



## Freedom in the World 2007

### ↓ Iran

**Population:** 70,300,000

**Capital:** Tehran

**Political Rights:** 6

**Civil Liberties:** 6

**Status:** Not Free

**Trend Arrow:** Iran received a downward trend arrow due to government crackdowns on freedom of assembly.

#### Ten-Year Ratings Timeline For Year Under Review

(Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status)

Year Under Review	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Rating	6,7,NF	6,6,NF	6,6,NF	6,6,NF	6,6,NF	6,6,NF	6,6,NF	6,6,NF	6,6,NF	6,6,NF

#### Overview:

Political and civil liberties continued to deteriorate in 2006 under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. While the reform movement was dealt significant blows through government suppression of dissent and control over media outlets, there was growing frustration over the Ahmadinejad government's handling of domestic policy. The government crackdown on peaceful demonstrations and strikes throughout the year also inhibited peaceful reform efforts. Negotiations over Iran's nuclear program are at an impasse and the country faces the serious prospect of international sanctions due to its refusal to suspend uranium enrichment activities. As a result the U.N. Security Council unanimously voted to impose limited sanctions. Ahmedinejad and his allies experienced a political setback in the municipal and Assembly of Experts elections in December.

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In 1979, a tumultuous revolution ousted Iran's hereditary monarchy, which was marked by widespread corruption and misguided modernization efforts. The revolution mobilized the entire Iranian population and brought together diverse political interests, from clerics to Communists as well as democrats and human rights activists, in their efforts to rid Iran of the Pahlavi dynasty's rule. Ultimately, it was the more organized clerical establishment, in a strategic alliance with Iran's merchant class, who came out on top. Under the charismatic

leadership of the previously exiled cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, democratic and republican interests were subsumed by more conservative theocratic rule. The constitution drafted by Khomeini's disciples provided for a president and parliament elected through universal adult suffrage, but an unelected clerical body, the Council of Guardians, was empowered to approve electoral candidates and certify that the decisions of elected officials were in accord with Sharia (Islamic law). Khomeini was named supreme leader and invested with control over the security and intelligence services, armed forces, and judiciary. Soon after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran became embroiled in an eight-year war of attrition with neighboring Iraq when Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein launched an invasion to settle a long-running border dispute. The conflict, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, cost over a million lives.

After Khomeini's death in 1989, the title of supreme leader passed to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a middle-ranking cleric who lacked the religious credentials and popularity of his predecessor. The constitution was changed to consolidate his power and give him final authority on all matters of foreign and domestic policy. Beneath its veneer of religious probity, the Islamic Republic gave rise to a new elite that accumulated wealth through opaque and unaccountable means. Basic freedoms were quickly revoked, and women in particular experienced severe regression in their status and rights. By the mid-1990s, dismal economic conditions and a demographic trend toward a younger population had created widespread hostility to clerical rule. A coalition of reformers began to emerge within the leadership, advocating a gradual process of political reform, economic liberalization, and normalization of relations with the outside world that was designed to legitimize, but not radically alter, the existing political system.

Representing this coalition, former culture minister Mohammed Khatami was elected president in 1997 with nearly 70 percent of the vote. Khatami's administration made considerable strides over the next few years in expanding public freedom. More than 200 independent newspapers and magazines representing a diverse array of viewpoints were established, and the authorities relaxed the enforcement of strict Islamic restrictions on social interaction between the sexes. Reformists won 80 percent of the seats in the country's first nationwide municipal elections in 1999 and took the vast majority of seats in parliamentary elections the following year.

The 2000 parliamentary elections prompted a backlash by hard-line clerics that continued through 2006. Over the four years after the elections, the conservative-controlled judiciary closed more than 100 reformist newspapers and jailed hundreds of liberal journalists and activists, while security forces cracked down ruthlessly on student protests against these measures. Significant political and economic reforms were overwhelmingly approved by parliament, only to be vetoed by the Council of Guardians.

Despite being reelected with 78 percent of the vote in 2001, Khatami did not use his popular mandate to challenge the country's conservative clerics, ignoring recurrent pleas by reformist members of parliament to call a national referendum to approve vetoed reform legislation, and repeatedly imploring citizens to refrain from demonstrating in public. Within the broader reform movement, Khatami was accused not just of being ineffective, but also of willingly serving as a democratic façade for an oppressive regime. Many Iranians abandoned hopes for government-led reform. Record low turnout for the February 2003 municipal elections resulted in a landslide victory by hard-liners and showed that the ability of reformist politicians to mobilize the public had deteriorated markedly.

