

# IRAN 2021 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 and holds constitutional authority over the judiciary, government-run media, and other key institutions. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has held the position since 1989. The Assembly of Experts selects and may dismiss the supreme leader. Although assembly members are nominally directly elected in popular elections, the supreme leader has indirect influence over the assembly’s membership via the Guardian Council’s vetting of candidates and control over 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. The supreme leader also has indirect influence over the legislative and executive branches of government. The Guardian Council vets candidates for the presidential and Islamic Consultative Assembly (parliament or *majles*) elections, routinely disqualifying some based on political or other considerations, and controls the election process. Neither 2021 presidential elections nor 2020 parliamentary elections were considered free and fair.

The supreme leader holds ultimate authority over all security agencies. 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 to the supreme leader, share responsibility for law enforcement and maintaining order. The Basij, a nationwide volunteer paramilitary group, sometimes acts as an auxiliary law enforcement unit subordinate to the Revolutionary Guard. The Revolutionary Guard and the national army (*artesh*) provide external security. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. There were credible reports that members of the security forces committed numerous abuses throughout the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary

killings by the government and its agents, most commonly executions for crimes not meeting the international legal standard of “most serious crimes” or for crimes committed by juvenile offenders, as well as after trials without due process; forced disappearance attributed to the government and its agents; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment by the government and its agents; arbitrary arrest or detention; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; political prisoners and detainees; politically motivated reprisals against individuals in another country, including killings, kidnappings, or violence; serious problems with independence of the judiciary, particularly the revolutionary courts; unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for offenses allegedly committed by an individual; serious abuses in a conflict, including military support for terrorist groups throughout the region, Syrian President Bashar Assad, pro-Iran Iraqi militia groups, and Yemeni Houthi rebels, all of which were credibly accused of abuses (see the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Syria, Iraq, and Yemen), as well as unlawful recruitment of child soldiers by government actors in Syria; severe restrictions on free expression and media, including violence, threats of violence, and unjustified arrests and prosecutions against journalists, censorship, and criminalization of libel and slander; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; severe restrictions on religious freedom; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on or harassment of domestic or international human rights organizations; lack of meaningful investigation of and accountability for violence against women; trafficking in persons; violence against ethnic minorities; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, 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 took few steps to identify, investigate, prosecute, and punish officials who committed human rights abuses or corruption. Impunity remained pervasive throughout all levels of the government and security forces.

## **Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person**

### **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 executions for crimes not meeting the international legal standard of “most serious crimes” or for crimes committed by juvenile offenders, as well as executions after trials without due process. As documented by international human rights observers, so-called revolutionary courts (see section 1.e., Trial Procedures) continued to issue the vast majority of death sentences and failed to grant defendants due process. The courts regularly denied defendants legal representation and, in many cases, solely considered as evidence confessions often extracted through torture. Judges also may impose the death penalty on appeal, which deterred appeals in criminal cases. On October 25, the UN special rapporteur (UNSR) on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javaid Rehman, told the UN General Assembly that almost all executions in the country constituted an arbitrary deprivation of life, noting “extensive, vague and arbitrary grounds in Iran for imposing the death sentence, which quickly can turn this punishment into a political tool.”

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. NGOs Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC), Human Rights News Activists (HRANA), Iran Human Rights (IHR), and the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center reported there were almost 150 executions as of mid-August, while the government officially announced approximately 20 executions in that time. Amnesty International and IHR stressed that the real numbers of persons at risk of execution and those who had been secretly executed were likely much higher, since officials and domestic media avoided reporting figures. The government often did not release further information, such as names of those executed, execution dates, or crimes for which they were executed.

In early January IHR and the digital news outlet *IranWire* reported that authorities

executed two Baloch prisoners, Hassan Dehvari and Elias Qalandarzehi, in Zahedan Prison; both were sentenced to death for “armed rebellion” based solely on their affiliation with family members belonging to dissident groups.

On January 30, according to Amnesty International and other NGOs, authorities executed Javid Dehghan in Zahedan Central Prison after sentencing him to death for “enmity against God” based on a “confession” extracted through torture. Branch 1 of the Revolutionary Court in Zahedan sentenced Dehghan to death in 2017 for alleged membership in the banned armed group Jaish al-Ald and alleged involvement in an armed ambush that killed two Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) soldiers. Following Dehghan’s 2015 arrest, authorities concealed his whereabouts from his family for three months. IRGC intelligence agents held him in solitary confinement in an undisclosed detention facility affiliated with Zahedan Central Prison, where they subjected him to beatings, floggings, and nail extraction. On February 4, UN human rights experts expressed their shock at the execution of Dehghan in an open letter to the Iranian government, which took place despite their public appeal to have it halted because of “serious fair trial violations,” “lack of an effective right to appeal,” and a “torture-induced forced confession.” In the letter they noted that Dehghan’s execution was one of several carried out against prisoners from the Baloch ethnic minority in a short time; at least 21 Balochi prisoners were executed between mid-December 2020 and January 30. Many had been convicted on drug or national security charges, following flawed legal processes.

In a February letter to the UN secretary-general, imprisoned human rights attorney Nasrin Sotoudeh asked the international community to “pay attention to the issue of executions in Iranian society, especially that of religious, ethnic minorities, and women, and take necessary measures to prevent such extensive executions.” Sotoudeh cited the case of Zahra Esmaili, who was executed on February 17 with eight other prisoners. According to the United Kingdom-based Iran International television station, Esmaili was sentenced to death for shooting and killing her husband, Alireza Zamani, a Ministry of Intelligence official, in 2018. Media reports during her trial suggested Zamani abused his children and threatened to kill Esmaili. *Didban Iran* website reported a claim that one of the children had killed Zamani and her mother confessed to protect her.

On February 28, according to the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI), authorities at Sepidar Prison executed the following four ethnic Arab political prisoners: Jasem Heidary, Hossein Silawi, Ali Khasraji, and Nasser Khafajian (Khafaji). Security forces summoned the prisoners' relatives without informing them of the imminent executions. After a 20-minute visit, the families were told to wait near the visitation center, and a few hours later they were given the bodies of their relatives. Ministry of Intelligence agents arrested Heidary in Tehran in 2017, and he "confessed" under torture to collaborating with a group opposed to the Islamic Republic. A revolutionary court in Ahvaz convicted Heidary of "armed insurrection" and sentenced him to death, and the Supreme Court upheld the verdict. Amnesty International reported he was held for months in solitary confinement without access to a lawyer or his family and was subjected to torture and other mistreatment. Security forces detained Silawi, Khasraji, and Khafajian in 2017 as alleged suspects in an armed attack on a police station and military outpost near Ahvaz. Authorities held the three in a Ministry of Intelligence detention center in Ahvaz without access to lawyers or their families and subjected them to torture. Prior to their execution, Amnesty International reported on February 12 that Khasraji, Silawi, and Heidary had sewn their lips together as part of a hunger strike since January 23 in Sheiban Prison "in protest at their prison conditions, denial of family visits, and the ongoing threat of execution."

In February authorities killed 10 fuel carriers (*sookhtbars*) in Sistan va Baluchestan Province at the border with Pakistan, who were protesting government blockades of cross-border shipments. On February 22, IRGC units fired lethal ammunition on protesters and bystanders, adding two more to the death toll and injuring many. The death toll was difficult to verify following the disruption of local mobile data networks, according to the United Nations (see sections 1.b., 1.c., and 6, National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities).

Islamic law 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 age 18. In June UN human rights experts expressed concern for the more than 85 individuals on death row for alleged offenses committed when they were younger than age 18, including Hossein Shahbazi and Arman Abdolali, who were arrested and sentenced

to death for crimes they allegedly committed at age 17. According to Amnesty International, their trials included the use of “torture-tainted ‘confessions.’” According to widespread media reports, on November 24, Abdolali was executed.

According to Amnesty International and IHR, in August authorities at Kermanshah Central Prison (Dizelabad) hanged Sajad Sanjari for a murder he committed in 2010 when he was 15 years old. Sanjari claimed he acted in self-defense after the man tried to rape him, but the trial court rejected the self-defense claims after several witnesses attested to the deceased’s good character. Sanjari was granted a retrial in 2015; a criminal court resentenced him to death, and the Supreme Court later upheld the sentence.

According to UN and NGO reports, authorities executed at least six persons in 2020 who were minors at the time of their alleged crimes: Majid Esmailzadeh, Shayan Saaedpour, Arsalan Yasini, Movid Savadi, Abdollah Mohammadi, and Mohammad Hassan Rezaiee.

Responding to criticism from the United Nations, Majid Tafreshi, a senior official and member of the state-run High Council for Human Rights, stated in an English interview with Agence France-Presse in 2020 that the government was working to reduce juvenile executions eventually to zero by “trying to convince the victim’s family to pardon” and claimed “96 percent of cases” resulted in a pardon.

According to human rights organizations and media reports, the government continued to carry out some executions by torture, including hanging by cranes, in which prisoners are lifted from the ground by their necks and die slowly by asphyxiation. 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.

According to the United Nations, between January 1 and June 18, authorities executed at least 108 individuals, mostly from minority groups, including 35 for drug charges. 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 also 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 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 was previously convicted of drug crimes and sentenced to more than 15 years’ imprisonment. Prosecutors frequently charged political dissidents and journalists with the capital offense of “waging war against God” and accused 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 UNSR expressed deep concern in his July report that “vague and broadly formulated criminal offenses,” – including “waging war against God,” “corruption on earth,” and “armed rebellion” – had been used to sentence individuals to death for participation in protests or other forms of dissent, even absent evidence for the accusations. According to the report, authorities executed at least 15 individuals in 2020 for these offenses.

The judiciary is required to review and validate death sentences; however, this rarely happened.

