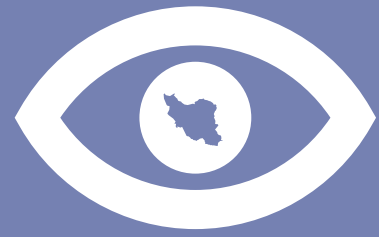


ARTICLE 19



## **Tightening the Net**

Online Freedoms in Iran Ahead of  
the 2017 Presidential Elections

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May 2017

# Introduction

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This report explores some of the gains and concerns for Internet rights under the moderate administration of Rouhani, before the 19 May Presidential elections in Iran. This is the first in a series of quarterly bulletins/briefings that will continue ARTICLE 19's reporting on Iran's Internet from our [Tightening the Net](#) series, with the aim of documenting the changes affecting online rights in Iran. This report covers Internet freedom in Iran from January to mid-April 2017.

A Look at Internet Freedom under the Rouhani Administration Ahead of the Elections

During Rouhani's 2013 election campaign, his slogan was "my government will be one that holds the keys to prudence and hope." Improvements in access to information and freedom of expression were alluded to be part of this progressive platform. At a campaign rally a week before the 14 June 2013 Presidential elections, [he told his supporters:](#)

We are living in a world in which limiting information is impossible. Youth are faced with bombardment of

information and we must prepare to handle it.

His Internet policy platform was centered on better access, but his main promise was to increase Internet speeds to improve the country's economic situation. However, he never made any concrete promises to lessen the censorship regime that was responsible for blocking Iranians from Twitter and Facebook<sup>1</sup>.

Fulfilling one of his 2013 campaign promises, the Rouhani administration published a [Charter of Citizen Rights](#) in December 2016. While it stands unclear what legal basis this document will hold, there are a few articles in the document that guarantee Iranian rights online:

A campaign banner of Rouhani next to his tagline "a government of hope and prudence" from May 2013, still being used today.



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<sup>1</sup> Facebook and Twitter were the two social media platforms that were censored in the lead-up to the 2009 Presidential elections following a surge in popularity and mobilisation on these platforms for the Green Movement.

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Article 26: Every citizen has a right to freedom of speech and expression. This right shall be exercised within the limits prescribed by law. Citizens have the right to freely seek, receive and publish views and information pertaining to various issues, using any means of communication. The Government shall, according to the law, guarantee freedom of speech and expression, especially in the mass media, cyber space, including in newspapers, magazines, books, cinemas, radio and television, social networks and the likes.

Article 33: Citizens have the right to freely and without discrimination enjoy access to and communicate and obtain information and knowledge from cyberspace. This right encompasses respect for cultural diversity, languages, traditions and religious beliefs and observance of ethical principles in cyberspace. Imposition of any type of restriction (such as filtering, interference, speed reduction and network interruption) without explicit legal authority is prohibited.

Article 35 Citizens have the right to enjoy cyber security, security of communication technologies and informatics, and protection of their personal data and privacy.

While a welcome sentiment, the Charter's guarantees have not been reflected in the arrests, censorship, and other forms of online repression which have occurred throughout the Rouhani administration. It is unclear what the significance of this document will be, especially given the fact that the conservative Judiciary has shown no signs of respecting these rights in their decision-making.



Rouhani fulfilling one of his campaign promises by unveiling the final draft of the Charter of Citizen Rights in December 2016.

# A. Censorship

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Censorship policy has been at the forefront of Internet controls in Iran. The Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution set up the Committee Charged with Determining Offensive Content (CCDOC) in 2001, and the 2009 Presidential election was a watershed moment in cementing censorship as an institutionalized component of the Iranian system. Seeing the momentum and popularity of the reformist coalition, especially Mir Hossein Mousavi's campaign's popularity over Facebook, both [Facebook and Twitter were blocked](#) prior to the 12 June 2009 election date, at some point in May. Following the unrest of 2009, Internet policy decisions became increasingly centralised towards the office of the Supreme Leader (SL), especially with the creation of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), the ultimate decision making body on the Internet accountable to the office of the SL. The Rouhani administration therefore has very little control over Internet censorship, as many influential bodies, including the SL's office, the Judiciary and the Revolutionary Guards have a say in the SCC, while the President does not. As such, many new websites have been added to the list of filtered content in Iran under the Rouhani administration. Nonetheless, while it is possible to deflect some of the responsibility for censorship, Rouhani's administration has been responsible for the continued rollout of the National Information Network, an institution feared by many to aid in streamlining censorship.