Popular dissatisfaction with the inability of the reform movement to deliver, coupled with the fact that the Council of Guardians rejected the candidacies of most reformist politicians,

including scores of incumbents, allowed hard-liners to triumph in the February 2004 parliamentary elections. Emboldened by the victory, the clerical establishment quickly moved to further restrict public freedom. Several major reformist newspapers were closed, while dozens of journalists and civil society activists were arrested during the year as the authorities attacked the country's last refuge of free expression—the internet. In October, the head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahroudi, announced that “anyone who disseminates information aimed at disturbing the public mind through computer systems” would be jailed. The government also launched a crackdown on “social corruption,” sending thousands of morality police and vigilantes into the streets to enforce Islamic dress codes and prevent public mingling of men and women.

The June 2005 presidential election swept away the last bastion of reformist political power in Iran. While the Council of Guardians ensured a reactionary outcome by rejecting the candidacies of popular reformers, the victory of Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over other approved candidates in a two-round election reflected popular desires for a change in the status quo. The son of a blacksmith, Ahmadinejad dressed modestly and lived in a working-class neighborhood. As Iran's first nonclerical president in more than two decades, he campaigned on promises to fight elite corruption and redistribute Iran's oil wealth to the poor and middle class.

Ahmadinejad signaled his intent to further erode political and civil liberties by awarding the powerful ministries of Information and the Interior to hard-liners who have been implicated directly in the extrajudicial killings of dissidents and other egregious human rights abuses. He quickly began a wide-ranging purge of the administration, including the dismissal of 40 of Iran's most experienced diplomats and seven state bank directors. The new president and many of the new appointees were veterans of the Iran-Iraq War.

His government tightened restrictions on media and announced plans to impose more stringent controls. Human rights suffered, with increasing reports of arrest, torture, and execution. Sharia was also more strictly imposed than under Khatami. Nevertheless, most political power remains with the senior clerics and the supreme leader.

Nevertheless, the most significant change associated with Ahmadinejad's ascension was in Iran's foreign policy. After two years of efforts by Britain, France, and Germany to convince Tehran to permanently halt its uranium-enrichment and plutonium-reprocessing programs, the new administration rejected a European Union (EU) package of economic incentives in August 2005 and resumed uranium processing work. The following month, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) ruled that Iran was in “non-compliance” with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Rather than attempting to allay fears that Iran was seeking to develop nuclear weapons, Ahmadinejad seemed intent on enflaming them, declaring that Iran was “ready to transfer nuclear know-how to Islamic countries.”

In January 2006, Iran announced that it was resuming other aspects of its nuclear fuel research, triggering condemnation from the international community. Iran's foreign minister also announced the end of Iran's voluntary cooperation with the IAEA. In April, an IAEA report faulted Iran for failing to suspend uranium enrichment and improve cooperation with inspectors. As a result of the IAEA reports and faltering negotiations, the UN Security Council in July adopted Resolution 1696, calling for Iran to suspend uranium enrichment by August 31 or face the possibility of economic sanctions.

Despite renewed efforts by the United Nations, the EU and Russia to reach a negotiated settlement with Iran, the nuclear issue remains at an impasse. The main sticking point is Iran's unwillingness to suspend uranium enrichment, which officials say must precede talks involving

the United States. Iranians insist they seek only peaceful uses of nuclear energy and accuse the West of restraining their progress. Iran rejected the August 31 UN deadline, later stating that it would engage in negotiations only if UN sanctions proceeds ended. However, on November 14, 2006, the IAEA reported that traces of plutonium and enriched uranium were found at a nuclear waste facility, after which the U.N. voted unanimously to impose sanctions and ban the sale to Iran of materials that could be used for nuclear or missile programs.

The nuclear crisis has been heightened by Ahmadinejad's repeated calls for the destruction of Israel and public remarks questioning the reality of the Holocaust. During the opening of the UN General Assembly in September, Ahmadinejad defended Iran's right to nuclear energy while criticizing the United States and the United Nations.

Iran has further alarmed the international community through its actions relating to the latest conflict between Israel and Lebanon in July and August 2006. Iran has been accused of using Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shiite militia and political party, as its proxy against Israel. The summer conflict was sparked by Hezbollah's abduction of two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border raid, and some analysts have theorized that Iran ordered the action specifically to draw Israel into a larger military clash. Iran remains accused of being a state sponsor of terrorism, not only through its support of Hezbollah, but because of its ties to Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Iraqi Shiite militias.