In late 2020 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 in a trial UN experts said was “marred by numerous reports of due process and fair trial violations, including incommunicado detention, denial of access to a lawyer, and forced confession.” In March UN experts described Djalali’s situation as “truly horrific” and said his “prolonged solitary confinement for over 100 days with the threat of imminent execution” in Ward 209 of Evin Prison amounted to torture. Authorities were reportedly “shining bright lights in his small cell 24

hours a day to deprive him of sleep.” On April 14, he was moved out of solitary confinement. Prison officials repeatedly denied Djalali access to medical care, which led to dramatic weight loss, stomach pain, and breathing problems to the point where he had trouble speaking, according to his wife. As of November he remained in prison.

On August 29, Ebrahim Yousefi, one of death row prisoner Heydar (Heidar) Ghorbani’s former cellmates, published an audio file describing the marks of torture he had seen on Ghorbani’s body following his interrogation by authorities in the Ministry of Intelligence’s detention center in Sanandaj in 2017. In January 2020 a revolutionary court in Kurdistan Province convicted Ghorbani of “armed rebellion” and sentenced him to death, despite the court acknowledging in the verdict that he was never armed. According to a September 2020 report by Amnesty International, authorities arrested Ghorbani in 2016 following the killing of several IRGC members in the city of Kamyaran. The court sentenced him to 90 years in prison and 200 lashes for “assisting in intentional murder” and “membership and collaboration” with the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, a banned political opposition group. On August 12, his lawyer said, “The accusation of armed rebellion against Mr. Ghorbani is not valid because a rebel is someone who is a member of an organization and uses a weapon against the Islamic Republic, and none of those apply to my client,” according to a report by CHRI.

On December 20, the government executed Ghorbani without prior notice. Authorities summoned his family to Sanandaj Prison in Kurdistan Province after his death to view his grave, but the family was not permitted to collect his body.

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

According to IHR, two days after 21-year-old Mehrdad Taleshi was arrested on February 1, he reportedly died at the Shapour criminal investigation department police station. His relatives told IHR that a Shapour police ambulance transferred his corpse to the Baharloo Hospital, where they reported seeing torture marks around his neck, as well as severe marks of injury on his head. Officials at the police station told Taleshi’s family they arrested him for marijuana possession; the family told IHR that Mehrdad was an athlete and did not even smoke cigarettes.

As of August the findings of a postmortem forensic exam remained undetermined, and the family's complaint to the criminal court had not been acknowledged.

In July UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet expressed "extreme concern" regarding deaths and injuries, as well as widespread arrests and detentions, by authorities in response to protests that broke out across multiple cities on July 15 over severe water shortages in Khuzestan Province. According to an Amnesty International report, on July 22, security forces in Izeh attacked largely peaceful protesters with live ammunition, killing 11 persons, including 17-year-old Hadi Bahmani.

In a July report, UNSR Rehman reiterated his "alarm" that authorities had not undertaken a credible investigation into those responsible for the killing of at least 304 protesters responding to fuel price hikes in November 2019. Instead, authorities continued to prosecute individuals who participated in the protests on charges including "taking up arms to take lives or property and to create fear in the public" (moharabeh), which carries the death penalty, and national security charges that carry long prison sentences. In response, human rights organizations outside of the country held a nonbinding people's tribunal, called the Aban Tribunal, in London to investigate the killing of protesters and numerous human rights violations that took place on November 15-18, 2019, in Iran.

On August 10, a Swedish court, drawing on the principle of universal jurisdiction, opened the trial of a former Iranian prosecutor, Hamid Nouri, for his alleged role in the executions of thousands of political prisoners in Iran in the 1980s. Human rights organizations and UNSR Rehman called for an independent inquiry into allegations of state-ordered executions of thousands of political prisoners in 1988, including the role played by newly elected President Ebrahim Raisi as Tehran's deputy prosecutor at the time.

## **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.

On February 3, 36 civil society and international human rights organizations published an open letter calling for urgent attention to “an ongoing wave of arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detentions, and enforced disappearances by the Iranian authorities” targeting members of the Kurdish ethnic minority. Between January 6 and February 3, the intelligence unit of the IRGC or Ministry of Intelligence agents arrested 96 Kurdish individuals across 19 cities, and at least 40 of the detainees were subjected to forced disappearances, for whom authorities refused to reveal any information regarding their fate or whereabouts to their families.

### **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 vaginal and anal examinations, sleep deprivation, waterboarding, suspension, forced ingestion of chemical substances, deliberate deprivation of medical care, 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, Vakilabad, Zahedan, Isfahan Central Prison (Dastgerd), 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. Authorities also allegedly maintained unofficial secret prisons and detention centers outside the national prison system, where abuse reportedly occurred.

In August according to the Associated Press and widespread media reports, the hacker group Edalet-e Ali (Ali's Justice) posted online security camera footage from Evin Prison of prison authorities beating and mistreating inmates, the attempted suicide of prisoners without authorities intervening, and emaciated inmates being dragged by their arms and left in stairwells. Human Rights Watch (HRW) assessed that the leaked footage was "likely the tip of the iceberg" of the abuses occurring in detention facilities, as it did not include footage from two prison wards inside Evin Prison controlled by the intelligence agencies, "where political prisoners often face serious abuse, including prolonged solitary confinement, use of blindfolds, and torture."

According to a February report by IHR, authorities held a public interrogation session at the Palace of Justice for physics students Ali Younesi and Amir Hossein Moradi, both arrested in April 2020 on charges of affiliation with the Mojahedin-e Khalgh (MEK) opposition group, which the Iranian regime has banned. The session revealed that beatings by Ministry of Intelligence agents of Younesi during his interrogation caused his eye to bleed for 60 days after his arrest. In August 2020 UN human rights experts sent a letter to the Iranian ambassador to the United Nations urging that he "take all necessary measures to guarantee the right of Mr. Younesi not to be deprived of his liberty, to protection from any act of torture or ill-treatment[,] and to fair-trial proceedings," a reference to his 59 days of solitary confinement and possible exposure to COVID-19 in overcrowded cells. On July 3, Younesi and Moradi were charged with "corruption on earth," which carries the death penalty, and other crimes. As of November 22, both students remained in Evin Prison's Ward 209.

Before their execution in early January (see section 1.a.), Hassan Dehvari and Elias Qalandarzehi described in a letter the seven months of torture they endured. Dehvari wrote, "In the (Ministry of) Intelligence (detention center), we were subjected to physical and psychological torture including being threatened with rape, tying us to the "miracle bed" (a bed used for flogging prisoners), all types of instruments, like whips, cable wires, a metal helmet that would be wired with electric shocks to our heads, attempting to pull out hand and toe nails, turning on an electric drill and threatening to drill our arms and legs, bringing my wife and a video camera and [telling] me that either I accept the charge or they would rape her

and film it in front of me.”

Judicially sanctioned corporal punishments continued. These included flogging, blinding, stoning, and amputation, which the government defends as “punishment” and does not consider to be torture. At least 148 crimes are punishable by flogging, while 20 may carry the penalty of amputation. According to the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, between January 1 and September 2, authorities sentenced at least 77 individuals to amputation and carried out these sentences in at least eight cases. There were no recorded cases of amputation during the year.

According to Amnesty International, authorities flogged Hadi Rostami, an inmate at Orumiye Prison in West Azerbaijan Province, 60 times on February 14 for “disrupting prison order.” 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.

On September 9, labor rights activist Sepideh Gholian detailed, in a series of tweets while she was on temporary furlough from Bushehr Prison, the abuse she witnessed of fellow inmates in the women’s ward. Gholian described how the prison warden punished a female inmate for taking a shower “at the wrong hour” by hosing her down naked in a public space and forcing other inmates to watch and jeer. Gholian alleged the warden forcibly sent female inmates to the men’s wards where they were subjected to sexual assault under the guise of “temporary marriages” (*sigheh*). She also detailed officials’ abuse of an Afghan child living with his mother in prison and the denial of undergarments for female prisoners as punishment, including for some who were menstruating. On October 10, Gholian was rearrested and taken to Evin Prison, where she remained at year’s end.

Impunity remained a widespread problem throughout 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 punish security forces for 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. If any investigations took place during the year, 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, widespread infrastructure deficiencies, lack of clean water and sanitary facilities, and insufficient numbers of beds continued to represent a serious threat to prisoners' lives and health, according to a July report by UNSR Rehman.

Overall conditions worsened significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a 2020 report by Amnesty International, which cited letters written by senior prison authorities, prisons lacked the 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. According to CHRI, the fifth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in July, greatly increased the risks of outbreaks among prisoners. CHRI cited multiple political prisoners describing how authorities had not taken appropriate steps to ensure prisoner safety, such as not disinfecting prison telephones or allowing prisoners to purchase personal hygiene products in Qarchak Prison. CHRI also quoted Saeid Janfada, the head of the State Prisons Organization in Khorasan Razavi Province, who stated on June 27 that "about nine" prisoners had died of COVID-19 in the province since March. According to UNSR Rehman's July report, authorities claimed "no one had died inside prison due to COVID-19 but acknowledged the death of 38 prisoners or prison staff in hospitals or treatment centers." Prisoners of conscience were mostly excluded from prison furloughs in 2020, 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 2020 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 September there was no indication the government had 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 intimidation against prisoners who filed complaints or challenged authorities. Medical services for female prisoners were reported as grossly inadequate.

A 2020 statement by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed serious concern regarding a consistent government pattern of 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. In July UNSR Rehman's report documented that some political prisoners in particular had become critically ill because they had not received urgently needed medical care.

According to HRW, CHRI, and media reports, two political prisoners died in the hospital after being denied adequate health care. On February 21, Behnam Mahjoubi died in the hospital of multiple seizures. He had been transferred from

Evin Prison after the State Medical Examiner concluded he was not fit to be incarcerated. Mahjoubi was a Gonabadi Sufi who had been serving a two-year sentence for “national security” charges since 2020. According to the Iranian Students’ News Agency, Sassan Niknafs died on June 5 after losing consciousness in the Greater Tehran Penitentiary. Niknafs was serving a five-year sentence on charges of “assembly and collusion against national security” and “propaganda against the state.”

