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UN human rights chief condemns Iran's execution of woman convicted as teenager

Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty (06.10.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2RB2jtp> - The UN human rights chief is condemning Iran's execution of a woman convicted of murdering her husband five years ago when she was 17 years old.

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said on October 5 that Zeinab Sekaanvand Lokran had insisted she was coerced into confessing to the 2012 murder and she was beaten by police after her arrest.

Moreover, it said, her claims of being a victim of domestic violence were not adequately considered during her trial, and she was not allowed access to a lawyer until her final trial session, when she recanted the confession that she made under duress.

Sekaanvand was executed on October 2 after her family was given only one day's notice to pay a last visit and "despite a number of appeals from UN Special Rapporteurs and the UN Secretary-General," the UN said.

"The sheer injustice in the case of Zeinab Sekaanvand Lokran is deeply distressing," Bachelet said. "The serious question marks over her conviction appear not to have been adequately addressed before she was executed. The bottom line is that she was a juvenile at the time the offense was committed and international law clearly prohibits the execution of juvenile offenders."

Bachelet called on Iran's government to honor two international treaties it signed requiring nations to end use of the death penalty against juvenile offenders.

Dozens of other convicted juvenile offenders reportedly remain on death row in Iran, which has already executed at least five juvenile offenders so far this year. The UN rights office opposes the death penalty in all cases.

Leading Iranian human rights defender sentenced to 16 years in prison

By Golnaz Esfandiari

RFL/RE (19.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1YUL6rL> - A leading Iranian human rights activist has been sentenced to a total of 16 years in prison after being convicted of charges that include membership in a campaign for the abolition of the death penalty.

The heavy sentence against Narges Mohammadi, the deputy head of the Defenders of Human Rights Center (DHRC) co-founded by Iranian Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi, was issued on top of a six-year-prison sentence she is already serving.

"It's revenge [against] a human rights defender to keep her in prison and intimidate other rights activists," Mohammadi's husband, Taghi Rahmani, told RFE/RL's Radio Farda.

Rahmani, who is based in Paris with their two children, said that 10 years of the 16-year prison sentence was issued for "establishing" the outlawed campaign called Step By Step To Stop The Death Penalty in Iran.

But he said Mohammadi was merely a member of the campaign, not a founder.

"She's not one of the founding members of the campaign," Rahmani said in a May 19 telephone interview.

"Why is working to decrease the high number of executions in Iran a crime?" Rahmani asked.

He said Mohammadi was sentenced to five years in prison for "meeting and conspiring against the Islamic republic," and one year for "acting against Iran's national security."

Rahmani said the charges stem from Mohammadi's interviews with Persian-language media based outside of Iran and also for a 2014 meeting in Tehran with former EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

Under Iranian laws, a person sentenced to multiple prison sentences will serve only the most severe, which means that in practice Mohammadi has been sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment.

The sentence can be appealed.

The French media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) condemned the sentence as the outcome of "a flawed trial" held on April 20 under the influence of Iran's intelligence ministry and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

"Such a heavy sentence shows the iniquitous character of Iranian justice," the group's secretary-general, Christophe Deloire, said in a May 19 statement.

He added: "President [Hassan] Rohani cannot remain silent in the face of such a judicial outrage even if everyone knows the judicial system takes its orders from the supreme leader."

Amnesty International said the "shocking" prison sentence against Mohammadi was "an all-out attack on human rights defenders in Iran."

"The authorities have made clear their ruthless determination to silence human rights defenders and instill fear in would-be critics of their policies," Philip Luther, director of the Middle East and North Africa program at Amnesty International, said in a statement.

Luther said it is shameful for the Iranian authorities to treat a prominent human rights defender as a criminal.

"It exposes their lip service to human rights as utterly meaningless and shows their deep disdain for the basic principles of justice," he said.

Mohammadi, who has been honored by RSF as an information hero for her defense of human rights, was arrested in May 2015.

She had been detained before and sentenced to prison over her human rights activities on several other occasions.

Iranian musicians possibly facing execution for playing metal

Onehallyu (16.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1OhFMae> - Nikan Siyanor Khosravi and Khosravi Arash Chemical Ilkhani, of the Iranian band, Confess, have both been arrested by the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution and are facing charges of blasphemy, advertising against the system, running an illegal and underground band and record label promoting music considered to be Satanic, writing anti-religious lyrics and granting interviews to forbidden foreign radio stations. These serious charges resulted in the two band members, aged 23 and 21 sitting in solitary [confinement] since last November until finally making bail on February 5th, paying the equivalent of \$30,000 US.

The musicians are lawyering up and could face a minimum of six months to six years in prison, and worse, if they are found guilty of the blasphemy charge, they could be executed! Unfortunately, it might very well be possible that they could be charged with blasphemy, considering the content of some of their songs such as, I Am Your God.

Call for Prime Minister Trudeau to secure release of imprisoned Iranian-Canadian

Iranhumanrights.org (01.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1Kni01D> - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau should extend all efforts to obtain the release of Saeed Malekpour, a Canadian resident and web developer imprisoned in Iran since 2008 on false charges, three prominent human rights campaigners wrote in a letter to the Prime Minister on January 29, 2016.

The letter was signed by Paul Haggis, founder of Artists for Peace and Justice and an Oscar-winning Canadian film writer and director; Nazanin Boniadi, actor and board member of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, and Hadi Ghaemi, executive director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

The letter stated, "In light of the lack of any evidence of his wrongdoing, the egregious denial of due process during his trial, and Tehran's recent demonstrated willingness to release dual nationals imprisoned in Iran in order to hasten its international re-integration, we urge you to make any and all efforts to obtain the freedom of Saeed Malekpour."

Malekpour, now 39, was arrested in Tehran in 2008 during a visit to Iran to see his dying father. He was charged with "insulting the sacred" for allegedly creating a pornographic website, because he had developed software that was used, without his knowledge, to post photos.

He made a televised "confession" in 2009 after being severely beaten, held in solitary confinement, and threatened with harm to his family. International human rights groups have documented Iran's practice of forcing political prisoners to make televised "confessions." Malekpour was sentenced to death in 2010, later reduced to life in prison. The letter noted that Malekpour had "suffered severe injuries due to beatings, and serious illnesses while in prison, including kidney problems and rheumatism, none of which have been properly treated," and implored the Prime Minister to "take action to release this young man who has suffered grievously after committing no crime."

Arrests gather pace in Iran after Khamenei gives green light for crackdown

Fear of post-nuclear deal rapprochement with West drives intensified repression

IranHumanRights.org (09.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1QfspO8> - Several journalists were arrested in Iran over the past week in an intensifying campaign of repression that is based on the belief, spearheaded by Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, that the US intends to use any post-nuclear deal opening in Iran to "infiltrate" and undermine the Islamic Republic.

The journalists, arrested by Iran's Revolutionary Guards Intelligence Organization, include Isa Saharkhiz, Ehsan Mazandarani, Afarin Chitsaz, and Saman Safarzaei, with a probable fifth whose identity is unconfirmed. All were critical of hardline policies or close to the Rouhani administration, which pushed for the nuclear negotiations and Iran's re-engagement with the world. The seizures follow the arrests of numerous activists, dual Iranian-American nationals, and cultural figures over the last several months.

The crackdown, which has been building in intensity over the past months, appears to be aimed at squashing any expectations of a broader rapprochement with the US following the nuclear deal. It has been kicked into high gear with vitriolic statements first made by Khamenei regarding a US-led "infiltration plot," and then echoed by Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Members of Parliament demanding the arrest of such "infiltrators" and "spies."

"Hardliners have thrived on isolation and vilification of the US. They are terrified of re-engagement with the West," said Hadi Ghaemi, executive director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. "And Iranian citizens are paying the price for their fear."

During a speech to commanders of the Revolutionary Guards on September 16, 2015, Khamenei urged the Guards' Intelligence Organization to counter a US-led "infiltration plot," stating, "The enemies' attempts to infiltrate are one of the biggest threats...economic and security infiltration is obviously dangerous and can have serious consequences but political and cultural infiltration by the enemy is a much more dangerous issue."

Hardliners seized upon Khamenei's exhortations to launch an accelerated assault on perceived foes. Soon after the leader's remarks, Member of Parliament Bijan Nobaveh Vatan, noted in an interview with Khabar Online that 12 MPs had signed a letter addressed to Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Ali Jannati and Minister of Intelligence Seyed Mahmoud Alavi on September 21, 2015, demanding that the authorities "seriously confront" the infiltration of Iranian (reformist) newspapers and media by "hundreds" of spies from Western intelligence services. "A list of twelve or thirteen of these [spies] has been announced, and this issue is under investigation and the relevant ministers are also informed of the issue," said Nobaveh Vatan.

On November 2, 2015, Mohammad Ali Jaafari, the Commander of the Revolutionary Guards, who reports directly to Khamenei, weighed in as well, warning of a "new sedition which is being led by the US government to infiltrate the country" and asserting that Americans were looking to use the post-deal era "to normalize relations beyond the nuclear issue [and] find ways to infiltrate the country."

The Guards have their own reasons to fear an opening to the West. New business competition from foreign investors will threaten the Revolutionary Guards' dominance in

the economy, and bring a standard of transparency that could create problems for corrupt networks. Indeed, a number of the arrests seemed tailor-made to dissuade foreign investors from setting up shop.

In an unusually direct response that challenged Khamenei's entire premise of "infiltration," President Rouhani said in a cabinet meeting on November 4, 2015, "We mustn't pick one or two people from here and there on excuses, in order to fabricate a case for them, and then aggrandize this case in the country and say this line is the "line of infiltration," or that current is the "current of infiltration." He added, "We must not play with the word 'infiltration.' Playing with words is to the detriment of our country. It is to the detriment of national unity."

But Khamenei made clear his views and apparent intention to clip Rouhani's wings when he stated to Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and high-level Iranian diplomats on November 1, 2015, "The foreign policy of Iran is based on long-term interests, principles and values. It does not change with the coming and going of different administrations [holding] various political outlooks. Administrations only have a role in tactics and executing foreign policy principles."

The crackdown has gathered urgency as the country approaches Parliamentary elections in February 2016. The Rouhani administration has gained political standing amongst the Iranian citizenry from the deal, and hardliners in the Revolutionary Guards, the Parliament, and the Judiciary are using the supreme leader's green light for a crackdown to try to weaken Rouhani and his allies.

The seriousness with which hardliners perceive the threats arising from the nuclear deal cannot be overstated. Officials themselves liken the present situation to the periods of greatest threat to the Islamic Republic.

In the November 2, 2015, comments by Revolutionary Guards Commander Jafaari, he called the [post-nuclear deal] era the "fourth sedition," noting that the Iran-Iraq war was the first (sedition), the 1998 student uprisings the second, and the 2009 post-presidential election protests the third. He added, "If the public begins to believe that now that we have reached an agreement in the nuclear issue, agreements can be reached in other issues, then that is a danger and sedition."

The current arrests and those over the last months are a visible expression of the crackdown, but there has also been an intensifying harassment campaign against journalists out of the public eye. Numerous journalists in Iran have been called, harassed, and threatened by security and intelligence organizations, the Campaign has learned, in a clear pattern of intimidation.

This pattern has a precedent: In January 2012, two months before Iran's previous Parliamentary election, a wave of arrests of Iranian journalists, bloggers, and civil activists took place. The sitting Minister of Intelligence at that time, Heydar Moslehi, claimed on January 8, 2012, one day after several arrests, that individuals who were pursuing US goals had been arrested, and that the arrested "spies" had been in touch with contact points abroad through social media networks.

Those 2012 elections resulted in a hardline Parliament that has blocked most of Rouhani's more moderate initiatives and propelled forward ultraconservative and repressive legislation.

"These arrests are a blatant campaign of intimidation," said Ghaemi. "Rouhani should speak out in defense of his citizens and the international community should forcefully register its utter rejection of such unlawful behavior."