In view of Ahmadinejad's confrontation with the international community, fear of appearing unpatriotic reinforced a trend toward self-censorship in the Iranian media and inhibited public criticism of the president. More reform-minded Iranians have criticized Ahmadinejad for isolating Iran internationally and stifling civil liberties at home. As a result, Ahmedinejad and his allies experienced a political setback in the December 2006 municipal and Assembly of Experts election. Many candidates closely associated with Ahmedinejad were not victorious in either election as voters turned to more moderate voices.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties:**

Iran is not an electoral democracy. The most powerful figure in the Iranian government is the supreme leader (Vali-e-Faghih), currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei; he is chosen by the Assembly of Experts, a clerics-only body whose 86 members are elected to eight-year terms by popular vote from a government-screened list of candidates. The supreme leader is commander in chief of the armed forces and appoints the leaders of the judiciary, the heads of state broadcast media, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Expediency Council, and half of the Council of Guardians. Although the president and parliament are responsible for designating cabinet ministers, the supreme leader exercises de facto control over appointments to the ministries of Defense, the Interior, and Intelligence.

All candidates for election to the presidency and the 290-seat unicameral parliament, both with four-year terms, are vetted for allegiance to the ruling theocracy and adherence to Islamic principles by the 12-person Council of Guardians. The council consists of six clergymen appointed by the supreme leader and six civil law experts selected by the head of the judiciary, all for six-year terms (the latter are nominally subject to parliamentary approval). The Council of Guardians also has the power to reject legislation approved by parliament; disputes between the two are arbitrated by the Expediency Council, another unelected, conservative-dominated body, currently headed by former president Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, who has sided with the reformist camp to curb the influence of his rival, current President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The recent elections in December 2006 for the Assembly of Experts were heavily vetted and even delayed by one month. The field of candidates fell sharply as the election cycle wound down; all of the women candidates were disqualified.

However, voter turnout was at 60 percent for the municipal elections, and voters sent a strong message to the current conservative administration. Moderate candidates came out on top in both elections, although the Interior Ministry submitted an election bill in July 2006 that would involve the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in the election vetting process and increase the voting age to 18, as well as impose new qualifications for presidential candidates.

Corruption is pervasive. The hard-line clerical establishment has grown immensely wealthy through its control of tax-exempt foundations (*bonyads*) that monopolize many sectors of the economy, such as cement and sugar production. Iran was ranked 105 out of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is severely limited. The government directly controls all television and radio broadcasting. Satellite dishes are illegal, though generally tolerated. However, there have been increasing reports of satellite dish confiscation and steep fines. The authorities have had some success in jamming broadcasts by dissident overseas satellite stations and recently made it illegal to cooperate with any Persian-language satellite channel. In December 2005, Iran's Supreme National Security Council blocked the launch of an independent satellite channel, Saba TV, run by former parliament speaker Mehdi Karrubi.

The Ministry of Culture must approve publication of all books and inspects foreign books prior to domestic distribution. The Press Court has extensive procedural and jurisdictional power in prosecuting journalists, editors, and publishers for such vaguely worded offenses as "insulting Islam" and "damaging the foundations of the Islamic Republic." The authorities frequently issue ad hoc gag orders banning media coverage of specific topics and events. Despite a period of greater press freedom between the initial election of President Mohammed Khatami and a series of student protests in 1999, threats against and arrests of Iranian journalists have increased in recent years. Many journalists are banned from leaving Iran, and the Islamic Culture and Guidance Ministry announced in September 2006 that it would not allow U.S. reporters to work inside the country.

The Ahmadinejad government holds that the duty of the media is to report and support government actions, not comment on them. Sensitivity over the nuclear issue at home and abroad has led to a greater government crackdown on news reporting. Use of "suspicious sources," or sources that criticize the government, is forbidden.

In 2006, the Iranian government shut down a number of newspapers that it perceived to be insufficiently supportive of the leadership and Ahmadinejad. Papers such as *Sharq*, *Hafez*, *Nameh*, *Khatereh*, and *Karnameh* have all recently been banned. They have been accused of "insulting religious, political, and national figures" as well as "fomenting discord." State forces have also tried to influence editorial content, not only through arrests but by advising publications on the subjects they can cover and what sources they can use. The Intelligence, Security and Islamic Culture and Guidance Ministries have instructed two state news agencies to coordinate coverage with them. In February, the Supreme National Security Council also instructed publications to portray Iran's diplomatic efforts regarding the nuclear dispute as successful.