Civil rights activist Saeed Eghbali reportedly suffered permanent hearing damage in Evin Prison after prison authorities denied him treatment for a ruptured ear drum. Notably, HRW reported that according to prisoner accounts, “Evin Prison, where most high-profile detainees are kept, actually has a higher standard of hygiene and access to medical care compared to other prisons, especially those far from [Tehran].”

The United Nations and NGOs 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.

Authorities occasionally held pretrial detainees with convicted prisoners. Previous reports indicated a deliberate practice of holding political prisoners in wards with allegedly violent and dangerous criminals, with the goal of “breaking” the political prisoners’ will. A July 2020 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 2019 protests, and child and juvenile detainees were reportedly held in the same cells as adults in some facilities, 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.

There were numerous reports of attempted prisoner suicides throughout the year in response to prison conditions or mistreatment. According to a March 3 report by the human rights NGO United for Iran, political prisoner Mohammad Nourizad, who suffered from heart disease, cut his face and neck with a razor in Evin Prison during a visit with his family in March to protest being denied access to medical care. Imprisoned since 2019 for signing an open letter with 13 others calling for the resignation of the supreme leader, Nourizad was released from Evin Prison in July.

According to a June 12 report by IHR, a juvenile prisoner on death row, Ali Arjangi, attempted suicide by slitting his throat and veins in Ardabil Central Prison. Arjangi's mother, a person with disabilities, was not able to pay the billion toman (\$23,700) blood money (*diya*) to the victim's family by May 12 for the alleged murder he committed at age 17. On June 30, he was released after charities and individuals helped raised the necessary funds.

**Administration:** In most cases authorities did not initiate credible investigations into allegations of inhuman conditions or suspicious deaths in custody. After videos of mistreatment in Evin Prison were made public, the head of the State Prisons Organization, Mohammad Mehdi Haj Mohammadi, apologized in a tweet “for these unacceptable behaviors” and promised to “deal seriously with wrongdoers.” Iran International reported that the judiciary began legal proceedings against six of the guards seen in the footage and announced, “a four-member committee to be based in Evin [Prison] to investigate the conditions and management of the prison.”

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.

In October 2020 HRW highlighted the cases of environmentalist Niloufar Bayani and student activist Parisa Rafiee, both of whom authorities had charged with “publishing false information,” and “propaganda against the state,” for reporting abuse in detention, including threats of sexual violence and rape. According to United for Iran, Rafiee was released. As of August 31, Bayani remained in Evin

Prison.

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. Families of executed prisoners did not always receive notification of their scheduled executions, or if they did, it was often provided on very short notice (see section 1.a.). Authorities frequently denied families the ability to perform funeral rites or to have an impartial and timely autopsy performed.

Prisoners practicing a religion other than Shia Islam reported experiencing discrimination.

**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. Former president Rouhani's 2016 *Citizens' Rights Charter* enumerated various freedoms, including "security of their person, property, dignity, employment, legal and judicial process, social security, and the like," but 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 routinely 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 family property.

The government continued to use house arrest without due process to restrict movement and communication. As of November former presidential candidates Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, as well as Mousavi's wife Zahra Rahnavard, remained without formal charges under house arrest imposed in 2011. Security forces continued to restrict their access to visitors and information. 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 often conducted in a violent manner, to include beating detainees. Plainclothes officers arrived unannounced at homes or offices; conducted raids; arrested persons; 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 or longer. Authorities often denied detainees access to legal counsel during this period.

According to a September 2020 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 2020, although Amnesty International estimated the number to be "far higher." There was no update on the number of detainees still in prison as of year's end.

International media and human rights organizations documented dual nationals enduring arbitrary and prolonged detention on politically motivated charges. UNSR Rehman continued to highlight cases of dual and foreign nationals whom

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-national Siamak Namazi on spurious charges of espionage following a lower court trial with numerous procedural irregularities, according to international media and NGO reports. Authorities detained Namazi in 2015, followed by his father, Baquer, in 2016. Baquer Namazi was granted medical furlough in 2018 and was subsequently cleared of all charges, but he remained under an exit ban and was not allowed to leave the country.

In January an Iranian state-run media organization affiliated with the IRGC, the Young Journalists Club, reported that dual-citizen Emad Shargi was detained in Evin Prison. According to *The New York Times*, authorities initially detained Shargi in April 2018. He was reportedly detained for eight months in Ward 2A, the IRGC’s intelligence unit inside Evin Prison, and interrogated about his business ties and travels, then released on bail in December 2018. In December 2019 the revolutionary court issued an order informing Shargi that he was cleared of all spying and national security charges; however, authorities refused to return his passport. He was called before the revolutionary court three times throughout 2020. In November 2020 Judge Abolqasem Salavati summoned Shargi to inform him that he had been tried in absentia and sentenced to 10 years in prison for espionage. Shargi was denied access to his lawyer and family members and only allowed to make brief, monitored telephone calls. As of September he remained detained in Evin Prison.

**Pretrial Detention:** Pretrial detention was often arbitrarily lengthy, particularly in cases involving alleged violations of “national security” law. Authorities sometimes held prisoners 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. Some were returned to prison after short furloughs despite having medical problems and the risk of COVID-19. 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 are 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 frequently 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 advises

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, which 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 holding 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 routinely 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 2019 protests.

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 were 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 September 23, at least 550 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. Courts 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 were not 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 or “exiled” political prisoners to prisons in remote provinces far from their families as a means of reprisal, denied them correspondence rights and access to legal counsel, 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.

In March, as reprisal for signing an open letter accusing the government of routinely denying medical care to prisoners, authorities transferred Maryam Akbari-Monfared from Evin Prison to a prison 124 miles away from her family. Akbari-Monfared had been imprisoned for nearly 12 years for seeking justice for her siblings, who were disappeared and extrajudicially executed in secret in 1988. Authorities originally tried and convicted Akbari-Monfared on charges of supporting the banned MEK opposition group in 2010, on the offense of “waging war against God.”

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.

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.

On November 16, authorities rearrested human rights defender and journalist Narges Mohammadi to serve a sentence handed down in May of 30 months in

prison and 80 lashes for alleged propaganda, defamation, and “rebellion” crimes. She was arrested while attending a ceremony in Karaj to honor a protester killed during protests in 2019 and reportedly placed in solitary confinement in Evin Prison. Mohammadi had been previously arrested in 2015, convicted in 2016, and given a 16-year sentence for “propaganda against the state,” “assembly and collusion against national security,” and establishing the illegal Step by Step to Stop the Death Penalty organization. After her release in October 2020, Mohammadi led a high-profile lawsuit by civil rights activists against the use by authorities of prolonged and routine solitary confinement in prisons, describing it as a form of “white torture.” She also publicly detailed via a video message in February how Evin Prison warden Gholamreza Ziaei had beaten her for participating in a peaceful sit-in inside the prison in 2019. During her previous confinement, authorities repeatedly denied her telephone contact with her family and appropriate medical treatment following her contraction of COVID-19 in 2020, as well as treatment related to a major operation she underwent in 2019.

According to CHRI and IHR, in March authorities transferred activist Atena Daemi from Evin Prison to Rasht Central Prison, far from her family. As of August 21, Daemi was on an indefinite hunger strike to protest the frequent and unjustified restrictions on prisoners’ telephone use rights. In 2020 authorities arbitrarily extended her five-year prison sentence by two years, shortly before she was due to be released 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.

CHRI reported in July that authorities had sentenced at least three human rights attorneys to unjust prison sentences. Branch four of the Revolutionary Court of Mashhad, Judge Mansouri presiding, sentenced Javad Alikordi, a defense attorney and law professor, to prison for “creating and managing a channel on the Telegram messaging application with the intention of overthrowing the state” (six and one-half years), “insulting the supreme leader” (one and one-half years), and “propaganda against the state” (eight months). Alikordi was imprisoned in Vakilabad Prison in Mashhad. He also received a two-year ban on teaching, a two-year ban on traveling abroad, and a two-year ban on membership in political and social groups.

On July 13, the Tehran Revolutionary Court reimposed on defense attorney Amir-salar Davoudi a sentence of 30 years and 111 lashes that had been revoked by the Supreme Court. Davoudi, also imprisoned for running a Telegram channel, was required to serve 15 years of the sentence. As of November 17, Davoudi was temporarily free on bail.

Mohammad Najafi, a defense attorney imprisoned in 2018 for speaking out about the death of a protester who died in police custody, was released on medical furlough in February, according to United for Iran. He was then ordered in July to serve 10 years behind bars on new charges of “propaganda against the state” and “calling for the boycott of elections and the removal of the supreme leader.”

According to CHRI, on August 14, judicial authorities in Tehran arrested six prominent lawyers and human rights activists – Arash Keykhosravi (lawyer), Mehdi Mahmoudian (civil activist), Mostafa Nili (lawyer), Leila Heydari (lawyer), Mohammad Reza Faghihi (lawyer), and Maryam Afrafaraz (civil activist) – and confiscated their cell phones and other personal belongings without a warrant. The six were preparing to file a lawsuit in accordance with Article 34 of the constitution against state officials for grossly mishandling the COVID-19 pandemic and negligence, “causing the death of thousands of Iranians.” Heydari was released the following day and Afrafaraz and Faghihi were subsequently released. They were pressured to drop the lawsuit and charged with national security crimes ostensibly relating to previous advocacy work. As of November 18, Keykhosravi, Nili, and Mahmoudian remained in prison.

According to *IranWire*, on September 1, Ministry of Intelligence agents rearrested journalist and workers’ rights activist Amirabbas Azarmvand on charges of “propaganda against the regime” and transported him to Ward 209 of Evin Prison. Azarmvand worked on economic and labor stories for *SMT/Samt* newspaper and was previously arrested in 2009, 2017, 2018, and on July 31 for his activism.