Iran: UN rights experts outraged at the execution of two juvenile offenders

UN (16.10.2015) – <http://bit.ly/1jthnaK> - United Nations human rights experts today expressed their outrage and profound sadness at the execution of Fatemeh Salbehi, a juvenile offender convicted for the death of her husband, whom she had been forced to marry at the age of 16.

Ms. Salbehi was hanged on Tuesday 13 October in breach of international law banning juvenile executions, and despite reported flaws in her trial and appeal process. She is the 11th woman to be executed so far this year in Iran, where at least 700 other people have been executed.

A week earlier, another juvenile offender was executed in secret in Iran: Samad Zahabi. No notice was provided to Mr. Zahabi's family, nor was the required 48 hour notice provided to his lawyer. He was sentenced to death in March 2013 for the killing of a fellow shepherd, when he was only seventeen years old.

"These executions are disturbing examples of surging execution rates and questionable fair trial standards in the Islamic Republic of Iran," said the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed. "The Iranian authorities must comply with its international law obligations and put an end to the execution of juvenile offenders once and for all."

The UN Special Rapporteur on summary executions, Cristof Heyns, stated "Let us be clear – these are unlawful killings committed by the State, the equivalent of murders performed by individuals. These are profound tragedies that demean the value of human life and sully the reputation of the country."

He added that "executing a juvenile offender, especially after a questionable trial, directly contravenes the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Iran is a party. Iran must immediately stop killing children".

"The lack of judicial consideration for Ms. Salbehi's circumstances is emblematic of the struggles victims of domestic abuse face in the judicial system," said the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Dubravka Šimonović. "We cannot ignore the serious consequences of psychological, sexual and physical violence in the home on a woman's physical and psychological health." While highlighting Ms. Salbehi's young age at the times of her marriages and her lack of consent, Ms. Šimonović expressed concern for the high numbers of early and forced marriages in Iran.

The UN human rights experts strongly urged the Iranian Government to immediately establish a moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty.

The Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures' experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

To learn more, log on to:

Human rights in Iran: <http://bit.ly/1FZa29k>

Summary executions: <http://bit.ly/1EIUV8o>

Violence against women: <http://bit.ly/1GCJVJ1>
UN Human Rights, Country Page – Iran: <http://bit.ly/1FZa29k>

Stop FGM Middle East: Iran

By Toyohara

Stop FGM Middle East (06.2015) - <http://www.stopfgmmideast.org/countries/iran/> In the Islamic Republic of Iran female genital mutilation (FGM) is acknowledged as a problem. There have been a number of scientific surveys in the past years and the topic was addressed on conferences. Only recently, several researchers have started looking into the issue in a more systematic way.

Several activists are tackling the issue. It seems that there is some awareness raising, but generally FGM remains a taboo.

About 50% among Sunni minorities

Small-scale surveys indicate a similar cluster to other areas in the Middle East: FGM seems to occur in irregular patterns, with high prevalence in regional and local hotspots. Local studies show that FGM is practiced in the provinces of Kurdistan, Western Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Illam, Lorestan and Hormozghan. No studies have been conducted in other provinces. The existing studies have found prevalence rates between 40 and 85%. In most cases type I is performed but there is also a relevant number of type II mutilations. The researcher Rayehe Mozafarian has collected several studies and conducted interviews herself which she published in 2013 in a book [Tigh o Sonat](#) and in summer 2014 in the study [Child Marriage and FGM in the I.R. Iran](#).

For a comprehensive research published in 2015, Kameel Ahmady and his team have surveyed 3000 women and 1000 men in Iran over the course of six years. The research shows that FGM is practiced by Sunni minorities in West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah and Hormozgan. Repeated surveys in the same provinces show that the practice is in decline, yet still highly prevalent in some areas. In Western Azerbaijan prevalence has dropped from 39% to 21% today. In Hormozghan 68% affirmed to be mutilated in 2011 while only 60% said so in 2014.

In 2011, the topic was discussed on a national [congress on health education](#) in Tabriz. A medical survey was presented which found an FGM prevalence of 55% in a group of 348 interviewed women in Kermanshah province.

From the existing studies it can be assumed that FGM is only or at least mostly practiced by Sunni minorities in Iran. Most regions are bordering Iraq, but prevalence is also high in some places in the very South, among them the city of Hormozgan and the ports of Bandar Kang and Jask.

Ayatollahs: FGM not Islamic, not acceptable today

The official position on FGM seems to be ambivalent. In response to various queries by the webjournal [Gozaar](#) about the stance of Islam in regard to female circumcision, Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Fazlollah answered in 2010, "Our studies of the existing texts on this subject show that female circumcision is not of Islam's doing and that it does not have an Islamic origin. Female circumcision was a ritual from the era of ignorance (the pre-Islamic era), when it was considered a way for a woman to make herself more attractive to her husband. What has been handed down to us by the Imams proves that the tradition of female circumcision was negated."

Mozafarian also collected the opinions of Shia clerics on female genital mutilation with mixed results. While the majority did not distance themselves from the practice, the [Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei](#) calls the practice not acceptable: "Today, female

genital mutilation is not common among Shiites but the usage narrative show that it does not hurt if it can be done with its conditions, including compliance with health issues. But because the social norms have changed today, this action would not be acceptable like many other topics which their sentences were changed due to circumstances and facts."

Ongoing activities against FGM in the provinces of Kermanshah and Kurdistan do not meet resistance from state institutions, but are observed with some suspicion by local authorities.

Iranian government takes positive steps

This was different a few years ago when Azarmehr Association of the Women of Kurdistan in Iran, an association active in voicing the general demands of women, started working against FGM. According to the activist Parvin Zabihi, who has written a book on the subject, a number of Kurdish university students started an association against FGM after having written their thesis on FGM. However, no permit was issued for this association. Another anti-FGM activist recounted according to Gozaar: "Officials in the Intelligence Ministry in Kurdistan have summoned us repeatedly and told us bluntly that we do not have the right to be active in this matter and that they have pronounced the establishment of our association to be an act against national security." To the knowledge of Stop FGM Middle East, one of the reasons given was that the Ministry considered FGM a Sunni business.

During the last years, a vivid debate developed in the Kurdish region after several TV specials on FGM had been aired by Iraqi-Kurdish television stations which are popular among Iranian Kurds. It seems that the Iranian government is reconsidering its reserved position on the issue and is planning to take steps against the practice.

Female genital mutilation practised in Iran, study reveals

First authoritative research shows FGM is carried out in four major provinces

The Guardian (04.06.2015) - <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/04/female-genital-mutilation-iran-fgm> - The first authoritative study into female genital mutilation in [Iran](#) has found the practice is being carried out in at least four major provinces while officials are silent on the matter.

According to [research by social anthropologist Kameel Ahmady](#) released on Thursday, FGM is more prevalent in the southern province of Hormozgan and its nearby islands (Qeshm and Hormuz) than in any other parts of the country.

It is also being practised to a lesser degree in Kurdistan, Kermanshah and West Azerbaijan provinces, which are situated in western Iran close to the Iraq border.

Ahmady's research shows that FGM is mainly an issue concerning the Shafi'i sect of Sunni Muslim Iranians, a minority in the Shia-dominated country. Only a small fraction of the Shia population living in proximity of Sunni communities practise FGM.

"FGM is practised in Iran in some cases to tame girls' sex drive before marriage; it is made to preserve their chastity," said Ahmady. "The attitude of officials and authorities is that FGM doesn't exist in Iran. The Iranian public is also largely ignorant about the subject."

Ahmady first decided to focus on FGM in Iran when he was working with relief NGOs in Africa in early 2000s. Over the course of 10 years he has spoken to around 3,000 Iranian women who have experienced FGM in Iran, as well as 1,000 men. His research was published to coincide with the International Day of Innocent Children Victims of Aggression, observed every year on 4 June.

"I returned to Iran in 2005 to study FGM in my home country and instantly I was shocked to discover that it even happened to the closest members of my own family and relatives," he said. "In fact, many in Iran don't have a clue that [FGM] is being practised in some parts of the country."

FGM, which has [affected millions of girls and women alive](#) worldwide, predates Islam and Christianity and has been practised in many different cultures and societies, from Coptic and Catholic Christians in Eritrea and in Ethiopia, to Beta Israel society, Australian aboriginal tribes and some parts of the Middle East and Asia. It is usually performed on girls between the ages of four and 12 and can include partial or in extreme cases total removal of external parts of female genitalia.

In Iran, the practice, referred to as *Khatne* or *Sonat*, is usually carried out outside hospital without anaesthesia or prior consent by amateur midwives. The tools used include sharp razors.

Mehrangiz Kar, a leading Iranian human rights lawyer, said it was tragic that such mutilation was carried out by women. "It's one of those instances where the violence against women is carried out by women in unhygienic circumstances," she told the Guardian. "In areas where FGM exists, unfortunately it's usually the mothers who insist that their daughters should be cut."

In at least one extreme case which had involved stitching up after cutting, Kar said an Iranian mother refused to allow her daughter to have her stitches removed before marriage. "The daughter told me that she was afraid of marriage; she feared she would have pain during sexual intercourse."

Although Ahmady's research is unprecedented in its depth, other people have also studied FGM in Iran, including Fatemeh Karimi and Rayehe Mozafarian, who have both published books on the subject. Mozafarian said that the Iranian authorities had let activists research FGM in Iran and had allowed those books to be published.

"When people in Iran learned for the first time seven or eight years ago that women are being cut there, it was a cultural shock," she said. "People didn't believe that it was being practised."

Mozafarian said she had reached out to the country's vice president for women's affairs, Shahindokht Molaverdi, who is considering her proposal for a nationwide campaign to end FGM. Iran's penal code criminalises mutilation but does not specifically mention FGM.

Mozafarian warned that in some parts of Khuzestan province, home to many Arab Iranians, an extreme form of FGM known as infibulation, which involves the removal of the clitoris as well as the narrowing of the vaginal opening by creating a covering seal, is being practised.

Influenced by events in the neighbouring Kurdistan region of Iraq, which prohibited FGM in 2007, female circumcision is in decline in Iran's Kurdistan but still goes on. Hormozgan is less affected by that change.

Not all Sunni Iranians practise FGM, such as those belonging to the Hanafi sect or those living in other provinces. In West Azerbaijan, FGM exists among Sunni Shafi'i Kurds of Sorani dialect but not among Sunni Shafie [Kurds](#) of Kermanji dialect, Ahmady's report shows. In Iran's Kurdistan, where prevalence of FGM is patchy, it is mainly seen in rural areas, some villages and communities but not usually in urban areas. Even in provinces where FGM exists, many communities do not practise it.

"The majority of women I spoke to who were circumcised defended FGM, saying that it is a tradition that had existed for hundreds of years," said Ahmady. "Some Sunni mums even boasted that their daughters were more virtuous than the majority Shia girls because they were cut."

Shia clerics also avoid interfering in what they see as a Sunni issue. The government, wary of inciting anti-Shia sentiment among the country's Sunni minority, is also largely quiet. In Hormozgan, minimal traces of FGM is seen in Shia communities in some village, the report shows.

HRWF Footnote

See the full report at <http://kameelahmady.com/wp-content/uploads/Kameel%20-%20EN%20Final.pdf>

Women still banned from sports stadiums

WUNRN (01.05.2015) - Following the announcement that the ban against women in stadiums would stay intact, two Friday imams have called for Iranians to pursue "religious and revolutionary values" in their daily lives.

"The idea of letting women to go to sport stadiums to watch matches has many immoral and negative social consequences," said Hassan Mosleh during his sermon in Borazjan, Bushehr province, on Friday, 17 April.

Another Friday Imam echoed Mosleh's comments, saying most Iranian women were not interested in such immoral behavior. "Those who support this idea have unfortunately lost the right and straight path," said Ali Rahdoust, Friday imam in Delvar, in the southern part of the province. "They imagine that the dignity and virtuosity of our girls and women is about going to sport stadiums, while the majority of our women are chaste and noble and are repulsed by such conduct."

"Men and women sitting next to each other to watch matches will destroy religious and revolutionary values," Mosleh said, as reported by Persian Gulf Website.