## 1. Rouhani Administration on Censorship and Accessibility

There have been some notable milestones throughout Rouhani's administration in terms of Internet policy and development.

- Rouhani's administration [effectively put a stop](#) to the Judiciary's order for Iran's filtering committee to censor the messaging platforms WhatsApp, Line and Tango. His administration was also able to previously push back against various attempts by conservative elements of the government, such as the judiciary and members of the CCDOC, to block Telegram after its rise at the end of 2015.
- The Rouhani administration's attempts at keeping platforms unblocked have led to various unsubstantiated statements:

- On 7 May 2015, Internet researchers were able to disprove [the administration's false claims](#) that the government was developing "sophisticated" technology to complete "intelligent filtering" on platforms such as Instagram, proving that the government was simply taking advantage of Facebook's [omission of https \(or SSL/TLS encryption\) deployment to censor individual pages](#). Iranian authorities generally have the ability to block encrypted web pages, however, censoring individual pages on Facebook and Instagram would require more sophisticated technology which Iran lacks at the moment, or direct cooperation with the technology company, much in the same way [Twitter has cooperated with the Turkish government](#) to censor certain accounts for Turkish users.
- Rouhani's administration claimed on multiple occasions to be working with the technology company Telegram, which has an estimated user base of over 20-40 million Iranians<sup>2</sup>, to censor immoral content. On 25 July 2015, ICT Minister Mahmoud Vaezi stated that Telegram would be censoring the sticker feature for Iranians:



Image of Instagram on the Iranian flag by Nicolas Raymond from Flickr. The Iranian government had tried to censor individual Instagram pages through a failed "intelligent filtering" program.

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<sup>2</sup> On 18 April, Durov claimed that Telegram had 25 million daily users inside of Iran, and around 40 million per month. <https://twitter.com/durov/status/854472773137256448>

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The administrators of Telegram were in touch with us with regard to this issue and apologized and explained the system was created so all users from around the world could use and design the stickers but we did not know that this would be misused by a few users in Iran. So the managers of Telegram stated that they will disable this option inside of Iran so this app can be used inside Iran.

Telegram would later vehemently [deny any cooperation](#) with the Iranian government for any type of censorship, beyond Porn Bots<sup>3</sup>, which they explained occurs in every country Telegram operates in. However, searches into porn bot accounts on Telegram have revealed there are many [non-Persian porn accounts in operation](#). Either the Iranian government are not stating the truth about their cooperation with Telegram in order to justify their efforts to keep it unfiltered, [or Telegram is being dishonest](#) in order to remain uncensored in Iran.

- The Rouhani administration has increased Internet bandwidth available to Iranian users in Iran tenfold, [increasing speeds](#) from 624 gigabits per second to 4,000 gigabits per second in at the beginning of 2017, and increasing the country's fiber optic network an additional 10,000 km since 2013. One of the greatest access to information struggles has been connection speeds, that at times have been throttled to keep users from online activities, especially during the 2013 Presidential elections.



An image of a Rouhani campaign staff on the Internet in a election campaign office in May 2013.

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<sup>3</sup> Telegram bots are third party applications that run inside Telegram. Users interact with the bots, in the same way they would interact with contacts, by sending message requests. Port bots typically share pornographic images upon request.

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## 2. Censorship in the lead-up to the 2017 elections

While censorship is prevalent in Iran, it continues to be a cat and mouse game between the filters established by the authorities and Iranian users, who are quick to find alternatives or deploy circumvention tools to get to the platforms they need.