Human rights attorney Nasrin Sotoudeh was temporarily released several times during the year on medical furloughs but remained in Qarchak Prison as of year’s end. A revolutionary court sentenced Sotoudeh in 2019 to a cumulative 38 years in prison and 148 lashes for providing legal defense services to women charged with crimes for not wearing a hijab. Sotoudeh was previously arrested in 2010 and

pardoned in 2013. In August 2020 she launched a 46-day hunger strike in Evin Prison to protest poor health conditions in prisons.

As of August 31, seven environmentalists affiliated with the now-defunct Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation – Niloufar Bayani, Sepideh Kashani, Sam Rajabi, Taher Ghadirian, Amir Hossein Khaleghi, Houman Jokar, and Morad Tahbaz – remained incarcerated in Evin Prison. According to HRW, in February 2020 a judiciary spokesperson announced a revolutionary court had upheld the prison sentences of eight environmentalists sentenced to between six and 10 years for various “national security” crimes. Authorities arrested the eight environmentalists, including U.S.-United Kingdom-Iranian national Morad Tahbaz, in 2018, and convicted them following an unfair trial in which a judge handed down the sentences in secret, did not allow the defendants access to defense lawyers, and ignored their claims of abuse in detention. The eighth environmentalist, Abdolreza Kouhpayeh, was released on medical furlough in March 2020, and Iranian-Canadian national Kavous Sayed Emami died in detention in 2018, reportedly as a result of torture. Sayed Emami died only 18 days after his arrest, supporting the claim that he died as a result of torture. His family’s request for an autopsy was denied.

Hossein Sepanta’s request for parole was repeatedly denied, despite deteriorating health conditions and denial of medical care. He had been imprisoned since 2014 in Adelabad Prison in Shiraz on a 10-year sentence for charges of “propaganda against the state” and “assembly and collusion against national security.”

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

**Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, Forced Returns, or Other Violence or Threats of Violence:** In July a New York federal court indicted four Iranian intelligence officials – Alireza Shavaroghi Farahani (aka Verezat Salimi and Haj Ali), Mahmoud Khazein, Kiya Sadeghi, and Omid Noori – for conspiracies related to kidnapping, sanctions violations, bank and wire fraud, and money laundering. The charges were connected to plotting since at least June 2020 to kidnap U.S.-based journalist and women’s rights activist Masih Alinejad, to silence her criticism of the Iranian government. It was reported that, as part of the kidnapping

plot, one of the intelligence officials researched methods of transporting Alinejad out of the United States for rendition to Iran, including placing her onto a military-style speedboat in New York City and transporting her by sea to Venezuela, whose government had friendly relations with Iran. The announcement stated these intelligence officials directed a “network” that also targeted victims in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States and had conducted similar surveillance of dissidents in those countries.

In August 2020 Reuters reported Ministry of Intelligence officials detained dual-national Jamshid Sharmahd, a member of the promonarchist group Tondar (Thunder) or Kingdom Assembly of Iran, which was based outside the country. While the government did not disclose how or where its officials detained Sharmahd, his son told Radio Free Europe that Sharmahd was likely captured in Dubai and taken to Iran. Sharmahd was 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. In April Amnesty International described his detention as “akin to an enforced disappearance” and stated he was being held “without trial and access to an independent lawyer of his choosing and consular assistance.”

In November 2020 *al-Arabiya* reported that Iranian-Swede Habib Asyud (also known as Habib Chaab), the former leader of a separatist group for the ethnic Arab minority in Khuzestan Province called the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA), 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 held ASMLA responsible for a terrorist attack in 2018 on a military parade that killed 25 individuals, including civilians.

In 2019 France-based Iranian activist Ruhollah Zam was abducted from Iraq. Iranian intelligence later took credit for the operation. Zam was executed in Iran in December 2020.

**Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion:** In July the technology news site *ZD Net* reported a series of phishing attacks from an Iranian hacker group known as both Charming Kitten and Phosphorus, allegedly affiliated with Iran’s

intelligence services. The hackers posed as academics at a United Kingdom university in phishing attacks designed to steal the passwords of experts in Middle Eastern affairs from universities, think tanks, and media. In January 2020 the same group used phishing attacks to target journalists as well as political and human rights activists.

According to international human rights organizations, the Ministry of Intelligence arrested and intimidated BBC employees' family members in the country, including the elderly. The government 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. In June the BBC reported their legal representatives had urged the UN Human Rights Council to act on this issue. The same report noted that in a March 2020 internal survey of 102 BBC Persian staff, 71 claimed they had experienced harassment.

**Misuse of International Law-enforcement Tools:** 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, such as entering “red notices” for dozens of U.S. officials in 2021, including former U.S. president Donald Trump, through Interpol.

### **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 Seizure and 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.

Two brothers of Navid Afkari, executed in 2020 for the murder of a law enforcement officer during antigovernment protests in 2018 in Shiraz, remained in Adelabad Prison without access to their families or medical care. Vahid Afkari was arrested with his brother Navid and received a 25-year prison sentence for aiding him. In December 2020 according to HRANA, authorities arrested Afkari’s father and another brother, Habib, as they sought to clear a site in Fars Province to install a gravestone memorializing Navid Afkari’s death. Habib Afkari was sentenced to 27 years and three months in prison plus 74 lashes, and Vahid Afkari received a new sentence of 54 years and six months plus 74 lashes, both on vague “national security” charges. HRANA reported authorities tortured the brothers during interrogations and Vahid attempted suicide twice following “severe torture.” On August 23, HRANA reported that the Supreme Court rejected Vahid Afkari’s request for a retrial.

On April 28, according to Iran International, security forces assaulted and arrested Manouchehr Bakhtiari for a third time, on charges related to activism on behalf of his son, Pouya, killed by security forces in the city of Karaj during November 2019 demonstrations. They beat family members present at the time of the arrest, including two children. Authorities threw Bakhtiari in the trunk of their vehicle and took him to an undisclosed location. A revolutionary court subsequently sentenced him to six years in prison, two and one-half years in “internal exile,” and a two-year ban on leaving the country. 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 Reporters Without Borders (RSF), in July 2020 authorities arrested Farangis Mazloom, the mother of imprisoned photojournalist Soheil Arabi, and in October 2020 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. An appeals court confirmed the sentence in March. Arabi had been imprisoned since 2013 on blasphemy and other expression-related charges. According to Mazloom, in October 2020 Evin Prison authorities moved her son to solitary confinement. In January IHR published a letter from Arabi in which he claimed authorities broke his arm while transferring him between prisons and forced him to witness 200 executions in the 34 days he spent in “exile” at Rajai Shahr Prison.

No comprehensive data-protection laws exist that provide legal safeguards to protect users’ data from misuse. Online activity was heavily monitored by the state despite Article 37 of the nonbinding Citizens’ Rights Charter, which states that online privacy should be respected.

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

## **g. Conflict-related Abuses**

### **Killings:**

**Syria:** There continued to be reports the government, primarily through the IRGC, directly supported the Assad regime in Syria and recruited Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani Shia fighters, as well as Syrians, 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 August pro-Iranian militias reinforced Syrian regime forces undertaking operations against opposition groups in southwestern Syria with the aim of disrupting ceasefire negotiations in Daraa. Fighting had restarted when Syrian government forces imposed a blockade on the main highways into the city of Daraa, leading to

shortages of medical supplies and food, to punish the inhabitants of the area for not supporting the widely contested May presidential election that gave Bashar al-Assad a fourth term. The NGO Syrian Network for Human Rights attributed 88 percent of civilian deaths in Syria since the beginning of the conflict to government forces and Iranian-sponsored militias.

**Iraq:** The government supported 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 in Iraq (see the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Iraq).

**Yemen:** 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 there. 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 and Saudi Arabia).

In February 2020 the Baha'i International Community stated that a Houthi court in Yemen was prosecuting a group of Baha'is under "directives from Iranian authorities." The court continued to prosecute the case despite the Houthis' release and deportation of six Baha'i prisoners in July 2020. Baha'is continued to face harassment in Yemen throughout the year because of their religious affiliation (see the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Yemen).

**Child Soldiers:** In a 2017 report, HRW asserted that the IRGC had recruited Afghan children as young as age 14 to serve in the Fatemiyoun Brigade, reportedly an Iranian-supported Afghan group fighting alongside government forces in Syria and noted that at least 14 Afghan children had been killed fighting in the Syrian conflict. In a July 2020 interview by *IranWire*, a Fatemiyoun Brigade member claimed he had joined the brigade in 2018 at age 16, and another brigade member said he had joined at age 15.

Iran has, since 2015, provided funding and weapons to the Houthis, who launched attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure both within the country and in Saudi Arabia. (See the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Saudi

Arabia and Yemen.)

**Other Conflict-related Abuse:** Hackers linked to Iran continued cyberattacks against Syrian opposition groups to disrupt reporting on human rights violations. IRGC authorities constructed a new prison near the Zamla gas field in Raqqa, Syria, where most detainees were held on charges of being affiliated with ISIS or espionage, according to the news website *Al-Monitor*.

## **Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties**

### **a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media**

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, 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 nonbinding Citizens’ Rights Charter 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.

**Freedom of Expression:** 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.

According to NGO reports, in February then president Rouhani signed additional provisions to Articles 499 and 500 of the penal code that could further restrict freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief and disproportionately impact members of religious and ethnic minority groups. According to the NGO Article 19, Article 499 bis prescribes a prison sentence or fine for “anyone who

insults Iranian ethnicities, divine religions, or Islamic schools of thought recognized under the Constitution with the intent to cause violence or tensions in the society or with the knowledge that such [consequences] will follow.” Article 500 bis prescribes a prison sentence or fine for anyone who commits “any deviant educational or proselytizing activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam.” 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. In July UNSR Rehman expressed “deep concern” regarding authorities’ continued targeting of individuals for exercising their right to freedom of expression, including journalists, media workers, writers, and cultural workers. 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 individuals with arrest or punishment for the expression of ideas or images they viewed as violations of the legal moral code.

