

# IRAN 2020 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Islamic Republic of Iran is an authoritarian theocratic republic with a Shia Islamic political system based on *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist). Shia clergy, most notably the *rahbar* (supreme leader), and political leaders vetted by the clergy dominate key power structures. The supreme leader is the head of state. The members of the Assembly of Experts are nominally directly elected in popular elections. The assembly selects and may dismiss the supreme leader. The candidates for the Assembly of Experts, however, are vetted by the Guardian Council (see below) and are therefore selected indirectly by the supreme leader himself. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has held the position since 1989. He has direct or indirect control over the legislative and executive branches of government through unelected councils under his authority. The supreme leader holds constitutional authority over the judiciary, government-run media, and other key institutions. While mechanisms for popular election exist for the president, who is head of government, and for the Islamic Consultative Assembly (parliament or *majles*), the unelected Guardian Council vets candidates, routinely disqualifying them based on political or other considerations, and controls the election process. The supreme leader appoints half of the 12-member Guardian Council, while the head of the judiciary (who is appointed by the supreme leader) appoints the other half. Presidential elections held in 2017 and parliamentary elections held during the year were not considered free and fair.

The supreme leader holds ultimate authority over all security agencies. Several agencies share responsibility for law enforcement and maintaining order, including the Ministry of Intelligence and Security and law enforcement forces under the Interior Ministry, which report to the president, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which reports directly to the supreme leader. The Basij, a volunteer paramilitary group with local organizations across the country, sometimes acted as an auxiliary law enforcement unit subordinate to Revolutionary Guard ground forces. The Revolutionary Guard and the national army, or Artesh, provided external defense. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. Members of the security forces committed numerous abuses throughout the year.

Government officials materially contributed to human rights abuses not only against Iranians, but also in Syria, through their military support for Syrian president Bashar Assad and Hizballah forces; in Iraq, through aid to pro-Iran Iraqi

militia groups; and in Yemen, through support for Houthi rebels (see the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Syria, Iraq, and Yemen).

Significant human rights issues included: numerous reports of unlawful or arbitrary killings, most commonly executions for crimes not meeting the international legal standard of “most serious crimes” and without fair trials of individuals, including juvenile offenders; forced disappearance and torture by government agents, as well as systematic use of arbitrary detention and imprisonment; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; hundreds of political prisoners and detainees; serious problems with independence of the judiciary, particularly the revolutionary courts; unlawful interference with privacy; severe restrictions on free expression, the press, and the internet, including violence, threats of violence, and unjustified arrests and prosecutions against journalists, censorship, site blocking, and criminalization of libel and slander; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; severe restrictions on religious freedom; restrictions on political participation through arbitrary candidate vetting; widespread corruption at all levels of government; lack of meaningful investigation of and accountability for violence against women; unlawful recruitment of child soldiers by government actors to support the Assad regime in Syria; trafficking in persons; violence against ethnic minorities; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons; criminalization of consensual same-sex sexual conduct; significant restrictions on workers’ freedom of association; and the worst forms of child labor.

The government effectively took no steps to investigate, prosecute, punish, or otherwise hold accountable officials who committed these abuses, many of which were perpetrated as a matter of government policy. This included the killing of at least 304 persons during suppression of widespread protests in November 2019 and abuses and numerous suspicious deaths in custody from previous years. Impunity remained pervasive throughout all levels of the government and security forces.

## **Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:**

### **a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings**

The government and its agents reportedly committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, most commonly by execution after arrest and trial without due process, or for crimes that did not meet the international threshold of “most serious crimes.”

Media and human rights groups also documented suspicious deaths while in custody or following beatings of protesters by security forces throughout the year.

As documented by international human rights observers, revolutionary courts continued to issue the vast majority of death sentences and failed to grant defendants due process. The courts denied defendants legal representation and in most cases solely considered as evidence confessions extracted through torture. Judges may also impose the death penalty on appeal, which deterred appeals in criminal cases. According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Human Rights Activists in Iran, the government did not disclose accurate numbers of those executed and kept secret as many as 60 percent of executions. As of October 12, NGOs Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC), Human Rights News Activists (HRANA), and the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center reported there were close to 200 executions during the year, while the government officially announced only 36 executions in that time period. The government often did not release further information, such as names of those executed, execution dates, or crimes for which they were executed.

On December 12, according to widespread media reporting, authorities executed opposition journalist and activist Ruhollah Zam after sentencing him to death in June on five charges including “corruption on earth.” On December 8, the judiciary announced that the Supreme Court upheld a revolutionary court of Tehran’s death sentence. Zam was editor of a website and a popular channel on the social media platform *Telegram* called *Amad News*, which he managed from France, where he lived since 2011 under political asylum. Zam’s *Telegram* account had more than one million followers, and he used it to post information on Iranian officials and share logistics regarding protests in the country in 2017 and 2018. According to media reports, as part of an Iranian-led intelligence operation, Zam was lured to a business meeting in Iraq in 2019 and captured there by Iranian security agents. Zam appeared on state-affiliated news outlets soon after his detention and purportedly “confessed” to his alleged crimes, before an investigation or the judicial process had commenced. In February, Zam’s initial trial was held without the presence of a defense lawyer.

On September 12, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW) and widespread media reports, authorities executed professional wrestler Navid Afkari convicted of murdering a sanitation worker, who was also a law enforcement officer, during antigovernment protests in 2018 in Shiraz. Authorities arrested Afkari and his brother Vahid one month after the protests and charged them with taking part in illegal demonstrations, insulting the supreme leader, robbery, and “enmity against

God.” In early September the Supreme Court upheld a death sentence imposed upon conviction by a criminal court in Shiraz against Navid and a 25-year prison sentence for Vahid convicted of assisting in the alleged murder, while simultaneously dismissing the brothers’ allegations that security officials obtained their confessions under torture and used as “evidence” against them a forced confession broadcast on state television Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). Five UN special rapporteurs condemned the execution as “summary” and concluded that it appeared to have been used by the government “as a warning to its population in a climate of increasing social unrest.” According to HRANA, on December 17, authorities arrested Afkari’s father and a different brother as they sought to clear a site in Fars Province to install a gravestone memorializing Navid Afkari’s death.

In March and April, thousands of prisoners in at least eight prisons across the country, many in provinces home to Ahwazi Arabs, staged protests regarding fears of contracting COVID-19. Prison authorities and security forces responded with live ammunition and tear gas to suppress the protests, killing approximately 35 prisoners and injuring hundreds of others, according to Amnesty International (see sections 1.b., 1.c., and 6, National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities).

UN human rights experts stated they were disturbed to hear authorities reacted to these prison riots by using “torture and ill-treatment that results in extrajudicial killings, or [through] executions.” In April, NGOs alleged authorities hastily executed political prisoner Mostafa Salimi, following his extradition from Iraq after escaping from prison during riots. Security forces initially arrested Salimi in 2003 and charged him with “enmity against God” for being a member of a Kurdish opposition party and allegedly engaging in armed conflict. On March 27, Salimi escaped during a riot that reportedly broke out due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus in Saqqez Prison. He crossed the border into the Iraqi Kurdistan Region before being extradited back to Iran without an opportunity to apply for asylum.

The Islamic penal code allows for the execution of juvenile offenders starting at age nine for girls and age 13 for boys, the legal age of maturity. The government continued to execute individuals sentenced for crimes committed before the age 18. In April, UN human rights experts expressed concern for the up to 90 individuals on death row for alleged offenses committed when they were younger than age 18.

According to widespread media, the United Nations, and NGO reports, in April authorities carried out two executions for conviction of crimes committed by

juveniles. Majid Esmailzadeh, arrested in 2012 as a minor for allegedly committing murder, convicted, and executed in a prison in Ardabil Province. A few days later, authorities in Saqqez Prison executed by hanging Shayan Saeedpour for conviction of committing murder in 2015 when he was age 17. Saeedpour escaped from Saqqez Prison during COVID-19 related riots in March; he was rearrested a few days later.

On April 22, the UN High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) highlighted the death of Danial Zeinoalebedini, who died early April in prison from abuse while facing execution for a crime committed in 2017 when he was age 17. Security officials allegedly beat Zeinoalebedini to death in Miandoab Prison in West Azerbaijan Province after they transferred him from Mahabad Prison with other prisoners who had rioted because of COVID-19 concerns.

According to Amnesty International, authorities executed four persons in 2019 who were minors at the time of their alleged crimes--Amin Sedaghat, Mehdi Sohrabifar, Amir Ali Shadabi, and Touraj Aziz (Azizdeh) Ghassemi.

According to human rights organizations and media reports, the government continued to carry out some executions by torture, including hanging by cranes. Prisoners are lifted from the ground by their necks and die slowly by asphyxiation. In addition adultery remains punishable by death by stoning, although provincial authorities were reportedly ordered not to provide public information regarding stoning sentences since 2001, according to the NGO Justice for Iran.

Although the majority of executions during the year were reportedly for murder, the law also provides for the death penalty in cases of conviction for “attempts against the security of the state,” “outrage against high-ranking officials,” *moharebeh* (which has a variety of broad interpretations, including “waging war against God”), *fisad fil-arz* (corruption on earth, including apostasy or heresy, see section 1.e., Politically Motivated Reprisal Against Individuals located Outside the Country), rape, adultery, recidivist alcohol use, consensual same-sex sexual conduct, and “insults against the memory of Imam Khomeini and against the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic.” Capital punishment applies to the possession, sale, or transport of more than approximately 110 pounds of natural drugs, such as opium, or approximately 4.4 to 6.6 pounds of manufactured narcotics, such as heroin or cocaine. It also applies to some drug offenses involving smaller quantities of narcotics, if the crime is carried out using weapons, employing minors, or involving someone in a leadership role in a trafficking ring

or who has previously been convicted of drug crimes and given a prison sentence of more than 15 years.

Prosecutors frequently used “waging war against God” as a capital offense against political dissidents and journalists, accusing them of “struggling against the precepts of Islam” and against the state that upholds those precepts. Authorities expanded the scope of this charge to include “working to undermine the Islamic establishment” and “cooperating with foreign agents or entities.”

The judiciary is required to review and validate death sentences.

In late November the Supreme Court reaffirmed the death sentence of dual national scientist Ahmadreza Djalali, leading observers to believe his execution was imminent. A court initially sentenced Djalali to death in 2017 on espionage charges. According to UN experts, Djalali’s trial was “marred by numerous reports of due process and fair trial violations, including incommunicado detention, denial of access to a lawyer, and forced confession.”

On July 19, the Associated Press reported the Supreme Court announced it would suspend the execution of three young men who participated in 2019 protests and review their case. A revolutionary court sentenced Amirhossein Moradi, Mohammad Rajabi, and Saeed Tamjidi to death on charges of “participation in armed conflict,” “illegal exit from the country,” “attending protests,” and “sabotage.” NGOs reported the court denied their lawyers access to them during the investigation phase and that security officials tortured them. Moradi said authorities coerced him into giving a “confession” and broadcast it on state television, using it as evidence to convict them.

In a July report, the UN special rapporteur (UNSR) on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran Javaid Rehman expressed “deep concern” regarding the “lack of independent, transparent and prompt investigations into the events of November 2019.” Estimates from Amnesty International and Reuters found security forces killed between 300 and 1,500 persons across the country in response to demonstrations against a fuel price hike. Authorities reportedly used firearms, water cannons, tear gas, and snipers against the largely peaceful protesters. The United Nations noted that seven months following the protests, authorities had still not announced official death and injury figures.

There continued to be reports the government directly supported the Assad regime in Syria, primarily through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and

recruited Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani Shia fighters, which contributed to prolonging the civil war and the deaths of thousands of Syrian civilians during the year (see the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Syria). According to IranWire, in June pro-Iranian militias reinforced Syrian regime forces undertaking operations against opposition groups in southwestern Syria. The Syrian Network for Human Rights attributed 89 percent of civilian deaths in Syria since the beginning of the conflict to government forces and Iranian-sponsored militias. Hackers linked to Iran continued cyberattacks against Syrian opposition groups in an effort to disrupt reporting on human rights violations.

The government directly supported certain pro-Iran militias operating inside Iraq, including terrorist organization Kata'ib Hizballah, which reportedly was complicit in summary executions, forced disappearances, and other human rights abuses of civilians in Iraq (see the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Iraq).

In May the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq reported that none of the “unidentified armed actors” responsible for 99 cases of abductions and disappearances of protesters and activists during protests across Iraq in October and November 2019 had been detained or tried. Activists blamed Iran-backed militia groups operating in Iraq for many of these deaths and abductions. Reuters reported that Kata'ib Hizballah member Abu Zainab al-Lami directed sniper shootings of peaceful Iraqi demonstrators during the 2019 protests.

Since 2015 the government has provided hundreds of millions of dollars in support to Houthi rebels in Yemen and proliferated weapons that exacerbated and prolonged the conflict. Houthi rebels used Iranian funding and weapons to launch attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure both within Yemen and in Saudi Arabia (see the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Yemen).

## **b. Disappearance**

There were reports of politically motivated abductions during the year attributed to government officials. Plainclothes officials seized lawyers, journalists and activists without warning, and government officials refused to acknowledge custody or provide information on them. In most cases the government made no efforts to prevent, investigate, or punish such acts.

In May, Amnesty International reported on the disappearance of four death row prisoners--Hossein Silawi, Ali Khasraji, and Naser Khafajian, members of the Ahwaz Arab minority, and Hedayat Abdollahpour, a member of the Kurdish

minority. Family members feared the government executed them in secret. On March 31, Silawi, Khasraji, and Khafajian were transferred to an undisclosed location from Sheiban Prison in Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province (see sections 1.a., 1.c., and 6, National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities). On May 9, Hedayat Abdollahpour was transferred from the central prison in Orumiye, West Azerbaijan Province, to an unknown location.

In late June the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) reported authorities were holding human rights lawyer Payam Derafshan incommunicado at an undisclosed location since his arrest without a warrant at his office in Tehran on June 8. Derafshan's lawyer told CHRI the court had opened a case against him on an unspecified charge and refused to allow him to select his own counsel. In May, Derafshan received a suspended sentence for charges of "insulting the supreme leader," but his lawyer said the second arrest was not connected to that case. On July 8, Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court sentenced him to two and a half years, later reduced to two years, for "propaganda against the state," "spreading falsehoods," and "unauthorized disclosure." As of August he was reportedly in poor health.

### **c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**

Although the constitution prohibits all forms of torture "for the purpose of extracting confession or acquiring information," use of physical and mental torture to coerce confessions remained prevalent, especially during pretrial detention. There were credible reports that security forces and prison personnel tortured and abused detainees and prisoners throughout the year.