### Messaging Applications

- Signal
  - Signal, a trusted encrypted messaging application, was censored sometime during the summer of 2016. This is according to censorship testing and user reports from Twitter users inside the country. However, the exact time and reasoning behind the censorship is unclear. The filtering of Signal has gone unnoticed by the Iranian government, in contrast to the much debated and discussed censorship status of Telegram.
  - While the status of Signal's censorship has not been broached by Iran's media or politicians, on 29 January 2017 the Islamic Student News Agency (ISNA) reported on Signal's encryption, recommending it to Iranian users. It is also notable that the word for "block" is used to describe "encryption" by Iranian media. This is possibly indicative of the fact that in Iran, Signal's technology "blocks" government's ability to carry surveillance. It is unclear if it is the source of funding for the technology, or its ability to provide high quality security for its users, which marked signal for censorship. In November 2013, Cryptocat, which had a high number of activist users in Iran, [was censored](#). At the time, Cryptocat was receiving Open Technology Fund (OTF) funding, administering funds from the United States Congress. Signal similarly uses OTF funding (while not the only source, it is the most publicized and well known one) and is popular among activists. Both the demographics of Signal's user base as well as its funding ties to the United States government might serve as reasons for its censorship. While this censorship signals the Iranian government's obvious discomfort with communications they cannot monitor, there are many alternatives that remain unblocked, such as Wire and WhatsApp, which use the same encryption method as Signal.
- Wispi
  - The messaging app [Wispi](#) had recently started acquiring some users inside of Iran. Statistics on the Iranian mobile application website [Cafe Bazaar](#), an Iranian alternative to Google Play and the Apple App store, show over 100,000 downloads of Wispi since it entered the Iranian mobile application market in February 2017. The Iranian technology website, Zoomit, described Wispi's potential to replace Telegram, and characteristics that make it particularly useful for the Iranian Internet environment, such as sharing capabilities for large files, stickers in Persian language, and public channels. [Zoomit later reported](#) that Wispi was censored on 1 March 2017 after weeks of advertisements and campaigns to attract an Iranian userbase. While its low user base means its censorship will not have a huge impact on freedom of expression and information in Iran, this does signal the government's discomfort with technology platforms that are aggressively trying to acquire users inside of Iran.
- Telegram
  - On 3 April 2017, the Minister of ICT, Mahmoud Vaezi [told the press](#) Telegram was seeking the government's approval for the deployment of voice calls in Iran. Telegram has deployed an encrypted call feature internationally, which according to [their own announcement](#), means the calls are secure from any third party, including Telegram. Telegram has failed to react to the Ministry's allegations they are cooperating, but it appears Iranians on Android devices have access to the new call feature. Iranians have had access to WhatsApp's call feature since it was introduced between March and April 2015, however the Ministry did not make similar announcements about WhatsApp calls. This announcement is likely part of the same strategy of claiming cooperation with Telegram, given the platforms influential presence on online communication and information sharing.

“The administrators of Telegram were in touch with us before they deployed the calling feature for Iranians in order to understand what the effects would be on domestic operators. There is now a committee to investigate the effects initiating voice calls through a social network will have on domestic operators, and the committee consists of domestic operators who will determine how local networks will be affected.” - Minister of ICT, Mahmoud Vaezi

– On 14 April 2017, Telegram voice calls were blocked within their first day of being deployed in Iran. The service was later resumed according to some users, but on 17 April, Iran’s prosecutor general officially announced the service had been blocked through a [judicial order](#). According to both Pavel Durov, the founder and CEO of Telegram, and various mobile operators inside Iran, the blockage on Telegram voice services is occurring on the international gateway operated by the Telecommunications Infrastructure Company of Iran. In a statement to the press on 16 April, Minister Mahmoud [Vaezi explained](#) the block as being beyond his control: “Telegram calls were initiated with cooperation with our ministry...I wasn’t informed about the filtering, but since it was ordered by the Prosecutor, you need to get further information from the Judiciary.”

