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The Human Rights Crisis in Iran: the Islamic Republic Continues to Crack Down on Dissent with Impunity

By Renee C. Redman, Esq.¹
November 9, 2009

On June 12, 2009, shortly after the polls closed, the Iranian government announced that the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had won the presidential election by a landslide. His main challengers, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, immediately disputed this conclusion on the grounds of fraud and called for new elections. Massive street demonstrations broke out protesting the reported result and in support of the opposition.

The government's brutal crackdown on protestors filled the headlines during the ensuing weeks. The world witnessed Iranian authorities beating, arresting and killing protestors. The incidence of large-scale demonstrations soon diminished and the human rights crisis in Iran became less visible as the government clamped down on accessibility of information. It has prevented foreign journalists from effectively reporting from the country, and continues to arrest Iranian journalists (the latest count is over 100). IHRDC has received reports that an increasing number of journalists are being forced to flee the country. The government also shut down organizations that were investigating allegations of abuse, including the campaign offices of Mousavi and Karoubi, as well as the Association to Defend Prisoners Rights.

However, the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC) is concerned that the human rights crisis in Iran is escalating. The Iranian government has continued to arrest hundreds - if not thousands - of dissenters, held mass show trials, convicted defendants based on forced confessions and reportedly without the assistance of their chosen lawyers, and, recently, began issuing summary death sentences to members of opposition movements. History shows that these events are not random, and that they are clear signs of a systematic and on-going deadly crackdown on all levels and forms of dissent. They continue a pattern of human rights violations by the Islamic Republic that must be challenged by the international community.

¹ Executive Director, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC) is an independent non-profit organization founded in 2004 by human rights scholars and lawyers. The mission of the Center is to (1) establish a comprehensive and objective historical record of the human rights situation in Iran since the 1979 revolution, and on the basis of that record, establish responsibility for patterns of human rights violations, (2) make the record available in an archive that is accessible to the public for research and educational purposes, (3) promote accountability, respect for human rights and the rule of law in Iran, and (4) encourage an informed dialogue on the human rights situation in Iran among scholars and the general public in Iran and abroad.

IHRDC is currently preparing a report on human rights violations perpetrated by Iranian authorities following the election. The report will be based on interviews of witnesses, as well as a detailed analysis of statements and documents issued by official Iranian news outlets, opposition figures in Iran, witnesses to violations and events, and others. It will also provide a legal analysis of the government's crackdown under both Iranian and international law.

Demonstrations

The demonstrations that broke out immediately following the announcement that Ahmadinejad had won the elections were brutally quashed. Peaceful demonstrators throughout the country were beaten, killed and arrested. The government claimed that about 4000 demonstrators were arrested and that about 300 remained in detention. The government has put the official death toll at 20. However, 72 deaths have been reliably reported, and the final number will be undoubtedly higher, as more demonstration-related deaths come to light. Tragically, there are reports that families continue to belatedly learn of the deaths of their loved ones and/or the location of their remains.

While the numbers and scale of demonstrations waned due to the crackdown, large demonstrations continue to regularly take place. Hundreds of people were reportedly arrested before and during the demonstrations that were broken up with beatings and tear gas.

Arrests and Detention

Immediately following the elections, the authorities also began arresting individuals considered to be threats to the government's authority, including reformers, journalists, minority and human rights activists, lawyers, academics and students. While many people have reportedly been released, hundreds remain in prison without access to their chosen lawyers or families. There are reliable reports that they are suffering from brutal conditions including torture, rape, lack of health care and solitary confinement.

The arrests of dissenters continue. It has been reported that over 100 journalists have been arrested. 400 people were reportedly arrested before the November 4 anniversary celebration of the taking of the American hostages thirty years ago.

Mass Show Trials and Death Sentences

On August 1, the first session of a mass show trial took place in Tehran. One hundred defendants were shown in prison uniforms, many appearing thin, dazed and confused. They included supporters of opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, as well as former government officials, including Muhammad Ali Abtahi (a former Vice President), and Muhammad Atrianfar (a former deputy interior minister). Among the defendants were several dual-citizens and journalists.

A political statement called an “indictment” was read. The “indictment” was not a legal document but quoted alleged confessions, including that the charges of election fraud were false. The charges included planning a velvet revolution, threats to national security through social unrest and collusion aimed at disrupting public security, participating in riots, dissemination of CDs and posters aimed at incitement, and communication with foreign media and networks.