Commonly reported methods of torture and abuse in prisons included threats of execution or rape, forced tests of virginity and "sodomy," sleep deprivation, electroshock, including the shocking of genitals, burnings, the use of pressure positions, and severe and repeated beatings.

Human rights organizations frequently cited some prison facilities, including Evin Prison in Tehran, Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj, Greater Tehran Penitentiary, Qarchak Prison, Adel Abad Prison, and Orumiye Prison for their use of cruel and prolonged torture of political opponents, particularly Wards 209 and Two of Evin Prison, reportedly controlled by the IRGC.



In March and April, the suppression of riots by security officials in at least eight prisons led to the deaths of approximately 35 prisoners and left hundreds of others injured (see sections 1.a. and 6, National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities).

According to a May report by Amnesty International, Hossein Sepanta, a prisoner in Adel Abad Prison in Shiraz, was severely beaten in 2019. Sepanta was already critically ill because authorities denied him proper treatment for his spinal cord disorder (syringomyelia). In July 2019 CHRI reported that in response to his hunger strike, prison authorities transferred Sepanta, a convert from Islam to Zoroastrianism, to the “punishment unit” inside Adel Abad Prison. According to a source inside the prison, an interrogator severely beat Sepanta, after which he trembled and had problems keeping his balance when walking. Sepanta is serving a 14-year sentence since 2013 on charges of “propaganda against the state” and “assembly and collusion against national security.”

According to a September 2 report by Amnesty International, police, intelligence agents, and prison officials used “widespread torture and other ill-treatment against men, women, and children” in detention following protests in November 2019. Methods of torture included severe beatings, forcible extraction of finger and toenails, electric shocks, mock executions, and sexual violence.

One anonymous protester interviewed by Amnesty stated that IRGC intelligence officials arrested him and several of his friends at a protest in November 2019. The security officers put him in the trunk of a car and took him to a detention center in Tehran, where they repeatedly kicked and punched him, suspended him from the ceiling, and administered electroshocks to his testicles. They subjected him twice to mock executions during which they informed him he had been sentenced to death by a court, placed a noose around his neck, and pushed a stool out from under his feet, only to have him fall to the ground instead of hang in the air. He was later convicted of a national security offense and sentenced to prison.

Authorities also allegedly maintained unofficial secret prisons and detention centers, outside the national prison system, where abuse reportedly occurred.

In early October according to media reports, videos posted on social media and apparently filmed in Tehran showed police beating detainees in pickup trucks in the middle of the street and forcing them to apologize for the “mistakes” they committed. On October 15, the judiciary announced a ban on the use of forced confessions, torture, and solitary confinement, and stressed the presumption of innocence and right to a lawyer. The judiciary chief called the public beatings a

“violation of civil rights,” and stated measures would be taken to hold the violators responsible, according to online news website *Bourse and Bazaar*. There was no information on results of any investigation into the incident, and many of the purportedly banned activities continued to be reported after the order.

Judicially sanctioned corporal punishments continued. These included flogging, blinding, stoning, and amputation, which the government defends as “punishment,” not torture. Conviction of at least 148 crimes are punishable by flogging, while 20 may carry the penalty of amputation. According to the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, from January 1 to September 24, authorities sentenced at least 237 individuals to amputation and carried out these sentences in at least 129 cases.

According to media and NGO reports, the Supreme Court upheld a lower court’s sentence ordering the amputation of all fingers on the right hand of four men convicted of theft, Hade Rustavi, Mehdi Sharia, Mehdi Shahabad, and Kara Karamu. As of November 6, the men were held in Orumiyeh Prison in West Azerbaijan Province. There was no information available on whether the sentence was carried out.

According to the NGO Article 18, on October 14, authorities flogged Christian convert Mohammad Reza (Youhan) Omidi 80 times. A court had sentenced him to the flogging in 2016 for drinking wine as part of Holy Communion.

Authorities flogged four political prisoners in prisons across the country in the month of June, according to a report from Iran News Wire. On June 8, authorities flogged Azeri rights activists Ali Azizi and Eliar Hosseinzadeh for “disturbing public order,” by taking part in the November 2019 protests in the city of Orumiyeh. Prison officials at Greater Tehran Penitentiary flogged protester Mohamad Bagher Souri on the same day. Authorities flogged Tehran bus driver and labor activist Rasoul Taleb Moghadam 74 times for taking part in a peaceful Labor Day gathering outside parliament in 2019.

Extrajudicial punishments by authorities involving degrading public humiliation of alleged offenders were also frequently reported throughout the year. Authorities regularly forced alleged offenders to make videotaped confessions that the government later televised. According to the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, on August 22, IRGC-affiliated *Fars News* posted a “documentary” on twin sisters Maryam and Matin Amiri, who had participated in “White Wednesday” demonstrations against mandatory veiling. The segment included a “confession” in which the women called themselves “naive, dumb, and passive”

and “of weak personality,” for protesting hijab laws. Days after the segment aired, expatriate women’s rights activist and founder of the movement Masih Alinejad reported via Twitter a court sentenced the twins to 15 years in prison and that they were being held in solitary confinement.

Impunity remained a widespread problem within all security forces. Human rights groups frequently accused regular and paramilitary security forces, such as the Basij, of committing numerous human rights abuses, including torture, forced disappearances, and acts of violence against protesters and bystanders at public demonstrations. The government generally viewed protesters, critical journalists, and human rights activists as engaged in efforts to “undermine the 1979 revolution” and consequently did not seek to punish security force abuses against those persons, even when the abuses violated domestic law. According to Tehran prosecutor general Abbas Jafari-Dolatabadi, the attorney general is responsible for investigating and punishing security force abuses, but if any investigations took place, the process was not transparent, and there were few reports of government actions to discipline abusers.

### **Prison and Detention Center Conditions**

Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, physical abuse, and inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care. Prisoner hunger strikes in protest of their treatment were frequent.

Physical Conditions: Overcrowding, long a problem in prisons with many prisoners forced to sleep on floors, in hallways, or in prison yards, became particularly acute following mass arrests during the November 2019 protests, according to comments by local government officials referenced in a July report by UNSR Rehman.

Overall conditions worsened significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a report by Amnesty International, which cited letters written by senior prison authorities, prisons had serious shortages of disinfectant products and protective equipment needed to address the spread of virus. The letters reportedly acknowledged many prisons held individuals with underlying health conditions, which increased their risk of complications if infected with COVID-19. Authorities announced that between late February and late May, they had temporarily released around 128,000 prisoners on furlough and pardoned another 10,000 in response to the outbreak. On July 15, as COVID-19 cases spiked again, the judiciary spokesperson announced the government had issued guidelines to

facilitate a second round of furloughs. Prisoners of conscience were mostly excluded from these measures, including human rights defenders, foreign and dual nationals, environmentalists, individuals detained due to their religious beliefs, and persons arbitrarily detained in connection with the November 2019 protests.

There were reported deaths in custody and prisoner-on-prisoner violence, which authorities sometimes failed to control. In April, Amnesty International reported at least 35 prisoners were killed and others injured in at least eight prisons across the country when security officials used live ammunition and tear gas to suppress riots because of COVID-19 safety fears. As of December 8, the government had not investigated these events.

According to IranWire and human rights NGOs, guards beat both political and nonpolitical prisoners during raids on wards, performed nude body searches in front of other prisoners, and threatened prisoners' families. In some instances, according to HRANA, guards singled out political prisoners for harsher treatment.

Prison authorities often refused to provide medical treatment for pre-existing conditions, injuries that prisoners suffered at the hands of prison authorities, or illnesses due to the poor sanitary conditions in prison. Human rights organizations reported that authorities used denial of medical care as a form of punishment for prisoners and as an intimidation tool against prisoners who filed complaints or challenged authorities. Medical services for female prisoners were reported as grossly inadequate.

An October 6 OHCHR statement expressed serious concern regarding a consistent pattern of the government denying medical treatment to detainees, including political prisoners, which was heightened during the year due to the spread of COVID-19 throughout prisons. The statement called for the unconditional release of human rights defenders, lawyers, political prisoners, peaceful protesters and all other individuals deprived of their liberty for expressing their views or otherwise exercising their rights.

The United Nations and NGOs have consistently reported other unsafe and unsanitary detention conditions in prisons, including contaminated food and water, frequent water and food shortages, rodent and insect infestations, shortages of bedding, intolerable heat, and poor ventilation.

There were no updates on the status of Gonabadi Sufi dervish women unjustly detained in Shahr-e Rey Prison on national security-related charges since 2018.

The women were routinely denied urgently needed medical care and kept in unsanitary, inhuman conditions.

Authorities occasionally held pretrial detainees with convicted prisoners. According to a June 2019 report from IranWire, there was a noticeable increase from the previous two years of the practice of holding political prisoners in wards with allegedly violent and dangerous criminals, with the goal of “breaking” the political prisoners’ wills. A July report by UNSR Rehman noted that prisoners ordinarily held in wards controlled by the IRGC or Ministry of Intelligence were moved to public wards after the sharp increase in detainees following the November 2019 protests. Also, according to HRANA, juvenile detainees were held with adult prisoners in some prisons, including Saghez Central Prison in Kurdistan Province. Male juvenile detainees were held in separate rehabilitation centers in most urban areas, but female juvenile detainees and male juvenile detainees in rural areas were held alongside adults in segregated detention facilities, according to NGO reports.

IranWire reported multiple prisons across the country held older children who lived with their incarcerated mothers without access to medical care or educational and recreational facilities. Following the November 2019 protests, child detainees were reportedly held in the same cells as adults at a facility in Ahvaz due to overcrowding, according to UNSR Rehman.

There were numerous reports of prisoner suicides throughout the year in response to prison conditions or mistreatment. According to a September 27 IranWire report, Mohammad Ghaderi attempted suicide in May to escape continuous torture by IRGC intelligence agents. In June prisoners Farzin Nouri and Hade Rustavi reportedly attempted suicide at Orumiyeh by consuming poison. In September, 20 prisoners attempted suicide within two weeks in Orumiyeh Central Prison in West Azerbaijan Province due to the horrific conditions in that prison. According to his wife, in May journalist and filmmaker Mohammad Nourizad, imprisoned since 2019 for signing an open letter with 13 others calling for the resignation of the supreme leader, attempted suicide in Vakilabad Prison in Mashhad. Authorities had prevented Nourizad from receiving a temporary furlough, being transferred to a prison closer to his home, and receiving regular telephone calls.

Administration: According to reports from human rights NGOs, prison authorities regularly denied prisoners access to an attorney of their choice, visitors, telephone calls, and other correspondence privileges. Prisoners practicing a religion other than Shia Islam reported experiencing discrimination.

Authorities did not initiate credible investigations into allegations of inhuman conditions or suspicious deaths in custody. Prisoners were able to submit complaints to judicial authorities but often faced censorship or retribution in the form of slander, beatings, torture, and denial of medical care and medication or furlough requests, as well as charges of additional crimes.

On October 23, HRW highlighted the cases of environmentalist Niloufar Bayani and student activist Parisa Rafiee, both of whom authorities charged with “publishing false information,” and “propaganda against the state,” for reporting abuse in detention.

Families of executed prisoners did not always receive notification of their scheduled executions, or if they did, it was often on very short notice. Authorities frequently denied families the ability to perform funeral rites or an impartial autopsy.

Independent Monitoring: The government did not permit independent monitoring of prison conditions. Prisoners and their families often wrote letters to authorities and, in some cases, to UN bodies to highlight and protest their treatment (see section 1.e., Political Prisoners and Detainees).

#### **d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention**

Although the constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, the practices occurred frequently during the year. President Rouhani’s 2016 *Citizen’s Rights Charter* enumerates various freedoms, including “security of their person, property, dignity, employment, legal and judicial process, social security, and the like.” The government did not implement these provisions. Detainees may appeal their sentences in court but are not entitled to compensation for detention.

#### **Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees**

The constitution and law require a warrant or subpoena for an arrest and state that arrested persons should be informed of the charges against them within 24 hours. Authorities, however, held some detainees, at times incommunicado, for prolonged periods without charge or trial and frequently denied them contact with family or timely access to legal representation.

The law obligates the government to provide indigent defendants with attorneys for certain types of crimes. The courts set prohibitively high bail, even for lesser crimes, and in many cases courts did not set bail. Authorities often compelled detainees and their families to submit property deeds to post bail, effectively silencing them due to fear of losing their families' property.

The government continued to use house arrest without due process to restrict movement and communication. At year's end former presidential candidates Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, as well as Mousavi's wife Zahra Rahnavard, remained under house arrest imposed in 2011 without formal charges. Security forces continued to restrict their access to visitors and information. In November it was reported that Mousavi and his wife had tested positive for COVID-19. Concerns persisted regarding Karroubi's deteriorating health, reportedly exacerbated by his treatment by authorities.

Arbitrary Arrest: Authorities commonly used arbitrary arrests to impede alleged antiregime activities, including by conducting mass arrests of persons in the vicinity of antigovernment demonstrations. According to Amnesty International, these arrests sometimes included children and bystanders at protests and were conducted in an often violent manner, involving beating detainees. Plainclothes officers arrived unannounced at homes or offices; arrested persons; conducted raids; and confiscated private documents, passports, computers, electronic media, and other personal items without warrants or assurances of due process.

Individuals often remained in detention facilities for long periods without charges or trials, and authorities sometimes prevented them from informing others of their whereabouts for several days. Authorities often denied detainees' access to legal counsel during this period.

According to a September report by Amnesty International, at least 7,000 persons were arrested in relation to the November 2019 protests, and at least 500 were subjected to criminal investigations on vague and unsubstantiated charges as of August, although Amnesty estimated the number to be "far higher."

International media and human rights organizations documented frequent detentions of dual nationals--individuals who are citizens of both Iran and another country--for arbitrary and prolonged detention on politically motivated charges. UNSR Rehman continued to highlight cases of dual and foreign nationals who authorities had arrested arbitrarily and subjected to mistreatment, denial of appropriate medical treatment, or both. The UNSR noted most dual and foreign

nationals did not benefit from temporary furloughs granted by authorities to many other prisoners. The UNSR previously concluded the government subjected dual and foreign nationals to “sham trials which have failed to meet basic fair trial standards and convicted them of offenses on the basis of fabricated evidence or, in some cases, no evidence at all, and has attempted to use them as diplomatic leverage.” Dual nationals, like other citizens, faced a variety of due process violations, including lack of prompt access to a lawyer of their choosing and brief trials during which they were not allowed to defend themselves.

