

HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN: REVIEW OF 2022/23

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IRAN

Islamic Republic of Iran

Head of state: **Ali Khamenei (Supreme Leader)**

Head of government: **Ebrahim Raisi**

Iran was rocked by an unprecedented popular uprising against the Islamic Republic system. Security forces unlawfully fired live ammunition and metal pellets to crush protests, killing hundreds of men, women and children and injuring thousands. Thousands of people were arbitrarily detained and/or unfairly prosecuted solely for peacefully exercising their human rights. Women, LGBTI people, and ethnic and religious minorities suffered intensified discrimination and violence. Enforced disappearances, torture and other ill-treatment, including through the deliberate denial of medical care, were widespread and systematic. Cruel and inhuman punishments, including flogging, amputation and blinding, were imposed and/or carried out. The use of the death penalty increased and public executions resumed. Trials remained systematically unfair. Systemic impunity prevailed for past and ongoing crimes against humanity relating to prison massacres in 1988 and other crimes under international law.

BACKGROUND

An unprecedented popular uprising rocked Iran from September, with people calling for an end to the Islamic Republic system. Protests were ongoing at the end of the year.

In March, the UN Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Iran. In November, the same body established a fact-finding mission to investigate human rights violations relating to the uprising.

All independent UN experts and international monitors other than the Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of the unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights were denied entry to Iran.

In March, Iran signed a bilateral treaty with Belgium – the Transfer of Sentenced Persons – raising concerns about its potential use to grant impunity for Iranian state agents arrested and convicted abroad of serious human rights violations. In December, the Constitutional Court of Belgium partially suspended implementation of the treaty and was due to rule on its annulment in early 2023.

Iran continued to provide military support to government forces in the armed conflict in Syria (see Syria entry).

Iran supported the Russian government's invasion of Ukraine by providing Shahed 136 drones, which were used to target and destroy civilian infrastructure.

In September/October, the Revolutionary Guards attacked Kurdish opposition groups inside the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, resulting in the deaths of more than a dozen people, including a pregnant woman.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSOCIATION AND ASSEMBLY

The authorities ramped up already suffocating levels of repression, leaving no space for peaceful dissent.

Freedom of expression and association

The authorities censored media, jammed satellite television channels and, from September, added Instagram and WhatsApp to the list of blocked and/or filtered mobile apps and social media platforms, which included Facebook, Signal, Telegram, Twitter and YouTube.

The authorities repeatedly shut off or disrupted internet and mobile phone networks during protests to suppress mobilization and hide the scale of violations by security forces.

The Internet User Protection Bill, which would further erode online freedoms and access to the global internet, remained pending. In September, an executive directive was issued further limiting access to online content.

The authorities banned all independent political parties, civil society organizations and independent trade unions, and subjected striking workers to reprisals.

Freedom of assembly

The authorities systematically adopted a militarized response to localized and nationwide protests.

In May, security forces in Khuzestan province, as well as Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province, unlawfully used live ammunition, birdshot, tear gas and water cannon to crush largely peaceful protests over soaring food prices and a deadly building collapse in Abadan, Khuzestan province. At least four people were killed. Scores of others, including children, sustained injuries from birdshot, the use of which violates the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment.¹

The death in custody of Mahsa (Zhin) Amini at the hands of Iran's "morality" police on 16 September sparked a nationwide uprising that continued the rest of the year. The authorities extensively and unlawfully fired live ammunition, metal pellets and tear gas and subjected protesters to severe beatings. Amnesty International recorded the names of hundreds of protesters and bystanders unlawfully killed by security forces, including dozens of children.² Hundreds were blinded or sustained other serious eye injuries due to security forces firing metal pellets. Thousands more sustained injuries for which many did not seek medical care due to fear of arrest.

More than half of those killed belonged to the oppressed Baluchi minority in Sistan and Baluchestan province and the oppressed Kurdish minority in the provinces of Kurdistan, Kermanshah and West Azerbaijan.

Peacefully protesting university students and schoolchildren were expelled and subjected to violent raids, beatings and other ill-treatment.

ARBITRARY DETENTION AND UNFAIR TRIALS

Thousands of people were arbitrarily detained and/or unfairly prosecuted throughout the year for peacefully exercising their human rights; many remained unjustly imprisoned.

According to a leaked audio-recorded official statement, between 15,000 and 16,000 people were detained during the first weeks of the uprising. The authorities continued mass arbitrary arrests until the end of the year and subjected many to unjust prosecutions and unfair trials.

Two young men were arbitrarily executed in relation to the nationwide uprising after sham trials and without advance notice to their families, while scores of others were under the sentence of death or remained on trial for overly broad capital charges including "enmity against God" (*moharebeh*) and "corruption on earth" (*efsad-e fel-arz*).

The authorities further suppressed civil society, subjecting hundreds of human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, political dissidents, activists, conservationists, writers, artists, musicians, university students and schoolchildren, to arbitrary detention and/or unjust prosecution.

