



In This Issue

- Repression of Bloggers in Iran, PAGE 1
- Relevant News, PAGE 1
- IHRDC Releases Report on Iran's Secret Prisons, PAGE 2
- IHRDC Releases Witness Statements, PAGE 2
- Remembrance: Islamic Republic Day, PAGE 3
- Spotlight on: Iran's Labor Movement, PAGE 4
- Iranian – American Journalist on Hunger Strike, PAGE 4

Contact Us

Iran Human Rights Documentation Center

129 Church Street,
Suite 304

New Haven, CT 06510

Ph: (203)772-2218

Fax: (203)772-1782

info@IranHRDC.org

Repression of Bloggers in Iran

On March 18, 2009, Omidreza Mirsayafi, a blogger, passed away in prison due to lack of medical treatment. Dr. Hesam Firuzi, an imprisoned human rights activist and physician, who was in prison with Mirsayafi, said that despite Mirsayafi's critical condition, prison officials refused to transfer him to a hospital. Dr. Firuzi said that in his medical opinion, Mirsayafi suffered from severe depression and could no longer handle imprisonment. Mirsayafi was sentenced to two and a half years' imprisonment earlier this year for insulting comments he allegedly made on his blog *Ruznigar*, in which he discussed music and culture.

A few weeks before, on February 4, 2009, Branch 1059 of Tehran's Criminal Court issued a verdict signed by Judge Hosseini, the fourth judge assigned to the case known as the Webloggers. The defendants, Roozbeh Mirebrahimi, Shahram Rafizadeh, Omid Memarian, and Javad Gholam Tamimi, were convicted of charges ranging from propagandist activity against the regime and spreading lies to treachery and insulting the Leader. They were collectively sentenced to six years' and eight months' imprisonment, and 124 lashes.

The defendants were arrested in 2004 at the same time as at least 15 other journalists and bloggers, during a period of intense crackdown on reformist media. In exchange for their release, they published confessions that they collaborated with foreign powers and against the national security of Iran. Mirebrahimi, Rafizadeh, and Memarian later issued statements retracting their confessions, explaining that they had been obtained under duress. In the winter of 2005, they and other bloggers met with Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahroudi, head of the Judiciary, who told them that their confessions had no legal merit. However, their confessions did form part of the basis for their convictions. IHRDC examines this and other cases in an upcoming report documenting the regime's systematic crackdown on free speech on the Internet.

Relevant News

- The Journalist's Union of Iran released its annual report documenting the situation of journalists in Iran in 1378 [March 2008-March 2009]. According to the report, the numerous closures, and prosecutions of newspapers and their editorial staff demonstrate the regime's blatant disregard for the fundamental right of free speech and expression. The report further states that journalists are treated as criminals who are guilty until proven otherwise.
- The execution of Delara Darabi, a 19-year-old artist, was halted at the last minute. According to Iranian *Shari'a* law, the execution has to be carried out in the presence of close relatives of the murder victim. It was halted allegedly because the family was unable to attend the execution as scheduled. Delara Darabi was accused of killing one of her relatives at the age of 17, a crime to which she originally confessed guilt but later recanted. Serious substantive and procedural irregularities surrounded Darabi's conviction, including the existence of credible information suggesting her innocence.
- On March 6, 2009, Amir Heshmat Saran, a political prisoner who was sentenced to eight years imprisonment in 2003 for having founded an organization called the National Unification Front, died in Raja'i Shahr Prison under suspicious circumstances.

IHRDC Releases Report on Iran's Secret Prisons

On March 30, 2009, the IHRDC released a new report titled *Covert Terror: Iran's Parallel Intelligence Apparatus*. This report exposes the clandestine and illegal activities of parallel intelligence organizations that operated in Iran during the Presidency of Mohammad Khatami from 1997 to 2005. Known collectively as *nahadhayih ittila'atīyih muvazi*, or Parallel Intelligence Apparatus (PIA), the illegal groups were linked to numerous government agencies including the Judiciary while operating completely outside the law. The PIA were used by the conservative establishment to maintain control over the levers of state and defeat the reformist movement that came to power with President Khatami.



The primary targets of the PIA were journalists, student activists and other civil society activists. Victims were detained in facilities outside the control of the State Prisons Organization. The locations of some of these detention facilities were known at the time, while others came to light only after the fact (and still others remain secret to this day). Victims were detained, brutally interrogated and subjected to lengthy periods of solitary confinement. They were charged with such crimes as attempted disruption of national security, spying, and espionage. Some were released only after they agreed to provide confessions that were scripted, taped by PIA agents, and broadcast on state-controlled media. Many continued to be harassed even after their release from detention.

IHRDC Releases Witness Statements

On April 29, 2009, the IHRDC released Witness Statements obtained in connection with *Covert Terror: Iran's Parallel Intelligence Apparatus*. The Statements, available in English and Persian, are scanned and fully searchable on IHRDC's online database, the *Aadel* Collection.