– This is the first official blow against Telegram, which has survived several reviews for filtering since 2015. While other platforms such as WhatsApp and FaceTime have had uninterrupted voice calling features long before Telegram, neither platform can rival the high user base of somewhere between 30-40 million, in a country with an estimated [40 million Internet user](#) base. The initiation of Telegram voice calls had the potential to make the use of Voice of Internet Protocol (VOIP) as ubiquitous as the usage of the platform in the country. However, while the Rouhani administration has been able to keep Telegram messaging unfiltered they have failed to do so for Telegram voice calls. The Rouhani administration has already stated they will not contest this decision. While the judiciary said its decision was for economic reasons, to protect the business of local mobile operators, it is notable that Telegram messaging and channels are not filtered. Incentive for a government who regularly monitors user data is stronger to maintain

Telegram messaging platforms unblocked, as there is a possibility to collect data on those activities. However, there is no possibility for the government to collect data on encrypted Telegram voice calls.

– The Prosecutor General, Mohamad Jafar Montezari, contradicted the judiciary’s original reasoning, when during an interview on a Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) channel on 22 April 2017, declared they blocked Telegram voice calls to protect national security, especially in the lead up to the elections.

“With the help of all our security agencies, we have determined that Telegram voice calls are harmful to national security, especially so close to an election” - Prosecutor General, Mohamad Jafar Montezari

### Censored Websites

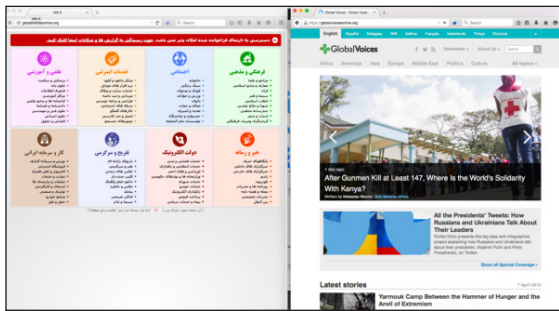
- Motherboard
  - Internet researchers have been [reporting](#) since 7 January 2017 that the technology news website for Vice, [Motherboard](#), has been blocked in Iran. Motherboard often keeps abreast of news related to Iranian censorship, and nation-state hacking, with in-depth interviews and investigations.



Researchers discovered that Vice’s technology website Motherboard is censored in Iran.

- Global Voices

– Recent tests indicate Iran’s filtering continues to remain most sensitive to content that is published in the Persian language. Tests of sites that carry their Persian language websites as sub-domains are the best indicators of this. The [Global Voices website](#) was [previously not encrypted, and only blocked on the http host](#). However, following the websites transfer to https by default in, the Iranian government’s censorship was effectively disabled on the platform. However, recent testing indicates that censorship is still enabled only on the [Persian website](#), a subdomain of the actual Global Voices website.



Censorship of Global Voices was disabled once the website moved to https. The government however made sure to censor the Farsi website, but not the English website once https was enabled.

