bank, further damaging fiscal transparency. Iran was ranked 146 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is severely limited. The government directly controls all television and radio broadcasting. Satellite dishes are illegal, and while they are generally tolerated, there have been increasing reports of dish confiscation and steep fines. The authorities have had some success in jamming broadcasts by dissident satellite stations based overseas, and cooperation with Persian-language satellite channels is banned. Even the purchase of satellite images from abroad is illegal. The Ministry of Culture must approve publication of all books and inspects foreign books prior to domestic distribution.

The authorities frequently issue ad hoc orders banning media coverage of specific topics and events. The foreign media were banned from covering the postelection demonstrations in 2009, and reporters from a number of countries were arrested and temporarily detained during the year. Five foreign journalists were arrested during demonstrations in February 2010 and later released. At least one Iranian reporter was jailed in 2010 for giving an interview to a foreign news outlet. Two German journalists remained in prison at year's end, having been arrested in October after interviewing the son and lawyer of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani, a woman who had been sentenced to death by stoning for adultery.

Iranian filmmakers are subject to tight restrictions, and many have been arrested or harassed since the 2009 election. In 2010, the Culture Ministry prescribed one-year bans for filmmakers involved in the production of unlicensed films, including those screened abroad.

The Press Court has extensive power to prosecute journalists for such vaguely worded offenses as "insulting Islam" and "damaging the foundations of the Islamic Republic." The use of "suspicious sources" or sources that criticize the government is also forbidden. Numerous periodicals were closed for morality or security offenses during 2010, including *Etemad*, which was edited by a former lawmaker and had called for the investigation of brutality by the IRGC-led Basij militia on university campuses, and *Iran Dokht*, which was managed by the son of opposition leader Mehdi Karroubi and had previously been raided by militia members.

Iran leads the world in the number of jailed journalists, with 37 behind bars at the close of 2010 and many serving lengthy prison sentences. Several dozen other journalists were arrested and released on bail during the year, often after they issued coerced confessions on television.

Internet penetration has skyrocketed in recent years, and individuals used mobile-telephone cameras and social-networking websites to provide some of the only independent coverage of the postelection crackdown in 2009. However, recognizing the internet's growing influence, the government has forced service providers to block a growing list of "immoral" or politically sensitive sites, and the country has developed one of the most expansive and sophisticated internet surveillance and filtering frameworks in the world. Key international social-media websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were blocked after the 2009 election, and the list of disabled political sites continued to grow in 2010, hampering the opposition's ability to communicate and organize. Former president Mohammad Khatami's website was blocked in October, and Iranian-Canadian blogger Hossein Derakhshan was sentenced in September to over 19 years in prison for alleged "cooperation with hostile states" and other charges.

Religious freedom is limited in Iran, whose population is largely Shiite Muslim but includes Sunni Muslim, Baha'i, Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian minorities. The Special Court for the Clergy investigates religious figures for alleged crimes and has generally been used to persecute clerics who stray from the official interpretation of Islam. Ayatollah Seyd Hussain Kazemeini Boroujerdi, a cleric who advocates the separation of religion and politics, is currently serving 11 years in prison for his beliefs. Notwithstanding the court's deterrent effect, senior clerics of many political persuasions have refused to endorse Ahmadinejad or side with Khamenei on the postelection crackdown. Grand Ayatollah Ali-Mohammad Dastgheib went so far as to challenge the authority of the supreme leader in September 2010.

Sunnis enjoy equal rights under the law but face discrimination in practice; there is no Sunni mosque in Tehran, and few Sunnis hold senior government posts. The Sunni militant group

Jundallah, associated with the ethnic Baluchi minority, has waged a campaign of bombings and other attacks on the government in recent years. In 2010, Jundallah leader Abdolmalek Rigand his brother were arrested and executed. The group vowed revenge, and government forces maintained a heavy security presence in the Baluchi region.

