



## Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group

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# Iran 2011-2013: the Situation for People Opposed to the Regime

*Background Paper for Blue Mountains Refugee Support  
by Gillian Appleton, February 2013*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the Iranian government's violent crackdown on protest and dissent in Iran following the street protests of 2009. Since then the regime has increasingly used excessive force and illegal procedures, ranging from arbitrary arrest and torture to public executions, to intimidate the population and minimise opposition, and has stifled freedom of expression. Persecution extends to ordinary Iranians and their associates, as well as to higher profile people such as known dissidents and human rights lawyers.

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## DEVELOPMENTS SINCE THE ASHURA DAY PROTESTS 27 DECEMBER 2009

The wave of protests in Iran began after the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009, an election widely perceived as rigged. The government's violent response saw hundreds arrested and left numerous dead - more than 100 according to western sources, possibly many more according to sources on the ground, but certainly far more than the government's claim of 36.

Sporadic protests continued until December 2009 and culminated in the Ashura Day protests on 27 December, so named because they took place at the time of this important Shiite religious festival, which had been traditionally associated with peaceful rallies and government tolerance of any associated protests.

The protests were called by the Green Movement, led by Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi. Rahim Jahanbegloo, a distinguished Canada-based Iranian philosopher and former political detainee, described this movement as 'a predominantly young, nonviolent and civil movement for change within Iranian society' and 'a pivotal moment in modern Iranian history'. (Eurozine, 05/09/2012). The Green Movement widened the divide between the Iranian state and civil society, and the regime, 'struggling with how to handle an overwhelmingly young population that is becoming less religious and more modern and progressive', chose to respond with force rather than engage constructively with the protestors.

Since then, repression of any form of political protest in Iran has increased significantly, partly as a response to growing unrest in other countries of the region - the 'Arab Spring' which began in Tunisia in December 2010. Amnesty International, in a report '*We are ordered to crush you*', *Expanding repression of dissent in Iran* (February 2012), summed this up as follows:

*Since the 2009 crackdown, the authorities have steadily cranked up repression in law and practice, and tightened their grip on the media. They have stopped public protests using articles of Iran's Penal Code that make demonstrations, public debate and the formation of groups and associations deemed a threat to 'national security' punishable by long prison sentences or even death. Lawyers have been jailed along with their clients. Foreign satellite television channels have been jammed. Newspapers have been banned. Dissidents and critics who write in newspapers or on websites, or speak to the media, risk being charged with offences such as "spreading propaganda against the system", "insulting officials", "spreading lies with intent to harm state security" or occasionally the "offences" of "corruption on earth" or 'enmity against God' which can carry the death penalty.*

Protest was muted during 2010, but In February 2011 a new wave of protests, no doubt exacerbated by Iran's increasingly dire economic situation and the plummeting value of its currency - began in several cities, and was brutally put down. Opposition/Green Movement leaders Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi were placed under house arrest and calls were made for their execution. Amnesty reported on these protests:

*On 14 February 2011, thousands of Iranians, encouraged by the mass protests sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East, defied a government ban by demonstrating in Tehran and other cities. The paramilitary Basij militia and other security forces responded by shooting at protesters, firing tear gas at them, and beating them with batons, before arresting many of them. In the wake of the toppling of autocratic governments in Tunisia and Egypt, the Iranian authorities were taking no chances.*

*The demonstrations were called by opposition leaders Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi in solidarity with the people of Tunisia and Egypt and were the first major public displays of opposition since the Iranian authorities viciously crushed vast protests that erupted and continued in the six months following disputed presidential election results in June 2009, culminating in demonstrations on the religious festival of Ashura in December 2009.*

*Subsequent demonstrations in 2011 in various Iranian cities were forcibly dispersed and further measures taken to stifle opposition and silence critics. One year later, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi remain under house arrest, and hundreds of people are believed to be still in jail simply for daring to express their views. Meanwhile, the security forces, particularly the Basij militia, continue to operate with virtual impunity for their crimes.*

In its Annual Report 2012 (published 24 May 2012), Amnesty stated that the regime *demonstrated its willingness to **arrest virtually anyone identified as challenging President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** (our emphasis). The government closely control the media, newspapers are banned and websites and foreign satellite television channels blocked. Protests against government policies are violently dispersed and government critics are arbitrarily arrested and detained yet people continue to defend their right to freedom of expression.* (p.13)

The foreign media were threatened with expulsion if they reported on the 2011 protests. The UN, the USA and all major Western countries condemned Iran's response to the protests.