Hundreds of workers, including teachers, faced arbitrary detention for going on strike, taking part in International Workers' Day rallies, and/or otherwise raising concerns about workers' rights.

¹ [Iran: They are Shooting Brazenly: Iran's Militarized Response to May 2022 Protests, 3 August](#)

² [Iran: Leaked Official Documents Ordering Deadly Crackdown Highlight Need for International Action, 30 September](#)

The practice of arbitrarily detaining foreign and dual nationals for leverage continued and, in some cases, constituted the crime of hostage-taking.³

The arbitrary house arrest of dissidents Mehdi Karroubi, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Zahra Rahnava entered its 12th year.

The judiciary lacked independence and oversaw a repressive apparatus replete with systematic due process violations, including denial of access to a lawyer at the investigation stage, enforced disappearance, incommunicado detention, admission of torture-tainted “confessions” as evidence, and summary and secret sham trials bearing no resemblance to judicial proceedings, resulting in imprisonment, flogging and death sentences.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture and other ill-treatment, including through prolonged solitary confinement and deliberate denial of medical care, remained widespread and systematic. Forced “confessions” obtained under torture and other ill-treatment were broadcast on state television.

Prison and prosecution authorities, working under the judiciary, held prisoners in cruel and inhuman conditions characterized by overcrowding, poor sanitation, inadequate food and water, insufficient beds, poor ventilation and insect infestation.

Dozens of people died in custody in suspicious circumstances involving credible reports of physical torture and/or denial of medical care. No investigations were conducted in line with international standards.

The Penal Code retained punishments violating the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment, including flogging, blinding, amputation, crucifixion and stoning.

Between May and September, the authorities amputated the fingers of at least five men convicted of theft: four in Evin prison, Tehran province, and one in Raja'i Shahr prison, Alborz province.⁴

In October, the cases of two men and a woman were sent to the Office for Implementation of Sentences in Tehran to carry out their sentences of blinding under the principle of *qesas* (retribution-in-kind). No public information emerged on their implementation by the end of the year.

Courts issued at least 178 flogging sentences, according to Abdorrahman Boroumand Center.

DISCRIMINATION

Ethnic minorities

Ethnic minorities, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds and Turkmen, faced widespread discrimination, curtailing their access to education, employment, adequate housing and political office. Continued under-investment in minority-populated regions exacerbated poverty and marginalization.

Persian remained the sole language of instruction in primary and secondary education, despite repeated calls for linguistic diversity.

Security forces unlawfully killed scores of unarmed Kurdish cross-border couriers (*kulbars*) between the Kurdistan regions of Iran and Iraq and Baluchi fuel porters (*soukhtbar*) in Sistan and Baluchestan province. Authorities failed to investigate the killings and hold those responsible accountable.

Religious minorities

Religious minorities, including Baha'is, Christians, Gonabadi Dervishes, Jews, Yaresan and Sunni Muslims, suffered discrimination in law and practice, including in access to education, employment, child adoption, political office and

³ [Iran: The Crime of Holding Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe Hostage Must Not Go Unpunished, 1 June](#)

⁴ [Iran: Finger amputation risk for eight prisoners, 16 June](#)

places of worship. Hundreds were arbitrarily detained, unjustly prosecuted, tortured or ill-treated and/or subjected to other forms of harassment for professing or practising their faith. People born to parents classified as Muslim by the authorities risked arbitrary detention, torture or the death penalty for “apostasy” if they adopted other religions or atheism.

Members of the Baha’i minority were subjected to widespread and systematic violations for practising their faith, including arbitrary detention, interrogation, torture and other ill-treatment, and enforced disappearance. Authorities forcibly closed Baha’i businesses, confiscated dozens of Baha’i properties, demolished their homes and cemeteries, and banned Baha’is from higher education. In June, an appeal court upheld a verdict authorizing the confiscation of 18 Baha’i properties in Semnan province. In August, the authorities bulldozed six Baha’i houses and confiscated more than 20 hectares of land in a village in Mazandaran province, resulting in loss of livelihood.⁵

Authorities raided house churches and subjected Christian converts to arbitrary arrest, confiscation of personal property, prosecution on national security charges, and punishments such as imprisonment, fines and internal “exile”.

Several Gonabadi Dervishes remained unjustly imprisoned.

LGBTI people

LGBTI people suffered systemic discrimination and violence. Consensual same-sex sexual relations remained criminalized with punishments ranging from flogging to the death penalty. State-endorsed “conversion therapies” amounting to torture or other ill-treatment remained prevalent, including against children. Hormone therapy and surgical procedures including sterilization were mandatory for legal gender changes. Gender non-conforming individuals risked criminalization and denial of access to education and employment.

In August, LGBTI rights defender Zahra Sedighi-Hamadani, known as Sareh, and another woman, Elham Choubdar, were sentenced to death for “corruption on earth” by a Revolutionary Court in Urumieh, West Azerbaijan province, due to their real or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity and their social media activities in support of LGBTI communities.⁶ The Supreme Court quashed their conviction and sentence in December and sent their case for retrial.

