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Fact Sheet

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Iran: Voices Struggling To Be Heard

[\[Brochure in pdf format \(384k\)\]](#)

The Iranian people have a long and sophisticated tradition of expressing their views and their feelings, whether through art, literature, film, news media or the political process. Today the courageous voices of the Iranian people are being stifled as they call for their rights, beliefs and needs to be respected. In response, the non-elected elements of the Iranian Government hierarchy are rebuffing these calls and attempting to extinguish the voices. Recent experience shows an upswing in repression by the regime, but also a determined resilience by the Iranian people as they struggle to define their own future and exercise all their human rights. For every voice that is silenced, more call out for freedom.

A VOICE EXTINGUISHED: Zahra Kazemi

"They have broken my nose and my thumb...and they have broken my toes, too." – Zahra Kazemi, as reported in the *Washington Post*

On June 23, 2003, outside the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran, police took the Canadian-Iranian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi into custody under suspicion of espionage. Some 3 weeks later she died in a Tehran hospital from head injuries suffered from a violent beating, most likely at the hands of her jailers. The circumstances of her death are unclear, but the story that unfolds is one that illustrates the grave human rights situation that exists in Iran today.

Although Zahra Kazemi was never charged with a crime, she would spend 77 hours in a police interrogation that included serious physical abuse. According to a subsequent Iranian investigation, Zahra began complaining of headaches and bleeding from the nose 3 days after her detention; she then fell into a coma and was transferred to a hospital where she eventually died.

Almost 2 weeks after Zahra had first been detained, her mother, Ezzet Kazemi, was summoned to Evin Prison and notified that her daughter had suffered a "brain stroke" and was now in a coma. After Zahra died from her injuries, it was agreed by Ezzet and Iranian officials in the presence of the Canadian ambassador that Zahra's body be repatriated to Canada. But the body did not make it to Canada. Iranian officials pressured Ezzet to change her decision, and Zahra was eventually buried in Shiraz, Iran, thereby preventing an independent autopsy.

Zahra's death was first deemed natural by Iranian officials, but international outrage, spurred in Canada by Zahra's son, Stephen, helped to bring about an official Iranian investigation into the incident. The investigation clearly implicated the involvement of government officials in the death of Kazemi. A junior official in the Ministry of Information has been arrested, but as of publication the trial had not begun. There remain widespread suspicions, voiced inside and outside Iran, that the arrest of this junior official could be part of a cover-up aimed at protecting higher-level government officials. Reporters Without Borders also has expressed concern about the slow pace of the impending trial and the prosecutors' lack of access to materials concerning the case.

"Unfortunately, Mrs. Zahra Kazemi's death was caused by the heedless disregard for Iranian law. When there are individuals or groups who consider themselves above the law, incidents such as this will occur. In the case that we will present, in addition to asking for the punishment of the murderer, in view of the public's knowledge of what happened, I will try to ensure that there will not be another Zahra Kazemi."
– Shirin Ebadi, Nobel Peace Prize Winner and Attorney representing the Kazemi family

VOICES SUPPRESSED: Attacks on the Free Press

The independent media in Iran is under constant attack. According to Reporters Without Borders, at least 10 journalists were in Iranian prisons at the end of 2003. There is a clear pattern of interference and harassment of the press by government officials with dozens of reporters, editors and publishers arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, harsh physical punishments, excessive fines and suspensions of journalistic privileges. A number of cases illustrate the types of abuses prevalent in Iran today:

As many as 85 newspapers, including 41 dailies, have been closed since the passage of the 1995 Press Law that established a supervisory board and court that has authority to impose various penalties, including closure and suspension of operating privileges.

In December 2002, Ali-Reza Jabari, a translator and freelance contributor to several independent newspapers, was arrested in his Tehran office by plainclothes policemen and taken to his home for an immediate search of the residence. Jabari was sentenced to 3 years in prison and 253 lashes. Before his arrest, Jabari was quoted in a Persian-language newspaper in Canada expressing critical opinions of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Taghi Rahmani, a journalist for Omid-e-Zangan, has been imprisoned since June 14, 2003, and has been subjected to extensive periods of time in solitary confinement. According to a Human Rights Watch report released in January 2004, Rahmani has yet to be charged with a crime.

Reza Alijani, editor in chief of *Iran-e-Farda*, was jailed in June 2003 but has not been charged with a crime. Much of his imprisonment has been spent incommunicado.

Hoda Saber, managing editor of *Iran-e-Farda*, was arrested in June 2003 but has also been held without charge since his arrest, much of it incommunicado.