In April 2011 Iran's parliament passed several articles of a draft bill which, according to Human Rights Watch in its 2012 World Report,

*severely limits the independence civil society organisations, and creates a Supreme Committee Supervising NGO Activities chaired by ministry officials and members of the security forces. Authorities had already banned or severely restricted the independence of several professional organisations not covered by the draft bill, including the Journalists' Association and the Bar Association. Dozens of activists affiliated with banned opposition political parties or student groups are currently serving time in prison.*

Freedom House reported that '[t]he post-election confrontations created a new political landscape, in which basic freedoms deteriorated and political affairs were further militarized'.

*.....In response to worsening conditions in the country, the UN Human Rights Council in March 2011 established the mandate for a special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran. Ahmed Shaheed, a former Maldivian foreign minister, was entrusted with the post, but the Iranian government refused to allow him into the country. (None of the United Nations' thematic special rapporteurs have been able to visit Iran since 2005.)*

In his report, the Rapporteur described how he went about gathering information.

*Despite not being allowed to visit the country, the Special Rapporteur followed 124 cases between February and June 2012, in relation to which he conducted 99 interviews with individuals located inside and outside the country. Of those interviews, 75 can be attributed to first-hand accounts, and 24 were conducted with reliable sources or eyewitnesses of human rights violations.* (p.4)

The UN Secretary-General issued a report on Iran on 22 August 2012. This summary is from the introduction to that report:

*Since the last report of the Secretary-General to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/19/82), human rights violations continued, targeting in particular journalists, human rights defenders and women's rights activists. Concerns about torture, amputations, flogging, the increasingly frequent application of the death penalty (including in public and for political prisoners), arbitrary detention and unfair trials, continue to be raised by United Nations human rights mechanisms. Freedom of expression and assembly remained curtailed, and opposition leaders have remained confined under house arrest since February 2011. Discrimination against minority groups persisted, in some cases amounting to persecution.*

The regime claimed that the Green Movement had tapered off, but the 2011 protests suggested otherwise. Reports identified hundreds of injuries and some deaths at the protests at the hands of the state, and arrest and imprisonment of hundreds of protestors. In 2012, sporadic protests continued, latterly in support of the Syrian uprising, but the government's savage reaction to any form of protest seemed to have had an effect. In August 2012 there were opposition calls for civil disobedience during the five-day conference of the Non-Aligned Movement of Nations in Teheran but the regime warned protestors against disrupting the conference, and no reports of significant protests could be found.

## EXECUTIONS

From 2010 onwards the Iranian regime has significantly stepped up its efforts to crush opposition with a campaign of violent treatment of protestors ranging from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment to execution.

*The Guardian* newspaper (7 July 2011) reported

*Factional infighting, paranoia, economic ineptitude and deepening confrontation with the west have characterised Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's leadership of Iran. But a second-term presidency launched amid bloodily suppressed protests in 2009 now appears to be assuming an even more vicious character as reports accumulate of ongoing, secret mass executions and new waves of political repression.*

*Hard facts are hard to come by in a country where independent reporting is all but a fond memory. But Iranian human rights groups, international watchdogs and country experts all suggest the regime is embarked on what in effect is a judicial killing spree. Ostensibly, it is cracking down on drug trafficking and other criminal activity. In truth, campaigners say, Tehran is pursuing a campaign of public intimidation and covert killing to subdue political opposition and quell turbulence caused by the Arab spring revolts.*