Sufi Muslims have also faced persecution by the authorities. The constitution recognizes Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as religious minorities, and they are generally allowed to worship without interference, so long as they do not proselytize. Conversion by Muslims to a non-Muslim religion is punishable by death. The non-Muslim minorities are barred from election to representative bodies (though a set number of parliamentary seats are reserved for them), cannot hold senior government or military positions, and face restrictions in employment, education, and property ownership.

Some 300,000 Baha'is, Iran's largest non-Muslim minority, are not recognized in the constitution, enjoy virtually no rights under the law, and are banned from practicing their faith. Baha'i students are barred from attending university and prevented from obtaining their educational records. Under Ahmadinejad, concerted efforts to intimidate, imprison, and physically attack Baha'is have been carried out by security forces, paramilitary groups, and ordinary citizens with impunity. Hundreds of Baha'is have been executed since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and at least 60 were in prison in 2010 because of their beliefs. In August 2010, seven Baha'i leaders—which constituted the group's entire leadership—were sentenced to 20 years in prison, later reduced to 10 years, on charges of espionage and "engaging in propaganda against Islam." Since October 2010, numerous arson attacks against Baha'i homes and businesses in the city of Rafsanjan have been carried out in order to force them out of their communities.

Academic freedom is limited. Scholars are frequently detained, threatened, and forced to retire for expressing political views, and students involved in organizing protests face suspension or expulsion in addition to criminal punishments. Since the 2009 presidential election, Basij units have increased their presence on campuses. Khamenei demanded in September 2010 that all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences be terminated. In October, the government stated that it was scrutinizing degree programs in law, women's studies, human rights, management, sociology, philosophy, psychology, education, political science, art, and culture to ensure their commitment to Islamic principles. While students were still being accepted for these programs, no further funding for liberal arts and humanities would be made available.

The constitution prohibits public demonstrations that "violate the principles of Islam," a vague provision that was regularly invoked in 2009 and 2010 to deny permit requests. Vigilante and paramilitary organizations that are officially or tacitly sanctioned by the government—most notably the Basij and Ansar-i Hezbollah—regularly play a major role in breaking up demonstrations. Heavy mobilizations of these forces helped to prevent large-scale opposition rallies during 2010. The effort included intimidation, physical attacks, and severe restrictions on freedom of movement targeting opposition leaders and their families.

Under the pretense of "countering immoral behavior," the government also disrupts private gatherings. The Basij carried out thousands of home raids in 2007, arresting more than 150,000 people and forcing them to sign letters promising to observe official dress codes and adhere to moral standards.

The constitution permits the establishment of political parties, professional syndicates, and other civic organizations, provided that they do not violate the principles of "freedom, sovereignty, and national unity" or question the Islamic basis of the republic. Human rights discourse and grassroots activism are integral parts of Iranian society. However, the security services routinely arrest and harass secular activists as part of a wider effort to control nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Although permits are not required by law, the Ministry of the Interior has been imposing them and shutting down organizations that do not seek or qualify for them. In March 2010, the judiciary stated that it had arrested 30 human rights defenders, who it claimed were collaborating with foreign intelligence services.

Iranian law does not allow independent labor unions, though workers' councils are represented in the Workers' House, the only legal labor federation. In 2009, union members throughout the

country were attacked and arrested by security forces for participating in May Day celebrations, and many others were targeted after the presidential election. In 2010, a large-scale strike over tax increases by Iran's influential bazaar merchants initially led to confrontations between the traders and Basij units that attempted to forcibly open bazaars, but Ahmadinejad ultimately offered concessions to calm the dispute.

The judicial system is not independent, as the supreme leader directly appoints the head of the judiciary, who in turn appoints senior judges. General Courts ostensibly safeguard the rights of defendants, but in practice suspects are frequently tried in closed sessions without access to legal counsel. Dissident clerics are tried before the Special Court for the Clergy. Political and other sensitive cases are tried before Revolutionary Courts, where due process protections are routinely disregarded and trials are often summary. Since the summer of 2009, hundreds of journalists and dissidents have been convicted of national security crimes in televised mass trials and secret Revolutionary Court proceedings, none of which met international human rights standards. Televised denunciations and confessions, which are generally believed to have been coerced, continued during 2010. In the most prominent example, the husband of human rights activist and 2003 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi denounced his wife on state television in June 2010. Judges commonly accept coerced confessions and disregard torture or abuse during detention.