Several activists who signed letters calling on the supreme leader to step down in 2019 remained in prison during the year on charges of “propaganda against the state” and “collusion against national security.”

**Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Other 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 did not renew for individuals facing criminal charges or who were 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 Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (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. Independent print media companies existed, but the government severely limited their operations.

**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 on issues considered sensitive by the government. The government also harassed many journalists' families (see section 1.e., Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion). According to information provided by Journalism is not a Crime, an organization devoted to documenting freedom of the press in the country, at least 99 journalists or citizen-journalists were imprisoned as of November, a significant increase from 2020.

According to the NGO Committee to Protect Journalists, in late January security forces arrested the editor of the Kurdish-focused news outlet *Aigrin Roj Weekly*, Mahmoud Mahmoudi, in Sandaj and transferred him to an unknown location. Mahmoudi had signed an open letter in late January protesting the mass arrest of civil, student, and environmental activists in Kurdistan Province. According to the same article, on June 20, the editor in chief of the Tehran-based *Nour-e Azadi* magazine, Reza Taleshian Jelodarzadeh, posted on his social media accounts that he had been arrested and was being transferred to Greater Tehran Penitentiary to serve a three-year sentence. In 2019 Jelodarzadeh was charged with "disturbing public opinion" and "spreading antiestablishment propaganda" for his posts on social media.

On February 7, RSF reported that freelance journalist Fariborz Kalantari was sentenced to three years in prison and 74 lashes for using his Telegram channel to circulate articles about corruption charges brought against former vice president Eshaq Djahangiri's brother, Mehdi Djahangiri.

On February 17, authorities arrested photojournalist Noushin Jafari in her Tehran home and took her to Qarchak Prison to begin serving a five-year prison sentence she received in 2019, on charges of "insult(ing) Islam's sacred values" on her social media account.

RSF also reported that in March photojournalist and women's rights activist Raha Askarizadeh was summoned to serve a two-year prison sentence and was banned from leaving the country for two years for her social media activity. Arrested in December 2019, she had been released on bail a month later pending trial.

According to *Journalism is not a Crime*, in September intelligence agents in the city of Paveh in Kermanshah Province detained two local journalists for publishing on local Telegram channels a story of the rape of a seven-year-old girl (see section 6, Child Abuse).

As of year's end, poet, author, and activist Baktash Abtin had been being placed into a medically induced coma to treat his severe COVID-19 symptoms after months of medical neglect in Evin Prison. Another fellow author and member of the Iranian Writers Association Board, Reza Khandan Mahabadi, was also transferred from Evin Prison to a hospital in December for COVID-19 treatment. The 73-year-old editor of the monthly political magazine *Iran-e-Farda*, Keyvan Samimi Behbahani, and another author Keyvan Bajan, remained in prison at year's end.

**Censorship or Content Restrictions:** The law forbids government censorship but also prohibits dissemination of information the government considers "damaging." 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.

During the year the government censored publications that criticized official

actions or contradicted official views or versions of events. 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. “Damaging” information included discussions of women’s rights, the situation of minorities, criticism of government corruption, and references to mistreatment of detainees. Authorities also banned national and international media outlets from covering demonstrations in an attempt to censor information about protests and intimidate citizens from disseminating information about them. As noted above, 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. According to RSF, judicial offices or Ministry of Intelligence officers summoned at least 42 journalists due to their news coverage in the period preceding the presidential election in June. Government authorities issued a range of prohibitions to journalists, including making “negative or critical comments about the election” and criticizing then candidate Ebrahim Raisi.

On July 13, reformist newspaper *Etemad* fired three of its political correspondents. While some commentators suggested the terminations were politically motivated, the newspaper did not offer any public explanation for the firings. On September 7, IRIB news presenter Hamid Arun announced via Twitter that he had been notified by his employer of his termination after he tweeted his disappointment at the sacking of a distinguished professor of philosophy, Bijan Abdolkarimi, from Islamic Azad University.

According to Freedom House, during the November 2019 protests and subsequent internet shutdown, journalists and media were issued official guidelines from the Ministries of Intelligence and 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 instead be portrayed as civil protests while minimizing the extent of violence.

As the outbreak of COVID-19 escalated, the head of the Cyber Police, Commander

Vahid Majid, announced the establishment of a working group for “combatting online rumors” relating to the spread of the virus. In April 2020 a military spokesman stated 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 NGO Committee to Protect Journalists, citing *IranWire* and Tasnim News Agency, on July 5, Judge Abbas Shaghghi of Branch 6 of Tehran’s Media Court convicted *Mizenaft* managing director Hamid Hajipour, *Naftema* managing director Mehdi Ghadiri, and two others from *Etelaterooz* whose names were not released, after the three media outlets published stories on alleged corruption by Kamran Mehravar, a director at the Ministry of Oil. Mehravar reportedly filed a lawsuit against the three websites, all of which covered energy news. As of November there was no indication the court had sentenced the journalists; keeping open files is a tactic the government used to intimidate journalists.

**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 June 17, authorities arrested poet and civil society activist Aram Fathi in a crackdown against dissidents initiated in connection with the presidential election.

Fathi was charged with “acting against national security” and “propaganda against the regime with the intention of disrupting the elections.” According to family members, intelligence officers tortured Fathi with an electric shock device and punched and kicked him to extract a confession during his 11-day detention in Marivan. On July 28, he was released on bail, and as of September 9, he was waiting to appear before the revolutionary court in Marivan, according to Journalism is Not a Crime.

## **Internet Freedom**

The Ministries of Culture and of Information and Communications Technology are the main regulatory bodies for content and internet systems, and they maintain monopoly control over internet traffic flowing into, in and out of the country. The Office of the Supreme Leader 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 use virtual private networks and distribute circumvention tools, and former minister of information and communications technology Mohammad Javad Azari-Jahromi was quoted in the press stating that using circumvention tools was illegal.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance must approve all internet service providers (ISPs). The government also requires all owners of websites and blogs in the country to register with the agencies that compose 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, Ministry of Intelligence, and Tehran Public Prosecutor’s Office.

The 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 in Khuzestan for almost two weeks during protests that initially broke out over water shortages in July, and for almost one week during nationwide protests in November 2019. Social media users reported internet outages across the country throughout the water shortage protests in July, which the independent internet watchdog NetBlocks corroborated and described as “consistent with a regional internet shutdown intended to control protests.”

Authorities blocked access to independent news sites and several 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 ISPs were forced either to 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, NIN enabled the government to reduce foreign internet connection speeds during politically sensitive periods, disconnect the national network from global internet content, and disrupt circumvention tools. According to Freedom House, several domestically hosted websites such as national online banking services, domestic messaging applications, and hospital networks remained 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 Raisi, Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian, and other government-associated officials and entities, including after shutting down most of the country’s internet access during both the November 2019 protests and the July water shortage demonstrations. According to Freedom House, websites were

blocked if they contradicted state doctrine regarding Islam, as well as government narratives on domestic or international politics. News stories that covered friction among political institutions were also frequently censored.

Government organizations, including the Basij Cyber Council, Cyber Police, and 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 online.

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

In October a cyberattack against the Oil Ministry computer system blocked motorists' ability to use their specialized smart cards to purchase subsidized fuel at 4,300 gas stations for several days. No group claimed responsibility for the attack; however, multiple officials blamed anti-Iranian forces from "abroad" for carrying it out.

### **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 Baha'i students from higher education and harassed those who studied through the unrecognized online university of the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education. According to the Baha'i International Community, on March 17, authorities expelled two Baha'i students midsemester from the University of Applied Science and Technology in Shiraz. The university president reportedly showed the students a letter from the Ministry of Education that requested the expulsion of nine Baha'i students from the Universities of Applied Science and

Technology across the country. Three other students were expelled from universities midsemester under similar circumstances.

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 and those containing what it deemed as 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 December 2020 film authorities sentenced director Reza Mihandoust to six years in prison for "membership in a group seeking to overthrow the government" and levied against him an additional six-month prison term for "spreading antigovernment propaganda." According to a relative of Mihandoust, these charges were linked to a documentary he directed in 2009 about women's rights activist Masih Alinejad, as well as his participation in the nationwide protests in November 2019. Despite being on temporary release, Mihandoust was reportedly unable to find work due to the national security charges he faces.

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 to ensure they comply with the country's moral values, although many underground musicians released albums without seeking such permission.

In September musician Mehdi Rajabian told BBC News he was prepared to face prison for releasing a new album he recorded "undercover in his basement" that included songs inspired by his abuse in Evin Prison, as well including female singers, despite the ban on them. Rajabian was previously arrested on "immorality" charges at least three times for his work but remained free as of

December.

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

The government severely restricted freedoms of peaceful assembly and association. The government's failure to investigate or prosecute attacks on human rights defenders and peaceful protesters led to de facto restrictions on freedoms of 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, since proregime groups rarely experienced difficulties, while groups viewed as critical of the regime experienced harassment regardless of whether authorities issued a permit.

According to HRANA, security forces detained 361 persons, and at least six individuals died and many were wounded during the two-week-long protests in Khuzestan and other parts of the country in mid-July over water shortages (see section 1.a.). Authorities responded with lethal force and used targeted internet shutdowns in areas of protests to prevent the flow of information. Similarly, after tolerating weeks of peaceful water protests initiated by farmers suffering from droughts and water shortages in Isfahan, security forces suppressed demonstrations on November 25 and 26 by firing tear gas and birdshot rounds, shutting down the internet and, according to a police commander in Isfahan, Hasan Karami, arresting 67 protesters. According to HRANA, as of November 29, authorities had arrested at least 214 individuals in Isfahan, including 13 minors. IHR reported that several of the detainees were injured by pellet guns and beatings and transferred to Isfahan Central Prison (also called Dastgerd Prison).