At the beginning of April, the Director of Information and International Affairs at the Ministry of Interior contradicted earlier statements by the Minister of Sport, who had said the government was reviewing the law prohibiting women from watching sports in stadiums. Abdolhamid Ahmadi had said that changes were likely to be implemented.

The issue has been widely covered in the Iranian and international media, with particular attention being paid to the case of Ghoncheh Ghavami, who was jailed for five months for trying to attend a volleyball match in Tehran.

Rahdoust said those calling for women to be allowed to watch sport in stadiums should shift their focus. "It is better for those who support such ideas to defend the less problematic idea of women getting into universities and prepare the grounds for them to achieve higher scientific qualifications," he said.

"It's better to be worried and concerned about women's unemployment or the increasing rate of divorce in society."

RAHA awards for Iranian Human Rights Defenders

Declaration of Dr Aaron Rhodes President of the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe; co-founder of the Freedom Rights Project at the UN Human Rights Council

Aaron Rhodes (17.03.2015) - The people being recognized today have all affirmed, in the most vivid way possible, the core human rights and freedoms to which the members of

the international community have committed themselves. They have done so by their actions: They have exercised the freedoms that are supposed to be guaranteed by international law, despite illegal laws and practices aimed at repressing such actions.

The classical view of freedom is that freedom means the ability to make choices, and to take responsibility for choices, for one's own destiny. Freedom is what bestows dignity on a person, but freedom does not really exist unless it is exercised. The people we are honoring today have exercised choice in a restrictive, coercive system enforced by brutality and fear. They have undertaken peaceful, public acts, on their own initiative, supporting human rights. They have shown themselves to be true human rights defenders, because they have sacrificed for the human rights of others. And they have been harshly persecuted.

Among those being honored today are journalists who, as independent professionals dedicated to exposing the truth, are human rights defenders. Independent journalism is often similar to human rights documentation, and subject to the same kinds of repressions, for the same reasons. There is a difference between an independent journalist and an opposition political activist. But in a repressive country like the Islamic Republic of Iran, independent journalism is considered a threat to a system sustained by falsehoods and propaganda. Iran is the second worst state in the world in terms of detaining journalists, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. There has been an increase in internet-related prosecutions. One person has recently been sentenced to death for "insulting the prophet" on Facebook.

Another person being honored is in prison but exercising her freedom of religion. She made a choice, the choice to honor her obligations to a transcendent moral deity in the face of a harsh governmental ban, demonstrating that the place in all of us, where we find our relationship to God, and our sovereignty as individuals, is sacrosanct. At least 100 Baha'i are imprisoned in the Islamic Republic; their crime: being Baha'i. The current administration has done nothing to address discrimination and persecution against religious and other minorities as it promised. According to a statement by 36 human rights organizations as evidence of the need to renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur,

"Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, members of ethnic minorities, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azeri Turks, Baluch, Kurds, and Turkmen, continue to face a range of discriminatory laws and practices, affecting their access to basic services such as housing, clean water and sanitation, employment and education."

Those being honored today have protested the imprisonment of citizens because of their political beliefs, and in have become political prisoners themselves, risking their liberty for the liberty of others. According to the 36 human rights groups, they join a diverse group that includes "journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders, artists, bloggers, aid workers, members of the political opposition, student activists, and ethnic and religious minority activists."

We hope these awards will help those being honored to continue their important work on behalf of all citizens of Iranian.

I would like to add a word about the geo-political position of the Islamic Republic today, and the human rights situation. It is clear that Iran's regional and international influence are increasing; Iran is seen as a partner in the struggle against violent extremism. Yet when we look objectively at the treatment of political prisoners, and at the kinds of punishment that are meted out to citizens usually after unfair trials, we must conclude that is extremism. Iran seems to be normalizing its relationship to the international community; does that mean these practices will henceforth be accepted, considered normal?

Aaron Rhodes, President of the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe; co-founder of the Freedom Rights Project (aaronarhodes@gmail.com)

- *Faran Hesami is a Baha'i psychologist, teacher and author. She is sentenced to four years in prison for teaching psychology at the Baha'i University.*
- *Khosrow Kurdpour and Masoud Kurdpour are two brothers. Khosrow is the chief editor of Mukrian News Agency, an online news agency, has been involved in civil and human rights activities for more than two decades. Masoud Kurdpour also works for this agency and as a civil activist.*
- *Kayvan Samimi is the managing editor of the banned Nameh monthly, a member of National Council of Peace and furthermore co-founder of the Kharabat website, Kayvan Samimi was also among political activists arrested through post-election riots in 2009.*
- *The 45 year-old Hakimeh Shokri is a supporter of mourning mothers and is serving a three-year sentence for her peaceful activities. Shorki used to visit the families of those who were killed or arrested during post-election riots in 2009.*

Supreme Court upholds Sohail Arabi's death sentence

Mohabat news (28.11.2014) - According to the report of Human Rights Activists , Branch 41 of the Supreme Court upheld Soheil Arabi's death sentence for alleged insults the Prophet and Imams and referred his case to the county Execution Office, Branch 76 of the Penal.

Sohail Arabi, according to his job as a photographer, had asked cyberspace and social networks activists, including Facebook, to write articles criticizing the government and sometimes with a humorous approach and he had publicized them. This prisoner of conscience is one of the victims of Revolutionary Guard Intelligence Service's project to deal with active citizens in Facebook during last year.

Sohail Arabi and his attorney objected the alleged insults the Prophet, and have repeatedly denied the charge. They also refer to Article 263 of the Penal Code about the charge of insulting the Prophet which says: "If the accused to insult, claims that his statements was on reluctantly, neglect, omission or drunk or anger or retrospectively language or no attention to the meaning of Quote of the words of the others, then it is not considered as insulting Prophet."

He is currently being held in ward 350 of Evin prison.

Iran executes Reyhaneh Jabbari despite global appeals for retrial

Activists say designer killed man in self defence after he tried to sexually assault her, and confession came under duress

The Guardian (25.10.2014) <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/25/iran-reyhaneh-jabbari-executes-appeals> - Iran has ignored an international campaign to spare the life of a 26-year-old woman convicted of murder by hanging her at dawn on Saturday.

Reyhaneh Jabbari had spent five years on death row for stabbing a 47-year-old surgeon who had previously worked for the intelligence ministry, the official IRNA news agency reported.

The UN and bodies including the European Union and Amnesty International had said that the interior designer's confession for killing Morteza Abdolali Sarbandi in 2007 was obtained under intense pressure and threats from Iranian prosecutors, and she should have had a retrial.

Ahmed Shaheed, the UN's human rights rapporteur on Iran, said in April that the killing was an act of self defence. Sarbandi had offered to hire Jabbari to redesign his office and took her to an apartment where he tried to sexually abuse her.

Iranian actors and other prominent figures had also appealed for a stay of execution.

Efforts for clemency had intensified in recent weeks. Jabbari's mother was allowed to visit her for one hour on Friday, Amnesty said - a custom that tends to precede executions in Iran.

However, Sarbandi's family insisted the murder was premeditated and that Jabbari had confessed to buying a knife two days before the killing.

According to Jalal Sarbandi, the victim's eldest son, Jabbari testified that a man was present in the apartment where his father was killed but she had refused to reveal his identity.

He said in April that his family "would not even contemplate mercy until truth is unearthed".

"Only when her true intentions are exposed and she tells the truth about her accomplice and what really went down will we be prepared to grant mercy," he said at the time.

Jabbari's plea of self-defence failed to persuade judges at various stages of the appeal process up to Iran's Supreme Court and she remained in prison throughout.

Her last chance of reprieve lay with the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, but he failed to intervene.

After the execution was carried out, the Tehran state prosecutor's office issued a statement that appeared aimed at countering sympathy for Jabbari. It said: "Jabbari had repeatedly confessed to premeditated murder, then tried to divert the case from its course by inventing the rape charge.

"But all her efforts to feign innocence were proven false in various phases of prosecution. Evidence was firm. She had informed a friend through text message of her intention to kill. It was ascertained that she had purchased the murder weapon, a kitchen knife, two days before committing murder."

Amnesty said Jabbari had admitted stabbing the man once from behind, but she insisted another man killed him. The human rights group said her claim was never properly investigated.

According to the UN, more than 250 people have been executed in Iran this year.

Britain said it is "concerned and saddened" by the execution. Foreign Office minister Tobias Ellwood said there were "questions around due process" in the case, which he warned would not help Iran revive relations with the rest of the world.

The hanging comes at an inopportune time for President Hassan Rouhani, who was elected last year partly on promises of liberal reform. He has been treading a precarious path to rapprochement with the West after decades of mutual hostility largely rooted in Iran's disputed nuclear programme and human rights practices.

Rouhani has come under fire from secular Iranians, his main political constituency, over a spate of acid attacks on young women deemed by their attackers to have insufficiently covered their hair in accordance with sharia law.

Many Iranians believe the attacks have been provoked by Islamist hardliners in a continuing campaign to thwart the political and social reforms pledged by the president during his electoral campaign.

However, many of Iran's more secular voters have also voiced frustration that domestic reforms appear to have taken a back seat to foreign policy under Rouhani, in particular the tortuous negotiations with world powers to resolve the nuclear stand-off.

Iran executes man for heresy

Mohsen Amir-Aslani convicted of insulting prophet Jonah and making 'innovations in religion' through interpretations of Qur'an

The Guardian (29.09.2014)

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/iranexecutes-man-heresy-mohsen-amir-aslani> - A 37-year-old man has been executed in Iran after being found guilty of heresy and insulting prophet Jonah, according to human rights activists.

Mohsen Amir-Aslani was arrested nine years ago for his activities which the authorities deemed were heretical. He was engaged in psychotherapy but also led sessions reading and reciting the Qur'an and providing his own interpretations of the Islamic holy book, his family said.

Amir-Aslani was hanged last week for making "innovations in the religion" and "spreading corruption on earth", but human rights activists said he was a prisoner of conscience who was put to death because of his religious beliefs. He had interpreted Jonah's story in the Qur'an as a symbolic tale.

Iran's judiciary, which was responsible for the handling of his case, has since denied that Amir-Aslani's execution was linked to his religious beliefs.

Instead, the authorities allege that he had illicit sexual relationships with a number of people who participated in his sessions and the type of activities he was involved in did not follow an official interpretation of the religion. It was not clear if Amir-Aslani had official permission to conduct his sessions.

"Mohsen held sessions in his own house dedicated to reciting the Qur'an and interpreting it. He had his own understandings [of the religion] and had published his views in the

form of a booklet and made it available to his fans," an unnamed source told the New York-based group, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI).

According to the source, Iran's ministry of intelligence was behind Amir-Aslani's arrest. "He was initially held for making innovations in Islam and providing his own interpretations of the Qur'an but later he was accused of insulting prophet Jonah and also faced accusations of having sex outside marriage," the source said. "They alleged that he had sexual relationships with a group of the people who participated in his classes."

Iran's judiciary has presented little evidence in public relating to the allegations of illicit sexual activities. The judge who presided over his case, Abolghassem Salavati, is known in Iran for leading numerous unfair trials, including many that resulted in execution.

Amir-Aslani's wife, Leila, told the opposition website Roozonline that she was hoping a high court would strike down his conviction but his sentence was eventually upheld. She told Roozonline that his conviction stemmed from his religious views and no evidence was presented to back up the charges related to his alleged sexual activities.

Iranian authorities are sensitive towards those practising Islam in ways not conforming to the official line. In recent years, several members of Iran's Gonabadi dervishes religious minority have been arrested and are currently serving lengthy prison terms.

Amnesty said last week that a group of nine Gonabadi dervishes were on hunger strike in protest at their treatment in prison. They were Mostafa Abdi, Reza Entesari, Hamidreza Moradi and Kasra Nouri, as well as the five lawyers representing them who have also been jailed: Amir Eslami, Farshid Yadollahi, Mostafa Daneshjoo, Afshin Karampour and Omid Behrouzi.