*According to Amnesty International Iran has admitted executing 190 people between January and the end of June this year [i.e. 2011]; an additional 130 reported executions have gone unacknowledged. These figures put Iran on course for a record year for capital punishment. In 2010, 252 people were executed, according to official figures, with 300 more also believed to have been killed.*

The *Guardian* report continued:

*The number of public hangings is also on the increase. Since the start of 2011, up to 13 men have been executed in public, eight of them since 16 April, an Amnesty report this year stated. Iran meanwhile reportedly defied international law by executing two juvenile offenders, in Bandar Abbas on 20 April. Overall, Iran's execution "average" is running at almost two people per day in 2011, making the regime the world's number two executioner after China.*

*Public executions are typically carried out by hanging the victim from a tall industrial crane and hoisting him high into the air.*

The newspaper quoted Mark Wallace, a former US ambassador and president of the United Against Nuclear Iran action group:

*"The international community needs to call for an end to this kind of barbarism and highlight more broadly the deteriorating human rights situation," he wrote in the Los Angeles Times. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jul/06/opinion/la-oe-wallace-cranes-iran-20110706>)*

*Wallace said political factors were at work. "It is no coincidence that Iran's increased staging of public executions came at the same time protest movements were gaining steam through the Middle East. What better way to keep Iranians from having 'dangerous ideas' like those of their neighbours? And it should come as little surprise that Iran is now aiding other governments in*

*the region, notably Syria, in their efforts to suppress domestic uprisings." This latter claim was recently corroborated by the US treasury department.*

The US Department of State in its 2011 Country Report: Iran quoted allegations by exiles and human rights monitors that 'many persons supposedly executed for criminal offences such as narcotics trafficking *were actually political dissidents*' (our emphasis).

The International Federation for Human Rights ([www.fidh.org](http://www.fidh.org)) and the Iranian League for Defence of Human Rights in a joint press release on 6 Jan 2011 stated:

*Thousands of people are believed to be on death row in Iran. A parliamentary delegation from Afghanistan visiting Iran in February 2010 reported that 3,000 Afghan nationals were on death row in Iranian prisons. A report in August 2010 indicated that the head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, had written a letter to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei asking for his permission to implement 1,120 death sentences. The Iranian authorities remained conspicuously silent on the report.*

The National Council of Resistance of Iran ([www.ncr-iran.org/en/human-rights](http://www.ncr-iran.org/en/human-rights)), a broad coalition of democratic Iranian organizations, groups, and individuals, claimed 700 people executed in 2012 up to the end of November, 354 officially announced and 346 secretly executed. It is notable that nearly half of those executed were between 20 and 30 years of age. The NCRI noted that there had been 50 UN General Assembly resolutions, the latest in December 2012, condemning Iran for human rights abuses.

Amnesty International wrote in its Annual Report 2012 (p.70) that the Iranian government, as a result of its extensive use of the death penalty, 'became increasingly isolated internationally and tolerated no dissent at home'. Globally, Amnesty noted, only China carried out more executions.

## **ARBITRARY ARREST, IMPRISONMENT AND TORTURE**

Freedom House in **Freedom in the World 2012** wrote of Iran's increased use of arbitrary arrest and detention, even though it is prohibited by the Iranian constitution.

*[F]amily members of detainees are often not notified for days or weeks. Suspected dissidents are frequently held in unofficial, illegal detention centres. Prison conditions in general are notoriously poor, and there are regular allegations of abuse, rape, torture, and death in custody. In a letter to Iranian authorities published in May 2011, 26 prominent political prisoners reported ill-treatment, prolonged solitary confinement, torture, and systemic due process violations during their interrogation and detention.*

Often those in custody for political reasons are not charged, and those who are, are charged with catch-all crimes such as espionage, threatening national security and contact with foreign entities. In May 2012 the US Department of State **Country Report on Human Rights**

**Practices:** Iran noted that arbitrary arrest 'was a common practice and was used by authorities to spread fear and deter activities deemed against the regime'.