Ten defendants were added the next day, and a second public session was held a week later on August 8. At that session, a second “indictment” was read charging many groups with seeking to overthrow the government, including the Royalist Society and the Mojahedin-e Khalq (Mojahedin), a Marxist-Islamic Party that engaged in violence in the past in an effort to overthrow former Supreme Leader Khomeini. Three more sessions reportedly have been held. At the fourth session, defendants included leaders of Islamic Iran Participation Front (a reformist group), Kian Tajbakhsh (an Iranian-American social scientist), and three journalists. These mass trials and accompanying “indictments” are meant to instill fear in the Iranian population. Thus far, several defendants have been sentenced to terms of imprisonment and whippings based on forced confessions. Mr. Tajbakhsh was reportedly sentenced to between 12 and 15 years imprisonment.

At least four of the 100 defendants have been sentenced to death. Three were arrested before the elections. The fourth was charged with membership in the Mojahedin. The first, Mohammad Reza Ali-Zamani, a 37-year-old Iranian, was arrested in April, and was the first defendant at the August 8 session. His indictment, signed by then-prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi, charged Ali-Zamani with *muharibih* (waging war against God) through membership in the Royalist Society, insulting what is holy, propaganda activity against the Islamic regime, actions against national security and illegally exiting Iran.

It is believed that Ali-Zamani was not permitted to use his own attorney. His conviction was based on his lengthy confession, which was shown on state television in August. He said that Royalist contacts in London and Los Angeles introduced him to American agents in Iraqi Kurdistan, and that he and others were to infiltrate the campaign offices of candidates, the university and labor unions. He had been sent back to Iran to cause confusion among the people and decrease their participation in voting. He also said that he had met an Israeli agent for whom he was to compile information to be sent to Washington DC. He said that he was arrested before he was able to take any action.

Two other alleged monarchists were sentenced to death a few days later: Arash Pour-Rahmani, and Hamed Rouhinejad. Naser Abdul Hosseini was sentenced for his alleged membership in the Mojahedin.

Executions

Executions are not unusual in Iran. Iran is second only to China in the number of people it executes. The Iranian government has reported 219 executions in 2009 – 115 during the period between the June 12 elections and Ahmadinejad’s inauguration on August 5. On October 11, Behnoud Shojaii, a juvenile offender, was hung.

However, the selection of these particular post-election defendants for execution – alleged members of groups that seek to overthrow the Islamic Republic - are not random. The death sentences based on forced confessions for actions that are not subject to the death penalty under Iranian law are eerily similar to those that were handed out during the summer of 1988 when an ailing Supreme Leader Khomeini ordered the summary execution of political prisoners.

The 1988 prison massacre

In late July 1988, the Islamic Republic of Iran began summarily interrogating, torturing and executing thousands of political prisoners throughout the country. The massacre continued into the fall. Well-planned and deliberately accomplished in secret, the massacre effectively eliminated any remaining political opposition to then-Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini's rule.

Although the exact number of victims is not known, thousands of prisoners were tortured and executed over the course of only a few months. The victims included prisoners who had served their sentences but had refused to recant their political beliefs, prisoners who were serving sentences of imprisonment, people who had been detained for lengthy periods but had not been convicted, and former prisoners who were rearrested. Many had been arrested when they were teenagers for commission of low-level offenses such as distribution of pamphlets. The political views of the victims stretched from support for the Mojahedin to support for the Tudeh Party, a secular Marxist party that until 1983, supported the regime.

The executions began pursuant to a *fatwa* issued by Ayatollah Khomeini immediately following Iran's announcement that it had agreed to a cease-fire in the devastating eight-year Iran-Iraq war. The *fatwa* created three-man commissions to determine who should be executed. The commissions, known by prisoners as Death Commissions, questioned prisoners about their political and religious beliefs, and depending on the answers, determined who should be executed and/or tortured. The questioning was brief, not public, there were no appeals, and prisoners were executed the same day or soon thereafter. Many secularists who were not executed immediately were tortured until their either died or agreed to pray.

The Iranian government has never identified those who were executed and tortured, and has never issued an official explanation for why political prisoners of different beliefs, many of whom had been imprisoned for years, were suddenly executed in the summer of 1988. By that time, most of the Mojahedin leaders had left the country or been killed, and the majority of the Mojahedin prisoners were from the lower ranks. Tudeh and other leftist parties had basically ceased to exist in Iran. Many of those executed had been convicted of relatively minor offenses—the more serious offenders had been executed in prior purges.

Today, Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini is reportedly ailing, and the Iranian government feels its hold on power is threatened. In response, it is holding mass trials with “indictments” that are little more than political propaganda, and sentencing people based

on forced confessions. In an apparent belief that neither the Iranian people nor the international community will object, the first defendants to be sentenced to death are alleged members of political groups that seek to overthrow the government – not reformists. However, the sentences remain unlawful under both Iranian and international law, and there is every reason to believe that more will follow. The Islamic Republic must be held accountable by the world for these and its other violations of human rights.