"The men were mostly detained in September 2011, during a wave of arrests of Gonabadi dervishes. They were all held in prolonged solitary confinement, without access to their lawyers and families, and were sentenced, after two years and following grossly unfair trials, to jail on various trumped-up charges," Amnesty said. "The men are prisoners of conscience, imprisoned solely for practising their faith and defending the human rights of dervishes through their legitimate activities as journalists and lawyers."

In Iran, Gonabadi dervishes face persecution, discrimination, harassment, arbitrary arrests and attacks on their prayer houses, Amnesty said.

Young Iranians sentenced to lashes, jail time for dancing in 'Happy' Pharrell video

The Huffington Post (18.09.2014) - Seven young Iranian men and women have been sentenced to jail time and 91 lashes for the crime of being "Happy" and letting the world know.

The group posted a video of themselves dancing with woman unveiled to the Pharrell hit "Happy" in April which led to their arrest in May for offending "public chastity."

The arrest of the six dancers and one director sparked the hashtag #FreeHappyIranians, and the following day hashtag creator Kambiz Hosseini tweeted that all but the director had been released.

IranWire reported on Wednesday, however, that the six dancers in the video have been sentenced to six months in prison and 91 lashes, while the director has been sentenced to one year in prison and 91 lashes.

Farshid Rofugaran, the group's lawyer, told IranWire that the sentences have already been suspended, but that he could not be sure of group's fate until he received official notification. Rofugaran said:

"A suspended sentence becomes null and void after a certain period of time. When it's a suspended sentence, the verdict is not carried out, but if during this period a similar offense is committed, then the accused is subject to legal punishment and the suspended sentence will then be carried out as well."

IranWire reports that the time period for the Happy group's sentence suspension will be three years.

Shortly after their release three days after being arrested, members of the group spoke out on their harsh treatment while in prison. IranWire reported that a source close to the group said they were interrogated and not permitted to use toilet facilities. The women in the group were also reportedly forced to strip naked and perform squats in front of female guards.

"It is beyond sad that these kids were arrested for trying to spread happiness," Pharrell said on his Facebook page.

Neda, one of the video's stars, told IranWire prior to the group's arrest that despite the joyous appearance of the video she was frightened throughout much of the filming.

"We were really afraid," Neda said. "Whenever somebody looked out of a window or someone passed by, we ducked behind a door to make sure we were not seen."

Rofugaran said the group may try to appeal the court's decision.

"I will do what my clients want me to do," Rofugaran told IranWire. "We are happy that both the prison sentences and the lashes are suspended."

During the last 9 months of 2013 more than 30,000 girls below the age of 15 were forced to marry

Justice For Iran (07.07.2014) / <http://justice4iran.org/english/j4iran-activities/during-the-nine-months-of-2013-more-than-30000-girls-below-the-age-of-15-were-forced-to-marry/> - On Thursday 3 July 2014, Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, expressed her concerns regarding the impending execution of juvenile offender, Razieh Ebrahimi, who murdered her husband following her marriage at the age of 14. During 1385-1392 (2006-2007 and 2013-2014), more than 1/3 of Iranian brides were below 19 years of age.

New research carried out by Justice for Iran (JFI) shows that during 1385-1392 (2006-2007 and 2013-2014) the rate of marriages among girls below 15 years of age was on the rise. Based on statistics published by Iran's [National Organization for Civil Registration](#), during the first nine months of 1392 (March-December 2013) more than 5% of women married were below the age of 15. According to the same source, more

than 1/3 of women whose marriages were registered were below the age of 19. Based on Iran's international commitments, citizens below the age of 18 are considered as minors. Although statistics published by Iran do not specify those below the age of 18 or those between 18 and 19, the high rate of women married below the age of 19 serves as a warning pointing to the need for more precise research in this field.

During the 3 July meeting of the 5+1 talks in Vienna, the High Commissioner for Human Rights highlighted the need for inclusion of human rights in nuclear negotiations: "I do encourage that any talks with Iran fully cover the human rights situation. We do need a commitment on the part of Iran that they will protect the human rights of their citizens."^[1] Prior to this development, in a [statement](#) issued on 26 June she pointed out that according to international laws Razieh Ebrahimi's death sentence is illegal.

Razieh Ebrahimi was forced to marry at the age of 14. At 15 she gave birth to her first child. As a result of continued physical and emotional abuse by her husband, at 17 she murdered him. Condemned to death, at 21 years of age, her death sentence for committing murder as a minor was halted, but once again she is facing execution.

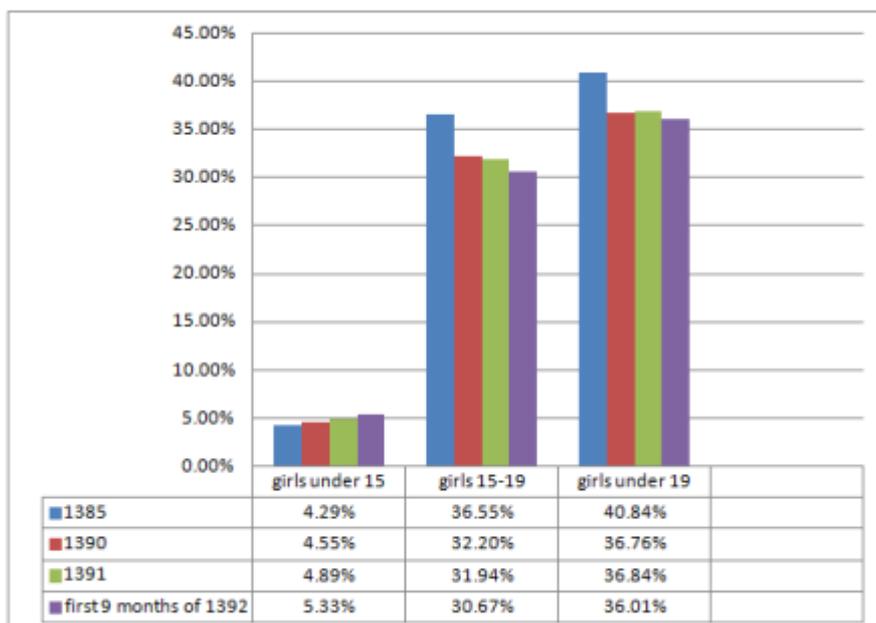
JFI welcomes Navi Pillay's remarks regarding inclusion of human rights in nuclear negotiations, and demands particular attention to the issue of early marriage given the fact that 1/3 of Iranian women, like Razieh Ebrahimi, are victims of early marriage.

Steady increase in the rate of early marriage among girls below the age of 15

New official statistics published towards the end of 1391 (2012-2013) and the first nine months of 1392 (March to December 2013) point to an insignificant drop in the number of girls between 15 and 19 who faced early marriage, however, there is a significant rise in the number of early marriages among girls below the age of 15. In addition, each year a greater number of girls below the age of 10, who are less able to resist their parents' decisions and forced measures based on law and religion, fall victim to early marriage.

Based on official statistics published by the National Organization for Civil Registration, in 1391 (2012-2013)^[2] 406,53 marriages involving girls below the age of 15 were registered, while more than 265,000 marriages registered involved girls between the ages of 15 and 19. Meanwhile in 1390 (2011-2012)^[3] the number of registered marriages of girls below the age of 15 was 39,831 and in 1385 (2006-2007) more than 33,000.

Iran is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Both instruments ban marriage at an early age and without informed consent. The UN Special Rapporteur on Slavery indicates forced marriage as a cause of modern slavery. While in Iran the minimum age for marriage is set at 13, pending a judge's permission, fathers or paternal relatives can marry their children at any age.



Percentage of early marriages during 1385-1392 (2006-2007 and 2013-2014) in Iran

Official statistics show that at least 36.84% of Iranian women whose marriages were registered in 1391 (2012-2013) were below the age of 19. More specifically, 31.94% of registered marriages during the same year involved girls between the ages of 15 and 19 and 4.89% of those were below 15 years of age.

They also point out that in 1391 (2012-2013) at least 235 girls below the age of 15 were married to men above the age of 35 and nearly 100 girls below the age of 15 were married to men above the age of 40, while 602 girls between 15 and 19 were married to men above 40 years of age. Percentage of early marriages involving girls and men below the age of 20 during 1385 and 1392 (2006-2007 and 2013)

Age distribution at the time of marriage

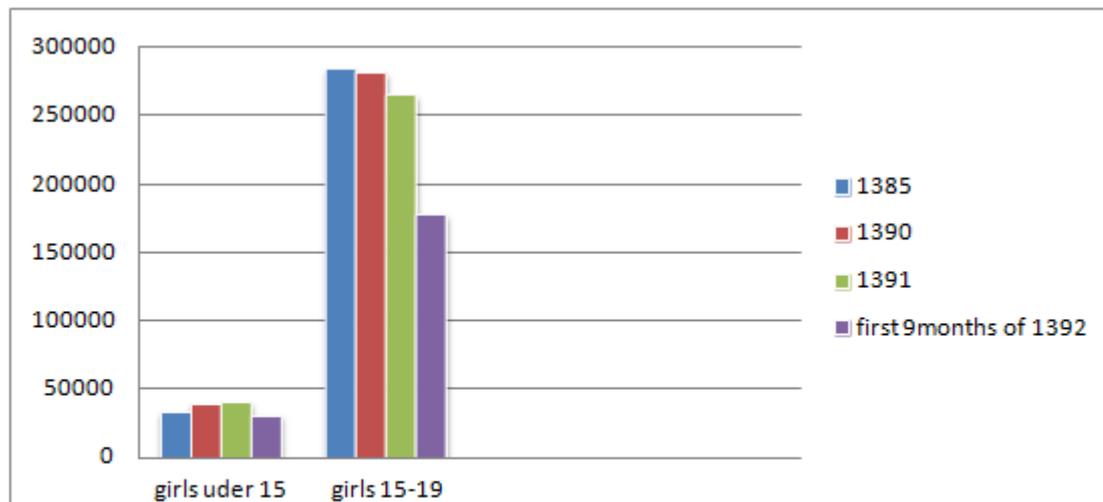
Total number of marriages	Men			Year
	Below 19	15-19	Below 15	
778,023	48,904	284,396	333,383	1385 (2006-07)
874,792	48,144	281,747	39,831	1390 (2011-12)
829,968	43,905	265,117	406,53	1391 (2012-13)
579,871	27,208	177,903	177,903	First nine months of 1392 (March to December 2013)

The latest statistics indicate marriages of 31,000 girls below the age of 15 were during the first nine months of 1392 (2013)[4] and 178,000 women married during this same period were between 15 and 19 years of age. However, at least 36.01% of women whose marriages were registered in Iran were below the age of 19.

They also show that during the first 9 months of 1392 (2013) the number of girls married who were below the age of 15 in 1391 (2012-2013) increased by 5.33%. Likewise

marriage registrations of 3.67% of women belonged to those between the ages of 15 and 19.

This report is based on statistics published on the websites of Iran's national and provincial organizations for Civil Registration. It is certain that the number of unregistered marriages is far higher than those registered.



Comparison of annual statistics on girl marriages between 1385 and 1392 (2006-2007 and 2013-2014)

Statistics of early marriages in various provinces of Iran

National Organization for Marriage Registration has published statistics based on different age categories for the first nine months of 1392 (2013-2014). However, statistics at the provincial level are not yet available. Nevertheless, limited statistics from various provinces demonstrate the fact that early marriages are not limited to specific regions of Iran. For instance, seven provinces of Tehran, North Khorassan, South Khorassan, East Azerbaijan, Gilan, Mazendaran and Kermanshah have published their statistics based on age categories for 1391 (2012-2013), all of which indicate high rates of early marriages. Although in Hamedan[5] no exact statistics are published, according to its Organization for Civil Registration, during the first nine months of 1391 (2012-2013), at least 38.12% of all marriages involved girls between the ages of 15 and 19.