Authorities continued to detain dual nationals Emad Sharghi and Siamak Namazi in Evin Prison on “espionage” charges following lower court trials with numerous procedural irregularities, according to international media and NGO reports. Sharghi was initially detained in April 2018 and released on bail in December of that year. In December 2019 officials informed Sharghi he had been cleared of all charges, but he was re-arrested in December 2020 after having been convicted and sentenced in absentia. Authorities initially detained Namazi in 2015 along with his father, Baquer, who was granted medical furlough in 2018 but was not allowed to leave the country.

On February 23, the Bahai International Community stated that a Houthi court in Yemen was prosecuting a group of Bahai under “directives from Iranian authorities.” The Bahai prisoners were deported in July without a review of their citizenship status. Bahais continued to face arbitrary detention and harassment in Yemen throughout the year because of their religious affiliation (see the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Yemen).

Pretrial Detention: Pretrial detention was often arbitrarily lengthy, particularly in cases involving alleged violations of “national security” law. Authorities sometimes held persons incommunicado for lengthy periods before permitting them to contact family members. Instances of unjust and arbitrary pretrial detention were commonplace and well documented throughout the year involving numerous protesters and prisoners of conscience who were not granted furloughs despite the rampant spread of COVID-19 in prison. According to HRW, a judge may prolong detention at his discretion, and pretrial detentions often lasted for months. Often authorities held pretrial detainees in custody with the general prison population.

#### **e. Denial of Fair Public Trial**



The constitution provides that the judiciary be “an independent power” that is “free from every kind of unhealthy relation and connection.” The court system, however, was subjected to political influence, and judges were appointed “in accordance with religious criteria.”

The supreme leader appoints the head of the judiciary. The head of the judiciary, members of the Supreme Court, and the prosecutor general were clerics. International observers continued to criticize the lack of independence of the country’s judicial system and judges and maintained that trials disregarded international standards of fairness.

### **Trial Procedures**

According to the constitution and law, a defendant has the right to a fair trial, to be presumed innocent until convicted, to have access to a lawyer of his or her choice, and to appeal convictions in most cases that involve major penalties. These rights were not upheld.

Panels of judges adjudicate trials in civil and criminal courts. Human rights activists reported trials in which authorities appeared to have determined the verdicts in advance, and defendants did not have the opportunity to confront their accusers or meet with lawyers. For journalists and defendants charged with crimes against national security, the law restricts the choice of attorneys to a government-approved list.

When postrevolutionary statutes do not address a situation, the government advised judges to give precedence to their knowledge and interpretation of sharia (Islamic law). Under this method judges may find a person guilty based on their own “divine knowledge.”

The constitution does not provide for the establishment or the mandate of the revolutionary courts. The courts were created pursuant to the former supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini’s edict immediately following the 1979 revolution, with a sharia judge appointed as the head of the courts. They were intended as a temporary emergency measure to try high-level officials of the deposed monarchy and purge threats to the regime. The courts, however, became institutionalized and continue to operate in parallel to the criminal justice system. Human rights groups and international observers often identified the revolutionary courts, which are generally responsible for hearing the cases of political prisoners, as routinely employing grossly unfair trials without due process, handing down predetermined

verdicts, and rubberstamping executions for political purposes. These unfair practices reportedly occur during all stages of criminal proceedings in revolutionary courts, including the initial prosecution and pretrial investigation, first instance trial, and review by higher courts.

The IRGC and Ministry of Intelligence reportedly determine many aspects of revolutionary court cases. Most of the important political cases are referred to a small number of branches of the revolutionary courts, whose judges often have negligible legal training and are not independent.

During the year human rights groups and international media noted the absence of procedural safeguards in criminal trials, and courts admitted as evidence confessions made under duress or torture. UNSR Rehman expressed concerns regarding allegations of confessions extracted by torture and a lack of due process or a fair trial, including in cases of persons arrested for participating in the November 2019 protests. In a July report, the UNSR cited unofficial reports documenting 75 court verdicts against protesters by April. For example, UNSR Rehman cited the case of Aref Zarei, whom a judge reportedly told not to bother hiring a lawyer because it would not help.

The Special Clerical Court is headed by a Shia Islamic legal scholar, overseen by the supreme leader, and charged with investigating alleged offenses committed by clerics and issuing rulings based on an independent interpretation of Islamic legal sources. As with the revolutionary courts, the constitution does not provide for the Special Clerical Court, which operates outside the judiciary's purview. Clerical courts have been used to prosecute Shia clerics who expressed controversial ideas and participated in activities outside the sphere of religion, such as journalism or reformist political activities.

### **Political Prisoners and Detainees**

Official statistics regarding the number of citizens imprisoned for their political beliefs were not available. According to United for Iran, as of October 18, an estimated 500 prisoners of conscience were held in the country, including those jailed for their religious beliefs.

The government often charged political dissidents with vague crimes, such as “antirevolutionary behavior,” “corruption on earth,” “siding with global arrogance,” “waging war against God,” and “crimes against Islam.” Prosecutors imposed strict penalties on government critics for minor violations.

The political crimes law defines a political crime as an insult against the government, as well as “the publication of lies.” Political crimes are those acts “committed with the intent of reforming the domestic or foreign policies of Iran,” while those with the intent to damage “the foundations of the regime” are considered national security crimes. The court and the Public Prosecutor’s Office retain responsibility for determining the nature of the crime.

The political crimes law grants the accused certain rights during arrest and imprisonment. Political criminals should be held in detention facilities separate from ordinary criminals. Political criminals should also be exempt from wearing prison uniforms, not subject to rules governing repeat offenses, not subject to extradition, and exempt from solitary confinement unless judicial officials deem it necessary. Political criminals also have the right to see and correspond with immediate family regularly and to access books, newspapers, radio, and television.

Many of the law’s provisions have not been implemented, and the government continued to arrest and charge students, journalists, lawyers, political activists, women’s activists, artists, and members of religious minorities with “national security” crimes that do not fall under the political crimes law. Political prisoners were also at greater risk of torture and abuse in detention. They were often mixed with the general prison population, and former prisoners reported that authorities often threatened political prisoners with transfer to criminal wards, where attacks by fellow prisoners were more likely. Human rights activists and international media reported cases of political prisoners confined with accused and convicted violent criminals, being moved to public wards in cases of overcrowding, and having temporary furloughs inequitably applied during the COVID-19 pandemic (see section 1.c., Physical Conditions). The government often placed political prisoners in prisons far from their families, denied them correspondence rights, and held them in solitary confinement for long periods.

The government reportedly held some detainees in prison for years on unfounded charges of sympathizing with real or alleged terrorist groups.

The government issued travel bans on some former political prisoners, barred them from working in their occupations for years after incarceration, and imposed internal exile on some. During the year authorities occasionally gave political prisoners suspended sentences and released them on bail with the understanding that renewed political activity would result in their return to prison. The

government did not permit international humanitarian organizations or UN representatives access to political prisoners.

According to CHRI, on September 26, Iran Writers Association members Reza Khandan Mahabahi, Baktash Abtin, and Keyvan Bajan began serving prison sentences for “assembly and collusion against national security,” related to publishing documents objecting to censorship and organizing memorial ceremonies for association members killed by state agents in the 1990s.

Also according to CHRI, authorities arbitrarily extended a five-year prison sentence by two years against activist Atena Daemi, shortly before she was due to be released in July after serving the full term on “national security” charges and for insulting the supreme leader. The additional two-year sentence reportedly stemmed from Daemi singing a song in prison honoring executed prisoners.

On October 7, judicial authorities ordered the release of human rights defender and journalist Narges Mohammadi. Mohammadi was arrested in 2015 and sentenced by a revolutionary court to 16 years in prison for “propaganda against the state,” “assembly and collusion against national security,” and establishing the illegal Step by Step to Stop the Death Penalty organization. During her time in prison, authorities repeatedly denied her telephone contact with her family, as well as appropriate medical treatment related to a major operation she underwent in May 2019.

Lawyers who defended political prisoners were often arrested, detained, and subjected to excessive sentences and punishments for engaging in regular professional activities. The government continued to imprison lawyers and others affiliated with the Defenders of Human Rights Center advocacy group.

In June, CHRI reported that at least five human rights attorneys--Soheila Hejab, Payam Derafshan, Mohammad Nafari, Amirsalar Davoudi, and Nasrin Sotoudeh--were in prison for their human rights work. Hejab and Derafshan (see section 1.b.) were detained during the year. In late May security officials incarcerated Hejab on earlier charges of supporting dissident groups, after she had been temporarily freed in March. In November the Kurdish Human Rights Network reported authorities charged Hejab with additional crimes related to a letter she wrote from prison marking the first anniversary of the November 2019 protests.

On November 7, the judiciary reported it had temporarily released Nasrin Sotoudeh, amid reports her health was rapidly deteriorating. On December 2, she

was returned to Qarchak Prison despite continuing health challenges. In March 2019 a revolutionary court sentenced Sotoudeh to a cumulative 38 years in prison and 148 lashes for providing legal defense services to women charged with crimes for not wearing hijab. Sotoudeh was previously arrested in 2010 and pardoned in 2013.

According to HRW, on February 18, a judiciary spokesperson announced a revolutionary court upheld prison sentences against eight environmentalists sentenced to between six to 10 years for conviction of various “national security” crimes. Authorities arrested the environmentalists, including United States-British-Iranian triple national Morad Tahbaz, in 2018 and convicted them following an unfair trial, in which the judge handed down the sentences in secret, did not allow access to defense lawyers, and ignored the defendants’ claims of abuse in detention.

### **Politically Motivated Reprisal against Individuals Located Outside the Country**

There were credible reports that the government attempted to misuse international law enforcement tools for politically motivated purposes as reprisals against specific individuals located outside the country.

In August, Reuters reported Ministry of Intelligence officials detained Jamshid Sharmahd, a member of a promonarchist group “Tondar” (Thunder) or “Kingdom Assembly of Iran” based outside the country, which it accused of responsibility for a deadly 2008 bombing at a religious center in Shiraz and of plotting other attacks. A man who identified himself as Sharmahd appeared on Iranian television blindfolded and “admitted” to providing explosives to attackers in Shiraz. The ministry did not disclose how or where they detained Sharmahd. His son told Radio Free Europe that Sharmahd was likely captured in Dubai and taken to Iran.

In November al-Arabiya reported the former leader of the separatist group for Iran’s ethnic Arab in minority in Khuzestan Province, the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA), Habib Asyud also known as Habib Chaab, who also holds Swedish citizenship, was arrested in Turkey and later resurfaced in Iran under unclear circumstances. Neither Turkey nor Sweden officially commented on Asyud’s case. The Iranian government holds ASMLA responsible for a terror attack in 2018 on a military parade that killed 25 individuals including civilians.

In October 2019 France-based Iranian activist Ruhollah Zam was abducted from Iraq. Iranian intelligence later took credit for the operation. Zam was executed in December (see Section 1.a.).

### **Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies**

Citizens had limited ability to sue the government and were not able to file lawsuits through the courts against the government for civil or human rights violations.

### **Property Restitution**

The constitution allows the government to confiscate property acquired illicitly or in a manner not in conformity with Islamic law. The government appeared to target ethnic and religious minorities in invoking this provision.

### **f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence**

The constitution states that “reputation, life, property, [and] dwelling[s]” are protected from trespass, except as “provided by law.” The government routinely infringed on this right. Security forces monitored the social activities of citizens, entered homes, offices, and places of worship, monitored telephone conversations and internet communications, and opened mail without court authorization. The government also routinely intimidated activists and government critics by detaining their family members as a form of reprisal.

On July 13, authorities arrested Manouchehr Bakhtiari for a second time related to activism on behalf of his son, Pouya, killed by security forces in the city of Karaj during the November 2019 demonstrations. The government previously detained 10 other members of Pouya Bakhtiari’s family, including his 11-year-old nephew and two of his elderly grandparents, to prevent them from holding a traditional memorial service for Bakhtiari 40 days after his death. According to media reports, in December Manouchehr Bakhtiari was released on bail.

According to international human rights organizations, the Ministry of Intelligence arrested and intimidated BBC employees’ family members, including elderly family members, based in Iran. The government also froze and seized assets of family members, demoted relatives employed by state-affiliated organizations, and confiscated passports. The government also compelled family members of

journalists from other media outlets abroad to defame their relatives on state television.

On July 16, a revolutionary court in Tehran sentenced Alireza Alinejad, brother of expatriate activist Masih Alinejad, to eight years in prison for “national security” crimes, and for insulting the supreme leader and “propaganda against the regime.”

On August 17, security officials detained and questioned human rights attorney Nasrin Sotoudeh’s daughter, Mehraveh, on unspecified charges, according to CHRI. She was later released on bail.

There are currently no comprehensive data-protection laws in place in the country, therefore there are no legal safeguards for users to protect their data from misuse. The online sphere is heavily monitored by the state despite Article 37 of the nonbinding Citizens’ Rights Charter, which states that online privacy should be respected.

The operation of domestic messaging apps is based inside the country, leaving content shared on these apps more susceptible to government control and surveillance. Lack of data protection and privacy laws also mean there are no legal instruments providing protections against the misuse of apps data by authorities.

In January, Certfa Lab reported a series of phishing attacks from an Iranian hacker group known as Charming Kitten, which was allegedly affiliated with Iran’s intelligence services. According to the report, the phishing attacks targeted journalists as well as political and human rights activists.

In March, Google removed a COVID-19 app known as AC19 from the Google Play store. No official reason was provided concerning the app’s removal, although Iranian users raised concerns regarding the app’s security, in light of its collection of geolocation data, and a lack of transparency from the government as to why the data were being collected and how it was being used.

In March, Comparitech reported that data from 42 million Iranian Telegram accounts were leaked online. Telegram released a statement alleging the data came from the two unofficial Telegram apps Hotgram and Telegram Talaei, which became popular after the platform’s ban in the country. There were reports the two client apps have ties to the government and Iranian hacker group Charming Kitten.

## **Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:**

### **a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press**

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for the press, except when words are deemed “detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public.” According to the law, “anyone who engages in any type of propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran or in support of opposition groups and associations shall be sentenced to three months to one year of imprisonment.”

The Charter on Citizens’ Rights acknowledges the right of every citizen to freedom of speech and expression. The charter grants citizens the right to seek, receive, publish, and communicate views and information, using any means of communication; however, it has not been implemented.

The law provides for prosecution of persons accused of instigating crimes against the state or national security or “insulting” Islam. The government severely restricted freedom of speech and of the press and used the law to intimidate or prosecute persons who directly criticized the government or raised human rights problems, as well as to compel ordinary citizens to comply with the government’s moral code. The government’s failure to investigate or prosecute attacks on human rights defenders and peaceful protesters led to de facto restrictions on freedom of assembly and association.