*Often plainclothes officers arrived unannounced at homes or offices and conducted raids without warrants or other assurances of due process, confiscating private documents, passports, computers, electronic media, and other personal items and arresting individuals. Once in detention centers, individuals languished for extended periods without charges or trials and in many circumstances were delayed in communicating their whereabouts to their families. Denial of legal access during this time was common, as was the imposition of travel bans if and when the individuals were released. (p.16)*

*Statistics regarding the number of citizens imprisoned for their political beliefs were not available, but human rights activists estimated the number in the hundreds, perhaps as high as 900. According to the ICHRI, an estimated 500 persons were arbitrarily detained for peaceful activities or the exercise of free expression, and another 500 prisoners of conscience had been*

*sentenced to lengthy prison terms following unfair trials. On June 28, the ICHRI reported there were more than 200 political prisoners inside Ward 350 of Evin Prison, at least 120 of whom were imprisoned in the aftermath of the 2009 elections or as Green Movement supporters (p.21).*

The Special Rapporteur stated that families and friends of those arrested and detained could themselves be arrested and interrogated, or

*threatened, insulted and tortured for the purpose of placing pressure on detainees, or to discourage them from public discussions about the situation of their loved ones. (p.10)*

*A large number of interviews conducted for this report recounted violations of international human rights law and of the aforementioned national provisions. Of the 99 individuals interviewed, three quarters reported that their property was searched and/or that they were arrested without being presented with warrants. Approximately 73 per cent of those interviewed alleged that they were blindfolded during interrogations; 58 per cent reported the use of prolonged solitary confinement; 62 per cent reported intimidation of family members for the purpose of placing pressure on the target of interrogations; 78 per cent stated that they were beaten during interrogations; and 8 per cent reported being hung from ceilings for the purpose of soliciting confessions. Moreover, 64 per cent of those interviewed alleged that they were denied adequate access to a lawyer after the investigative phase of their case, and another 82 per cent stated that they believed that the judge had already made up his mind about their case, and that he was being directed by the Prosecutor's Office. (p.14)*

## **LACK OF DUE PROCESS AND FAIR TRIAL**

For those under arrest, their chances of finding a lawyer to defend them became increasingly bleak as a result of the regime's policy of targeting human rights lawyers. Human Rights Watch in its report **Why They Left**: stories of Iranian Activists in Exile (December 2012) stated:

*An indication of the lengths to which the government has gone to stifle civil society and dissent is its targeting of lawyers who have chosen to defend activists and dissidents arrested and charged by the authorities. In recent years, the pressure on rights lawyers defending activists has been unprecedented. Several prominent lawyers, like Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi, traveled to European countries and stayed there after it became clear they could not go back without facing harassment, arrest or imprisonment on politically motivated charges.*

Amnesty International's Annual Report 2012 stated:

*Security officials continued to arrest and detain government critics and opponents arbitrarily, often holding them incommunicado and without access to their families, lawyers or medical care for long periods. Many were tortured or ill-treated. Scores were sentenced to prison terms after unfair trials, adding to the hundreds imprisoned after unfair trials in previous years.*

From the International Federation for Human Rights and the Iranian League for Defence of Human Rights joint press release (6 Jan 2011):

*The Iranian judicial system consistently and systematically denies the defendants the right to due process and fair trials as required by international standards. The prisoners are sentenced after frequently coerced confessions and grossly unfair and show trials. The Islamic Penal Code in force in Iran stipulates that "any person resorting to arms to cause terror, fear or to breach public security and freedom will be considered to be a mohareb [fighter against God] and corrupt on earth." Furthermore, it classifies armed robbers and highway bandits to be moharebs. Judges have the power to choose from four punishments for moharebeh: execution, crucifixion for three days (not necessarily entailing death), amputation of the right hand first and then of the left foot, and internal banishment. They often opt for the death penalty, in particular in political cases.*

## WHO IS TARGETED?

In the report **Why They Left**, Human Rights Watch noted that 'Along with members of the political opposition, human rights activists, journalists and bloggers, and rights lawyers bore the brunt of [the government's] attacks'. Indeed, media accounts of abuse of protestors and dissidents arrested during 2011-12 tend to focus on high profile, known dissidents.