## Censorship of social media platforms

- Twitter

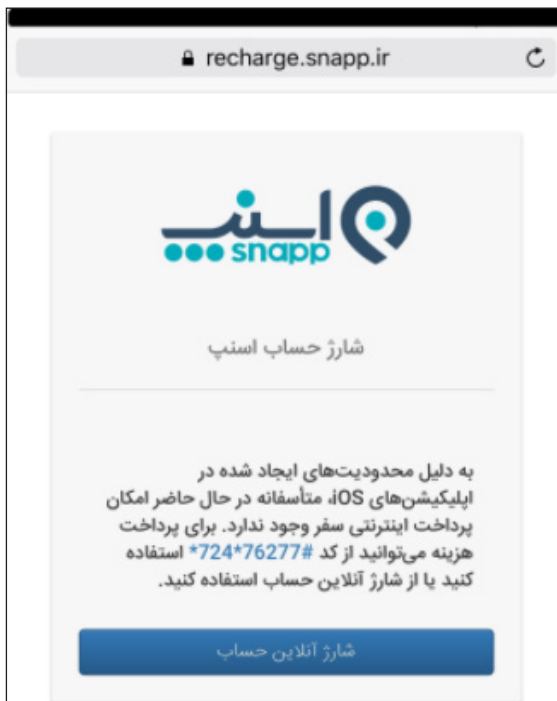
– On 11 January 2017, the deputy speaker and moderate member of parliament, Ali Motahari declared there is no legitimacy in the censorship of Twitter. The censorship of social media such as Twitter continues in Iran, despite officials from all political factions making use of it. Statements in favour of unfiltering Twitter have been numerous since 2013, yet very little has been done in terms of officially lifting the ban. Ironically, many conservative politicians who have supported censorship are using platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Most notably, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the President whose administration was responsible for the increase and institutionalisation of censorship posted his [first Tweet](#) urging Twitter users to follow on 5 March 2017. On 9 April, the Minister of ICT Vaezi told the press that the government were indeed pushing for the unfiltering of Twitter, however the authority to finalise the decision lies outside of their government, with elements such as the hardline judiciary, and the members of the CCDOC<sup>4</sup>.

– [Reports since November 2016](#) have led many to believe this slow, quiet, and limited unfiltering of Twitter has led to an increase in Twitter users from inside Iran. This is because there are different filtering policies per ISP, previously done at a nationwide (IXP) level. Through a nationwide censorship system, websites such as Facebook or Twitter would be blocked through IP-based filtering on a national scale. For example, all packets entering Iran (through all national exchange points) containing the [Facebook.com](#) or [Twitter.com](#) IP address in their destination would be dropped. Since these reports, it's clear this decision is relegated to particular ISP companies. In November 2016, many users were reporting access to Twitter through the Shatel network.

<sup>4</sup> The CCDOC is composed of 13 members including the Attorney General (head of the Judiciary, and consequently the head of the Committee), Minister of Intelligence and National Security, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Minister of Justice, Minister of Information and Communications Technology, Minister of Education, Minister of Research and Science, the Chief of Police, an expert on ICT chosen by Parliament, a member of Parliament's legal committee (as chosen by this committee and approved by parliament), the head of the Islamic Development Organization, the head of the IRIB, and a representative of the council of Islamic Revolution



- Server locations
  - The filtering committee (CCDOC) is close to the deadline it set in May 2016 for May 2017, which requires all social media platforms to [move their servers inside Iran or face censorship](#). The deadline is an effort by the Iranian government to have access to the online data of Iranian users. It is unclear whether the Iranian government will follow through with the deadline.
- “Immoral” content
  - On 28 February 2017, the Minister of ICT, Mahmoud Vaezi, stated that he is working with the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC) to penalize specific users who post “immoral” content on online websites or platforms, instead of censoring or penalizing the platforms, or administrators. What methods the government will use to keep track of offenses is unknown, and whether this



The message users of Iran's version of Snapp get when they want to do payments on the iOS app. Apple has removed the feature because of financial sanctions on Iran.

will mean the uncensoring of Twitter or Facebook is also unclear, however it echoes similar efforts at “intelligent filtering” that aimed to filter individual pages instead of entire platforms. This was most notably a [failure in the case of Instagram](#), as the programme of intelligent filtering was dismantled once Instagram launched encryption on its mobile application. While these efforts can be seen as the administration seeking to lessen the toll of censorship by finding means for targeted censorship, there have nonetheless been no efforts to seek the wholesale removal of filters.

- Restrictions on mobile applications
  - There is a continued [push by diaspora organisations](#) for technology companies to provide their services to Iranians. However, US based companies avoid financial transactions to Iranians and Iranian start-ups because of the need to comply with the Office of Foreign Assets Controls (OFAC) in the U.S. Treasury, which continues to place sanctions on Iranian Transactions (Iranian Transactions Sanctions Regulations (31CFR Part 560). These regulations restrict the Central Bank of Iran and other Iranian banks' transactions to U.S. entities, either blocking or penalising them. This creates added strains on access to information and resources, especially for Iranian industries and consumers (so far, major technology startups such as the Iranian e-Bay Digikala and the Iranian Uber Snapp, have been denied financial services over iOS applications, because of Apple's compliance with sanctions regulations).