Although some provinces have yet to publish the relevant statistics based on age, the age groups of mothers who have borne children in that year indicate the extent to which girls face early marriage. For instance, in Ardebil[6] in 1391 (2012-2013) 53 mothers of new born babies were below the age of 15 and 3177 girls between 15 and 19 became mothers during the same year. In 1392 (2013-2014) at least 54 girls below the age of 15 became mothers and 2240 were between 15 and 19.[7]

Number of registered early marriages in 1391 (2012-2013) in some Iranian provinces

Below 15 years of age	North Khorassan: 1225 ¹	Kermanshah: 783 ²				
Between 10 and 14	East Azerbaijan: 3920 ³	South Khorassan: 360 ⁴	Mazendaran: 1591 ⁵	Gilan: 930 ⁶	Tehran: 1752 ⁷	
Between 15 and 19	East Azerbaijan: 15545	South Khorassan: 3481	Mazendaran: 9502	Gilan: 8262	North Khorassan: 4801	Tehran: 1752

In October 2013 JFI published an in depth statistical [report](#) on early marriages between 1385 (2006-2007) and 1390 (2011-2012). Based on findings of this report early marriages among girls below the age of 15 in 1390 (2011-2012) compared to 1385 (2006-2007) increased by at least 35% while in 1390 (2011-2012) at least 1537 girls below the age of 10 and 29,827 girls between 10 and 14 years of age were faced with marriage.

[1]Please see report: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/03/us-iran-nuclear-un-idUSKBN0F812020140703>

[2]National Organization for Civil Registration, marriage statistics for 1391 (2012-2013)

[3]National Organization for Civil Registration, marriage statistics for 1390 (2011-2012)

[4]National Organization for Civil Registration statistics published for the first nine months of 1392 meaning 21 March to December 2013.

[5] Provincial Organization for Civil Registration, <http://www.sabteahval.ir/Upload/Modules/Contents/asset87/azdvaj-9-%2091.pdf>

[6] Statistical report of the Ardebil Organization for Civil Registration for 1391 (2012-2013), <http://www.sabteahval.ir/Upload/Modules/Contents/asset84/asset13151/v91.pdf>

[7] Statistical report of the Ardebil Organization for Civil Registration for 1392 (2013-2014), <http://www.sabteahval.ir/Upload/Modules/Contents/asset84/k-%209-%2092.pdf>

[8]Report on age distribution of marriages registered in 1391 (2012-2013) in North Khorassan <http://www.sabteahval.ir/Upload/Modules/Contents/asset240/e3-1391-12.pdf>

[9]Analytical report on marriages and divorces registered in 1391(2012-2013) in Kermanshah (2011)http://www.sabteahval-ksh.ir/fa/ftps/E-html/Ezdevaj_Talagh1391.pdf

[10]Analytical report on marriages and divorces registered in 1391 (2012-2013) in East Azerbaijan <http://www.eanocr.ir/amar/ezdevajtalag91.pdf>

[11]Report on age distribution of marriages registered in 1391 (2012-2013) in South Khorassan http://skocr.ir/User_Files/amar/new/91/91year/e2-91.pdf

[12]Report on age distribution of marriages registered in 1391 (2012-2013) in Mazendaran <http://www.sabteahval.ir/Upload/Modules/Contents/asset82/e291.pdf>

[13]Analytical report on marriages and divorces registered in 1391 (2012-2013) in Gilan
<http://www.nocrgilan.ir/fa/upload/bf83de0/d7839821.pdf>

[14]Analytical report on marriages and divorces registered in 1391(2012-2013) in Tehran
http://www.sabteahval-tehran.ir/App_Upload/Statistic/A392013257175044.pdf

The plight of Iraq's civilian population

The current conflict in Iraq is affecting all ethnic and sectarian groups, regardless of their political affiliations.

By Donatella Rovera

Al Jazeera (05.07.2014) / <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/07/iraq-minorities-islamic-state-201474133540646195.html> - Thousands of Iraqi civilians displaced by the current conflict are stranded at checkpoints separating the areas controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the rest of Iraq. At first civilians, who fled after the Islamic State (formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant - ISIL) captured large areas of northwestern Iraq, were being allowed to enter Iraqi Kurdistan, but in recent weeks and days, access has been severely restricted by the KRG.

Some of those who fled are seeking refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan while others want to travel southwards to the capital and beyond. The former are mostly Sunni Muslims who fear air strikes by government forces and their allies and the harsh rule of the Islamic State. The latter are Shia Muslims from the Turkmen and Shabak communities who are trying to flee southwards to government-controlled areas of Iraq where the majority of the population is Shia and where they feel there is no risk of an Islamic State takeover.

The sudden capture of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, on June 10 by the Islamic State prompted a mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of frightened residents who have poured into the neighbouring autonomous Kurdish region, administered by the KRG.

With the withdrawal of the Iraqi army from northwestern Iraq, the KRG has gained control of the disputed oil-rich town of Kirkuk and other areas, and in recent days, it has announced plans for a referendum on independence, a move fiercely opposed by the Iraqi central government.

Regardless of the political wrangling between Baghdad and Erbil, it is imperative that civilians displaced by the conflict are granted refuge in and safe passage through KRG-controlled areas.

While Iraqi and international political discourse seems largely out of step with the rapidly changing reality on the ground, the sectarian dimension of the conflict is becoming more marked by the day and Iraq's diverse communities are struggling to grapple with the new reality. They increasingly wonder where and how they can be safe.

The Turkmen community is a telling example. When I first arrived in Iraq, just after the capture by the Islamic State of Tal Afar - home to some 200,000 people - and other areas mostly inhabited by members of the Turkmen community, local residents mostly identified themselves as Turkmen. Now, only a few weeks later, virtually all those I meet identify themselves as Turkmen Shia or Turkmen Sunni. The Turkmen Shia are trying to flee to the Shia stronghold in the south, the Turkmen Sunni are not even contemplating

going there; they are staying put in the north, terrified of government air strikes against areas controlled by the Islamic State.

"We are not with ISIL, but when the government bombs ISIL we are in the middle and when we get killed nobody cares," said a woman whose relatives - two young children and their parents - were killed in an air strike in Tal Afar on June 22.

Shia Shabak who have fled villages east of Mosul recently seized by the Islamic State, told me that some of their relatives had been killed or captured, while their Shabak Sunni neighbours had remained in the villages and faced no trouble from the Islamic State.

Many Shia Turkmen and Shabak civilians I met have alleged that their Sunni neighbours are cooperating with the Islamic State, while Sunni Turkmen and Shabak have accused Shia members of their community of being linked to pro-government armed Shia militias.

While no evidence is generally provided to support such polarising narratives, perception can be as important as reality, poisoning relations between communities and adding fuel to an already inflamed situation.

Minorities in Iraq, including Christians, Yazidis and others feel particularly vulnerable, and rightly so. The Islamic State referred to their Yazidi hostages as "devil worshippers" in one of their recent videos, and the abduction of two Christian nuns in Mosul on June 28 are just two examples of a string of recent incidents targeting minority groups.

However, members of Iraq's majority communities do not feel safe either. Indeed, most of those killed and displaced in this conflict are from the Shia- and Sunni-majority communities, who happened to be a minority in a particular place at a particular time.

Increasing speculation about a possible three-way split of Iraq into Shia, Sunni and Kurdish states or entities, is raising serious concerns about the massive population displacement which would likely ensue. Minorities are very concerned about whether, if this came to fruition, their communities would still have a future in Iraq. Iraqi leaders and would-be leaders and their backers in the international community must act responsibly and work towards finding solutions to the current crisis which ensure that members of all communities are protected and their rights respected.

Donatella Rovera is Amnesty International's Senior Crisis Response adviser in northern Iraq.

Follow her on Twitter: [@DRovera](https://twitter.com/DRovera)

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.

Parliamentarians demand stronger veil enforcement

Proponents fear Western cultural influence against the veil

Arab News (15.06.2014) / <http://www.arabnews.com/news/587126> - Two thirds of Iran's MPs have written to the president urging him to take measures to ensure women correctly observe Islamic dress, denouncing Western cultural influence against the veil.

The 195 members of the 290-strong parliament who signed the letter in part blamed satellite television for feeding the trend, ISNA news agency reported on Sunday.

A defining feature of Iran's interpretation of Islamic law since the 1979 revolution, hijab

obliges women to cover their hair and much of their body in loose clothing when outside, regardless of their religion.

A dedicated "morality police" has long handed out fines, verbal notices or even arrested women it considers are not properly observing the rules, but lawmakers have in recent months criticized lax enforcement.

In the letter, the MPs wrote: "One of the main areas of cultural invasion is in trying to change the way of life of Iranians regarding the veil. We ask that you give the necessary orders to enforce the law."

Iran's parliament is dominated by conservative males.

However, President Hassan Rouhani, a self-declared moderate who was surprisingly elected last June, has expressed a desire to expand social freedoms — to the disapproval of hard-liners.

In October, he asked police to be moderate when enforcing the hijab requirements and recently said, "We cannot take people to heaven by using whips," a remark that was condemned by conservatives.

Rather than wearing a full length traditional "chador" that drapes the head and body, many women wear a thinner head scarf, leggings and shirt.

Police in Tehran earlier this month launched a new drive against non-compliance of the female dress code. Officers were deployed on the capital's biggest roads, and women — drivers and passengers — checked.

The MPs letter and push for stronger enforcement coincides with an online campaign in which hundreds of Iranian women posted pictures of themselves flouting the dress code inside Iran.

The Facebook page "Stealthy Freedoms of Women in Iran," was launched by a London-based Iranian woman who said she wanted a debate on having the right to choose to wear the hijab.

The campaign did not generate a reaction from the government.

At least two protests to demand enforcement of hijab have taken place in Tehran in the past two months.

Human Rights under President Rouhani

Presentation at the conference "Religious Minorities in Iran under President Rouhani" organised by HRWF at the European Parliament on 18 March 2014

Dr Majid Golpour

HRWF (25.03.2014) - Honorable MEPs, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your presence, and thank you to the HRWF Executive Director Mr. Fautré for inviting me to speak at this conference to focus our attention on the complex Iranian situation and the state of fundamental freedoms and rights in Iran. To gain a view on why human rights are not respected and understand who is responsible for these violations.

Many national, European and NGO reports provide data on human rights' violations in Iran, but few explain the reasons and systems behind it. I also feel that we need to look more closely at which international sanctions should be directed towards who, to help bring about the restoration of human rights for all Iranian men and women.

We will start from the constitutional point of view, pointing to the underlying reasons that the Islamic Republic of Iran's political system restricts human rights. We will then have a quick look at some of the data on human rights abuses, including those of the religious minorities (which will be detailed by the speakers who will follow). Finishing with a review of the current situation, to understand if, under Rouhani's presidency, the regime is respecting human rights, even partially, or not?

It is vital to understand the constitutional concept and reality of the 'Islamic Republic' as Ayatollah Khomeini built it. It is a mix of theocratic and republican regimes, continuously engineered over 35 years of Islamic Revolution – and still a work in progress! As such, the Iranian constitutional framework is extremely complex and equally paradoxical, based on its presupposed "divine laws".

It is written in constitutional black and white that the central power and absolute authority is in the hands of the Supreme Leader – Mr. Khamenei. He is chosen by, and takes his legitimacy from the Assembly of Experts. He is in charge of the regime's complete ideology and runs, and has the right to impose his will – in God's name – on all the institutions.

This specific mode of governance – Welayat al- Faqih – means that sovereignty is not in the peoples' hands, but comes from God via the Supreme Leader.

It is within this constitution where the process of legitimation comes from the top-down, that the Iranian people are invited to choose their representatives – the President and members of Parliament. But all candidates are 'pre-selected' by the unelected Guardian Council of the Constitution, totally under the influence of the Supreme Leader.

In June 1989, Mr. Khamenei became the guardian of Khomeini's ideological principles and revised the Constitution in July 1989 with his new status as the "absolute ruler". In the name of "Divine Truth," the Supreme Leader took total control of foreign relations, defense, security and justice, with a heavy hand on the media.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a two-headed system, with one head claiming "God's sovereignty," imposing its "divine right", and the other head which in principle at least, provides choices and safeguards the rights of the Iranian people. The President, Mr. Rouhani is, in theory, part of this second head. It is a constant struggle between the two heads and many different factions, with, until today, the Supreme Leader winning by polarizing society ideological lines.