While this is understandable in light of severe restrictions on the media, and the difficulties involved in making contact with 'ordinary' Iranians and their families, it is a mistake to assume that those who were subjected to the kinds of treatment outlined above are all high profile, well-known people.

Highlighting this, Amnesty in the same report pointed out:

***Although most of the hundreds of thousands who took to the streets to protest the June 2009 presidential election result had not been political or civil society activists, they nonetheless found themselves targets of security and intelligence forces. After public protests came to an end, the authorities continued their relentless assault on all forms of dissent, targeting civil society groups and activists who had little if any connection to the protests themselves but whom they deemed to be supporters of a "velvet revolution" working to undermine the foundations of the Islamic Republic (our emphases).***

*Security forces arrested and detained scores of activists, including those advocating on behalf of ethnic minorities, women, and students, and subjected many to trials that did not meet international fair trial standards. Dozens remain in prison on charges of speech crimes such as "acting against the national security," "propaganda against the state," or "membership in illegal groups or organizations."*

In May 2012 Human Rights Watch drew attention to the 'dozens of university students currently behind bars solely for peacefully expressing political opinions'.

Human Rights Watch concluded: 'The post-2009 crackdown has had a profound impact on civil society in Iran. No truly independent rights organizations can openly operate in the country in the current political climate. Many of the most prominent human rights defenders and journalists are in prison'. ( <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/05/05/iran-free-students-jailed-speaking-out>)

## FAILED ASYLUM SEEKERS

In its 2012 report **Why They Left**, Amnesty drew attention to the number of civil society activists seeking refuge abroad since 2009, with 'a noticeable increase in the number of civil society activists who have applied for asylum and resettlement to third countries'.

*According to statistics compiled by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from 44 industrialized countries that conduct individual asylum procedures, there were 11,537 new asylum applications from Iranians to these 44 countries in 2009; 15,185 in 2010; and 18,128 in 2011. The largest number of new asylum applications was lodged in neighbouring Turkey, which saw a 72 per cent increase in the number of Iranian asylum seekers between 2009 and 2011.*

Turkey offered only temporary asylum. The surge in Iranian refugees was reflected in Australia, where

*'Iranians have overtaken Afghans to become the largest group of asylum seekers arriving by boat to Australia....*

*'Iranian boat arrivals leapt eightfold, from 197 in 2009-10, to 1549 [in 2010-11]. At the same time, visa success rates have plummeted, from 100 per cent in 2008, to 27 per cent last year'. ('Surge in number of Iranian boat arrivals', **The Age**, 3 Oct 2011)*

In the context of strict government control of the media, limited information is available about the treatment of asylum seekers returning to the country, whether forcibly or voluntarily. In the light of all the foregoing evidence, a returning individual who had chosen to leave the country for any reason – ranging from a desire to improve their economic circumstances, to fear of arrest for activities deemed to be opposed to the regime - would be likely to be subject to interrogation, at the least, and potentially to harassment, arbitrary arrest and even more extreme forms of abuse.