Freedom of Speech: Authorities did not permit individuals to criticize publicly the country’s system of government, supreme leader, or official religion. Security forces and the judiciary punished those who violated these restrictions, as well as those who publicly criticized the president, cabinet, and parliament. A July UN report noted continued government efforts to “suppress” freedom of expression in the country.

The government monitored meetings, movements, and communications of its citizens and often charged persons with crimes against national security and for insulting the regime, citing as evidence letters, emails, and other public and private communications. Authorities threatened arrest or punishment for the expression of ideas or images they viewed as violations of the legal moral code.

In March, Mehdi Hajati, a former member of the Shiraz City Council, was arrested for criticizing the government’s response to the outbreak of COVID-19 on Twitter.



According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), in July authorities arrested Farangis Mazloom, the mother of imprisoned photojournalist Soheil Arabi, and in October sentenced her to 18 months in prison on charges of “meeting and plotting against the national security” and antigovernment propaganda, presumably as a result of activism on behalf of her son. Arabi has been imprisoned since 2013 on blasphemy and other expression-related charges. According to Mazloom, in October Evin Prison authorities moved her son to solitary confinement.

Several activists, including Zahra Jamali and Mohammad Nourizad, who signed letters calling on the supreme leader to step down in June and August 2019 remained in prison during the year on charges of “propaganda against the state” and “collusion against national security.”

Freedom of Press and Media, Including Online Media: The government’s Press Supervisory Board issues press licenses, which it sometimes revoked in response to articles critical of the government or the regime, or it did not renew them for individuals facing criminal charges or incarcerated for political reasons. During the year the government banned, blocked, closed, or censored publications deemed critical of officials.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) severely limited and controlled foreign media organizations’ ability to work in the country. The ministry required foreign correspondents to provide detailed travel plans and topics of proposed stories before granting visas, limited their ability to travel within the country, and forced them to work with a local “minder.”

Under the constitution private broadcasting is illegal. The government maintained a monopoly over all television and radio broadcasting facilities through IRIB, a government agency. Radio and television programming, the principal source of news for many citizens, particularly in rural areas with limited internet access, reflected the government’s political and socioreligious ideology. The government jammed satellite broadcasts as signals entered the country, a continuous practice since at least 2003. Satellite dishes remained illegal but ubiquitous. Those who distributed, used, or repaired satellite dishes faced fines. Police, using warrants provided by the judiciary, conducted periodic campaigns to confiscate privately owned satellite dishes throughout the country.

Under the constitution the supreme leader appoints the head of the Audiovisual Policy Agency, a council composed of representatives of the president, judiciary, and parliament. The Ministry of Culture reviews all potential publications,

including foreign printed materials, prior to their domestic release and may deem books unpublishable, remove text, or require word substitutions for terms deemed inappropriate.

Independent print media companies existed, but the government severely limited their operations.

RSF reported citizen journalist and writer Payman Farhangian was sentenced to 38 years in prison on charges of antigovernment publicity and “creating a group of more than two persons on ([the messaging service) *Signal* in order to endanger national security,” related to posts supportive of the labor movement. His lawyer said he appealed the sentence.

In April, Masoud Heydari and Hamid Haghjoo, the managing director and the Telegram channel administrator at the semiofficial Iranian Labor News Agency (ILNA), were arrested following the alleged posting of a cartoon mocking COVID-19 remedies prescribed by religious leaders. ILNA officials denied publishing the cartoon and said they were falsely accused. Heydari was released on bail while Haghjoo was detained pending investigation into the case; there were no updates as of year’s end.

In August, Mostafa Moheb Kia, a journalist with the monthly political magazine *Iran Farda*, was sentenced to six months in prison for “antigovernment propaganda” and “meeting and plotting against national security.” His sentence came three weeks after a revolutionary court in Tehran confirmed the three-year jail sentence of *Iran Farda*’s 72-year-old editor Kayvan Samimi Behbahani. On December 15, Samimi was reportedly jailed.

On August 18, Nader Fatourehchi, a freelance journalist who reported on high-level corruption in the government, self-reported on Twitter that he was sentenced to one year in prison and a suspended sentence for three years, on a charge of “stirring up public opinion against government institutions, officials and organizations.”

Violence and Harassment: The government and its agents harassed, detained, abused, and prosecuted publishers, editors, and journalists, including those involved in internet-based media, for their reporting. The government also harassed many journalists’ families.

According to information provided by Journalism is not a Crime, an organization devoted to documenting freedom of the press in the country, at least 78 journalists or citizen-journalists were imprisoned as of November, a significant increase from 2019.

Authorities banned national and international media outlets from covering demonstrations in an attempt to censor coverage of protests and intimidate citizens from disseminating information about them. As of November 13, *Shargh* journalist Marzieh Amiri was reportedly released from detention after being sentenced in December 2019 on national security charges to five years in prison (reduced from an original sentence of 10 years and 148 lashes) for covering labor protests.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The law forbids government censorship but also prohibits dissemination of information the government considers “damaging.” During the year the government censored publications that criticized official actions or contradicted official views or versions of events. “Damaging” information included discussions of women’s rights, the situation of minorities, criticism of government corruption, and references to mistreatment of detainees.

Officials routinely intimidated journalists into practicing self-censorship through arrests and imprisonments. Public officials often filed criminal complaints against newspapers, and the Press Supervisory Board, which regulates media content and publication, referred such complaints to the Press Court for further action, including possible closure, suspension, and fines. The Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) determined the main topics and types of news to be covered and distributed topics required for reporting directly to various media outlets, according to the IHRDC.

According to Freedom House, during the November 2019 protests and subsequent internet shutdown, journalists and media were issued official guidelines from the Ministry of Intelligence and Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance on how to cover the protests. The ministries threatened journalists with criminal prosecution if they strayed from official guidance, which instructed that the protests not be made into “headline news” and should be portrayed as civil protests while minimizing the extent of violence.

As the outbreak of COVID-19 escalated, the head of the Cyber Police (known as FATA), Commander Vahid Majid, announced the establishment of a working group for “combatting online rumors” relating to the spread of the virus. In April a

military spokesman said authorities had arrested 3,600 individuals for spreading COVID-19 “rumors” online, with no clear guidance on what authorities considered a “rumor.”

Libel/Slander Laws: The government commonly used libel and slander laws or cited national security to suppress criticism. According to the law, if any publication contains personal insults, libel, false statements, or criticism, the insulted individual has the right to respond in the publication within one month. By law “insult” or “libel” against the government, government representatives, or foreign officials while they are in the country, as well as “the publication of lies” with the intent to alter but not overthrow the government, are considered political crimes and subject to certain trial and detention procedures (see section 1.e.). The government applied the law throughout the year, often citing statements made in various media outlets or on internet platforms that criticized the government, in the arrest, prosecution, and sentencing of individuals for crimes against national security. According to the Committee to Project Journalists, in February a Tehran court found guilty editors-in-chief of three news sites on “defamation” charges filed by a state-owned gas company.

National Security: As noted above, authorities routinely cited laws on protecting national security to arrest or punish critics of the government or to deter criticism of government policies or officials.

On September 2, a revolutionary court in Tehran reportedly sentenced journalist Mohammad Mosaed to more than four years in prison, a two-year ban on journalistic activities, and a two-year ban on using any communications devices, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Prosecutors charged Mosaed with “colluding against national security” for activities in 2019 including posting on the internet during a government-implemented internet shutdown.

## **Internet Freedom**

The Ministries of Culture and of Information and Communications Technology are the main regulatory bodies for content and internet systems and maintain monopoly control over internet traffic flowing in and out of the country. The Office of the Supreme Leader also includes the Supreme Council of Cyberspace, charged with regulating content and systems. The government collected personally identifiable information in connection with citizens’ peaceful expression of political, religious, or ideological opinion or beliefs.

The law makes it illegal to distribute circumvention tools and virtual private networks, and Minister of Information and Communications Technology Mohammad Javad Azari-Jahromi was quoted in the press stating that using circumvention tools is illegal.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance must approve all internet service providers. The government also requires all owners of websites and blogs in the country to register with the agencies that comprise the Commission to Determine the Instances of Criminal Content (also referred to as the Committee in Charge of Determining Unauthorized Websites or Committee in Charge of Determining Offensive Content), the governmental organization that determines censoring criteria. These agencies include the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Ministry of Information and Communications Technology, the Ministry of Intelligence, and the Tehran Public Prosecutor's Office.

Ministry of Information and Communications Technology regulations prohibit households and cybercafes from having high-speed internet access.

The government restricted and disrupted access to the global internet, including fully blocking access for almost one week during nationwide protests in November 2019. There were reports the government again slowed internet access on December 25, approximately 40 days after the protests began, which media and NGO reports noted would correspond to memorial ceremonies for the victims. The Ministry of Information and Communications Technology denied reports of an internet shutdown in December.

Authorities blocked access to independent news sites and a number of social media and communication platforms deemed critical of the state, and continued to monitor private online communications and censor online content. Individuals and groups practiced self-censorship online.

According to Freedom House, authorities employed a centralized filtering system that can effectively block a website within a few hours across the entire network. Private internet service providers (ISPs) were forced to either use the bandwidth provided by the government or route traffic containing site-visit requests through government-issued filtering boxes developed by software companies within the country.

The government continued to implement the National Information Network (NIN, also known as SHOMA). As described by Freedom House, SHOMA enabled the

government to reduce foreign internet connection speeds during politically sensitive periods, disconnect the network from global internet content, and disrupt circumvention tools. According to Freedom House, a number of domestically hosted websites such as national online banking services, domestic messaging apps, and hospital networks were able to remain online using the NIN infrastructure while global traffic was disconnected during the November 2019 protests.

Authorities restricted access to tens of thousands of websites, particularly those of international news and information services, the political opposition, ethnic and religious minority groups, and human rights organizations. They continued to block online messaging tools, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, although the government operated Twitter accounts under the names of Supreme Leader Khamenei, President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Zarif, and other government-associated officials and entities, including after shutting down most of the country's internet access during the November demonstrations. According to Freedom House, websites are blocked if they contradict state doctrine regarding Islam, as well as government narratives on domestic or international politics. News stories that cover friction among political institutions are also frequently censored.

In October 2019 a letter signed by Javad Javidnia, the former deputy prosecutor general responsible for cyberspace, and secretary to the Committee to Determine Instances of Criminal Content (CDICC), was sent to ISPs asking them to block the official Android app store and the Google Play store "as soon as possible." The letter stated that the CDICC made the decision "in accordance with Article 749 of the Islamic Penal Code relating to computer crimes." Article 749 requires all ISPs to filter any content determined by the CDICC as criminal content. Resistance in complying with this article results in the termination of the ISP or in some cases a financial penalty.

Government organizations, including the Basij Cyber Council, the Cyber Police, and the Cyber Army, which observers presumed to be controlled by the IRGC, monitored, identified, and countered alleged cyberthreats to national security. These organizations especially targeted citizens' activities on officially banned social networking websites such as Telegram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr, and they reportedly harassed persons who criticized the government or raised sensitive social problems.

The popular messaging app Telegram remained blocked during the year, although it continued to be accessed using circumvention tools.

According to Freedom House, significant internet disruptions were observed as protests broke out in the aftermath of the military's January 8 accidental shooting down of airliner Ukraine International Airlines Flight PS752. Access to the messaging app WhatsApp was also disrupted during this time.

In February extensive network disruptions impacted the country, which the Ministry of Information claimed to be due to a DDoS attack originating from outside the country, although they did not provide information to verify this claim.

In early March as the country was battling outbreaks of COVID-19, reports confirmed that access to Persian Wikipedia had been blocked using the same method used for blocking Telegram and Facebook, although officials did not comment on the incident.

In July further network disruptions were reported following protests against the government's foreign policy and the continuing economic crisis in Khuzestan Province. The same month, network disruptions were reported for three hours as online users used hashtags on social media to speak out against death sentences handed down to three men who participated in the 2019 protests.

In September the Tehran Province chief justice issued a directive establishing specialized court branches to handle cases against cyberspace businesses, according to a November report by Iran-based technology news website *Peyvast*. The directive instructed courts to prosecute the users of "user-centric software" for illegal content, rather than the owners of the technology platforms on which the content was published.

Contrary to the directive, in late October, Judge Mohammad Moghisseh of Tehran Revolutionary Court Branch 28 sentenced *Aparat* CEO Mohammad Javad Shakouri-Moghadam to a total of 12 years in prison for "encouraging corruption," "publishing vulgar content," and "propaganda against the regime," for a 2019 video posted on the platform in which a reporter asked children in Tehran if they knew how they were born. Shakouri-Moghadam appealed the ruling and was freed on bail.

Bloggers, social media users, and online journalists continued to be arrested. In April popular Instagram couple Ahamand Moin-Shirazi, a former world

kickboxing champion, and his wife Shabnam Shahrokhi reported they were sentenced in absentia for charges of “propaganda against the regime” and “spreading obscene and vulgar content” related to posts on social media.

In May police confirmed the arrest of parkour athlete Alireza Japalaghy and an unnamed woman for “advocating vice,” after Japalaghy posted photos of them embracing that went viral on social media. Japalaghy was later released and reportedly fled the country. The woman’s whereabouts were unknown.

The government uses an extensive digital propaganda apparatus, backing numerous initiatives to promote blogging among its supporters. Following the January death of IRGC-Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, a number of Twitter accounts claiming to be located in Iran began tweeting using hashtags such as #hardrevenge and images of Soleimani.

### **Academic Freedom and Cultural Events**

The government significantly restricted academic freedom and the independence of higher education institutions. Authorities systematically targeted university campuses to suppress social and political activism by banning independent student organizations, imprisoning student activists, removing faculty, preventing students from enrolling or continuing their education because of their political or religious affiliation or activism, and restricting social sciences and humanities curricula.

Authorities barred Bahai students from higher education and harassed those who studied through the unrecognized online university of the Bahai Institute for Higher Education.

The government maintained control over cinema, music, theater, and art exhibits and censored those productions deemed to transgress Islamic values. The government censored or banned films deemed to promote secularism, non-Islamic ideas concerning women’s rights, unethical behavior, drug abuse, violence, or alcoholism.

According to the IHRDC, the nine-member film review council of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, consisting of clerics, former directors, former parliamentarians, and academics, must approve the content of every film before production and again before screening. Films may be barred arbitrarily from screening even if all the appropriate permits were received in advance.



In March media and NGOs reported authorities summoned filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof to prison to serve a one-year sentence, although his lawyer advised him not to turn himself in due to the coronavirus outbreak. In July 2019 CHRI reported that a court sentenced Rasoulof to one year in prison for the content of his films. According to Rasoulof, the accusations made against him in court focused on films he made examining the government's repression of members of the Bahai faith. Since 2017 authorities have banned Rasoulof from leaving the country and making films. Similarly, film director Jafar Panahi has been barred from traveling since 2010, when he was charged with generating "propaganda against the Islamic Republic."