# B. Arrests, Imprisonment, Exile, Intimidation and Surveillance

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While censorship is a direct strategy to curtail the free flow of information, arrests, intimidations and the fear of looming surveillance works to stifle freedom of expression more than any filter. This past year started with the arrests and physical take overs of the social media pages of models and members of the fashion industry, and progressed recently into various reformist Telegram channels being seized and their administrators arrested.

## Rouhani's Policies and Surveillance

There has been a very thin line between innovation and control in this administration's shaping of Internet policy, as improvements of internet development come with a heavy price in handing over data to the government. This is seen in the many of the promises of the incoming President to further develop Iran's ICT industry, increase Internet speeds, and boost entrepreneurship, especially in the startup realm. This has had a two-pronged outcome. Firstly, boosting local ICT development has helped with one of the mandates of the [National Internet Project](#), which is to localize all Internet services and place servers inside the country, thereby promoting local industry away while tightening controls away from foreign competition. While this does promote local development, it also works to localize the storage of the data of users within the country, thus allowing that data to fall within the purview of Iran's local laws, potentially allowing for government surveillance. Notable cases of the government's use of user data for repression include the arrests of Isa Saharkhiz, [using information from his text messages through Nokia-Siemens technology](#) for cell phone monitoring, as well as the arrest of Iranian-American Nostrallah Khosravi-Roodsari who was arrested based on [Iran's mass surveillance of SMS data](#).

## Surveillance and Intimidation

Within the past year there has been two strategies that the various branches of the Iranian government have employed to control the online information and communication space. First are direct policies and regulations that have aimed to tighten controls; the second strategy are what ARTICLE 19 believe are suspected government efforts to hack and intimidate the online activities of users online.

- New policies to regulate Telegram and enable surveillance have emerged in the last few months. The government now requires all [public channels with over 5,000 followers to register](#) with the Cyber Police. This government rhetoric over the dangers of the free flow of information without government interference is [based around combating "fake news."](#) In January it was made clear that by registering with Samandehi.ir, channel administrators must add an automated government bot as co-administrators. The bot is suspected to enable wide-ranging surveillance abilities by allowing access to databases of specific users whose online activity can be further [monitored](#).
- The second government strategy is to hack or target users online, in particular to dissuade or frighten Iranians from certain online activities or expressions. The technical research of the [Iran Threats](#) project have detailed sophisticated strategies and technologies to attack users, such as Malware to target journalists, and various methods of hijacking Telegram accounts. From January to February a number of journalists, members of Iranian civil society and activists in the diaspora were on the receiving end of Iranian government phishing attacks, with a mass notice from the Google email service Gmail to a number of these individuals that their emails were the target of "nation-state" attackers. Undoubtedly, these efforts that ARTICLE 19 has [previously linked](#) to the Iran Cyber Army work to intimidate activists and journalists voicing opinions critical of the Iranian state.

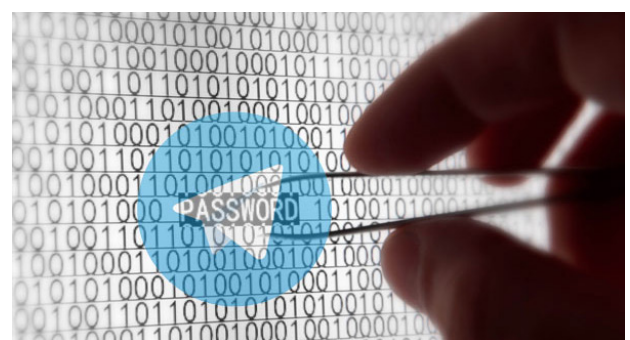


Image of someone trying to extract passwords with a Telegram logo: Telegram vulnerabilities have been known to be manipulated by the Iran Cyber Army.