Amnesty International in **Why They Left** stated:

*Failed asylum seekers ... risk arrest if they return to Iran, particularly if forcibly returned, where their asylum application is known to the authorities. A report issued by a Swiss refugee agency quotes an unnamed judge as saying: "Asylum seekers are interrogated on return, whether or not they have been political activists in Iran or abroad. If they have tried to conduct propaganda against Iran, then they are culpable and are detained until a judge decides the sentence. In recent years many people have tried to destroy the reputation of Iran and this must be stopped. Such people help the opposition groups and their culpability is plain. Returnees will therefore be held for a few days until it is clear to the police, that they have not been involved in political activity. If the police can prove that the person was not active and has not done or said anything that could damage the reputation of the Islamic Republic, then they are released. If the person was either politically active in Iran before leaving, or has been active abroad, they must be tried and receive a punishment appropriate to their activities.*

On January 15, 2013, <http://iranian-refugees.org> reported that some UNHCR-registered refugees whom Iranian Refugee Action Network tried to help when they escaped persecution by the Iran were arrested after they fled to Iraq.

*[U]nfortunately, despite intervention, [they] were handed back to the regime when the UNHCR were unable to act in time to stop this. They have now been sentenced to death, despite being completely innocent political prisoners – one is a chemistry teacher, one a poet and the group includes bloggers who tried to let the world know what is happening in Iran.*

The following excerpts are from the UK Border Agency, **Country of Origin Report – Iran**, 16/01/2013.

*32.25 On 6 May 2011, Amnesty International (AI) reported that 'Nineteen-year-old student activist Arash Fakhravar was reportedly arrested on arrival in Tehran after returning from France where he was an asylum-seeker. The circumstances of his departure from France are unclear. His current whereabouts are unknown, and he may have been subjected to enforced disappearance.'*

*The same source also reported that, 'In February 2011, Rahim Rostami, a 19-year-old member of Iran's Kurdish minority who had arrived in Norway as an unaccompanied minor, and whose asylum claim had been rejected by the Norwegian authorities, was forcibly returned by Norway to Iran where he was reportedly arrested. He is believed to still be detained, with bail reportedly having been denied.'*

*This report followed an article written by a former Supreme Court judge which appeared in Iran newspaper, a daily paper published by the Iranian government, on 17 February 2011. Referring to existing laws that enable Iran's judiciary to bring charges against Iranians for alleged violations of Iranian law committed while outside Iran, the article stated that failed asylum-seekers could be prosecuted for making up accounts of alleged persecution. On 26 April 2011, Kayhan newspaper, which is controlled by the Office of the Supreme Leader, also reported that Iranians are seeking asylum "on the pretext of supporting the opposition".*

Despite numerous attempts by Australia, the Iranian government has made it clear that it will

not accept the involuntary return of failed asylum-seekers (Minister Chris Bowen, reported in The Australian, 12 Jan 2012, 'Iranian Asylum Seekers Caught Between Two Worlds').

### **ELECTIONS 2013**

The next presidential election was announced late last year to take place on 14 June 2013. Some reformist candidates – but not Mir Hossein Mousavi, who has declined – are likely to stand. Ahmadinejad, whose term ends, will work to install one of his allies. However, blame for Iran's dire economic situation is widely laid at his door, making it harder to hijack the electoral process as in 2009.

A commentator concluded:

*Despite the [post 2009] crackdown, presidential elections still represent the moments when reformist candidates and movements have found the greatest success since the clergy took power in 1979. As the highest directly elected official and the second most powerful leader in the clerical regime after the Supreme Leader, the president still represents an opportunity for advancement in Iran's long, but steady, democratization process.* (Henry Carey, **Iranian Presidential Election: a Path to Reform**, World Policy, 18 October 2012).

### **CONCLUSION**

Opposition to the Ahmadinejad regime in Iran has been effectively crushed by the regime's campaign of terror against dissidents and anyone perceived as opposed to it, following the street protests of 2009 and 2011. While media attention has focused on higher profile people targeted by the government with arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, torture and even execution, ordinary Iranians perceived to have opposed the regime, and their friends and families, have been subjected to similar treatment. Court processes are corrupted and human rights lawyers have been silenced.

Without a process of reform, this situation appears unlikely to change significantly in the near future. The presidential elections scheduled for June this year will be a critical test of the regime's grip on power, and the extent to which it has managed to crush dissent.



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