Officials continued to discourage teaching music in schools. Authorities considered heavy metal and foreign music religiously offensive, and police continued to repress underground concerts and arrest musicians and music distributors. The Ministry of Culture must officially approve song lyrics, music, and album covers as complying with the country's moral values, although many underground musicians released albums without seeking such permission.

In August authorities reportedly arrested musician Mehdi Rajabian on "immorality" charges related to the release of an album and publication of a video on which he worked with female musicians and dancers. Rajabian was arrested on at least two previous occasions for his work.

## **b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association**

The government severely restricted freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

### **Freedom of Peaceful Assembly**

The constitution permits assemblies and marches of unarmed persons, "provided they do not violate the principles of Islam." To prevent activities it considered antiregime, the government restricted this right and closely monitored gatherings such as public entertainment and lectures, student and women's meetings and protests, meetings and worship services of minority religious groups, labor protests, online gatherings and networking, funeral processions, and Friday prayer gatherings.

According to activists, the government arbitrarily applied rules governing permits to assemble, as proregime groups rarely experienced difficulty, while groups

viewed as critical of the regime experienced harassment regardless of whether authorities issued a permit.

Protests against government corruption and economic mismanagement continued throughout the year, as did labor-sector protests and protests against the country's compulsory hijab laws. In a July report, UNSR Rehman stated he was "gravely concerned at the unprecedented use of excessive force" against peaceful protesters in the country and noted a "trend...of suppressing the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression and assembly."

The United Nations expressed particular concern regarding the government's excessive use of force in January against protesters in several cities who had gathered to express discontent with how the government handled an investigation into the shooting down of a Ukrainian airliner by military forces. According to the UN's investigation, "eyewitness testimonies and footage indicated that, on January 11 and 12, security forces had again used excessive force against protesters by firing pointed pellets, rubber bullets and teargas, causing injuries. Security forces also used pepper spray and batons and fired tear gas into an enclosed Tehran metro station. Injured protesters either chose not to go to hospitals or were turned away due to fear of their arrest. Security forces reportedly maintained a strong presence in hospitals and tried to transfer some protesters to military hospitals. Student protesters at several universities were also reportedly arrested and assaulted." The government undertook no credible investigations of these allegations.

In July local security forces used tear gas to disperse economic protests in the southwestern cities of Behbahan and Shiraz, which also were related to news that a court upheld death sentences against three men who participated in separate protests earlier in the year. Police warned they would deal "decisively" with further demonstrations.

The government did not investigate the killing of at least 304 protesters by security forces in November 2019 (see section 1.a.).

### **Freedom of Association**

The constitution provides for the establishment of political parties, professional and political associations, and Islamic and recognized religious minority organizations, as long as such groups do not violate the principles of freedom, sovereignty, national unity, or Islamic criteria, or question Islam as the basis of the country's system of government. The government limited the freedom of

association through threats, intimidation, the imposition of arbitrary requirements on organizations, and the arrests of group leaders and members (see section 7). The government continued to broaden arbitrarily the areas of civil society work it deemed unacceptable, to include conservation and environmental efforts (see section 1.d.).

### **c. Freedom of Religion**

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

### **d. Freedom of Movement**

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights, with some exceptions, particularly concerning migrants and women.

In-country Movement: Judicial sentences sometimes included internal exile after release from prison, which prevented individuals from traveling to certain provinces. Women often required the supervision of a male guardian or chaperone to travel and faced official and societal harassment for traveling alone.

Foreign Travel: The government required exit permits for foreign travel for all citizens. Citizens who were educated at government expense or received scholarships had either to repay the scholarship or receive a temporary permit to exit the country. The government restricted the foreign travel of some religious leaders, members of religious minorities, and scientists in sensitive fields.

Numerous journalists, academics, opposition politicians, human and women's rights activists, and artists remained subject to foreign travel bans and had their passports confiscated during the year. Married women were not allowed to travel outside the country without prior permission from their husbands.

### **e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons**

Not applicable.

### **f. Protection of Refugees**

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) with regard to refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the government recognized 951,142 Afghans under a system known as *Amayesh*, through which authorities provide refugees with cards identifying them as de facto refugees. The cards enable refugees to access basic services, facilitate the issuance of work permits, and serve as a safeguard against arrest and deportation. Amayesh cardholders must obtain permission for any travel outside their province of registration. In late July the Amayesh re-registration exercise started and expanded the eligibility criteria for Amayesh card renewal to include those who missed the four previous rounds. Undocumented spouses and family members of Amayesh cardholders are reportedly also able to enroll. NGO sources reported Amayesh cards, which are valid only for one year, were increasingly difficult to renew and prohibitively expensive for refugees to maintain, due to increased annual renewal fees. In addition to registered refugees, the government hosted some 450,000 Afghans who hold Afghan passports and Iranian visas and an estimated 1.5 to two million undocumented Afghans. The country also hosted 28,268 Iraqi refugees.

Abuse of Migrants, Refugees, and Stateless Persons: HRW and other groups reported the government continued its mistreatment of many Afghans, including physical abuse by security forces, deportations, forced recruitment to fight in Syria, detention in unsanitary and inhuman conditions, forced payment for transportation to and accommodation in deportation camps, forced labor, forced separation from families, restricted movement within the country, and restricted access to education or jobs.

On May 1, Iranian border guards reportedly forced a group of 57 Afghan migrant workers they had detained entering the country into a fast-flowing river near Zulfiqar at gunpoint. According to a Reuters report sourced to Afghan lawmakers investigating the incident, at least 45 of the men drowned. There was no information regarding the status of a joint investigation into the incident by the Iranian and Afghan governments.

Refoulement: According to activist groups and NGOs, authorities routinely arrested Afghans without Amayesh cards and sometimes threatened them with deportation. According to the International Organization for Migration, from the beginning of the year to October 24, Iran deported 249,807 Afghans to Afghanistan and an additional 416,450 undocumented Afghans returned to Afghanistan, with some claiming they were pressured to leave or left due to abuse by police or state authorities.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status to qualified applicants. While the government reportedly has a system for providing protection to refugees, UNHCR did not have information regarding how the country made asylum determinations. According to HRW, the government blocked many Afghans from registering to obtain refugee status.

Afghans not registered under the Amayesh system who had migrated during past decades of conflict in their home country continued to be denied access to an asylum system or access to register with UNHCR as refugees. NGOs reported many of these displaced asylum seekers believed they were pressured to leave the country but could not return to Afghanistan because of the security situation in their home provinces.

Freedom of Movement: Refugees faced certain restrictions on in-country movement and faced restrictions from entering certain provinces, according to UNHCR. They could apply for laissez-passer documents allowing them to move among those provinces where Afghans were allowed to go.

Employment: Only refugees with government-issued work permits were able to work.

Access to Basic Services: Amayesh cardholders had access to education and health care, including vaccinations, prenatal care, maternal and child health, and family planning from the Ministry of Health. All registered refugees may enroll in a basic health insurance package similar to the package afforded to citizens, which covered hospitalization and paraclinical services (medicine, doctor's visits, radiology, etc.). During the year UNHCR covered the insurance premium for 92,000 of the most vulnerable refugees, including refugees who suffer from special diseases and their families. The remaining refugee population may enroll in health insurance by paying the premium themselves during four enrollment windows throughout the year.

The government claimed to grant Afghan children access to schools. More than 480,000 Afghan children were enrolled in primary and secondary schools, including 130,000 undocumented children. According to media reporting, however, Afghans continued to have difficulty gaining access to education.

Most provinces' residency limitations on refugees effectively denied them access to public services, such as public housing, in the restricted areas of those provinces.

### **g. Stateless Persons**

There were no accurate numbers on how many stateless persons resided in the country. Persons without birth registration, identity documents, or refugee identification were at a heightened risk of statelessness. They were subjected to inconsistent government policies and relied on charities, principally domestic, to obtain medical care and schooling. Authorities did not issue formal government support or travel documents to stateless persons.

In June a law passed in October 2019 entered into force granting Iranian citizenship to the children of Iranian women married to foreign men (see section 6, Children). Previously, female citizens married to foreign men were not able to transmit citizenship to their children, unlike male citizens, whose children and spouses receive citizenship automatically. As a result of this disparity, between 400,000 and one million children of the more than 150,000 Iranian women married to foreign men lacked Iranian nationality, according to media reporting. These dependents could only apply for citizenship after they lived in Iran for at least 18 years. Under the law, the children of Iranian women and foreign men qualify for citizenship, although it is not automatic; the mother must submit an application for them. Children who turn 18 may apply for nationality themselves, even if their mother is deceased. Foreign men married to Iranian women may receive legal residency.

Human rights activists noted concern that the amended law requires the Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC's Intelligence Organization to certify that no "security problem" exists before approving citizenship for these specific applications, and this vaguely defined security provision could be used arbitrarily to disqualify applicants if they or their parents are seen as critical of the government.

## **Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process**

The constitution provides citizens the ability to choose the president, as well as members of the Assembly of Experts and parliament, provided all have been vetted and approved by the Guardian Council. Elections are based on universal suffrage. Candidate vetting conducted by unelected bodies, however, abridged this right in all instances. Reported government constraints on freedom of expression and

media; peaceful assembly; association; and the ability freely to seek, receive, and impart information and campaign also limited citizens' right to choose freely their representatives in elections.

The Assembly of Experts, which is composed of 86 popularly elected clerics who serve eight-year terms, elects the supreme leader, who acts as the de facto head of state and may be removed only by a vote of the assembly. The Guardian Council vets and qualifies candidates for all Assembly of Experts, presidential, and parliamentary elections, based on criteria that include candidates' allegiance to the state and adherence to Shia Islam. The council consists of six clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six jurists nominated by the head of the judiciary (who is appointed by the supreme leader) and approved by parliament.

Observers noted that the supreme leader's public commentary on state policy exerted significant influence over the actions of elected officials.

### **Elections and Political Participation**

Recent Elections: Parliamentary elections held in February continued to fall short of international standards for free and fair elections, primarily because of the Guardian Council's controlling role in the political process, including determining which individuals could run for office and, in certain instances, arbitrarily removing winning candidates. The Guardian Council disqualified 7,296 candidates of the 14,500 who registered to run, according to the Atlantic Council. The disqualifications prevented reformist candidates from contesting 230 of parliament's 290 seats. According to observers, the freedom and fairness of the electoral environment was significantly diminished by widespread government crackdowns on protests in November 2019 and in January.

Presidential and local council elections were held in 2017. In 2017 the Guardian Council approved six Shia male candidates for president from a total candidate pool of 1,636 individuals. Voters re-elected Hassan Rouhani as president.

Candidates for local elections were vetted by monitoring boards established by parliament, resulting in the disqualification of a number of applicants. Observers asserted that reformist candidates such as Abdollah Momeni, Ali Tajernia, and Nasrin Vaziri, previously imprisoned for peacefully protesting the 2009 election, were not allowed to run due to their political views.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The constitution provides for the formation of political parties, but the Interior Ministry granted licenses only to parties deemed to adhere to the “governance of the jurist” system of government embodied in the constitution. Registered political organizations that adhered to the system generally operated without restriction, but most were small, focused around an individual, and without nationwide membership. Members of political parties and persons with any political affiliation that the regime deemed unacceptable faced harassment and sometimes violence and imprisonment. The government maintained bans on several opposition organizations and political parties. Security officials continued to harass, intimidate, and arrest members of the political opposition and some reformists (see section 1.e.).

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: Women faced significant legal, religious, and cultural barriers to political participation. According to the Guardian Council’s interpretation, the constitution bars women, as well as persons of foreign origin, from serving as supreme leader or president, as members of the Assembly of Experts, the Guardian Council, or the Expediency Council, and as certain types of judges.

In an October 10 press conference, Guardian Council spokesperson Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei claimed there was no prohibition on women running for president in the 2021 election. The Guardian Council disqualified all 137 women who registered as candidates for the 2017 presidential election. Almost 18,000 female candidates, or 6.3 percent of all candidates, were permitted to run for positions in the 2017 local elections.

All cabinet-level ministers were men. A limited number of women held senior government positions, including that of vice president for legal affairs and vice president for women and family affairs. According to the World Bank, women make up 6 percent of members of parliament.

On December 5, Fars News reported that Branch 15 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced former vice president for women and family affairs Shahindokht Molaverdi to 30 months in prison. Fars stated the sentence included two years on charges of divulging “classified information and documents with the intent of disrupting national security” and six months for “propaganda against the sacred regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran.” Observers noted Molaverdi had over the years defended the right of women to attend sporting events in stadiums, criticized the marriage of girls younger than age 15, and been involved in other high-profile issues. Fars reported Branch 2 of Tehran’s Criminal Court also sentenced



Molaverdi for encouraging “corruption, prostitution, and sexual deviance.” Similar charges were brought in the past against individuals flouting mandatory hijab laws or encouraging others to do so. On December 5, Molaverdi announced that she would appeal the verdicts.

Practitioners of a religion other than Shia Islam are barred from serving as supreme leader or president, as well as from being a member in the Assembly of Experts, Guardian Council, or Expediency Council. There are two seats reserved in parliament for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian and Chaldean Christians together, one for Jews, and one for Zoroastrians. There were no non-Muslims in the cabinet or on the Supreme Court.

In 2018 the Expediency Council, the country’s highest arbiter of disputes between the parliament and the Guardian Council over legislation, amended the Law on the Formation, Duties, and Election of National Islamic Councils to affirm the right of constitutionally recognized religious minorities to run in local elections.

#### **Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government**

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, but the government implemented the law arbitrarily, sometimes pursuing apparently legitimate corruption cases against officials, while at other times, bringing politically motivated charges against regime critics or political opponents. Officials continued to engage in corrupt practices with impunity. Many expected bribes for providing routine services or received bonuses outside their regular work, and individuals routinely bribed officials to obtain permits for otherwise illegal construction.

Endowed religious charitable foundations, or bonyads, accounted for one-quarter to one-third of the country’s economy, according to some experts. Government insiders, including members of the military and clergy, ran these tax-exempt organizations, which are defined under law as charities. Members of the political opposition and international corruption watchdog organizations frequently accused bonyads of corruption. Bonyads received benefits from the government, but no government agency is required to approve its budget publicly.

Numerous companies and subsidiaries affiliated with the IRGC engaged in trade and business activities, sometimes illicitly, including in the telecommunications, mining, and construction sectors. Other IRGC entities reportedly engaged in smuggling pharmaceutical products, narcotics, and raw materials. The domestic

and international press reported that individuals with strong government connections had access to foreign currency at preferential exchange rates, allowing them to exploit a gap between the country's black market and official exchange rates.