Of the 11 presidential elections organized since the 1979 Revolution, this system, theocratic, modern and totalitarian, systematically ejects the 'elected' leaders, as the following details confirm:

- Mr. Bani Sadr, the first president, elected in 1980 with 78% of the votes, was impeached and forced into exile, not even 19 months into his mandate;
- Mr. Rajai, his successor, elected with 91% of the votes, was assassinated along with his Prime Minister, Mr. Bahonar;
- Mr. Rafsanjani, with 96% of the votes for his first mandate and 64 % for the second, strangely had his 2013 election bid 'rejected' by the 'Guardian Council';
- Mr. Khatemi who was elected twice with unprecedented levels of participation, is himself forbidden to leave the country and under house arrest.
- The guillotine of the ideology which was previously in the hands of its supposedly favorite twice-elected candidate Mr. Ahmadinejad, has turned against him, and he is now banished from the public sphere.

If the republic openly and publicly tramples the rights of its own Presidents, how could it honor the rights of its citizens? Can we really expect respect for human rights under a regime that represses the rights of elected presidents, parliamentarians...? Or presidential candidates like Mr. Moussavi and Mr. Karoubi? Or even its own religious leaders, such as Ayatollah Montazeri, founding father of the Islamic Republic and the Welayat al- Faqih? All of whom are under house arrest, with others exiled for life, imprisoned or in the worst cases, executed or assassinated.

Indeed, Iranians are 'free' to vote, but for whom, under what conditions and with what control over the outcome of their own votes? A system that is constitutional in principle, but is in reality controlled from start to finish by the Council of Guardians, the Assembly of Experts and as necessary, the national intelligence and security.

For more than 25 years, under the leadership of the Welayat al- Faqih, freedom of expression, association and assembly have seen a violent degradation, for the Iranian people, and for the multiple factions within the regime itself. The 2009 presidential election clearly demonstrated that at an institutional level, there are no human rights and the entire system and social setup works to keep the regime intact, at whatever cost.

For any sanctions to have any impact on human and women's rights in Iran, they need to be aimed in the right direction. Firstly, the institutions responsible for the different human rights abuses need to be clearly targeted. Knowing that the majority of abuses originate from non-elected institutions, the people need to be supported in their struggle to gain justice from these same institutions. If in Iran, they are only 'accountable to God'... Internationally at least they should be made accountable through the sanctions.

Let's have a look at some of the human rights abuses being played out on the Iranian stage.

Religious intolerance and discrimination, and organized hatred have increased tensions, with wider and larger-scale restrictions applied across all spheres of society, including for ethnic groups (Kurd, Baluch, Arabic)- and religious minorities (Sunni, Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians) for whom the regime does not even recognize their status as a minority.

The very concept of minority/majority is completely stripped of any sense, with the majority of the population – women and young people – having no rights either.

Both in number and scope, Iranian women are the first victims of religious fanaticism: administratively through the Family Code which deprives them of their most basic rights regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody... and morally, persecuted daily at the hands of Iran's morality police patrols.

Statistics show that between 2003 and 2013, more than 30,000 women were arrested in Iran. Official reports also point to nearly half a million warnings issued against women and 7,000 women then being forced to pledge to observe Islamic hijab laws. A further 4,400 cases were referred to the judiciary. The Tehran Deputy Chief of Police announced that on average, 150 women are arrested each day and 1,500 receive warnings.

The government maintains a legal interpretation of Islam that enforces gender segregation across the country without regard to religious affiliation, with women of

all religious groups obliged to adhere to Islamic dress in public – full head covering and loose full body clothing.

The constitution itself, along with other laws and policies, greatly restrict freedom of religion and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security closely monitor all religious activity.

In theory, so-called ‘minority religions’ are free to worship and to form ‘religious societies,’ as long as they do not proselytize’. The paradox of this government is that they don’t actually recognize minorities, so how can the rights and responsibilities be fixed for them? In reality, non-Muslims cannot engage in public religious expression, persuasion, or conversion amongst Muslims, and proselytizing is punishable by death.

Needless to say that the government does not recognize groups such as the Sufi Muslims and Bahais, who have no freedom to practice their beliefs. While there are no official figures, estimates of Sufi numbers are up to 5 million in Iran. A very large ‘minority’!

The government guards a close eye on religious material, with Government officials frequently confiscating Christian Bibles and pressuring their publishing houses.

And don’t think the situation is any better for “majority” Shiite Muslim citizens. Within Shia Islam, the interpretation is ever-changing and many of this “majority” find also themselves in trouble with the government – including highly esteemed religious leaders.

As the Constitution does not allow Shia Muslims to change, or renounce their religious beliefs. A child born to a Muslim father is legally considered as a Muslim and conversion from Islam is considered as apostasy, which is punishable by death.

The interpretation of Islamic law is very wide and very flexible, with blasphemy a common charge, which can be punishable by death, and could end in a public hanging. A crime against Islam can be considered as a crime against the Islamic Republic, meaning treason against the State, also punishable by death... not to mention the torture, intimidation and ‘accidental’ deaths that occur on a daily basis in Iranian prisons.

It is not without reason that Iran is leading the world in the per-capita number of executions.

So, has any of this changed since Rouhani came to office in August of 2013?

No.

Unfortunately the numbers continue to rise as statistics show.

During his election campaign, Rouhani denounced the repressive climate, but without questioning the regime’s ideology which limits the fundamental rights and freedoms of Iranians to practically zero.

Social advances made up the biggest promises of his campaign, and national and international public opinion is waiting for results, which according to all the latest reports are slow in coming.

But as we have seen, the Islamic Republic's constitution does not confer Rouhani with either the status or the authority to deliver on such promises. In 7 months, the only noticeable move is the change of tone and mastery of the rhetorical and cooperative language.

But to believe that the system and its ideological orientation is changing is ill-informed and will create analytical errors with serious consequences for the Iranian people.

Following his 'preselected' election win, Rouhani's number one priority is to secure an end to the international sanctions that jeopardize the survival of the regime. Given the magnitude of effects of sanctions on the economy, his government is willing to grant certain well-calculated concessions at the international and national level. And to do this, he needs to be recognized as having philosophical-political positions that are beyond both conservative and reformist factions.

The Rouhani government is made up of, and surrounded by, networks of intelligence and security, as well as technocrats advocating economic liberalism. But, they will not move towards political liberalism unless pressured by the international community, and especially as a concession to Europe, such as Ms. Ashton's recent trip showed – to help bring an end to the sanctions.

Human rights improvements should be a non-negotiable part of the final resolution of the nuclear crisis.

To survive the inner power struggles, and with the Assembly, the armed forces and the Supreme Leader, Rouhani needs to play a winning financial-economic hand, in a rather tight window of time. From this imperative comes his determination to get a win-win solution with the five plus one group. All the while getting battered at home by the extremist wings of the administration, notably the Ministries of Justice and Internal Affairs.

But here again, caution should be applied to the Rouhani government's cry, who to gain strength and credibility with the 5 +1 group, feels compelled to go through the motions of pleading for the release of certain prisoners, defend freedom of the press, or respect the freedom of association and meetings for some artists, writers, lawyers, or even women's groups women or ethnic minorities, etc. Only going through the motions...

But there is some light...

Initiatives to solve the nuclear crisis could be an opening to bring about more flexible policies towards sectors of civil society, and some of the religious and ethnic minorities, provided that the issue of human rights gets on the nuclear negotiations agenda in the first place.

It is a window of opportunity that should not be missed, to enable some real positive change for the Iranian people.

Moreover, firmness on human rights is the only credible guarantee to diminish the military involvement – controlled by the Revolutionary Guards – in Iran's nuclear project. This military aspect, far from being the paternal sponsor of a national project, is a thinly disguised continuation of Khomeini's unfinished revolution, orchestrated by the Supreme Leader.

It symbolizes all the aspects of poor governance, which as always, justifies its obvious mismanagement of Iran's immense resources, by violent rhetoric against the Israeli-American scapegoat.

Iran has a long history and culture with human and religious rights. 2,500 years back, the Persian King of Kings Cyrus the Great ruled over one of the largest empires ever seen in the history of mankind, on the principles of religious freedom and harmony. And more recently, it was a renewed respect for human rights in 1977 that helped usher in the beginnings of regime change at that time.

So today's question is how can Europe participate in helping to bring human rights and religious freedom can back to their rightful place in Iran, to relieve the unspeakable suffering of Iranian men, women and children for over 35 years.

Thank you for your attention.

Thirty-five years of forced hijab

Justice for Iran (08.03.2014) - ***Thirty-five Years of Forced Hijab: The Widespread and Systematic Violation of Women's Rights in Iran*** points out over the past ten years more than 30,000 women have faced arrest throughout Iran due to hijab laws. Iran is the first country where the state forces all girls and women to observe uniform hijab laws. Without a clear definition of hijab, Islamic Republic laws consider women who lack "Islamic veil" in "public" as criminal and punishable by imprisonment and fines. The call for enforced hijab was first raised 35 years ago by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, just 24 days after the revolution was declared victorious, on 7 March 1979. However, given the resistance of a considerable percentage of Iranian women, it took three years of tension and violence to enforce this law.

Although Islamic Sharia laws deem hijab compulsory at age 9, Islamic Republic requires all girls to begin observing hijab laws at the outset of primary education at age 7. It also imposes hijab laws on women of all faiths regardless of their sacred teachings on the issue of hijab. Furthermore, it is used as a tool for segregation and imposition of a wide range of limitations on women including violations of fundamental rights, including the right to education, work and movement.

The report documents over past 35 years many women have been deprived of education, employment, driving, travelling by air, access to public medical services as well as cultural and recreational facilities because of their hijab. It also refers to instances involving arrest and other violations of the articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child through impositions of hijab rules on girl children.

In addition, the report embodies a comparative look at the Islamic Republic's efforts to enforce hijab laws in contradiction to its international commitments. As a signatory to the International Bill of Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child Iran is duty bound to implement the articles. However, many of its domestic codes and procedures on hijab violate the rights enshrined in these documents.

The report goes on to point out how a high number of women are not only exposed to insult, harassment and physical abuse at the hands of the authorities, but that they also face detention and various forms of torture, including lashing. The report describes the process of arrest and prosecution of women based on the charge of improper Islamic

hijab and unjust sentences. It also presents an overview of the psychological abuse where in some cases women have faced death or suicide. However, it also highlights an important historical fact that despite 35 years of violent enforcement measures, Iranian women continue to resist hijab laws and through their daily struggles provide an example for women in other Muslim majority countries, in particular those in transition, to demand their rights and freedom.

In addition, based on official statistics, reports by human rights organizations and victim statements instances involving harassment, such as expulsion of women from governmental offices, refusal to grant promotion on the grounds of lacking proper Islamic hijab, banning access to education, summoning female students to disciplinary bodies and expulsion from dormitories continue unabated. Furthermore, despite many promises there has been no tangible improvement since Mr. Rowhani took office.

"Thirty-five Years of Hijab" offers a number of recommendations and highlights the need for the international community to shine a spotlight on forced hijab as a symbol and means of advancing serious and systematic human rights violation of more than half of Iran's population. JFI calls on the Islamic Republic to lift the mandatory hijab laws and instead safeguard women's rights to education, work, participation in cultural life, access to public services, and freedom of movement. JFI also calls on the United Nations, in particular the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, the United Nations Working Group on Discrimination Against Women look into gender-based discrimination in policies and practice; and the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, to include the issue of "forced hijab" in Iran in their agenda and use all means at their disposal to force the Islamic Republic to lift the law on mandatory hijab.

Full Report:

<http://justice4iran.org/english/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Hejab-Report-JFI-English.pdf>

Hashem Shaabani Nejad, Iranian poet, executed for 'waging war on God'

The World Post (13.02.2014) - Arab-Iranian poet and human rights activists Hashem Shaabani Nejad was executed in Iran at the end of January on charges including "waging war on god," [the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center reports](#).

