



For immediate release - 30 April 2010

Iran: Release Journalists Detained as Prisoners of Conscience and Lift Sweeping Restrictions on Freedom of Information

In the lead up to World Press Freedom Day on 3 May, two leading human rights organizations - Amnesty International and ARTICLE 19 - are calling on the Iranian authorities to release the dozens of journalists and bloggers detained as prisoners of conscience for exercising their right to freedom of expression and to lift the sweeping restrictions on freedom of expression and the right to information which have been expanded since the disputed presidential election of June 2009.

The organizations said press freedom gives citizens the power to hold the authorities to account – and with no accountability, human rights violations run rife as has been demonstrated over the last year.

Rather than upholding freedom of expression, since last year's disputed presidential election, which brought millions of protesters onto the streets, the Iranian authorities have intensified their long-standing suppression of both the traditional media and the rising number of "citizen journalists" who use new technology to impart information, including on human rights violations. Iran has been described by press freedom organizations as "the biggest jailer of journalists" in the world. The Iranian authorities have sought to muzzle the press and independent reporting to avoid public scrutiny and accountability.

Dozens of journalists – who worked for reformist publications or are perceived to be close to reformists, or who were critical of the authorities, or who reported on human rights violations – have been arbitrarily detained. Statements by officials have accused journalists of being at the heart of alleged attempts to overthrow the government by a "soft revolution", leaving them at risk of prosecution on vaguely-worded charges such as "acting against state security" or "propaganda against the system by giving interviews to foreign media" or "gathering and colluding with the intent of harming state security".

Some – such as Bahman Ahmadi Amou'i, sentenced to a five-year prison term and financial journalist Saeed Laylaz, sentenced to six years - remain in a precarious situation after temporary release on payment of large bail amounts, usually via house deeds which put their – or their relatives' – houses at risk of confiscation. Others have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms after grossly unfair trials and are now serving their sentence. They include well-known journalists Masoud Bastani, and Hengameh

Shahidi, both sentenced to six years. A few have received sentences of flogging after conviction of alleged “insults to officials” such as the President or the Supreme Leader.

Others are yet to be charged or tried, despite having spent months in detention, often in solitary confinement in prisons where they risk torture or other ill-treatment including beatings, threats and even mock execution. They include Isa Saharkhiz, detained since July 2009, Emadeddin Baghi and Badrolsadat Mofidi, the Secretary of the Association of Iranian journalists which was banned by the authorities in August 2009, both held since December 2009. All three are suffering ill-health in detention, amid fears that the medical treatment they are receiving is inadequate.

Shiva Nazar Ahari, a blogger, journalist and human rights activist associated with the Committee of Human Rights Reporters, has the dubious distinction of having been arrested twice since the election. Arrested in June, she was held for three months, but was rearrested in December 2009 when on her way to attend the funeral of Grand Ayatollah Montazeri. The Iranian authorities have claimed that the CHRR is linked to the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran, a banned opposition group, which the CHRR strenuously denies. Shiva Nazar Ahari has not yet been tried and her mother has said that court officials have been unable to locate her daughter’s files so that her lawyer may access them.

Those in detention join other journalists who suffered a similar fate before the 2009 election who are also held as prisoners of conscience. They include Mohammad Sadiq Kaboudvand, a member of Iran’s Kurdish minority and founder of the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan who is serving a 10-year sentence and cleric Mojtaba Lotfi, sentenced to four years’ imprisonment in November 2008 for publishing on his blog a sermon critical of the authorities by the late Grand Ayatollah Montazeri.

Amnesty International and ARTICLE 19 are urging the Iranian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all journalists held in Iran as prisoners of conscience – detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

The two organizations are also urging the authorities to lift restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom to seek, receive and impart information. These restrictions include widespread censorship, the banning of newspapers, the filtering of websites, restrictions on speed of access to the internet, and occasional closure of the internet system altogether. A new Cyber-Crimes Law enacted in July 2009 further infringes freedom of expression, as does an amendment to the Press Law which brings websites under the purview of this very flawed piece of legislation.

The organizations said that “the right to know” is a prerequisite of a free society – one of the promises made by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Background

The theme of this year's Press Freedom Day – to be discussed at a conference on 2 May 2010 in Australia organized by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is “freedom of information, the right to know”. Ahead of this conference, UNESCO is calling on its member states to "reaffirm and implement their international commitments to guarantee and promote freedom of information". Iran has been a member of UNESCO since 1948.

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.
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