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## Arrests, Imprisonment, Exile

- The past three months have seen numerous arrests of citizen journalists, bloggers and popular social media users, and worsening conditions for those detained. The arrests have a chilling effect on Iranian Internet users' online free expression, especially in the lead up to the 2017 Presidential elections.
- Sina Dehghan was sentenced to death by Iran's Supreme Court in January, for posts he published publicly on LINE instant messenger at the age of 19, "insulting Islam". Now 21 and on death row, the campaign to overturn his death sentence is ongoing. This case sets a precedent for lethal consequences for Iranians who overstep the authorities' red lines of "immoral" content online, further stifling freedom of expression online. It also highlights the deceitful dealings of the judiciary, who promised he would be pardoned if he signed a confession and showed remorse. His family were also told to keep quiet to increase the chances of his pardon, to no avail.
- On 12 March 2017, [Iran's Revolutionary Guards arrested 12 administrators](#) of channels supporting the reformist political faction and the moderate President Hassan Rouhani. The Telegram channels affected by the crackdown include Eslahtalaban News, Eslahaat News, Majmeye Eslahtalaban and Haamiyan Dolat. Telegram was able to restore the archives of the accounts, but no new posts have been added to the channels since the arrests. Two individuals have so far been identified as the arrested administrators: Saeed Naghdy and Ali Ahmadian, both associated with reformist media and the administration of reformist channels. Ahmadian is believed to have run the Eslahaat News channel. Four reformist members of Parliament demanded an explanation for the arrests from Rouhani in an [open letter](#) on 17 March. During the first cabinet meeting after the Iranian New Year on 21 March 2017, Rouhani publicly demanded his Minister of Interior [to explain](#) the "suspicious arrests of media activists on the eve of the elections" and asked him to prevent further security violations. On 5 April 2017, Rouhani's Minister of Intelligence, Mahmoud Alavi [announced](#) that the government of Hassan Rouhani was against these arrests. On the same day, Iran's Attorney-General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri announced that some of the arrested Telegram administrators would be released shortly, however the arrests and seizures of the channels were legitimate, and were done in the interest of national security.
- On 12 April 2017, the deputy chief of the Judiciary continued to support the legitimacy of the arrests, citing the threats to 'national security.'
- This highlights a significant disconnect over the values and promises of the Rouhani administration to uphold the rights of freedom of expression in a country where the judiciary and the revolutionary guards operate outside of their authority.
- [Soheil Babadi](#) was placed into exile in Hormozgan after a five-year prison sentence for posting jokes about religion on Facebook this past February. His charges included "insulting the sacred," "insulting the Supreme Leader" and "insulting the President [Ahmadinejad]." These charges are identified under Article 500, 514, and 609 of the Islamic Penal Code (IPC)
- [Soheil Arabi](#), arrested in 2013, and originally sentenced to death (a sentence overturned in 2015) for Facebook posts that "insulted the prophet." His legal team's requests to get medical attention for Arabi have been ignored since February, as he suffers from seizures. He is charged under Article 513 of the IPC.

# Conclusion

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While the Rouhani administration claims it has made great strides towards Internet freedoms, its main achievement has been in prevention, and only on certain platforms. The implementation of blocks on thousands of websites continued throughout this government, including numerous arrests, and efforts to centralize user data into the hands of the government. Various efforts, such as intelligent filtering, targeted censorship and articles promoting an end to Internet filtering in the Charter of Citizen's Rights have proven ineffective and baseless given the real-world events that have continued in Iran to stifle and prevent freedom of expression, violate user privacy, and hinder access to online information. The work of Iran's conservative Judiciary and Revolutionary Guards has continued to strengthen the state's work in intimidation, arrests, surveillance and censorship. As the country enters its 12th Presidential election, real concerns exist for both the country's ability to freely share and distribute information during this important political moment, as well as to exercise freedom of expression online without fear of repression.

A woman shows her inked finger after having voted during the 2013 Presidential elections in Iran