The country's penal code is based on Sharia and provides for flogging, amputation, and execution by stoning or hanging for a range of social and political offenses; these punishments are carried out in practice. Ashtiani, the woman sentenced to death by stoning in August 2010, had not been executed by year's end amid international condemnation of the case. Iran's overall execution rate has increased significantly under Ahmadinejad, with up to 399 people put to death in 2009 and 337 in 2010. While the majority were executed for drug-related offenses, a number of prisoners have received the death sentence for their involvement in protests. Throughout the year, government, judicial, and parliamentary officials publicly called for detained protesters to be executed as rebels and saboteurs. Contrary to Iran's obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the judiciary continues to execute juvenile offenders. In 2010, at least one such inmate was executed, and 141 others remained on death row. The government had announced in 2008 that it would no longer execute juveniles, but it later clarified that the death penalty remained an option under the parallel "retribution" system, in which the sentence is imposed by the victim's family rather than the state. This would be allowed for male offenders over the age of 15 and female offenders as young as nine.

Although the constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, such abuses are increasingly routine, and family members of detainees are often not notified for days or weeks. Suspected dissidents are frequently held in unofficial, illegal detention centers. Prison conditions in general are notoriously poor, and there are regular allegations of abuse, torture, and death in custody. Male and female detainees alleged rape by security forces in the second half of 2009; after Karroubi released a detainee's first-hand account of rape on his website that year, prosecutors initiated a case against him. The rape claims were reinforced when a former member of the Basij confessed that security personnel were permitted to rape detainees as a "reward" for their work. Tehran prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi and two other judicial officials were suspended in August 2010 for their roles in the torture of detainees and the deaths of three opposition activists, but they were not arrested or charged with a crime. Twelve correctional officers accused of torture and the deaths of the three prisoners were brought before a court in March, but information on the proceedings was not disclosed, and it was unclear whether they were ever sentenced.

The constitution and laws call for equal rights for all ethnic groups, but in practice these rights are restricted by the authorities. Ethnic Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, and Azeris complain of political and economic discrimination. Kurdish opposition groups suspected of separatist aspirations, such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), are brutally suppressed. The Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), a separatist militant group linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey, has conducted a number of guerrilla attacks in recent years and was declared a terrorist organization by the United States in 2009. Iranian efforts to combat the PJAK have included raids into Kurdish territory in neighboring Iraq. In May 2010, Iranian authorities executed four Kurdish prisoners who were accused of belonging to separatist groups, a charge their lawyer denied. Their bodies were not released to their families, bolstering claims that their confessions had been coerced

through torture and sexual violence.

Freedom of movement is routinely restricted in Iran. Political activists are often banned from leaving the country after release from detention, and security services have been known to confiscate passports or interrogate travelers on their return from conferences abroad. In April 2010, Khatami was refused permission to leave the country to attend a conference in Japan.

Women are widely educated; a majority of university students are female, and 94 percent of secondary-school-aged girls attend school, compared with only 80 percent of boys. Women currently hold seats in the parliament, though they are routinely excluded from running for higher offices. Twice-elected parliament member Marzieh Vahid-Dastjerdi became Iran's first female cabinet minister in September 2009, when she was appointed to head the Health Ministry. However, female judges may not issue final verdicts, and a woman cannot obtain a passport without the permission of her husband or a male relative. Women do not enjoy equal rights under Sharia-based statutes governing divorce, inheritance, and child custody, though some of these inequalities are accompanied by greater familial and financial obligations for men. A woman's testimony in court is given only half the weight of a man's, and the monetary damages awarded to a female victim's family upon her death is half that owed to the family of a male victim. Women must conform to strict dress codes and are segregated from men in some public places, and there has been a crackdown in recent years on women deemed to be dressed immodestly.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*