An Iranian military court began a hearing on November 21 to investigate the downing of Ukrainian International Airlines flight 752, which killed 176 persons in 2020, with reportedly 10 military personnel of various ranks and family members of the deceased present. The government undertook no credible investigations into the excessive use of force in January 2020 against protesters in several cities who had gathered to express discontent with the handling of the investigation into the plane's downing nor into security officials' harassment of victims' families, as reported by Human Rights Watch in May. 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.a., Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining). 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., Arbitrary Arrest).

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

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>.

### **d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country**

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) in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. According to UNHCR, the government recognized 780,000 Afghans in the country 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 2020 the Amayesh reregistration 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 were 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 approximately 586,000 Afghans who hold Afghan passports and Iranian visas and an estimated 2.6 million undocumented Afghans. The country also recognized 20,000 Iraqi refugees under a similar system known as *Hoviat*.

After the Taliban took control of the Afghan government in August, official border crossings between Afghanistan and Iran were closed on August 16 to persons without valid passports and Iranian visas, and the government does not allow the entry of undocumented persons. UNHCR issued a nonreturn advisory for Afghanistan on August 16 and continued to call on countries to keep their borders open to Afghans seeking international protection. Most Afghans fleeing to Iran entered irregularly through unofficial border crossings and with the help of smugglers. UNHCR reported an increase in the number of Afghans in need of international protection, and 27,816 newly arrived Afghans approached UNHCR offices in Iran in during the year. UNHCR believed the total number of new arrivals to be much higher. According to preliminary estimates by the government, up to 500,000 Afghans arrived during the year.

In August UNHCR expressed concern regarding an incident in which 200 Afghan refugees fled across the border from Nimruz Province into Iran over a single weekend. On August 9, semiofficial news agency Fars reported Iran's refusal to hand over Afghan refugees to the Taliban following the group's capture of the "Milak" border terminal in the Sistan and Baluchistan Province. According to Fars, Iran's Special Envoy for Afghanistan Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian and UN Special Envoy Jean Arnault met that same day, and Arnault reportedly praised Iran's "constructive role" towards Afghanistan. At the end of a three-day visit to Iran in December, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi urged the international community to scale up its support to the government and people of Iran, who were receiving Afghans fleeing a deteriorating situation in their country.

**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 registering 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.

**Refoulement:** According to activist groups and NGOs, authorities routinely arrested Afghans without Amayesh cards and sometimes threatened them with deportation. From the beginning of the year to November 28, according to the International Organization for Migration, 1,150,842 undocumented Afghans returned to Afghanistan, with some claiming they were pressured to leave or left due to abuse by police or state authorities. As of December the government continued to return Afghans who were apprehended while trying to enter Iran, despite advocacy by UNHCR to provide asylum to those fleeing conflict. In December UNHCR estimated the government deported 65 percent of all newly arriving Afghan asylum seekers.

**Abuse of Migrants and Refugees:** HRW and other groups reported the government continued its mistreatment of many Afghans, including through 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.

In May 2020 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.

**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 permitted to travel.

**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 care, 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 120,000 of the most vulnerable refugees, including refugees who suffered 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. During the 2020-21 academic year, more than 470,000 Afghan children were enrolled in primary and secondary schools, including 138,000 undocumented Afghan children. According to media reports, 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 November 2020 the government began implementing a law passed in 2019 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 reports. Under the new law, the children of Iranian women and foreign men qualify for citizenship, although it is not automatic; the mother must apply 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:** Presidential elections held on June 18 fell 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. Overwhelmingly positive media coverage of a single candidate and the reformist political leaders' unwillingness to coalesce behind a challenger also contributed to the election outcome. The election turnout of 48.8 percent was the lowest in the history of the Islamic Republic, breaking the 1993 election record low of 50.66 percent. Former judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi, widely asserted to be the supreme leader's choice for his eventual successor, won the election and took office on August 3. According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Guardian Council disqualified 7,296 candidates in the period preceding the election. The council barred all reformist candidates from running, as well as the conservative former parliament speaker Ali Larijani, who was widely considered the strongest challenger to hardliner Ebrahim Raisi, and former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Domestic and foreign media reports and social media users noted mostly unspecified or ambiguous violations on election day. One incident acknowledged by officials occurred when some electronic voting machines in Tehran went offline for brief periods of time, but those officials stated backup analog vote counting procedures prevented significant voting disruptions.

**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, Guardian Council, or Expediency Council; and as certain types of judges.

In an October 2020 press conference, former guardian council spokesperson Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei claimed there was no prohibition on women running for president in the 2021 election. Nonetheless, the Guardian Council disqualified all 40 women who registered as candidates for the 2021 presidential election.

All cabinet-level ministers were men. A limited number of women held senior government positions, including that of vice president for women and family affairs. Women made up approximately 6 percent of parliament.

In December 2020 Fars News, an agency managed by the IRGC, 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. Molaverdi responded that she would appeal the verdicts; there was no update of her case by year’s end.

In early September President Raisi appointed Ansieh Khazali as the vice president

for women and family affairs. Unlike Molaverdi, Khazali was against UNESCO's 2030 initiative that includes eliminating gender discrimination from education and said she supported child marriage.

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. The law allows 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. There were numerous reports of government corruption during the year. 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 (*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 their budgets 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:** In January a court sentenced Mahdi Jahangiri, the brother of Eshaq Jahangiri, who served as a vice president during the Rouhani administration, to two years in prison on corruption charges. Jahangiri was arrested in 2017 for financial crimes, including “professional currency smuggling.”

See section 2.a., Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media; and Violence and Harassment for examples of journalists persecuted for reporting on corruption.

In June 2020 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 21 billion tomans (\$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, in the belief that Mansouri was present in Germany. In June 2020 Mansouri was found dead after an apparent fall from the sixth story of the hotel where he was staying while awaiting extradition to Iran under Romanian supervision. There were no reports of further investigation into his death during the year.

## **Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights**

The government restricted the operations of, and did not cooperate with, local or international 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 stated he remained concerned regarding the continued intimidation and imprisonment 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 NGOs, 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 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 17, for the ninth 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, while underlining the disproportionate application of the death penalty to individuals belonging to minority groups, such as the Kurds and Baluch, who were particularly targeted for alleged involvement in political activities. The resolution repeated its call for the country to cooperate with UN special mechanisms, citing the government's failure to approve repeated requests from UN thematic special procedures mandate holders to visit the country. The most recent visit by a UN human rights agency to the country was the 2005 survey of the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing. Miloon Kothari. The resolution also 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. It further highlighted the government's long-standing efforts to target Iranians, dual nationals, and foreign citizens outside its borders via harassment, killing, and abduction to Iran, where some faced trial and execution.

**Government Human Rights Bodies:** The High Council for Human Rights is part of the judicial branch of the government and lacks independence. As of October 8, the Raisi administration had not named a successor to former council head Ali Bagheri-Kani. The council continued to defend the imprisonment of high-profile human rights defenders and political opposition leaders, and it assured families they should not be concerned for the "security, well-being, comfort, and vitality" of their loved ones in prison, according to IRNA. In 2020 Bagheri-Kani continued to call for an end to the position of the UNSR for Iran and asserted that the country'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 and Societal Abuses**

### **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, which 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 spousal and intrafamilial abuse a private matter and seldom discussed it publicly.

An April 2020 IRNA article 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 disfigurement at women perceived to have violated various “morality” laws or practices. Although the Guardian Council reportedly approved a law increasing sentences for the perpetrators of these attacks, the government instead continued to prosecute individual activists seeking stronger government accountability for the attacks. In October 2020 a court sentenced Aliyeh 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. Also in October 2020 authorities arrested Negar Masoudi for holding a photograph exhibition featuring victims of acid attacks and for advocating to restrict the sale of acid.

According to Iran International, on August 8, a man in the city of Orumiyyeh allegedly used his motor vehicle to run over two women, seriously injuring one of

the women, after accusing them of “bad hijab,” interpreted by some as not appropriately following the Islamic dress code.

**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 diya equal to half the full amount of diya 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 and was inflicted on girls ages five through eight, primarily in Shafi’i Sunni communities.

**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 newspaper *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, because fathers (but not mothers) are considered legal guardians and are exempt from capital punishment for murdering their children.

In June 2020 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. In June 2020, in response to a national outcry over Ashrafi’s killing, the Guardian Council approved a law making it a crime to abuse emotionally or physically or abandon a child, but it left unchanged the maximum sentence of 10 years for a father convicted of murdering his daughter. Observers noted the Guardian Council had rejected three previous iterations of the bill. In August 2020 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 stricter penalty, but there were no reported updates to the case.

**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's and human rights observers reported that sexual harassment was the norm in many workplaces. In April multiple women, including model and actress Boshra Dastournezhad, came forward on social media sites such as Clubhouse and Instagram to accuse singer and songwriter Mohsen Namjoo of sexual harassment and sexual assault. They circulated a petition calling on media outlets to ban his presence until the allegations were investigated. According to *IranWire*, on April 18, Namjoo apparently apologized for the sexual harassment accusations but denied other sexual assault allegations via his YouTube channel. The incident fueled online debate regarding victims' accounts of sexual harassment and assault.

According to *IranWire*, 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. On November 15, Emamverdi's trial began before a revolutionary court in Tehran, where he reportedly denied all charges.

**Reproductive Rights:** There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

It is illegal for a single woman to access contraception, although most single women had access to contraception, particularly in urban areas. Government health care previously included full free access to contraception and family planning for married couples. In 2012 on the supreme leader's orders, the government ended the Family and Population Planning Program. On November 16, President Raisi signed into law the "rejuvenation of the population and support of the family" bill, which directs authorities to prioritize population growth. These policies include measures such as outlawing voluntary sterilization and banning the free distribution of contraceptives by the public health-care system. The law also stipulates that content on family planning in university textbooks should be

replaced with materials on an “Islamic-Iranian lifestyle,” with a framework drawn up in cooperation with religious seminaries and the Islamic Propaganda Organization. In January according to a report by Iran International, the Ministry of Health banned health centers in nomadic tribal areas from providing contraceptives to women. On November 16, UN human rights experts “urge[d] the Government to immediately repeal [the law] and to take measures to end the criminalization of abortion and to ensure that all women can access all necessary health services, including sexual and reproductive care, in a manner that is safe, affordable, and consistent with their human rights.”