VOICES PERSECUTED: *The Baha'i Faith*

The Constitution of Iran establishes Islam as the official religion, specifically that of the Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism doctrine. While the Constitution also recognizes other Islamic denominations, as well as Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians, followers of minority religions can be subject to harassment, intimidation and discrimination. The freedom to practice a religion not recognized by the Constitution is actively restricted by the Iranian Government, both in law and in practice. Members of unrecognized minority faiths are subject to varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education and housing. The Baha'is are not recognized as a legitimate religious minority in Iran and, in fact, were defined by the government as a political "sect" with suspicion of counterrevolutionary intentions. But according to a report published jointly by the UN Commission on Human Rights and the Baha'i International Community, the tenets of the Baha'i faith require its members to be obedient to their government and to avoid partisan politics, subversive activities and all forms of violence. Still this community has been the target of systematic mistreatment by the Iranian Government since 1979 and is denied a majority of the basic human rights afforded others within the society, including other religious minorities.

According to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the U.S., more than 200 members of the Baha'i faith have been killed in Iran since 1979, with 15 additional missing and presumed dead. As of this time, there are reportedly four Baha'is in prison for practicing their faith, with sentences ranging from 4 years to life in prison.

The government has continued to keep a small number of Baha'is arbitrarily imprisoned, some at risk of execution, at any given time. Another policy employed to harass and intimidate the Baha'i community is periodic arrest and release with charges still pending, so that the Baha'is are subject to re-arrest at any time.

Reports suggest explicit government policies exist to harass and disenfranchise members of the Baha'i faith. One policy issued by the Iranian Ministry of Justice in 2001 directed government officials to restrict the educational opportunities of Baha'is by expelling them from public and private universities and purposely enrolling members of the Baha'i faith in ideologically stringent schools.

In response to being denied admittance to both public and private universities, members of the Baha'i faith have organized their own educational system. However, the Iranian Government has used harassment and intimidation to discourage its operation, including raids in 1998 of more than 500 Baha'i homes and offices affiliated with the Baha'i educational system. These raids included the arrest of numerous faculty and staff.

Through discrimination in the employment market and outright seizure of private property, the economic well-being of the Baha'is is in serious peril.

VOICES OF DEMOCRACY: *The Political Struggle*

"Our dream country is one where human rights are respected, where people aren't sent to prison and tortured for their ideas, for their writing, for their work. That's our dream country."

– Supporter of imprisoned student leader Amir Fakhravar, anonymously interviewed for a PBS Frontline report

The political situation in Iran is a story of two drastically different worlds occupying the same reality. Throughout Iran there is now widespread alienation from the corrupt, oppressive policies of the government that have consistently failed to address the Iranian people's yearning for liberty and an accountable, democratic system of government that will pursue policies that improve their daily lives. In June 1997 and again in 2001, a decisive election victory ushered President Mohammed Khatami into office under the auspices of a reformist agenda. The realization of this reform movement has been actively stifled by hard-line elements within the government, most specifically by the un-elected Guardian Council, a board of clerical leaders and legal scholars. Reformist and dissident voices within the government and society have been repressed and harassed by government and quasi-government factions under the influence of the hard-line clerics. The Guardian Council has the ability to review and block legislation passed by the Majlis, or parliament. In August 2002, the Guardian Council vetoed two bills passed by the Majlis seeking to enhance the powers of President Khatami. Various paramilitary forces, such as the so-called Basijis, gangs of men known as the Ansar-e Hezbollah (Helpers of the Party of God), and most recently a "morality force" formed in July 2002, have been employed as tools of repression within Iranian society. These vigilante groups use intimidation, threats and physical abuse to quell dissent and harass journalists, demonstrators and members of the public who voice opinions that are seen as threatening to the power of the religious elite. Eventually, the reformist movement's inability to realize its agenda contributed to the erosion of the Iranian people's confidence in the government institutions.

On February 20, 2004, elections were held for the 290-seat Parliament in Iran. In a move to diminish pro-reformist re-election chances, the Guardian Council disqualified approximately one-third of the 8,200 submissions for candidacy, including those of more than 80 reformists currently holding Majlis seats, effectively limiting the democratic alternatives available to Iranian voters. Despite threats of an election boycott, resignations by some reformist officials and the urgent passage of a law barring undocumented disqualifications, the Guardian Council only reinstated a fraction of the disqualified candidates. Conservative candidates did not face a reformist opponent for 132 of 290 seats. The decision of the Guardian Council to silence reformist voices in Parliament was accompanied by the culmination of a four-year campaign against the reformist press. On the eve of the elections, Chief Prosecutor Mortazavi added the last two reformist newspapers to a list of dozens that his "Press Court" had ordered closed since 2000. In addition, the hard-line judiciary sealed an office belonging to a leading reformist party on the night before the election. In today's Iran, the political aspirations of the public for a greater role in charting the direction of their society are only tolerated when they coincide with the wishes of entrenched conservative interests.