Women and girls

The authorities continued to treat women as second-class citizens, including in relation to marriage, divorce, child custody, employment, inheritance and political office.

The legal age of marriage for girls remained at 13, and fathers could obtain judicial permission for their daughters to be married at a younger age.

Women and girls were at the forefront of the popular uprising, challenging decades of gender-based discrimination and violence, and defying discriminatory and degrading compulsory veiling laws that result in them facing daily harassment and violence by state and non-state actors, arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, and denial of access to education, employment and public spaces.

There was a stricter enforcement of these laws in mid-2022, culminating in the death in custody of Mahsa (Zhina) Amini in September, days after she was violently arrested by Iran’s “morality” police amid credible reports of torture and other ill-treatment.

Authorities failed to provide adequate gender-specific healthcare to women prisoners.

The “Defending dignity and protecting women against violence” bill, introduced over a decade earlier, stalled in parliament. Lawmakers failed to revise the bill to define domestic violence as a separate offence, criminalize marital rape and child marriage, or ensure men who murder their wives or daughters face proportionate punishments.

⁵ [Iran: Intensified assault on Iran’s Baha’i minority, 23 August](#)

⁶ [Iran: Iranian LGBTI defender sentenced to death: Zahra Sedighi-Hamadani & Elham Choubdar, 15 September](#)

REFUGEES' AND MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

Security forces unlawfully fired live ammunition at Afghan men, women and children attempting to cross the Afghanistan/Iran border, resulting in unlawful killings. Afghans who managed to enter Iran were arbitrarily detained and subjected to torture and other ill-treatment before being unlawfully and forcibly returned.

DEATH PENALTY

Executions increased from the previous year and public executions resumed after a two- year hiatus.

The authorities used the death penalty as a tool of political repression against protesters, dissidents and ethnic minorities. The oppressed Baluchi minority made up a disproportionate number of those executed.

The death penalty was imposed after grossly unfair trials, including for offences not meeting the threshold of the “most serious crimes” such as drug trafficking, financial corruption, vandalism and for acts protected under international human rights law, including the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression.

Several people were executed for offences that occurred when they were children; scores of others who were below 18 years of age at the time of the crime remained on death row.

IMPUNITY

No public official was investigated or held accountable for extrajudicial executions and other unlawful killings, torture, enforced disappearance and other grave human rights violations committed in 2022 or previous years.

The authorities covered up the real number of those killed by security forces during protests by blaming deaths on “rioters” or, in some cases, including those of children killed, claiming their deaths resulted from suicide or accidents. They dismissed complaints by victims’ families and threatened to kill or harm them or their children if they spoke out.

No independent investigation was carried out into Mahsa (Zhin) Amini’s death in custody. The authorities denied responsibility, concealed vital evidence, and threatened her family and others disputing the official narrative and calling for truth and justice.⁷

Relatives seeking truth and justice and witnesses from the November 2019 protests who testified at the International People’s Tribunal on Iran’s Atrocities in London, UK, faced arbitrary detention and other forms of harassment.⁸

No independent investigations took place into the use of unlawful force against prisoners in Evin prison in October or into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of at least eight prisoners.⁹

The authorities continued to conceal the truth surrounding the January 2020 missile strike against Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752, which killed 176 people. In August, the judiciary announced the return of the case of 10 low-ranking officials tried before a military court for their involvement in the missile strike to the prosecutor’s office due to a “flawed investigation”.

Impunity prevailed for ongoing crimes against humanity relating to the mass extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances of 1988, with many of those involved holding top positions, including the president. High concrete walls were erected around the Khavaran mass graves where the remains of several hundred victims are believed to be buried, raising concerns about the security of the site.¹⁰ In July, a Swedish court sentenced former Iranian official Hamid Nouri to life in prison over crimes relating to the 1988 prison massacres, following an historic trial under the principle of universal jurisdiction.

⁷ [Iran: Urgent International Action Needed to Ensure Accountability for Mahsa Amini's Death in Custody, 27 September](#)

⁸ [Iran: Authorities Violating Absolute Prohibition of Torture Through Harassment of Witnesses Involved in Iran Atrocities Tribunal, 7 April](#)

⁹ [Iran: Tortured prisoners at Evin prison are in urgent need of international protection, 18 October 2022](#)

¹⁰ [Iran: Walls erected around graves of massacre victims show urgent need for international investigation, 13 September](#)

FAILURE TO PREVENT CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Environmental experts criticized the authorities' failure to address Iran's environmental crisis, marked by loss of lakes, rivers and wetlands; deforestation; air pollution; water pollution caused by the discharge of wastewater into urban water sources; and land subsidence.

In July, Iran was one of only eight countries to abstain from a UN General Assembly resolution, adopted with 161 states in favour, which declared access to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment a universal human right.