Corruption: The judiciary continued an anticorruption campaign that observers viewed as motivated by several factors, including political infighting and replacing lost revenue due to economic challenges. The supreme leader approved a request from the head of the judiciary in 2018 to set up special revolutionary courts to try individuals for economic crimes, seeking maximum sentences for those who “disrupted and corrupted” the economy. He was quoted stating that punishments for those accused of economic corruption, including government officials and those from the military, should be carried out swiftly. Amnesty International criticized the courts' lack of fair trial and due process guarantees.

In June media reported Romanian authorities arrested Iranian judge Gholamreza Mansouri at Iran's request after Mansouri and several other judges in Iran were accused of accepting more than \$500,000 in bribes. Several days prior, RSF filed an official complaint with German federal judicial authorities highlighting Mansouri's role in suppressing and jailing dozens of Iranian journalists, and urging his arrest, believing Mansouri was present in Germany. On June 19, Mansouri was found dead after an apparent fall from the sixth story of the hotel where he was staying under Romanian supervision, awaiting extradition to Iran.

In October, IRNA reported that former managing director of Sermayeh Bank Ali Reza Heydarabadipour was extradited from Spain that month to face corruption charges. Heydarabadipour was accused of “disrupting the economic system by betraying the trust” and “acquiring illicit property” and was sentenced in absentia to 12 years in prison by the Third Branch of the Special Court for Investigating Crimes in the Country's Economic System. He was in prison as of December 4.

Financial Disclosure: Regulations require government officials, including cabinet ministers and members of the Guardian Council, Expediency Council, and Assembly of Experts, to submit annual financial statements to the government inspectorate. Little information was available on whether the government effectively implemented the law, whether officials obeyed the law, or whether financial statements were publicly accessible.

## **Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights**

The government restricted the operations of and did not cooperate with local or international human rights NGOs investigating alleged violations of human rights. The government restricted the work of domestic activists and often responded to their inquiries and reports with harassment, arrests, online hacking, and monitoring of individual activists and organization workplaces.

By law NGOs must register with the Ministry of Interior and apply for permission to receive foreign grants. Independent human rights groups and other NGOs faced harassment because of their activism, as well as the threat of closure by government officials, following prolonged and often arbitrary delays in obtaining official registration.

During the year the government prevented some human rights defenders, civil society activists, journalists, and scholars from traveling abroad. Human rights activists reported intimidating telephone calls, threats of blackmail, online hacking attempts, and property damage from unidentified law enforcement and government officials. The government summoned activists repeatedly for questioning and confiscated personal belongings such as mobile phones, laptops, and passports. Government officials sometimes harassed and arrested family members of human rights activists. Courts routinely suspended sentences of convicted human rights activists, leaving open the option for authorities to arrest or imprison individuals arbitrarily at any time on the previous charges.

In his July report, UNSR Rehman expressed “deep concern” regarding the harassment, imprisonment, and mistreatment in prison of human rights defenders and lawyers. He noted forcible prison transfers and lack of medical care appeared to be used as reprisals against activists for starting peaceful protests inside prisons or undertaking hunger strikes (see section 1.e., Political Prisoners and Detainees).

According to NGO sources, including HRW and Amnesty International, the government’s human rights record and its level of cooperation with international rights institutions remained poor. The government continued to deny requests from international human rights NGOs to establish offices in or to conduct regular investigative visits to the country. The most recent visit of an international human rights NGO was by Amnesty International in 2004 as part of the EU’s human rights dialogue with the country.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: During the year the government continued to deny repeated requests by the UNSR on the situation of human rights in Iran to visit the country.

On November 18, for the eighth consecutive year, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution expressing serious concern regarding the country's continuing human rights violations, including death sentences imposed following unfair trials and reports of forced confessions obtained through torture. The resolution repeated its call for the country to cooperate with UN special mechanisms, citing the government's failure to approve any request from a UN thematic special procedures mandate holder to visit the country in more than a decade. It drew attention to the government's continued failure to allow UNSR Rehman into the country to investigate human rights abuses despite repeated requests, in view of the absence of independent or transparent investigations into the regime's killings of at least 304 protesters in November 2019. The most recent visit by a UN human rights agency to the country was in 2005.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The High Council for Human Rights, headed by Ali Bagheri Kani, is part of the judicial branch of the government and lacks independence. The council continued to defend the imprisonment of high-profile human rights defenders and political opposition leaders, and assured families they should not be concerned for the "security, well-being, comfort, and vitality" of their loved ones in prison, according to IRNA. Kani continued to call for an end to the position of the UNSR for Iran and asserted that Iran's criteria for human rights was different because of the "religious lifestyle" of its citizens. There was no information available on whether the council challenged any laws or court rulings during the year.

## **Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons**

### **Women**

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is illegal and subject to strict penalties, including death, but it remained a problem. The law considers sex within marriage consensual by definition and, therefore, does not address spousal rape, including in cases of forced marriage. Most rape victims likely did not report the crime because they feared official retaliation or punishment for having been raped, including charges of indecency, immoral behavior, or adultery, the last in which conviction carries the death penalty. Rape victims also feared societal reprisal or ostracism. There were reports that approximately 80 percent of rape cases went unreported.

For a conviction of rape, the law requires four Muslim men or a combination of three men and two women or two men and four women, to have witnessed a rape. A woman or man found making a false accusation of rape is subject to 80 lashes.

The law does not prohibit domestic violence. Authorities considered abuse in the family a private matter and seldom discussed it publicly.

An April 10 article in IRNA noted a “dramatic increase” in domestic violence-related telephone calls to public social welfare hotlines. The State Welfare Organization sent a public text message the same day highlighting the existence of the hotlines. Calls to the hotlines reportedly doubled after the text message was sent, according to a government official. In a call with an expatriate media outlet, women’s rights activist Shahla Entesari also reported higher rates of domestic violence during pandemic-related lockdowns in the country.

In previous years assailants conducted “acid attacks” in which they threw acid capable of severe disfiguration at women perceived to have violated various “morality” laws or practices. Although the Guardian Council reportedly passed a law increasing sentences for the perpetrators of these attacks, the government continued to prosecute individual activists seeking stronger government accountability for the attacks. On October 11, a court sentenced Alieh Motalebzadeh to two years in prison for “conspiracy against state security” for advocating for women who were victims of acid attacks. Motalebzadeh was a member of the “One Million Signatures” campaign to change discriminatory laws against women. On October 29, authorities arrested Negar Masoudi for holding a photo exhibition featuring victims of “acid attacks” and for advocating to restrict the sale of acid.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law criminalizes FGM/C and states, “the cutting or removing of the two sides of female genitalia leads to *diyeh* (financial penalty or blood money) equal to half the full amount of *diyeh* for the woman’s life.”

Little recent data were available on the practice inside the country, although older data and media reports suggested it was most prevalent in Hormozgan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and West Azerbaijan Provinces.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: There were reports of killings motivated by “honor” or other harmful traditional practices during the year. There are no

official statistics kept in the country concerning honor killings, but according to academic articles and university thesis estimates cited by the daily *Ebtekar*, every year between 375 and 450 such killings occur, in which mostly women are killed by their male relatives--including their husbands, fathers, and brothers--in the name of preserving the family's "honor."

The law reduces punitive measures for fathers and other family members who are convicted of murder or physically harming children in domestic violence or "honor killings." If a man is found guilty of murdering his daughter, the punishment is between three and 10 years in prison rather than the normal death sentence or payment of *diyeh* for homicide cases.

In June, Reza Ashrafi reportedly beheaded his 14-year-old daughter, Romina Ashrafi, with a farming sickle because she had "run off" with her 29-year-old Sunni Muslim boyfriend. The father faced a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison because fathers are considered legal guardians and, unlike mothers, are exempt from capital punishment for murdering their children. In response to a national outcry over Ashrafi's killing, on June 7, the Guardian Council approved a law making it a crime to emotionally or physically abuse or abandon a child, but the maximum sentence of 10 years for conviction of murder by a father of his daughter remains unchanged. Observers noted the Guardian Council had rejected three previous iterations of the bill. In August a court reportedly convicted and sentenced Ashrafi's father to nine years in prison, sparking further outrage at the leniency of the sentence. Ashrafi's mother said she planned to appeal the sentence to seek a tougher penalty.

Sexual Harassment: The law prohibits physical contact between unrelated men and women. There were no reliable data on the extent of sexual harassment, but women and human rights observers reported that sexual harassment was the norm in many workplaces. There were no known government efforts to address this problem.

In September al-Jazeera reported a female employee of a technology company detailed on social media sexual misconduct charges against a male executive in the company, and several other existing female and former employees reported being fired for reporting the misconduct to the company's human resources officials. The company's CEO reportedly promised an investigation into the employee and apologized to the women.

In October the *New York Times* reported numerous women in the country aired harassment allegations against more than 100 prominent men following inspiration from the global #MeToo movement. In interviews 13 women recounted details alleging 80-year-old artist Aydin Aghdashloo's sexual misconduct spanning a 30-year period. According to the article, on October 12, Tehran police chief Hossein Rahimi announced that bookstore owner Keyvan Emamverdi confessed to raping 300 women after 30 women filed legal complaints against him. Police stated he would be charged with "corruption on earth," a capital offense.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Discrimination: The constitution provides for equal protection for women under the law in conformity with its interpretation of Islam. The government did not enforce the law, and provisions in the law, particularly sections dealing with family and property law, discriminate against women. Judicial harassment, intimidation, detention, and smear campaigns significantly challenged the ability of civil society organizations to fight for and protect women's rights.

In June the president issued a decree enacting into law an amendment to the country's civil code that allows Iranian women married to foreign men to transmit citizenship to their children (see section 2.f. and section 6, Children). In January 2019 Ahmad Meidari, the deputy of the Ministry of Social Welfare, reportedly estimated that 49,000 children would benefit if the legislation were enacted. The government does not recognize marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men, irrespective of their citizenship. The law states that a virgin woman or girl wishing to wed needs the consent of her father or grandfather or the court's permission.

The law permits a man to have as many as four wives and an unlimited number of *sigheh* (temporary wives), based on a Shia custom under which couples may enter into a limited-time civil and religious contract that outlines the union's conditions.

A woman has the right to divorce if her husband signs a contract granting that right; cannot provide for his family; has violated the terms of their marriage contract; or is a drug addict, insane, or impotent. A husband is not required to cite a reason for divorcing his wife. The law recognizes a divorced woman's right to part of shared property and to alimony. These laws were not always enforced.

The law provides divorced women preference in custody for children up to age seven, but fathers maintain legal guardianship rights over the child and must agree on many legal aspects of the child's life (such as issuing travel documents, enrolling in school, or filing a police report). After the child reaches the age seven, the father is granted custody unless he is proven unfit to care for the child.

Women sometimes received disproportionate punishment for crimes such as adultery, including death sentences. Islamic law retains provisions that equate a woman's testimony in a court of law to one-half that of a man's and value a woman's life as one-half that of a man's. According to the law, the diyeh paid in the death of a woman is one-half the amount paid in the death of a man, with the exception of car accident insurance payments. According to a CHRI report, in July 2019 the government declared equality between men and women in the payment of blood money. Per the Supreme Court ruling, the amount paid for the intentional or unintentional physical harm to a woman is still one-half the blood money as that paid for a man, but the remaining difference would be paid from a publicly funded trust.

Women have access to primary and advanced education. Quotas and other restrictions nonetheless limited women's admissions to certain fields and degree programs.

The Statistical Center of Iran reported that overall unemployment rate in the second quarter of the year was 9.5 percent. Unemployment of women in the country was twice as high as it was of men. All women's participation in the job market was 17.9 percent, according to the Global Gender Gap 2020 report. Women reportedly earned significantly less than men for the same work.

Women continued to face discrimination in home and property ownership, as well as access to financing. In cases of inheritance, male heirs receive twice the inheritance of their female counterparts. The government enforced gender segregation in many public spaces. Women must ride in a reserved section on public buses and enter some public buildings, universities, and airports through separate entrances.

The law provides that a woman who appears in public without appropriate attire, such as a cloth scarf veil (*hijab*) over the head and a long jacket (*manteau*), or a large full-length cloth covering (*chador*), may be sentenced to flogging and fined. Absent a clear legal definition of "appropriate attire" or of the related punishment,



women (and men) were subjected to the opinions of various disciplinary and security force members, police, and judges.

Authorities continued to arrest women for violating dress requirements, and courts applied harsh sentences. In February an appeals court upheld sentences of 16 to 23 years against Yasaman Aryani, her mother Monireh Arabshahi, and Mojgan Keshavarz for “spreading propaganda against the system” and “inciting corruption and prostitution.” They were arrested after posting a video for International Women’s Day in March 2019 during which they walked without headscarves through a Tehran metro train, handing flowers to female passengers.

In May the lawyer for imprisoned activist Saba Kord Afshari stated on Twitter that judicial authorities had reinstated a 7.5-year prison sentence for “corruption and prostitution” against his client without explanation. An appeals court had previously dropped that charge against Kord Afshari, who was also found guilty for “gathering and conspiring” and “spreading propaganda” related to videos she posted to social media in which she walked without a hijab and stated her opposition to compulsory dress requirements. Kord Afshari’s cumulative sentence increased back to 15 years with the reinstated portion of the sentence. In February, Kord Afshari’s mother, Raheleh Ahmadi, began serving a two-year sentence for “national security” crimes related to advocacy on behalf of her daughter. Human rights groups reported both mother and daughter were denied requested medical treatment and furlough during the year.

In a February letter to Iranian authorities, the world soccer governing body International Federation Football Association (FIFA) insisted women must be allowed to attend all soccer matches in larger numbers than the government previously permitted. In October 2019 the government permitted approximately 3,500 women to attend a World Cup qualifier match at Azadi Stadium, which has an estimated capacity of 78,000.

As noted by the former UNSR and other organizations, female athletes have been traditionally barred from participating in international tournaments, either by the country’s sport agencies or by their husbands. There were, however, cases throughout the year of female athletes being permitted to travel internationally to compete.

## **Children**

Birth Registration: Prior to June only a child's father could convey citizenship, regardless of the child's country of birth or mother's citizenship. Legislation taking force in June provides Iranian mothers the right to apply for citizenship for children born to fathers with foreign citizenship (see section 2.f. and section 6, Women). Although the law is retroactive, mothers do not receive equal treatment; they have to file an application for their children, whereas children born to Iranian fathers automatically have citizenship. The law also includes a stipulation of obtaining a security clearance from the security agencies prior to receiving approval. Birth within the country's borders does not confer citizenship, except when a child is born to unknown parents. The law requires that all births be registered within 15 days.