The government did not provide access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence. Emergency contraception was not available as part of clinical management of rape.

According to human rights organizations, an increase in child marriage – due in part to a government “marriage loan” program providing financial relief to poor families who want to marry off their girls – was likely adversely affecting the quality of health care for such girls and increasing maternal mortality rates. The practice of female genital mutilation, which primarily occurs on girls ages five through eight in Shafi’i Sunni communities, was associated reportedly with increased obstetric problems and may increase maternal mortality rates.

**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 hindered the ability of civil society organizations to fight for and protect women’s rights.

In June 2020 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.g, Stateless Persons and section 6, Children). 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 temporary wives (*sigheh*), based on a Shia custom under which couples may enter a limited-time civil and religious contract that outlines the union's conditions. The law does not grant women equal rights to multiple husbands.

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 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 life. By law the *diyeh* paid in the death of a woman is one-half the amount paid in the death of a man, except for car accident insurance payments. According to a CHRI report, in 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 remains one-half the blood money paid for harm to 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 the overall unemployment rate in the second quarter of the year was 8.8 percent. Unemployment of women in the country was twice as high as it was of men. Overall female participation in the job market was 18.9 percent, according to the Global Gender Gap 2021 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 in 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 over the head (hijab) 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 for 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 2019 during which they walked without headscarves through a Tehran metro train, handing flowers to female passengers. As of September 19, all three women remained in prison.

In May 2020 the lawyer for imprisoned activist Saba Kord Afshari said on Twitter that judicial authorities had reinstated a seven and one-half-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 of “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 reverted to 15 years with the reinstated portion of the sentence. In February 2020 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. Kord Afshari was “exiled” to Ward 6 of Qarchak Prison in Varamin in late January, where reportedly authorities beat her and held her alongside violent criminals. She ended her hunger strike in May. Ahmadi reportedly suffered spinal cord damage in Evin Prison upon hearing of her daughter’s transfer. As of September 19, both women remained in prison.

In a February 2020 letter to Iranian authorities, the world soccer governing body International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) insisted women be allowed to attend all soccer matches in larger numbers than the government previously permitted. In October authorities reversed their earlier announcement that 10,000 vaccinated spectators – including women – could watch Iran play in a FIFA qualifying match and allowed no spectators into the stadium.

As noted by the former UNSR and other organizations, female athletes were 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.

## **Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination**

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. Nonetheless, the government discriminated against minorities.

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. 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 again

expressed concern regarding the reported high number of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience from the Azeri, 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.

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 freedoms 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. The UNSR noted in his July report that in the early part of the year many Kurdish individuals were arrested and detained in unknown locations.

According to the same UNSR report, authorities continued to target Kurdish-language teacher Zara Mohammadi, who supported learning in mother tongue languages, when an appeals court confirmed a five-year prison sentence on February 13 related to national security charges. Authorities detained without furlough Kurdish political prisoner Zeinab Jalalian, who was arrested in 2008 for allegedly being a part of a banned armed Kurdish political group, and reportedly denied her access to adequate health care.

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.

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.

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, to include Supreme Leader Khamenei. Azeris reported the government discriminated against them by harassing Azeri activists or organizers and changing Azeri geographic names.

In July the UNSR reported that authorities continued to target Azeri civil society actors, including Abbas Lisani and Alireza Farshi, for their advocacy of minority rights. According to a February report by CHRI, Farshi, who was convicted and imprisoned on national security charges for peaceful activities on International Mother Language Day in 2014, was transferred from Evin Prison to Greater Tehran Penitentiary after being subjected to physical violence by authorities that resulted in injuries. He was also reportedly facing new charges related to his advocacy. Between January and June 14, Lisani and seven other Azeri political prisoners refused liquids in protest over Farshi's mistreatment. Authorities reportedly agreed to address their concerns, which included access to medical leave and a cessation of the transfer of prisoners convicted of violent crimes into their ward, but authorities did not fulfill these promises.

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.

According to widespread media reports and the UNSR's July report, on February 22, IRGC officials killed 10 fuel couriers in Sistan va Balochistan Province, leading to protests. Authorities used excessive force including live ammunition to suppress these protests, causing two additional deaths (see section 1.a., Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings). UNSR Rehman previously noted in July 2020 that "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 more than 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."

The UNSR's report noted that excessive force was routinely used in antinarcotic operations in Sistan va Balochistan Province. In May for example, antinarcotic police in Iranshahr reportedly fatally shot a five-year-old child in the head.

## **Children**

**Birth Registration:** The law provides Iranian mothers the right to apply for citizenship for children born to fathers with foreign citizenship (see section 2.g, Stateless Persons and section 6, Women). Although the law is retroactive, mothers do not receive equal treatment; they must 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 2020 following the killing of Romina Ashrafi (see section 6, Other Harmful Traditional Practices) 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 a 2019 report, UNSR Rehman expressed concern regarding access to education for minority children, including references to high primary school dropout rates for ethnic minority girls living in border provinces.

The government consistently barred use of minority languages in school for instruction.

**Child Abuse:** There was little information available on how the government dealt with child abuse. The 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. In June 2020 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. 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 requires 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 children 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 in 2020, compared with the same period in 2019. According to *IranWire*, in October the head of Paveh city's intelligence office ordered officers to detain and interrogate harshly two journalists for reporting on the rape of a seven-year-old girl by a 43-year-old man on September

20. The same intelligence office banned a psychiatrist from treating the child and left her with no medical care. Authorities threatened to arrest the journalists if they continued investigating the case.

According to *IranWire*, the Students' Basij Force stepped up efforts in 2020 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 (see section 1.g., Child Soldiers). 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 does not criminalize child marriage.

According to the UNSR's January report, between March 2018 and March 2019 the National Organization for Civil Registration registered 13,054 marriages of girls younger than 13. In 2019 a deputy minister warned that banks offering "marriage loans" without age restrictions increased child marriage. He stated that from March to August 2019, 4,460 girls younger than 15 had received such loans. Between March and June 2020, 7,323 marriages involving girls ages 10 to 14 were registered. The report also noted that a survey found that 37.5 percent of those subjected to child marriage were illiterate and a significant number reported domestic abuse.

**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 96 percent of the refugees resided.

**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 were reportedly subjected to government restrictions and discrimination. Government officials, including the supreme leader, routinely engaged in egregious anti-Semitic rhetoric and Holocaust denial and distortion. On May 7, so-called Jerusalem Day, Supreme Leader Khamenei issued numerous anti-Semitic tweets calling those who live in Israel "racists," questioning the Holocaust, and calling again for a referendum of original inhabitants to determine the future status of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza.

Cartoons in state-run media outlets repeatedly depicted foreign officials as puppets of Jewish control. In September 2020 a government-controlled arts organization, the Hozeh Honari, announced it would hold a third "Holocaust Cartoon Festival," the previous two having been held in 2006 and 2016. The contest results were released on January 1.

According to media reports, officials and media propagated conspiracy theories blaming Jews and Israel for the spread of COVID-19. According to NGO reports, school textbooks contained content that incites hatred against Jews as part of the state curricula for history, religion, and social studies.

## **Trafficking in Persons**

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

## **Organ Harvesting**

It is legal for persons to sell their kidney. The government matches buyers and sellers and sets a fixed price, but a black market for organs also existed.

## **Persons with Disabilities**

According to HRW the 2018 Law for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities increases pensions and extends insurance coverage to disability-related health-care services, but it does not explicitly prohibit discrimination. According to CHRI, as of 2019 the government did not allocate a budget to enforce the law. The law prohibits persons with vision, 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 were largely unable to meet the needs of the entire population.

In 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 with disabilities from the public school system. Based on government figures, during the 2018-19 school year, 150,000 children of school age with disabilities were enrolled in school, and more were in "special schools" that segregated them from other students. Estimates put the total number of school-age children with disabilities at 1.5 million. They continued to face stigma and discrimination from government social workers, health-care workers, and others. Subsequently, 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 historic 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. Individuals 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.

### **HIV and AIDS Social Stigma**

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

### **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, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) activists expressed concern that the government executed LGBTQI+ individuals under the pretext of more severe, and possibly specious, criminal charges such as rape. Security forces harassed, arrested, and detained individuals they suspected of being LGBTQI+. In some cases security forces raided houses and monitored internet sites for information on LGBTQI+ 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.

According to Amnesty International, on May 4, 20-year-old Alireza Fazeli Monfared, who identified as a nonbinary gay man, was abducted by male relatives in his hometown of Ahwaz in Khuzestan Province. The next day these men reportedly told Monfared’s mother they had killed him and dumped his body under a tree. Authorities confirmed his throat was slit and announced an investigation; however, according to Amnesty International in September, none of the suspected perpetrators had been arrested.

According to an August factsheet by CHRI, a 2020 survey by 6Rang of more than 200 individuals living in the country and identifying as LGBTQI+ found that 46 percent reported being victims of sexual violence at their school or university, 49 percent reported being victims of sexual violence by their peers, and more than 52 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 LGBTQI+ status or conduct. Authorities particularly blocked websites or content within sites that discussed LGBTQI+ issues, including the censorship of *Wikipedia* pages defining LGBTQI+ and other related topics. There were active, unregistered LGBTQI+ NGOs and activists in the country.

In 2019 a revolutionary court sentenced Rezvaneh Mohammadi, a gender-equality activist, to five years in prison. 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 via threat of rape, to confess to receiving money to overthrow the government. Mohammadi was reportedly freed on bail.

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.