"Through these massive disqualifications, they (hard-liners) want only their own thinking to control the next parliament. This will be no more an election, but an appointment of the next parliament by hard-liners."

– Mohsen Mirdamadi, Member of Parliament

A VOICE OF HOPE: *Shirin Ebadi*

"Shirin Ebadi has been a courageous human rights advocate in Iran for many years, and we couldn't be more excited that she has received this extraordinary honor. The Nobel Committee has sent a powerful message to the Iranian Government that serious human rights violations must end. We hope they hear that message."

– Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch

"As a lawyer, judge, lecturer, writer and activist, she has spoken out clearly and strongly in her country, Iran and far beyond."

– The Norwegian Nobel Committee

Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2003 for her life-long campaign to protect vulnerable and persecuted groups within Iranian society. Since being forced from her position as the president of the city court of Tehran, she has used her legal expertise to promote and protect some of the most basic and necessary human rights. Most specifically, she has provided legal representation to many activists who are the targets of government harassment because of dissident opinions and democracy promotion. She has courageously fought for equitable and just treatment for women in Iranian society, and she has also helped to organize efforts to publicize and alleviate the harsh conditions of "street children" in Iran.

"Any person who pursues human rights in Iran must live with fear from birth to death, but I have learned to overcome my fear."

– Shirin Ebadi

Ebadi has shown a noble and inspiring disregard for her own well-being by representing individuals or the families of people who have suffered from violence and repression in Iran. In 2000, she was arrested and accused of distributing a videotape that implicated prominent hard-line leaders of instigating attacks against advocates of reform. She received a suspended sentence and a professional ban. She was then detained after attending a conference in Berlin on the Iranian reform movement.

Ebadi provided legal representation for highly politicized and sensitive cases, like the case of Ezzat Ebrahim-Nejad, one of the students killed during the 1999 Tehran University protests by vigilante groups operating under the influence of hard-line clerics. She also served as the attorney for the family of Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar, prominent political activists who were stabbed to death in 1998 by "rogue" elements within the Intelligence Ministry. Shirin Ebadi's designation as the recipient of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize recognizes the struggle of Iranian citizens to have a voice in determining their own future.

"In Iran, the demand for democracy is strong and broad as we saw when thousands gathered to welcome home Shirin Ebadi, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. The regime in Tehran must heed the democratic demands of the Iranian people, or lose its last claim to legitimacy."

– President George W. Bush

VOICES OF THE FUTURE: *The Aspirations of Youth*

"We want more freedom... For 25 years we have lived without any freedom. We want social freedom, economic freedom and political freedom."

– Mahmoud, protestor quoted in *New York Times*

Throughout modern history, young people have played a prominent role in the call for democracy. Iran is no different. Students have mobilized to demand greater freedoms and to support reform efforts by the Khatami Government, the Majlis, and individuals willing to speak the truth. A free media, a fair electoral system and public debate typically serve as the outlets to express the desires and disappointments of the civic minded. These outlets have been systematically shut, leaving large student demonstrations in the streets as the only way to voice frustration and anger in Iran.

In June 2003, a large protest began in Tehran involving university students in response to a rumor alleging the possible privatization of the university system and the introduction of a tuition system. The protests grew as nightly gatherings spread off campus and the tone of the protests became more political as the students and sympathetic neighbors began to use the public gathering as a forum to decry the current political situation and demand democratic reforms. The intersections of Tehran were jammed with cars honking their horns in support of the demonstrations. Iranian Government officials reported approximately 4,000 protestors arrested and demonstrations planned for the following month were banned. No reliable sources were available on the number of injured, but there were numerous reports of violent clashes between students and paramilitary groups in the streets of Tehran.

Youth represents the future of Iran. Yet the regime's vision of the future clashes with the dreams of young Iranians, who have the most to gain or lose. Their continued support for reform through whatever peaceful means available sends a clear message. They will make their voices heard.

"Iran is an ancient land, home to a proud culture with a rich heritage of learning and progress. The future of Iran will be decided by the people of Iran. Right now, the Iranian people are struggling with difficult questions about how to build a modern 21st century society that is at once Muslim, prosperous and free. There is a long history of friendship between the American people and the people of Iran. As Iran's

people move towards a future defined by greater freedom, greater tolerance, they will have no better friend than the United States of America.”

– President George W. Bush, July 12, 2002
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