Education: Although primary schooling until age 11 is free and compulsory for all, media and other sources reported lower enrollment in rural areas, especially for girls. According to HRW, the child protection law passed in June following the killing of Romina Ashrafi sets out financial penalties for parents or guardians who fail to provide for their child's access to education through secondary level. Secondary education is free.

Children without state-issued identification cards are denied the right to education. In his February 2019 report, UNSR Rehman expressed concern over access to education for minority children, including references to high primary school dropout rates for ethnic minority girls living in border provinces.

Child Abuse: There was little information available on how the government dealt with child abuse. The 2003 law states, "Any form of abuse of children and juveniles that causes physical, psychological, or moral harm and threatens their physical or mental health is prohibited," and such crimes carry a maximum sentence of three months in confinement. On June 7, the Guardian Council approved legislation to support a child's safety and well-being, including penalties against physical harm and for preventing access to education. Article 9 of the law defines a set of punishments, which include imprisonment and "blood money," for negligence by anyone, including parents, that results in death, disability, bodily harm, and sexual harassment. The law required the State Welfare Organization to investigate the situation of children in "extreme danger" of abuse, exploitation, or being out of school, among other concerns. The state also has the authority to remove a child from a household and put them under state supervision until the prosecutor takes on the case. The law also applies to all citizens younger than age 18, despite the earlier age of maturity.

Reports of child abuse reportedly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The head of the State Welfare Organization in Mashhad noted an eightfold increase in child abuse cases reported in Mashhad compared with the same period in 2019. Concerns that street children were spreading the virus led to an increase in child detentions. For example, according to an August 13 Atlantic Council article, in April an aid worker found six children that had been detained by Tehran municipality officials “bruised and bloodied” in basement municipality offices.

According to IranWire, the Students’ Basij Force stepped up efforts to recruit young persons into the organization. Although “most of these activities are of an educational and ideological nature,” there were reports that during recent domestic unrest, some younger Basij forces armed with light military equipment were seen on the streets of some cities.

There continued to be reports of IRGC officials recruiting Afghan child soldiers, including to support Assad regime forces in Syria and the Taliban in Afghanistan. In a 2018 interview by IranWire, a Fatemiyoun Brigade commander confirmed Afghan minors as young as 14 served in his unit in Syria.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age of marriage for girls is 13, but girls as young as age nine may be married with permission from a court and their fathers. According to HRW, the child protection law failed to criminalize child marriage.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The legal age requirements for consensual sex are the same as those for marriage, as sex outside of marriage is illegal. There are no specific laws regarding child sexual exploitation, with such crimes either falling under the category of child abuse or sexual crimes of adultery. The law does not directly address sexual molestation or provide a punishment for it.

According to CHRI, the ambiguity between the legal definitions of child abuse and sexual molestation could lead to child sexual molestation cases being prosecuted under adultery law. While no separate provision exists for the rape of a child, the crime of rape, regardless of the victim’s age, is potentially punishable by death.

Displaced Children: There were reports of thousands of Afghan refugee children in the country, many of whom were born in Iran but could not obtain identity documents. These children were often unable to attend schools or access basic government services and were vulnerable to labor exploitation and trafficking.

UNHCR stated school enrollment among refugees was generally higher outside the 20 settlements, where more resources were available and where 97 percent of the refugees reside.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State’s Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

### **Anti-Semitism**

The law recognizes Jews as a religious minority and provides for their representation in parliament. According to the Tehran Jewish Committee, the population includes approximately 9,000 Jews. Members of the Iranian Jewish community are reportedly subject to government restrictions and discrimination. Government officials continued to question the history of the Holocaust, and anti-Semitism remained a pervasive problem. In October 28 comments on his website and Twitter addressed to “young French people,” Supreme Leader Khamenei questioned why it was a crime to raise doubts regarding the Holocaust. In a May 22 speech and tweets, Khamenei referred to Israel as a “cancerous tumor.” On May 19, Khamenei published a poster depicting Jerusalem with the phrase, “The final solution: Resistance until referendum.” Cartoons in state-run media outlets repeatedly depicted foreign officials as puppets of Jewish control. In September a government-controlled arts organization, the Hozeh Honari, announced it would hold a third “Holocaust Cartoon Festival,” the previous two held in 2006 and 2016. According to media reports, officials and media propagated conspiracy theories blaming Jews and Israel for the spread of COVID-19.

### **Trafficking in Persons**

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

### **Persons with Disabilities**

In 2018 parliament adopted the Law for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. According to HRW, the law increases pensions and extends insurance coverage to disability-related health-care services, but it does not explicitly prohibit discrimination. According to CHRI, as of December 2019, the

government did not allocate a budget to enforce the law. The law prohibits those with visual, hearing, or speech disabilities from running for seats in parliament. While the law provides for government-funded vocational education for persons with disabilities, domestic news reports noted vocational centers were located only in urban areas and unable to meet the needs of the entire population.

In October 2019 HRW and CHRI reported persons with disabilities remained cut off from society, a major obstacle being a mandatory government medical test that may exclude children from the public school system. They continued to face stigma and discrimination from government social workers, health-care workers, and others. Many persons with disabilities remained unable to participate in society on an equal basis. The law provides for public accessibility to government-funded buildings, and new structures appeared to comply with these standards. There were efforts to increase access for persons with disabilities to historical sites. Government buildings that predated existing accessibility standards remained largely inaccessible, and general building accessibility, including access to toilets, for persons with disabilities remained a problem. Persons with disabilities had limited access to informational, educational, and community activities. CHRI reported in 2018 that refugees with disabilities, particularly children, were often excluded or denied the ability to obtain the limited state services provided by the government.

### **Members of National/Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups**

The constitution grants equal rights to all ethnic minorities, allowing minority languages to be used in media. The law grants the right of citizens to learn, use, and teach their own languages and dialects. Minorities did not enjoy equal rights, and the government consistently barred use of their languages in school as the language of instruction.

The government disproportionately targeted minority groups, including Kurds, Ahwazis, Azeris, and Baluchis, for arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention, disappearances, and physical abuse. These ethnic minority groups reported political and socioeconomic discrimination, particularly in their access to economic aid, business licenses, university admissions, job opportunities, permission to publish books, and housing and land rights. In a July report, UNSR Rehman expressed concern regarding the reported high number of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience from the Azerbaijani-Turk, Kurdish, and Ahwazi Arab communities.

Another widespread complaint among ethnic minority groups, particularly among Ahwazis, Azeris, and Lors, was that the government diverted and mismanaged natural resources, primarily water, often for the benefit of IRGC-affiliated contractors. According to reports from international media and human rights groups, these practices devastated the local environment on which farmers and others depended for their livelihoods and well-being, resulting in forced migration and further marginalization of these communities.

The law, which requires religious screening and allegiance to the concept of “governance by the jurist,” not found in Sunni Islam, impaired the ability of Sunni Muslims (many of whom are also Baluch, Ahwazi, or Kurdish) to integrate into civic life and to work in certain fields.

Human rights organizations observed that the government’s application of the death penalty disproportionately affected ethnic minorities (see section 1.a.). Authorities reportedly subjected members of minority ethnicities and religious groups in pretrial detention repeatedly to more severe physical punishment, including torture, than other prisoners, regardless of the type of crime of which they were accused.

The estimated eight million ethnic Kurds in the country frequently campaigned for greater regional autonomy. The government continued to use the law to arrest and prosecute Kurds for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association. The government reportedly banned Kurdish-language newspapers, journals, and books and punished publishers, journalists, and writers for opposing and criticizing government policies.

Authorities suppressed legitimate activities of Kurdish NGOs by denying them registration permits or bringing security charges against persons working with such organizations. Authorities did not prohibit the use of the Kurdish language in general but did not offer education in Kurdish in public schools.

UNSR Rehman’s July report also noted, “in the border areas of Kurdistan, Ilam, West Azerbaijan and Kermanshah Provinces, Kurdish couriers (*kolbars*) continue to face excessive and lethal force by border officials. In 2019 there were 84 reported deaths and 192 injuries of kolbars, continuing a trend that has seen over 1,000 kolbars killed or injured due to the actions of border officials since 2014. It is with concern that cases of violence against kolbars are often either dismissed by the courts or closed without conviction or compensation for the victims and their families.”

International human rights observers, including the IHRDC, stated that the country's estimated two million Ahwazi Arabs, representing 110 tribes, faced continued oppression and discrimination. Ahwazi rights activists reported the government continued to confiscate Ahwazi property to use for government development projects, refusing to recognize property titles issued during the prerevolutionary era.

On March 30 and 31, according to reports from families of prisoners, journalists, and Ahwazi Arab human rights activists and organizations, security forces used excessive force to quell prison protests in the city of Ahvaz in Khuzestan Province, causing up to 15 deaths in Sepidar Prison and 20 deaths in Sheiban Prison (see section 1.a.). Numerous videos taken from outside both prisons and shared on social media showed smoke rising from the buildings, while sounds of gunfire can be heard. Arab minority rights activist Mohammad Ali Amourinejad and several other inmates, including prisoners of conscience serving life sentences for "enmity against God" due to promoting educational and cultural rights for Ahwazi Arabs, were transferred out of Sheiban Prison following the unrest and by year's end were held incommunicado in an unknown location (see section 1.b.).

Ethnic Azeris, who number more than 18 million, or approximately 24 percent of the population, were more integrated into government and society than other ethnic minority groups and included the supreme leader. Azeris reported the government discriminated against them by harassing Azeri activists or organizers and changing Azeri geographic names.

In October, following an outbreak of violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, Amnesty International expressed concern over the arrest of approximately 20 ethnic Azeri activists in Iran who had participated in pro-Azerbaijan protests. HRANA asserted the number of protesters arrested was much higher, adding that they were arrested "violently."

Local and international human rights groups alleged discrimination during the year against the Baluchi ethnic minority, estimated at between 1.5 and two million persons. Areas with large Baluchi populations were severely underdeveloped and had limited access to education, employment, health care, and housing. Baluchi activists reported that more than 70 percent of the population lived below the poverty line.

According to activist reports, the law limited Sunni Baluchis' employment opportunities and political participation. Activists reported that throughout the year, the government sent hundreds of Shia missionaries to areas with large Sunni Baluch populations to try to convert the local population. According to Baluchi rights activists, Baluchi journalists and human rights activists faced arbitrary arrest, physical abuse, and unfair trials.

On May 6, IranWire and the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization reported security forces shot and killed Sunni Baluchi brothers Mohammad and Mehdi Pourian in their home in Iranshahr, the capital of Sistan and Baluchistan Province. A 17-year-old named Daniel Brahovi was also killed in the incident. Iranshahr prosecutor Mohsen Golmohammadi told local media that the three were "famous and well-known miscreants" and that "several weapons and ammunition were seized from them." The families of the three deceased men registered a complaint against the security forces involved but did not receive any official information regarding the judicial process or information related to their sons' alleged criminal activity.

### **Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

The law criminalizes consensual same-sex sexual activity, which is punishable by death, flogging, or a lesser punishment. The law does not distinguish between consensual and nonconsensual same-sex intercourse, and NGOs reported this lack of clarity led to both the victim and the perpetrator being held criminally liable under the law in cases of assault. The law does not prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. While few details were available for specific cases, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) activists expressed concern that the government executed LGBTI individuals under the pretext of more severe, and possibly specious, criminal charges such as rape. In June 2019 the foreign minister appeared to defend executions of LGBTI persons for their status or conduct. After being asked by a journalist in Germany why the country executes "homosexuals," the foreign minister stated, "Our society has moral principles. And we live according to these principles. These are moral principles concerning the behavior of people in general. And that means that the law is respected and the law is obeyed."

Security forces harassed, arrested, and detained individuals they suspected of being LGBTI. In some cases security forces raided houses and monitored internet sites for information on LGBTI persons. Those accused of "sodomy" often faced



summary trials, and evidentiary standards were not always met. The Iranian Lesbian and Transgender Network (6Rang) noted that individuals arrested under such conditions were traditionally subjected to forced anal or sodomy examinations--which the United Nations and World Health Organization stated may constitute torture--and other degrading treatment and sexual insults. Punishment for same-sex sexual activity between men was more severe than between women.

In a September survey of more than 200 individuals living in the country and identifying as LGBTI, 6Rang found that 15 percent reported being victims of sexual violence at their school or university, 30 percent reported being victims of sexual violence by their peers, and more than 42 percent reported being victims of sexual violence in public spaces. Anonymous respondents reported being beaten, detained, and flogged by security authorities.

The government censored all materials related to LGBTI status or conduct. Authorities particularly blocked websites or content within sites that discussed LGBTI issues, including the censorship of Wikipedia pages defining LGBTI and other related topics. There were active, unregistered LGBTI NGOs and activists in the country.

There was no available update in the case of Rezvaneh Mohammadi, a gender-equality activist sentenced to five years in prison by a revolutionary court in December 2019. According to CHRI, authorities arrested Mohammadi in 2018 and held her in solitary confinement for several weeks at Evin Prison, where they pressured her, including with threats of rape, to confess to receiving money to overthrow the government.

Hate-crime laws or other criminal justice mechanisms do not exist to aid in the prosecution of bias-motivated crimes.

The law requires all male citizens older than age 18 to serve in the military but exempts gay men and transgender women, who are classified as having mental disorders. Military identity cards list the subsection of the law dictating the exemption. According to 6Rang, this practice identified gay or transgender individuals and put them at risk of physical abuse and discrimination.

NGOs reported authorities pressured LGBTI persons to undergo gender reassignment surgery. According to a July report by 6Rang, the number of private and semigovernmental psychological and psychiatric clinics allegedly engaging in

“corrective treatment” or reparative therapies of LGBTI persons continued to grow. The NGO 6Rang reported the increased use at such clinics of electric shock therapy to the hands and genitals of LGBTI persons, prescription of psychoactive medication, hypnosis, and coercive masturbation to pictures of the opposite sex. According to 6Rang, one such institution is called The Anonymous Sex Addicts Association of Iran, with branches in 18 provinces.

## **HIV and AIDS Social Stigma**

Despite government programs to treat and provide financial and other assistance to persons with HIV/AIDS, international news sources and organizations reported that individuals known to be infected with HIV/AIDS faced widespread societal discrimination. Individuals with HIV or AIDS, for example, continued to be denied employment as teachers.

## **Section 7. Worker Rights**

### **a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining**

The constitution provides for freedom of association, but neither the constitution nor law specifies trade union rights. The law states that workers may establish an Islamic labor council or a guild at any workplace, but the rights and responsibilities of these organizations fell significantly short of international standards for trade unions. In workplaces where workers established an Islamic labor council, authorities did not permit any other form of worker representation. The law requires prior authorization for organizing and concluding collective agreements. Strikes are prohibited in all sectors, although private-sector workers may conduct “peaceful” campaigns within the workplace. The law does not apply to establishments with fewer than 10 employees.