While LGBTQI+ status and conduct are criminalized, many clerics believed that LGBTQI+ persons were trapped in a body of the wrong sex, and NGOs reported that authorities pressured LGBTQI+ persons to undergo gender reassignment surgery. Reports indicated these procedures disregarded psychological and physical health and that many persons recommended for surgery did not identify as transgender but were forced to comply to avoid punishment for their LGBTQI+ identity. According to a July 2020 report by 6Rang, the number of private and semigovernmental psychological and psychiatric clinics allegedly engaging in “corrective treatment” or reparative therapies of LGBTQI+ persons continued to grow. The NGO 6Rang reported the increased use at such clinics of electric shock therapy to the hands and genitals of LGBTQI+ persons, prescription of psychoactive medication, hypnosis, and coercive masturbation to pictures of persons of the opposite sex. According to 6Rang, one such institution was called the Anonymous Sex Addicts Association of Iran, with branches in 18 provinces.

## **Section 7. Worker Rights**

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

The constitution provides for freedom of association but does not provide for the right of workers to form and join trade unions. 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. Penalties were not imposed for violations involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination.

Antiunion discrimination occurred, and the government harassed trade union leaders, labor rights activists, and journalists during crackdowns on widespread protests. According to NGO and media reports, as in previous years, several trade unionists, including members of teachers unions, were imprisoned or remained unjustly detained for their peaceful activism. Independent trade unionists were subjected to arbitrary arrests, tortured, and if convicted subjected to harsh sentences, including the death penalty.

In February authorities reportedly summoned to prison Ali Nejati, a labor rights activist and former employee of the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Company, to serve a five-year sentence. Nejati had previously been pardoned, but the judiciary reportedly informed his lawyer his pardon had been a “mistake.”

According to media and NGO reports, on May 1, International Labor Day, police violently attacked and arrested at least 30 activists who had gathered for peaceful demonstrations demanding workers’ rights in Tehran and elsewhere. All detainees were later released on bail. The government barred teachers from commemorating International Labor Day and Teachers’ Day. Several prominent teachers and union activists remained in prison without facing trial or, if convicted, awaited sentencing, including Mahmoud Beheshti Langroudi (see below in this subsection).

According to Radio Zamaneh, in June 2020 Jafar Azimzadeh, the general secretary of the board of the Free Union of Iranian Workers and a prominent labor activist, was sentenced to 13 months in prison for “propaganda against the regime.” Azimzadeh was previously 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 seeking to raise the national minimum wage. In

September 2020 Azimzadeh was transferred to Rajai Shahr Prison after ending a 21-day hunger strike to protest being denied medical treatment after contracting COVID-19. On April 10, Azimzadeh was released from prison.

In his July report, UNSR Rehman drew attention to the prolonged solitary confinement of labor rights activist and British-Iranian dual-national Mehran Raof as “especially disturbing.” According to Amnesty International, in October 2020 IRGC intelligence agents arrested Raof, along with several other labor rights activists throughout the country. In June Raof reportedly appeared in court on vague charges of involvement in banned political groups. He subsequently was being held in solitary confinement in Ward 2A of Evin Prison and was denied legal counsel and calls to his immediate family members, who lived abroad.

The Interior Ministry; the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare; and the Islamic Information Organization determined labor council 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 worker efforts to maintain independent unions. The councils, nevertheless, sometimes could block layoffs and dismissals. There was no representative worker 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 continued 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.

In 2018 security forces violently suppressed protests at the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane

Company factory. In 2019 the protests there restarted 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.” They each received a prison sentence of five years. Except for Gholian, all, including syndicate member Mohammad Khanifar, were reportedly pardoned during the year. Gholian was rearrested a week after being released on bail in June 2020 and was transferred to Evin Prison. On October 10, Gholian was rearrested and returned to Evin Prison in retribution for posting on social media while on furlough from Bushehr Prison about the sexual abuse and torture she witnessed against incarcerated women and children (see section 1.c., Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment).

According to Radio Zamaneh, workers at Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Company began striking in June 2020 to reverse the privatization of the company and to demand the arrest of CEO Omid Asadbeigi, who was accused of currency theft and the embezzlement of their wages. In September 2020 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. In May, according to Radio Zamaneh, a Tehran court ruled in favor of the dismissal of Asadbeigi and Mehrdad Rostami, the two owners of the factory. A few days after the ruling, due to pressure from the government, the previous owners halted production at the factory. The Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Workers’ Union announced on April 23 that the factory workers’ lawyer Farzaneh Zilabi had been summoned to court in Shush city, Khuzestan Province, where his license was then suspended. According to labor activists, the company’s executives had not paid workers’ salaries since March, and authorities reduced the company’s water rights by half. The workers’ union reported that on June 3, police opened fire to disperse workers gathered outside the factory to protest the situation.

On April 4, security forces detained labor activist and retired worker Ismail Gerami in his Tehran home in a reported effort to prevent a rally of retirees. According to Radio Zamaneh, in May retirees – including retirees of social security, Laleh Hotel, Shiraz Telecommunication, the steel industry, Iran Air, and the health-care sector – took to the streets in multiple cities for several weeks to demand an increase in their retirement pay. The Revolutionary Court of Tehran sentenced Gerami to five years in prison, 74 lashes, and a fine.

The government continued to arrest and harass teachers' rights activists from the Teachers Association of Iran and related unions. In response to an announcement by the head of the Plan and Budget Organization, Masoud Mirkazemi, that the new government had abandoned the plan to raise teachers' salaries, on September 5, large groups of teachers gathered outside of parliament to protest, according to CHRI. Reportedly they chanted, "The poverty line is 12 million tomans (\$2,800); our salary is three million tomans (\$710)." On September 14, another protest was held around the country.

According to a CHRI report, Mahmoud Beheshti-Langroudi, the former spokesman for the Iranian Teachers' Trade Association (ITTA) who had been jailed since 2017, continued serving a 14-year combined sentence for charges associated with his peaceful defense of labor rights. Esmail Abdi, a mathematics teacher and former ITTA secretary general, continued serving his 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." In March 2020 Abdi was furloughed due to the COVID-19 pandemic but a month later was returned to Evin Prison 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. As reportedly occurred with other activists and political prisoners throughout the year, on March 16, authorities suddenly "exiled" or transferred Abdi from Evin Prison to Rajai Shahr Prison as reprisal for a 13-day hunger strike in protest of restrictions of prisoner rights. In his July report, UNSR Rehman expressed concern regarding Abdi's detention.

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

The law prohibits and criminalizes 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 the law prescribes penalties that were commensurate with those for other analogous crimes such as kidnapping. Conditions indicative of forced labor sometimes occurred in the construction, domestic labor, and agricultural sectors, primarily among 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 age 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. A 2020 law that protects children and adolescents 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. 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).

According to Borna News Agency, on February 1, a 14-year-old from Mahshahr named Mohammad hanged himself after COVID-19 left him unemployed. He reportedly had been forced to drop out of school in 2020 due to poverty and was selling purified water for a living.

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, stated 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. It was unclear whether penalties for violations were commensurate with other laws on civil rights, such as election interference.

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 for women in the country was twice as high as it was for 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 only hire secretaries of their own gender. The law 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, Baha'is, and Baluchis reported political and socioeconomic discrimination regarding 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**

**Wage and Hour Laws:** The law does not provide for a national minimum wage for all sectors of the economy. 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 2020 media reported that following failed meetings, workers, employers, and the government agreed to increase the minimum wage from the previous year by 21 percent. According to CHRI, the Free Union of Iranian Workers issued a statement denouncing the Supreme Labor Council's method of averaging the inflation rate for a basket of essential goods and services "that is less than half the actual rate of inflation and as a result lowers what workers will earn down to a level below the poverty line."

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 entitle 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. The government did not effectively enforce the laws related to wages, 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. In June 2020 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 89-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. Health-care workers continued to protest during the year in several cities after hospitals failed to pay 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. In early June authorities arrested nine workers of District 2 Municipality for protesting. According to the FTUIW, Boroujerd police raided a gathering of Saman Time workers in April and arrested several protesting workers.

According to HRANA, Javanmir Moradi, a labor activist and member of the Electricians' Union in Kermanshah, was arrested and tried in 2020 and sentenced to one year in prison. During the year the appeals court commuted his sentence to a fine. According to Radio Zamaneh, Branch 2 of Shahria's Revolutionary Court

sentenced Haidar Ghorbani, a construction worker and member of the FTUIW, to 11 years in prison on national security charges and “propaganda against the regime.” In addition to directly suppressing and detaining protesting workers, employers threatened to fire workers inside production units. Managers at the General Directorate of Ports and Maritime Affairs in Khuzestan Province asked workers to pledge not to participate in protests. They also prevented two workers’ representatives from entering the workplace. In the Arvand Free Zone Organization, service workers in the Abadan and Khorramshahr industrial towns who protested wage arrears and went on strike were threatened with dismissal. Gharib Havizavi and Hossein Rezaei, labor representatives for the Ahwaz National Steel Industrial Group, were fired on March 30. Since late March workers in oil refining, petrochemicals, and drilling industries continued to strike in at least 25 rallies across the country over working conditions, employment contracts that disadvantaged workers, and unpaid wages.

**Occupational Safety and Health:** Little information was available regarding labor inspection and related law enforcement activity. While the law provides for occupational health and safety standards, the government did not effectively enforce these standards. Penalties for violations of the law were not commensurate with those for crimes like negligence. The law states inspections may be done day or night, without prior notice. Family businesses require written permission of the local prosecutor. The law does not provide workers the right to remove themselves from a hazardous workplace 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 2020, according to a report issued by 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 deaths and injuries increased by 8.5 percent compared with the same period of the previous year. Naeiji stated the three main reasons for work-related deaths were falls, being struck by hard objects, and electrocution. In 2018 the Iranian Labor News Agency 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.

**Informal Sector:** The law does not provide for occupational health and safety standards for workers in the informal economy. Large numbers of workers were employed in small workplaces or in the informal economy. Workers lacked basic protections in construction, domestic labor, and agricultural sectors, primarily among adult Afghan men and boys younger than age 18.