

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Events of 2006



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Respect for basic human rights in Iran, especially freedom of expression and assembly, deteriorated in 2006. The government routinely tortures and mistreats detained dissidents, including through prolonged solitary confinement. The Judiciary, which is accountable to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, is responsible for many serious human rights violations.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's cabinet is dominated by former intelligence and security officials, some of whom have been implicated in serious human rights violations, such as the assassination of dissident intellectuals. Under his administration, the Ministry of Information, which essentially performs intelligence functions, has substantially increased its surveillance of dissidents, civil society activists, and journalists.

Iranian authorities systematically suppress freedom of expression and opinion by closing newspapers and imprisoning journalists and editors. The few independent dailies that remain heavily self-censor. Many writers and intellectuals have left the country, are in prison, or have ceased to be critical. In September 2006 the Ministry of Culture and Guidance closed the reformist daily, *Shargh*, and shut down two reformist journals, *Nameh* and *Hafez*. In October the Ministry shut down a new reformist daily, *Roozgar*, only three days after it started publication. During the year the Ministry of Information summoned and interrogated dozens of journalists critical of the government.

In 2006 the authorities also targeted websites and internet journalists in an effort to prevent online dissemination of news and information. The government systematically blocks websites inside Iran and abroad that carry political news and analysis. In September 2006 Esmail Radkani, director-general of the government-controlled Information Technology Company, announced that his company is blocking access to 10 million "unauthorized" websites on orders from the Judiciary and other authorities.

The Ahmadinejad government, in a pronounced shift from the policy under former president Mohammed Khatami, has shown no tolerance for peaceful protests and gatherings. In January 2006 security forces attacked striking bus drivers in Tehran and detained hundreds. The government refused to recognize the drivers' independent union or engage in collective bargaining with them. In February government forces attacked a peaceful gathering of Sufi devotees in front of their religious building in Qum to prevent its destruction by the authorities, using tear gas and water cannons to disperse them. In March police and plainclothes agents charged a peaceful assembly of women's rights activists in Tehran and beat hundreds of women and men who had gathered to commemorate International Women's Day. In June as women's rights defenders assembled again in Tehran, security forces beat them with batons, sprayed them with pepper gas, marked the demonstrators with sprayed dye, and took 70 people into custody.

Since President Ahmadinejad came to power, treatment of detainees has worsened in Evin prison as well as in detention centers operated clandestinely by the Judiciary, the Ministry of Information, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The authorities have subjected those imprisoned for peaceful expression of political views to torture and ill-treatment, including beatings, sleep deprivation, and mock executions. Judges often accept coerced confessions. The authorities use prolonged solitary confinement, often in small basement cells, to coerce confessions (which are videotaped) and gain information regarding associates.

In 2006 two prisoners held for their political beliefs, Akbar Mohammadi and Valiollah Feyz Mahdavi, died in suspicious circumstances in prison. The authorities prevented their families from conducting independent autopsies. The government has taken no action to investigate the cause of the deaths.

There is no mechanism for monitoring and investigating human rights violations perpetrated by agents of the government. The closure of independent media in Iran has helped to perpetuate an atmosphere of impunity.

In recent years public testimonies by numerous former prisoners and detainees have implicated Tehran's public prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi and his office in some of the worst cases of human rights violations. Despite extensive evidence, Mortazavi has not been held responsible for his role in illegal detentions, torture of detainees, and coercing false confessions. The case of Iranian-Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi, who died in the custody of judiciary and security agents led by Mortazavi in June 2003, remains unresolved. Mustapha Pour-Mohammadi, the current interior minister, is implicated in extrajudicial massacres of thousands of political prisoners in 1988.

In 2006 the authorities intensified their harassment of independent human rights defenders and lawyers in an attempt to prevent them from publicizing and pursuing human rights violations. In August the Interior Ministry declared illegal the Center for Defense of Human Rights, led by Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner. Ebadi and her colleagues provide pro-bono legal counsel to hundreds of dissidents, journalists, and students facing prosecution for exercising fundamental freedoms, such as peacefully protesting or criticizing government policies. The authorities threatened Ebadi and her colleagues with arrest should they continue their activities in defense of human rights. Following international protests, the government has not carried out its threat, but Ebadi and her colleagues remain vulnerable.