Authorities did not respect freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, and the government did not effectively enforce applicable laws. The government severely restricted freedom of association and interfered in worker attempts to organize. Labor activism is considered a national security offense, for which conviction carries severe punishments up to and including the death penalty. The law does not prohibit antiunion discrimination and does not require reinstatement of workers fired for union activity.

Antiunion discrimination occurred, and the government harassed trade union leaders, labor rights activists, and journalists during a crackdown on widespread

protests. Independent trade unionists were subject to arbitrary arrests, tortured, and if convicted subjected to harsh sentences, including the death penalty.

According to Radio Zamaneh in June, Jafar Azimzadeh, the general secretary of the board of the Free Trade Union of Iranian workers and a prominent labor activist, was given another sentence of 13 months in prison for “propaganda against the regime.” Azimzadeh was arrested in 2015 and sentenced to six years in prison by Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court of Tehran for organizing a petition that collected 40,000 signatures to raise the national minimum wage. In September, Azimzadeh was transferred to Rajai Shahr Prison after ending a 21-day hunger strike in protest of being denied medical treatment after contracting COVID-19, along with 11 other prisoners in Evin Prison.

According to media and NGO reporting, on May 1, International Labor Day, police violently attacked and arrested at least 35 activists who had gathered for peaceful demonstrations demanding workers’ rights, organized by 20 independent labor organizations, in front of parliament. The government barred teachers from commemorating International Labor Day and Teachers’ Day. Several prominent teachers and union activists remained in prison untried or if convicted awaited sentences, including Mahmoud Beheshti Langroudi (see below).

The Interior Ministry; the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare; and the Islamic Information Organization determined labor councils’ constitutions, operational rules, and election procedures. Administrative and judicial procedures were lengthy. The Workers’ House remained the only officially authorized national labor organization, and its leadership oversaw, granted permits to, and coordinated activities with Islamic labor councils in industrial, agricultural, and service organizations with more than 35 employees.

According to CHRI, the labor councils, which consisted of representatives of workers and a representative of management, were essentially management-run unions that undermined workers’ efforts to maintain independent unions. The councils, nevertheless, sometimes could block layoffs and dismissals. There was no representative workers’ organization for noncitizen workers.

According to international media reports, security forces continued to respond to workers’ attempts to organize or conduct strikes with arbitrary arrests and violence. As economic conditions deteriorated, strikes and worker protests were numerous and widespread across the country throughout the year, often prompting a heavy police response. Security forces routinely monitored major worksites.

According to CHRI, workers were routinely fired and risked arrest for striking, and labor leaders were charged with national security crimes for trying to organize workers.

According to Radio Zamaneh, workers at Haft Tappeh sugarcane company began striking in June to reverse the privatization of the company and to demand the arrest of CEO Omid Asadbeigi accused of currency theft and the embezzlement of their wages. On September 7, the Supreme Auditing Court ruled that Haft Tappeh's sale must be annulled "due to violations in transferring the ownership of the company, failure to achieve goals set by the sale and the buyers' bad faith in honoring their commitments," thereby removing Asadbeigi as owner. The Haft Tappeh Workers Syndicate then issued a statement declaring a temporary halt to the protest.

According to a CHRI report, in 2018 security forces violently suppressed protests at Haft Tappeh, the country's largest sugar production plant, which had been the site of continuing protests against unpaid wages and benefits for more than two years. In May 2019 the protests resurfaced in response to the announcement of a joint indictment issued against five journalists and two labor rights activists. Sepideh Gholian, Amir Hossein Mohammadifard, Sanaz Allahyari, Ali Amirgholi, Asal Mohammadi, Esmail Bakhshi, and Ali Nejati were charged with "assembly and collusion against national security," "forming groups with the intention to disturb national security," and "contacts with antistate organizations." In December 2019 they each received a prison sentence of five years. Except for Gholian, all as well as syndicate member Mohammad Khanifar were reportedly pardoned during the year. Gholian was re-arrested a week after being released on bail in June and was transferred to Evin Prison.

On October 29, four Haft Tappeh workers--Yusef Bahmani, Hamid Mombini, Massoud Hayouri, and Ebrahim Abassi--were arrested for "disrupting public order" and interrogated without access to their lawyers. In November they started a hunger strike at Dezful Prison to protest their unlawful detention. As of November 8, the strike continued.

According to NGO and media reports, as in previous years, a number of trade unionists were imprisoned or remained unjustly detained for their peaceful activism. Mehdi Farahi Shandiz, a member of the Committee to Pursue the Establishment of Labor Unions in Iran, continued serving a three-year sentence, having been convicted of "insulting the supreme leader" and "disrupting public order." Arrested several times and jailed since 2012, there were reports that

Shandiz was beaten and tortured in Karaj Prison and kept for prolonged periods in solitary confinement.

The government continued to arrest and harass teachers' rights activists from the Teachers Association of Iran and related unions. In March 2019 media outlets reported continued nationwide teacher strikes demanding better pay, rights to an official union, and the release of teachers' rights activists who were jailed during protests in 2018. Hashem Khastar--a teachers' rights activist from Mashhad, was arrested in August 2019 after signing an open letter calling for the resignation of the supreme leader--received a 16-year sentence on March 29.

According to a CHRI report, Mahmoud Beheshti-Langroudi, the former spokesman for the Iranian Teachers' Trade Association (ITTA) jailed since 2017, continued a 14-year combined sentence for charges associated with his peaceful defense of labor rights. CHRI reported in July 2019 that Beheshti-Langroudi commenced another hunger strike protesting his unjust sentence, the judiciary's refusal to review his case, and the mistreatment of political prisoners.

Esmail Abdi, a mathematics teacher and former secretary general of ITTA, continued a six-year prison sentence for labor rights activism. He was arrested in 2015 and convicted in 2016 for "propaganda against the state" and "collusion against national security." On March 17, Abdi was furloughed due to the COVID-19 pandemic but was returned to Evin Prison in April to serve a suspended 10-year sentence he received in 2010 for "gathering information with the intention to disrupt national security" and "propaganda against the state." He contracted COVID-19 after being returned to Evin. Human rights activists viewed Abdi's re-arrest as a new wave of repression aimed to keep heads down before May Day.

Education International and the United Kingdom Teachers' Union, NASUWT, condemned Abdi's re-arrest and also called for the immediate release of Mohammad Habibi, another teacher who was arrested in 2018. Habibi, who is serving a harsh prison sentence for pressing for an improved educational environment, was terminated from the education service.

Media reported that on June 1, a member of the Trade Union of the Tehran and Suburbs Vahed Bus Company was flogged 74 times. Seyed Rasoul Taleb Moghadam, a union member who was detained during the 2019 International Workers' Day demonstration, presented himself at Evin Court for his sentence. Afterwards, he was transferred to Evin Prison's quarantine area.

## **b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor**

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, but the government did not effectively enforce the law and made no significant effort to address forced labor during the year. It was unclear whether penalties were commensurate with those prescribed for other analogous crimes such as kidnapping. Conditions indicative of forced labor sometimes occurred in the construction, domestic labor, and agricultural sectors, primarily regarding adult Afghan men and boys younger than age 18. Family members and others forced children to work.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment**

The law does not prohibit the worst forms of child labor. The law prohibits employment of children younger than age 15 and places restrictions on employment of children younger than 18, such as prohibiting hard labor or night work. The law does not apply to domestic labor and permits children to work in agriculture and some small businesses from the age of 12. The government did not adequately monitor or enforce laws pertaining to child labor, and child labor remained a serious problem. Penalties for violations were not commensurate with those for other analogous, serious crimes, such as kidnapping. The United Nations in 2016 cited a 2003 law that exempts workshops with fewer than 10 employees from labor regulations as increasing the risks of economic exploitation of children. The UN report also noted serious concerns with the large number of children employed under hazardous conditions, such as in garbage collection, brick kilns, and industrial workshops, without protective clothing and for very low pay. According to HRW, on June 7, the Guardian Council approved a 51-article bill to protect children and adolescents that includes penalties for certain acts that harm a child's safety and well-being, including physical harm and preventing access to education. The law reportedly allows officials to relocate children in situations that seriously threaten their safety. Article 7 of the law imposes financial penalties for parents or guardians who fail to provide for their child's access to education through secondary level (see section 6, Children).

There were reportedly significant numbers of children, especially of Afghan descent, who worked as street vendors in major urban areas. According to official estimates, there were 60,000 homeless children, although many children's rights organizations estimated up to 200,000 homeless children. The Committee on the

Rights of the Child reported that street children in particular were subjected to various forms of economic exploitation, including sexual abuse and exploitation by the public and police officers. Child labor also was used in the production of carpets and bricks. Children worked as beggars, and there were reports criminals forced some children into begging rings. According to the Iranian Students News Agency, Reza Ghadimi, the managing director of the Tehran Social Services Organization, said in 2018 that, according to a survey of 400 child laborers, 90 percent were “molested.”

Also, see the Department of Labor’s *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

#### **d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation**

The constitution bars discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, and social status “in conformity with Islamic criteria,” but the government did not effectively enforce these prohibitions. According to the constitution, “everyone has the right to choose any occupation he wishes, if it is not contrary to Islam and the public interests and does not infringe on the rights of others.” Discrimination with respect to employment and occupation occurred in several categories, including gender, ethnicity, and disability.

Despite this constitutional provision, the government made systematic efforts to limit women’s access to the workplace, and their participation in the job market remained as low as 16 percent. Women reportedly earned 41 percent less than men for the same work. Unemployment of women in the country was twice as high as it was of men. Hiring practices often discriminated against women, and the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare guidelines stated that men should be given preferential hiring status. An Interior Ministry directive requires all officials to hire only secretaries of their own gender. The labor code restricts women from working in jobs deemed hazardous or arduous. Women remained banned from working in coffee houses and from performing music alongside men, with very limited exceptions made for traditional music. Women in many fields were restricted from working after 9 p.m.

Kurds, Ahwazis, Azeris, and Baluchis reported political and socioeconomic discrimination with regard to their access to economic aid, business licenses, and job opportunities.

CHRI reported that, according to the director of the State Welfare Organization, 60 percent of persons with disabilities remained unemployed.

#### **e. Acceptable Conditions of Work**

In 2018 the Supreme Labor Council, the government body charged with proposing labor regulations, agreed to raise the minimum monthly wage by 19.8 percent. There were reported complaints that the minimum wage increase was too low in light of the plunging value of the Iranian rial against the United States dollar, which is used to price day-to-day goods. The minimum wage is commonly below the poverty line in rural areas. In April media reported that following failed meetings, workers, employers, and the government agreed to increase the minimum wage from last year's by 21 percent. Workers' monthly allowance was set at \$25 and the daily wage increased to \$3.80 according to ILNA.

Forced migration across the country and illegal collection and sales of plastics and other waste products were early indicators of the critical socioeconomic situation on the rise since the COVID-19 outbreak. The Ministry of Labor reported that more than 783,000 individuals registered for unemployment insurance for the first time between mid-March and late April, of whom 654,000 had been approved. The Iranian Parliament Research Center estimated that between 2.8 and 6.4 million workers, a significant proportion of whom were day laborers and small business owners, could become unemployed due to the far-reaching effects of COVID-19.

The law establishes a maximum six-day, 44-hour workweek with a weekly rest day, at least 12 days of paid annual leave, and several paid public holidays. Any hours worked above that total entitles a worker to overtime. The law mandates a payment above the hourly wage to employees for any accrued overtime and provides that overtime work is not compulsory. The law does not cover workers in workplaces with fewer than 10 workers, nor does it apply to noncitizens.

Employers sometimes subjected migrant workers, most often Afghans, to abusive working conditions, including below-minimum-wage salaries, nonpayment of wages, compulsory overtime, and summary deportation without access to food, water, or sanitation facilities during the deportation process. The government did not effectively enforce the laws related to wages and hours, and occupational safety and health. Penalties were not commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud.



According to media reports, many workers continued to be employed on temporary contracts, under which they lacked protections available to full-time, noncontract workers and could be dismissed at will. On June 2, a group of nurses protested after their temporary contracts were not renewed. While the Health Ministry had complained of a shortage of up to 100,000 nurses, health-care centers and hospitals increasingly took advantage of labor laws that allowed them to hire nurses with 87-day contracts, which were not renewed. The problem was compounded by the pandemic, as many private and state hospitals lost business from revenue-generating procedures, which were placed on hold. In June health-care workers protested in several cities after hospitals failed to pay the government approved wages. None had received overtime pay or COVID-19 health benefits. Large numbers of workers employed in small workplaces or in the informal economy similarly lacked basic protections.

Low wages, nonpayment of wages, and lack of job security due to contracting practices continued to contribute to strikes and protests, which occurred throughout the year. According to local and international media reports, thousands of teachers, and workers from a variety of other sectors continued to hold large-scale, countrywide rallies and protests demanding wage increases and payment of back wages. During the year authorities increased pressure against these protesters through intimidation, wrongful arrests, and arbitrary charges. In June a court in the western city of Arak sentenced 42 workers to 74 lashes, one year in prison, and one month of hard labor on a railroad. In October 2019 security forces had brutally beat them as they demonstrated outside their employer's factory over unpaid wages and the company's privatization.

In August workers in oil refining, petrochemicals and drilling industries continued to strike over working conditions and unpaid wages.

Little information was available regarding labor inspection and related law enforcement. While the law provides for occupational health and safety standards, the government sometimes did not enforce these standards in either the formal or informal sectors. The law states inspections may be done day or night, without prior notice. Family businesses require written permission of the local prosecutor. Workers reportedly lacked the power to remove themselves from situations that endangered their health or safety without jeopardizing their employment. Responsibility for identifying unsafe situations rests with the technical protection and occupational health committee of workplaces designated by the Ministry of Labor.

Labor organizations reported that hazardous work environments resulted in the deaths of thousands of workers annually. In February according to a report from a state media outlet, the head of the Public Relations and International Affairs Office of the Iranian Forensic Medicine Organization Hamed Naeiji announced that in 2019 the number of work-related death and injuries increased by 8.5 percent in comparison with the same period of the previous year. Naeiji stated the three main reasons for work-related deaths were falls, being hit by hard objects, and electrocution. In 2018 ILNA quoted the head of the Construction Workers Association as estimating there were 1,200 deaths and 1,500 spinal cord injuries annually among construction workers, while local media routinely reported on workers' deaths from explosions, gas poisoning, electrocution, or similar accidents.