The Witness Statements describe in harrowing detail the unlawful targeting, arrest, detention, harassment and torture suffered by activists and dissidents in the hands of the PIA. The Statements were prepared by human rights lawyers at the IHRDC and are based on in-person and telephonic interviews. Individuals interviewed include Ali Afshari, Hassan Zarezadeh Ardeshtir, Fariba Davoodi Mohajer, Amir Farshad Ebrahimi, Ensafali Hedayat, Shahram Rafizadeh, Mohsen Sazegara and Kourosh Sehati.

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Remembrance: Islamic Republic Day

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In March 1979, a few months after the establishment of the interim government, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued an order calling on all Iranians to participate in a national referendum to choose their form of government. Khomeini insisted that he would vote for an Islamic republic, "not a word more, not a word less." On the day of the referendum the only question posed to the public was "Islamic republic?" with the limited response choices of "yes" and "no." An overwhelming majority of Iranians - over 98% of the ballots cast - voted for an Islamic republic. April 1st is commemorated in Iran as Islamic Republic Day.



Mehdi Bazargan, head of the interim government casts his ballot at the referendum

The absence of any independent monitoring of the referendum and numerous reports of irregularities cast a long shadow over the legitimacy of the results. Many of the voting locations and ballot boxes were guarded by armed revolutionary guards who closely supervised the voting process. Some groups who opposed the formation of an Islamic republic, including the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, boycotted the referendum. Moreover, voting did not take place in some cities because ballots did not arrive on time.

The Revolutionary Council, the *ad hoc* legislative body set up in the absence of a parliament and permanent government, was responsible for organizing the referendum. The Revolutionary Council issued two protocols regarding the organization of a referendum, and 2) to reduce the age of voting from 18 to 16 so it would be closer to the religious age of maturity (15). This move contributed to high voter turnout which, according to the Revolutionary Council, provided the new Islamic Republic with "political and international validation."

In spite of the controversy surrounding the referendum, the Islamic Republic was approved, and Ayatollah Khomeini victoriously announced that the results reflected the "victory of the oppressed ... over the arrogant." Within a few months, the Constitution was written and approved following another referendum.

Thirty years after a national referendum resulted in the establishment of the Islamic Republic and the ratification of the new Constitution, the human rights situation in Iran remains troubling. IHRDC continues to urge the Iranian government to observe international and domestic laws that promote and protect human rights.

Spotlight on: Iran's Labor Movement

The roots of the Iranian labor movement can be traced to the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, when a group of Iranian laborers who had worked abroad encouraged the development of socialist ideas inside the country. In the ensuing years, Iranians began to set up labor unions to protect workers' rights. These unions grew in size and number, but were often targeted by the central government. Despite this repression, the revolution of 1979 came to fruition largely with the help and participation of the working class. Many expected that the labor syndicates and unions would be revived, but the Islamic Republic effectively prohibited the right to organize independent trade unions. To this day the only legal workers' unions, the "Workers' House" and the "Islamic Labor Councils," are government-sponsored.

During the eight years of reform under President Khatami, the syndicates became more active and independent labor unions were organized throughout the country. Most of these syndicates and unions faced heavy attacks by the security and intelligence forces. Notable victims included the Syndicate of Tehran and the Suburb's Bus Company (the leaders of which have been consistently targeted, arrested and convicted of harsh sentences); *Iran Khodro* Auto Company (its workers face arrests and attacks by the government every time they express their desire to form an independent labor union); and the Syndicate of Laborers of Sugarcane Farmers of *Haft Tappeh* (the leaders of which were recently arrested, tried and sentenced to imprisonment).

During the past few months, hundreds of workers have been fired from factories and production companies in Iran. Many within the regime have criticized this as an attempt to silence labor movement activists and their supporters before the upcoming presidential election.

Iranian-American Journalist on Hunger Strike

Roxana Saberi, an Iranian-American journalist temporarily living in Tehran, was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment on April 18, 2009. Ms. Saberi, who was arrested in January 2009, was originally charged with operating with an expired journalist license. Later, in early April 2009, the Iranian Judiciary announced that Saberi had been charged with espionage and spying for foreign powers and that she had accepted all of her charges. She was found guilty and sentenced to eight years imprisonment and is currently detained in Evin Prison.

Immediately after the verdict was issued, the U.S. government announced its "deep disappointment" with the sentencing and demanded that Saberi be released. Iranian authorities including Ayatollah Shahroudi (head of the Judiciary) and President Ahmadinejad have demanded that Tehran's Prosecutor General, Saeed Mortazavi, afford Saberi a "quick and fair" appeal.

Saberi's father recently announced that she had begun a hunger strike on April 21, 2009. He visited Saberi on April 27th and described her as "extremely fragile" and "pale." Several lawyers from the office of the Human Rights Defenders, including Shirin Ebadi, have agreed to represent Saberi during her appeal process. An appeal was filed on April 25, 2009. Her lawyers have since made several attempts to visit Saberi in prison, but have been repeatedly denied access by prison officials.

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