In June 2006 government agents arrested Ali Akbar Mousavi Khoini, a former member of parliament and outspoken critic of the government's human rights record. The authorities held him in solitary confinement without access to his lawyers for more than four months. The Judiciary released him on October 21, only after he posted \$300,000 bail. During a brief release to attend his father's funeral in September, he publicly alleged that he was being tortured and forced to "repent" for his activities.

Iran has executed at least 13 juvenile offenders in the last five years, more than any other nation. On May 11, 2006, Iran executed Majid Segound and Masoud Naghi Biranvand, both 17 years old at the time of execution. Two youths scheduled to be executed on September 20, 2006, for murders committed while under 18 had their executions suspended when the victims' families agreed to accept blood money in lieu of execution. About 30 juvenile offenders are on death row.

Iran's ethnic and religious minorities are subject to discrimination and, in some cases, persecution. In May Iranian Azeris in the northwestern provinces of East and West Azerbaijan and Ardebil demonstrated against government restrictions on Azeri language and cultural and political activities. Security services forcibly disrupted public protests that engulfed the region. In some protests demonstrators attacked government offices. Four people died in clashes in the city of Naghadeh on May 25.

In the southwestern province of Khuzistan, unrest among Iran's Arab population intensified in 2006. Revolutionary Courts, following secret proceedings that did not meet international fair trial standards, condemned at least 16 Iranians of Arab origin to death on charges of armed activity against the state.

The government continues to deny Iran's Baha'i community permission to publicly worship or pursue religious activities. In a letter dated October 29, 2005, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei instructed several government organs, including the Ministry of Information and the armed forces, "to acquire a comprehensive and complete report of all the activities of Baha'is for the purpose of identifying all the individuals of these misguided sects." In May the authorities arrested 54 Baha'i youth who were teaching English, math, and other non-religious subjects to underprivileged children in the southern city of Shiraz. None of the Baha'i youth were charged with a crime. All but three were released after a week of detention and the remaining three were released on June 14, 2006.

In 2006 negotiations over Iran's nuclear program dominated the policy of the European Union towards Iran, with human rights concerns a secondary matter. The EU pledged to tie Iranian respect for human rights to progress in co-operation on other issues, but the pledge had little impact. Iran refused to resume its "human rights dialogue" with the EU that it had suspended in 2005, despite the EU's repeated calls to do so.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution in November 2005 noting serious violations and the worsening human rights situation in Iran. Under a standing invitation that Tehran issued in 2002 to the thematic mechanisms of the UN Commission on Human Rights, the special rapporteur on violence against women, Yakin Ertrk, visited Iran in February 2005. In a January 2006 report she highlighted "discriminatory provisions in both the Civil and Penal Codes, and flaws in the administration of justice," resulting in disempowerment of women. The special rapporteur on adequate housing, Miloon Kothari, visited Iran in August 2005 and issued a report in March 2006. In his March 2006 report he raised several concerns about discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities and nomadic groups, among other things.

Iran has not responded to requests by the UN special rapporteurs on extrajudicial executions and torture, made in 2004 and 2005 respectively, to visit the country.

The Bush Administration remains divided on its Iran policy, and relations between the United States and Iran remain poor. The State Department frequently invoked Iran's human rights record as a matter of concern. In February the State Department budgeted US\$75 million "to support democracy promotion activities in Iran," but a vast majority of Iranian dissidents, human rights defenders, and civil society activists inside Iran publicly dissociated themselves from the initiative, making clear they do not seek any financial help from the American government. The administration did not utilize multilateral international institutions to address human rights violations in Iran, in contrast to its vigorous efforts to build international coalitions in response to Iran's alleged drive to acquire nuclear weapons and its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and armed groups in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

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