According to IHRDC, Shaabani was executed in an undisclosed prison alongside Hadi Rashedi. Both men were members of the Dialogue Institute, an organization in Iran's Khuzestan Province that promotes the understanding of Arabic culture and literature in Iran.

Arrested in early 2011, Shaabani appeared with three other men in a documentary on Iran's Press TV in December 2011 in which they appeared to confess to being part of an armed Arab terrorist group. Shaabani later said the confession was coerced. Even so, the poet was sentenced to death in July 2013 on charges of waging war on god, sowing corruption on earth, producing propaganda against the Islamic Republic and acting against national security.

[According to independent watchdog Freedom House](#), Shaabani's execution shows that despite promises by Iranian president Hassan Rouhani after his 2013 election to fight discrimination of ethnic minorities, violent repression remains government policy.

Iran's Arab minority is believed to constitute [between 3 and 8 percent of the population](#) and mostly lives in the oil-rich Khuzestan province, which is known as Ahwaz in the Arab community. Amnesty International warned in January 2014 that [minority groups, including the Ahwazi Arabs, are subject to discriminatory laws](#) and suffer from restricted social, cultural, linguistic and religious rights.

In addition, the organization says members of the Arab minority disproportionately receive unfair trials, sometimes culminating in the death penalty. According to Amnesty, authorities have remained focused on the Ahwazi since major unrest erupted in the region in 2005.

The poet Iran executed

The hanging of poet Hashem Shaabani tells you everything you need to know about Iran's regime.

By David Keyes

The Daily Beast (11.02.2014) - As Iranian poet Hashem Shaabani was dangling from a noose two weeks ago, desperately grasping for his last breath of air, one wonders what he would have thought about Western leaders who call President Hassan Rouhani a moderate. What exactly is moderate, Shaabani could have thought, about a regime which brands a poet an "enemy of God" and strangles him to death?

The crazy thing is that by the logic of the Iranian government, Shaabani had to be killed. He criticized God and the punishment for blasphemy is clear: death. Technically, Shaabani criticized the regime by speaking out against repression of ethnic Arabs in the Khuzestan province, but since the regime sees itself as the representative of God on Earth, his fate was sealed. It's not called a theocracy for nothing.

Islamic scholar and former Iraqi parliamentarian, Iyad Jamal al Din, once told me of Iran's Supreme Leader:

Ayatollah Khamenei is a man just like me. He's a cleric and I'm a cleric. But he says, "I am the representative of God." From him, these words make me sleepless. You all [in America] sleep normally because you don't know what that means. I know what it means. He means that he is right and the others are wrong. And wrong must not live. You should be defeated and destroyed.

President Rouhani and foreign minister Mohamed Zarif are making quite a show of Iran's supposed moderation. They speak at ritzy conferences in Davos and Munich, maintain Twitter and Facebook accounts (despite banning them in Iran) and talk of Iran's commitment to peace and justice. But behind the soothing rhetoric is a regime which tortures journalists, imprisons bloggers and hangs poets.

As world powers attempt to negotiate an accord with Iran, they would do well to keep Shaabani in mind. What does the hanging of a poet have to do with nuclear negotiations? Everything. It gets to the heart of the nature of the regime.

Can the world trust a government which doesn't even trust its own people? Can the West rely on a regime which so fears dissidents that it puts them to death? Can nukes

be entrusted to the murderers of Neda, the young Iranian woman whose bloody death was captured on YouTube at a 2009 protest?

Shaabani, and the more than 300 Iranians executed since Rouhani took power, are powerful reminders that the Iranian government remains as fanatic as it is dangerous. The scores of students, bloggers and peaceful activists languishing in Evin prison are living testaments to Iran's ongoing brutality.

When the Iranian government no longer fears its own people, then we will no longer have any reason to fear it.

Afghan refugees in Iran face abuse, says HRW

BBC News (20.11.2013) - The US-based advocacy group Human Rights Watch (HRW) has accused Iran of violating its legal obligations towards refugees from Afghanistan and failing to protect them from abuse.

In a report published on Wednesday, HRW says thousands of Afghans have been summarily deported from Iran without a hearing of their right to remain.

Thousands of Afghans enter Iran illegally every year.

About 2.4 million Afghans are resident in the country.

'Real and serious danger'

In its report, HRW says Iranian officials "have in recent years limited legal avenues for Afghans to claim refugee or other immigration status in Iran, even as conditions in Afghanistan have deteriorated".

Iran's home office says that around two-thirds of the Afghans resident there are illegal immigrants.

"Iran is deporting thousands of Afghans to a country where the danger is both real and serious," said Joe Stork from HRW's Middle East division.

"Iran has an obligation to hear these people's refugee claims rather than sweeping them up and tossing them over the border to Afghanistan."

HRW said it had evidence of violations including physical abuse, detention in unsanitary and inhumane conditions, forced labour and separation of families.

Last year the Iranian government passed a law that restricts residence permits to those Afghan immigrants who live in three of Iran's 31 provinces.

In November, it ordered 300,000 Afghans living in the country on temporary permits to leave, HRW said, adding that so far the plan had not been implemented.

HRW said the Iranian government's policies meant many undocumented Afghan children could not go to school, and migrants recognised as refugees were limited to "dangerous and poorly paid" manual labour jobs.

And the group warned of rising anti-foreigner sentiment in Iran which was leaving the Afghan population at risk of physical violence.

16 Balochis were executed in an act of revenge by Iran

Between 314 and 544 persons have been executed in Iran in 2013 alone

Asian Human Rights Commission (04.11.2013) - 16 Baloch political prisoners were executed in Iran in an act of revenge for an attack on the border security forces. The executed Balochis were already in Zahedan prison and took no part in the attack. It was alleged that the Baloch prisoners crossed the border from Pakistan and they were executed after an encounter between Mersad, an Iranian paramilitary group and another armed group. In this encounter, according to government news agencies, 17 border security personnel were killed. Public prosecutor Mohammad Marziyeh announced that "Sixteen rebels linked to groups hostile to the regime were hanged in the prison of Zahedan in response to the death of border guards in Saravan, Iran."

Many Balochi persons have been arrested in Iran on charges of crossing the border illegally, smuggling drugs and creating a law and order situation. However, they are hanged on the charges of insurgency after attacks on border security personnel and clashes with the security forces.

The Balochis residing in Pakistan and Iran are the victims of their regimes on both sides of the border who are happy to use them as scapegoats to appease the public. Balochis want only the fundamental rights that they are entitled to but face enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in both countries. Balochistan, a vast area of land has bountiful natural resources and Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan have occupied the land and denied the people of their rights to a homeland. These three countries are making free with the natural resources and give nothing back but oppression and fear.

According to the Hizbe Mardum, Balochistan, that on October 25, 16 political prisoners from Balochistan province bordering Iran and Pakistan were put to death by hanging. These hangings came as retaliation for a clash between Mersad, a paramilitary group and another armed group.

Public prosecutor Mohammad Marziyeh announced that "Sixteen rebels linked to groups hostile to the regime were hanged in the prison of Zahedan in response to the death of border guards in Saravan". He also claimed that more people were to be executed in the coming days. The 16 men who were hanged had already been in the Iran prison system, and were not part of the military clash. Evidence has yet to emerge linking them to the military forces that clashed by the border.

The armed encounter took place in a mountainous region outside the town of Saravan in the Saran Balochistan province. Various references claim that somewhere between fourteen and seventeen border security personnel were killed in the encounter.

The Iranian government has a poor record of disproportionate punishment in executing Baloch citizens and denying them the right of fair trial. Many of the citizens of Balochistan province are minority Sunni Muslims, compared to the Shi'a majority in Iran.

According to the Balochistan Peoples Party, Iran is home to the second highest number of death penalty cases in the world, falling behind only China, a country that has nearly 18 times its' population. According to official statistics from the Iranian government and

reproduced by Amnesty International, 314 hangings have been carried out thus far in 2013. Unofficial death penalty monitors put the statistic closer to 544, and the real number may be much higher. Of these, at least 63 have been public.

In Iran, the death penalty is prescribed for a variety of non-lethal offenses including spying, apostasy, rape, extra-marital affairs, same-sex relations, and drug trafficking. According to the provincial justice chief, eight of the prisoners were hung for drug offenses. The remaining eight had been convicted of 'enmity against God' and 'corruption on Earth'. The circumstances surrounding their arrest, trial, and detention is unclear. However, they were all Balochistan citizens.

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has received the names of ten of the executed persons. They are: Hamza Regi, Abdol Wahab Regi, Meherullah Regi, Habibullah Regi, Jehand Regi, Sher Ahmad Hussainzehi, Bashir Ahmad Hussainzehi, Nazim Mollazehi Naveed Shujaee and Hamid Wakalat. Of these ten persons, two of them had already sent appeals to the United Nations pleading for clemency which is further proof that they were already in the Iranian prison system and therefore could not possibly have taken part in the attack.

There are also concerns about the competency of Iran's legal system. Often, prisoners are denied access to legal counsel and due process. Denying prisoners access to defense attorneys directly conflicts with their right to effective representation under the ICCPR. Legal representation and due process are a fundamental right in ensuring a fair trial. The vague wording of legislation and crimes, as well as low standards for evidence cast doubts on Iran's judicial system to meet international standards.

There was some hope that new President Hassan Rouhani would bring about changes in the practice of torture and state-sponsored killings. However, since taking office in August, Rouhani's regime has seen an increase in executions and enforced disappearances.

Article 14 of the ICCPR further provides that everyone "shall be entitled to... adequate time and facilities for the preparation of his defenses." To continually deny minority prisoners the right to due process and a fair trial is to violate international legal standards and the ICCPR.

Iran has been a signatory to the ICCPR since 1975 yet continues to ignore its obligations. The death penalty must end in Iran, especially as it disproportionately affects impoverished and minority groups. 'Revenge' executions are not a fair application of the law and will not help to stem violence.

The AHRC urges the Iranian authorities to stop executions in general and of Baloch political prisoners in particular. Iran must respect the basic human rights of the Baloch people and other minorities in the country. The government must conduct impartial investigations into the extrajudicial killings of civilian Balochis and other minorities living in Iran; and take immediate measures to ensure that the enforced displacement of the Baloch people is halted. The authorities responsible for the executions of the 16 Balochis must be investigated and punished accordingly. Furthermore, the families of the executed persons must be given suitable compensation.

It should free all political prisoners and people who have committed any crimes under the laws of the country must be ensured of a fair, free and open trial and access to legal representation.

Iran's newfound engagement should extend to human rights

Governments should prevent horse-trading across the human rights and nuclear portfolios

Huffington Post (23.10.2013) - In recent months, the new Iranian government of President Hassan Rouhani has taken important steps to engage with the international community to resolve concerns surrounding its nuclear program. In his address to the UN General Assembly on September 24, Rouhani [declared](#) that Iran "is prepared to engage immediately in time-bound and results-oriented talks to build mutual confidence and the removal of mutual uncertainties with full transparency." While Rouhani was talking specifically about Iran's nuclear program, the Iranian people and the world hope that this newfound approach will be extended to human rights.

Reducing international tensions and improving the economy were not the only issues on which Rouhani was elected to office. In fact, these goals were not distinct to his campaign. Most of the candidates within the large field of presidential hopefuls offered their own solutions toward these objectives. What actually distinguished Rouhani from his opponents, and arguably the reason why he won, was his promise to uphold the human rights of the Iranian people. During the campaign, Rouhani promised to advance free speech; to end discrimination against women and minorities; and to release political prisoners. In April, he stated that "All Iranian people should feel there is justice. Justice means equal opportunity. All ethnicities, all religions, even religious minorities, must feel justice."

This week, Iran is once again the topic of discussion at the UN. This time, human rights take center stage. The presentation of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran on Wednesday affirms that much work remains to be done for President Rouhani's pledges on human rights to be turned into policy. According to the [Special Rapporteur's report](#):

The human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran continues to warrant serious concern.... tensions between various aspects of the country's laws and its human rights obligations, along with the capricious application of those laws, remain causes of the lack of progress. As a result, gender discrimination, as well as systemic violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, continue to characterize the human rights situation in the country.

The fact is, until recently Iran has done little to improve its record on human rights despite the demands of its people and the international community. The government has failed to cooperate with UN human rights mechanisms, or to implement the hundreds of recommendations provided by UN bodies since the early 1980s for it to meet its international human rights obligations. For instance, while Iran accepted [126 specific human rights recommendations](#) by the UN Human Rights Council's universal periodic review in 2010, it has done little to implement in earnest any of them. It has failed to allow any of the UN's independent experts mandated to monitor human rights around the world to visit the country since 2005.

Some positive steps however have been taken by the Rouhani administration in recent weeks, for instance the release of several prisoners of conscience including Nasrin Sotoudeh, a human rights advocate and lawyer. Still, there is no indication that these steps represent concrete, irreversible changes in Iran's policies toward its citizenry. No legal reforms or guarantees have yet been provided to ensure that citizens and victims will receive the protections and remedies they have thus far been denied. Absent legal

reforms, the concern exists that positive steps may have more to do with improving Iran's public image as the country negotiates on its nuclear program.

The reality in Iran is still grim. The country continues to be the world's leading per capita executioner. Between January 2012 and June 2013, the state took the lives of 724 citizens, and most for crimes that did not meet the international standard for capital punishment. Human rights organizations have [noted](#) that the rate of executions has actually accelerated in recent weeks with 125 persons being to death since Rouhani's election. Iranian courts recently declared plans to re-execute a man after he survived his first hanging.

The plight of journalists remains a serious source of concern, with 40 journalists currently serving prison sentences, convicted for either national security crimes or crimes of a political nature, with 18 being convicted for "spreading propaganda against the State." Over 500 human rights defenders remain detained. Iranian human rights activists [estimate](#) the total number of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Iran to be around 1,000. Prison conditions are deplorable with reports of overcrowding, limited access to sanitation, and inadequate provisions of food, water, and medical treatments. And discrimination against women in law and practice continues unabated. Women's access to decision-making roles and higher education remains restricted, with women banned from 77 fields of study and hundreds of courses. And, just last month, a disturbing new law was passed allowing men to marry a foster or adopted daughter as young as 13.

President Rouhani has pledged to actively pursue the passage of citizen's rights legislation in the Iranian Parliament. This is a crucially important effort to ensure that the internationally guaranteed rights of Iranians are nationally codified, legally binding, and in accordance with international human rights law. The president should use all of his power to build a case for the debate and passage of these laws. But no Iranian government can move this difficult agenda forward on its own. Progress requires both political courage by the Rouhani administration as well as robust investment and partnership by the international community.

Iran's situation will be considered by UN member states in November and again in March. This provides a good timeframe for all nations to engage in substantive discussions with the Iranian Government about its specific plans to usher in human rights and democratic reforms. UN member states should make it crystal clear now that attention to human rights will not be horse-traded for nuclear concessions from Iran. Quite the opposite, the international community has the responsibility to elevate the human rights portfolio on par with other issues, and to induce Iran's cooperation with the UN Human Rights Council and its appointed mandate holder. If Iran seizes this opportunity, it will come closer to achieving long overdue progress on human rights and democratization in the country.

Dokhi Fassihian is an international human rights expert. Since 2003, she has led three non-governmental organizations working in the areas of human rights, democracy, and Iranian affairs.

Federalism can help remedy conflicts in the Middle East, say conference speakers at the European Parliament

By Serena Romeo, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (09.10.2013) - On 2nd October, MEP Tunne Kelam hosted a conference in the European Parliament on federalism in the Middle East as one possible solution to the region's conflicts. The event was organised in collaboration with the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) and gave particular focus to Iran and Iraq.

Marino Busdachin, General Secretary of UNPO and moderator of the conference, underlined that federalism is not an easy system to implement, citing that even modern states like Belgium have their own problems to face with their respective federalist systems. In the Middle East, where states and minorities exist with overlapping interests, implementing such a system could nonetheless offer a path toward reconciliation within countries and in the region.

William Spencer from the Institute for International Law and Human Rights compared the different systems of government adopted by European states with the possibility of a federalist system in Iraq. The expressions of federalism in Europe vary from one state to another, depending on which power or which authority has been decentralised. In the case of Iraq, Spencer noted that the country's new constitution has defined its government as a federal system, which has the potential to mitigate some long-standing conflicts; however, work still needs to be done to provide an adequate legal framework to protect religious and linguistic minorities in Iraq. Even still, such a framework could be useless if state institutions are too weak to guarantee these protections. Federalism can be a first step toward democracy, he said, but it is surely not the final step.

Regarding Iran, Ayda Karimili, spokesperson for the Southern Azerbaijani Alliance, began by outlining the composition of the country's population, where there are several ethnic minorities like Turks, Kurds, Baloch, Turkmen, Arabs and Lors. However, solidarity between the various "nations" of Iran, said Loghman Hazar Ahmedi of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan and member of the Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran (CNFI), is strong only because of their common struggle against discrimination from the regime. According to Loghman Ahmedi, the implementation of a federal system would be positive both for the state and for the security of the Middle East region.

The Government of Iran has been widely criticised for its systematic violations of human rights and brutal repression of its political opponents. On the 26th September, an exchange of views on the human rights situation in Iran took place at the EP Subcommittee on Human Rights, during which a political prisoner described the mistreatment and "psychological rape" he endured in an Iranian prison. In November 2012, the European Parliament passed a Resolution on the situation of ethnic minorities in Iran, highlighting the need to improve the human rights situation there.

The second panel focused on the theoretical concept of federalism. A doctoral researcher at KU Leuven Institute of Philosophy, Michael Jewkes, spoke about the theory of federalism. Nasser Boladai of the Balochistan People's Party discussed how federalism in Iran could be regarded as a solution for the rights of minorities, since minorities are well established in different parts of the Iranian territory. Finally, Ivan Serrano of Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona talked about the implementation of federalism in different European countries in regard to their national minorities.

All in all, the theme of the conference was quite clear: serious consideration of a federal model of government could go a long way toward resolving conflicts in the Middle East. The extent to which sitting governments in the region are prepared to move in this direction – and how to create the political will to do so – are still open for debate.

Iran should halt executions as rate of hangings accelerates

Hundreds gather for a public execution. So far in 2013, Iran has executed at least 402 individuals, 53 of them in public.

International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (08.10.2013) – The Iranian authorities should impose an immediate moratorium on executions in Iran given the alarming rise in the use of the death penalty in recent weeks, the [International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran](#) and the [Iran Human Rights Documentation Center](#) said today.

As World Day Against the Death Penalty approaches on October 10, the Judiciary should review the sentencing guidelines that allow for the use of capital punishment, and revise them in accordance with international standards, the human rights organizations added.

In the two weeks between September 11 and September 25, Iranian officials hanged a record [50 individuals](#), primarily for drug-related offenses.

“While Rouhani was promoting a softer image of Iran internationally during his visit to New York two weeks ago, it was business as usual on the domestic front with scores of prisoners put to death following unfair trials,” said Hadi Ghaemi, executive director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. “Since Rouhani’s inauguration, the increasing number of prisoners being sent to the gallows is indefensible,” he added.

The increase in execution numbers comes at a time when the release of several well-known political prisoners has raised hopes for substantive human rights reform in Iran. Iranian president Hassan Rouhani’s visit to the UN General Assembly in New York and his diplomatic overtures aimed at ending tensions related to Iran’s nuclear dossier have been widely seen as a new, more conciliatory phase in relations between Iran and the international community. Yet while Rouhani was elected on promises of change and human rights reforms, there have been [at least 125 executions](#) since his inauguration on August 4, with dozens of other prisoners sentenced to death or facing imminent execution.

Iran carries out more executions per capita annually than any other country in the world. So far in 2013, Iran has executed at least 402 individuals. It also carries out many of these executions in public, with 53 such public executions in 2013.

[UN experts](#) and [other governments](#) have repeatedly voiced concern over Iran’s use of the death penalty in drug-related convictions. Under international law, the use of the death penalty is restricted to only the “most serious” crimes, and the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions has [explicitly held](#) that drug-related crimes do not meet this criterion. Yet drug offenders are routinely sentenced to death and executed in Iran. In the past month alone, 25 out of the total 55 individuals executed were convicted of drug-related offenses. United Nations experts [have called on Iranian authorities](#) to impose a moratorium on the death penalty.

There are also serious concerns about the legal rights afforded to defendants in death penalty cases. Many defendants are denied due process and do not have adequate access to legal counsel. Additionally, evidentiary standards in these trials, especially in cases deemed “security crimes” by the Iranian Judiciary, fall well below international norms.

While the executive branch does not have direct control over executions or the prison system, recent developments—including the release of a few prominent political prisoners in advance of Rouhani’s visit to the UN—suggest that Iran’s Judiciary supports the new president’s diplomatic endeavors, at least in part. Yet the accelerating pace of executions over the past month indicates that Iran’s Judiciary has not initiated any broad review of domestic policy since Rouhani’s election.

In addition to the high numbers of individuals put to death for drug-related offenses, there is an on-going concern that the death penalty continues to be used as a tool to stifle political dissent, especially against ethnic minorities, such as in the case of [six Kurdish Sunni activists](#) and [four Arab-Iranian men](#) whose death sentences were recently upheld by Iran’s Supreme Court and who currently face imminent execution.

On September 19, 2013, Mowlana Abdulhamid, the Sunni Friday prayer leader, [wrote a letter](#) to Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, calling for a halt to the execution of another 26 Sunni Kurdish-Iranian young men on death row at Karaj’s Rajaei Shahr prison.

“The rapid pace of executions over the past month shows that while talk of human rights reforms has intensified with the release of high-profile political prisoners and promises for more pardons, there is still a long way to go in pushing change on the margins of society,” said Gissou Nia, executive director of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. “The seeming trend for reform has yet to extend to Iran’s liberal application of the death penalty, which disproportionately affects ethnic minorities and the poor.”

Conference in Brussels examines religion’s role in upcoming Iranian elections

By Dr Mark Barwick, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (10.06.2013) - The Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of Religions and Laïcité at the Free University of Brussels (ULB), headed by Prof. Anne Morelli, recently organised a study day on the role of religion in the upcoming presidential election in Iran. Interventions took place principally by video-conference.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, has accused foreign and domestic critics of trying to undermine the country’s election, which is set for the 14th of June. Indeed, there is much to criticise in the Iranian electoral process. During the video-conference, Professor Ali Ansari of St Andrew’s University in Scotland called it “political theatre.”

The eight candidates for the Iranian presidency are pre-selected by the Guardian Council of the Constitution, a 12-member body that wields extraordinary power and influence. Members of the Council are appointed by the Supreme Leader of Iran, effectively sidelining any political opposition to the regime and ensuring that only loyalists can hold decision-making power in the country. The Guardian Council is charged with interpreting the Constitution, supervising elections and approving candidates for high office.

Referring to the upcoming election, Khamenei said recently that “a vote for any of these eight [presidential] candidates is a vote for the Islamic republic and a vote of confidence in the system and our electoral process.”

Professor Djalili Mohammed-Reza stated that the system, in fact, guarantees that the candidates are not only “yes-men” but more importantly “of course-men” that sanction the authoritarian Islamist regime in power. Political analyst and opposition leader Ramin

Kamrane went even further, stating that the Iranian Constitution is "fascist," conceived to ensure the preservation of the "totalitarian regime" in place.

Sadegh Zibakalan, a leading political scientist and professor at the University of Tehran, said that the big question for many Iranians at this time is whether they should even participate in the election. After the highly-contested 2009 presidential election which provoked widespread protest throughout the country, many Iranians have lost all confidence in the system of which Khamenei speaks so highly. Speakers at the conference were divided on whether to advocate for the boycott or to encourage Iranians to show their support for democracy by voting in high numbers.

The conference was moderated by Dr Majid Golpour, a sociologist and university researcher based in Paris. Additional speakers were Ramin Jahanbegloo, Iranian philosopher and academic based in Canada, Gissou Nia, executive director of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre, and Said Arjomand, professor of sociology at the State University of New York.