In July, the government announced that journalists who criticized the government would be prosecuted. Two editors of reformist publications, Lutfullah Meysami and Issa Saharkhiz, were arrested in August. Meysami was found guilty of insulting and libeling the police and

propagandizing against the system. Saharkhiz was sentenced to a jail term and banned from journalistic activity for five years for publishing anticonstitutional articles and propagandizing against the government, among other offenses. The press crackdown under Ahmadinejad is not only due to sensitivities surrounding the nuclear negotiations, but was also an effort to control information that could have impacted the elections for the Assembly of Experts and municipal councils. However, it is worth noting that Akbar Ganji, an Iranian journalist who was arrested and served a six-year prison term was released in October 2006 after paying a fine of US\$163,000. His release followed numerous domestic and international appeals to the government and a prolonged hunger strike.

The government systematically censors internet content by forcing internet service providers (ISPs) to block access to a growing list of “immoral sites and political sites that insult the country’s political and religious leaders.” At least a dozen journalists and bloggers (writers of internet journals known as weblogs, or blogs) were indicted or convicted of press offenses during 2006, and many more were summoned for questioning about their writings. In May, the Communication and Information Technology Ministry announced the creation of a central filtering site that would block access to unauthorized websites, identify internet users and keep a record of sites visited. The ministry also announced the launch of a “national” internet later that year. Many internet sites of student groups and civil society organizations were shut down in 2006.

Religious freedom is limited in Iran, which is largely Shiite Muslim with minorities of Sunni Muslims, Baha’is, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Shiite clerics who dissent from the ruling establishment are frequently harassed. Sunnis enjoy equal rights under the law, but there is discrimination in practice, such as the absence of a Sunni mosque in Tehran and the paucity of Sunnis in senior government offices. The constitution recognizes Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as religious minorities and generally allows them to worship without interference so long as they do not proselytize. Conversion by Muslims to a non-Muslim religion is punishable by death. The non-Muslim minorities are barred from election to representative bodies (though a set number of parliamentary seats are reserved for them), cannot hold senior government or military positions, and face restrictions in employment, education, and property ownership. Some 300,000 Baha’is, Iran’s largest non-Muslim minority, are not recognized in the constitution, enjoy virtually no rights under the law and are banned from practicing their faith. Hundreds of Baha’is have been executed since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Discrimination and harassment against Sufi Muslims has increased. In February 2006, security forces in Qom attacked and detained hundreds of Sufis gathered in front of their house of worship to prevent its destruction. Following the election of Ahmadinejad, negative campaigns against religious minorities in Iran have increased through the state-controlled media. In March 2006, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 60/171, expressing serious concern about the continued discrimination against religious minorities in Iran.

Academic freedom in Iran is limited. Scholars are frequently detained for expressing political views, and students involved in organizing protests often face suspension or expulsion by university disciplinary committees. In the months following his election, Ahmadinejad replaced the heads of at least a dozen major universities. In April 2006, Ramin Jahanbegloo, a prominent intellectual and head of the Cultural Research Bureau, a think tank in Iran, was arrested at Tehran airport and taken to Evin prison, a notorious torture center. There the authorities forced him to confess that he had conspired to overthrow the Islamic Republic, but he was subsequently released. Student political activists have also been targeted by the regime. In

September 2006, over 50 liberal student-rights activists were ejected from their universities. The government has also prevented liberal student activists from registering for the new academic year, and has begun a campaign targeting liberal student organizations. Authorities bugged and monitored the movements and communications of student activists, even arresting some on vague charges. In July 2006, Ahmad Batebi, a well known former student activist, was re-arrested and returned to Evin prison.

The 1979 constitution prohibits public demonstrations that “violate the principles of Islam,” a vague provision used to justify the heavy-handed dispersal of assemblies and marches. Hard-line vigilante organizations unofficially sanctioned by the conservative establishment—most notably the Basij and Ansar-i Hezbollah—play a major role in breaking up public demonstrations.

The Iranian government frequently disrupts peaceful protests and arrests participants. Even former officials are not immune. Former member of parliament Mousavi Khoini was detained in June 2005 while attending a peaceful public protest. He has been held without charge, and has claimed that prison officials tortured him in order to force him to renounce past criticism of the government. As a member of parliament, Khoini had repeatedly challenged the judiciary and intelligence services for human rights abuses. In July 2006, Iranian security services violently dispersed a peaceful assembly of women’s rights activists marking International Women’s Day. Police beat and arrested a number of demonstrators. Freedom of assembly was heavily restricted in 2006 as many more peaceful protests were violently dispersed by security forces.

The constitution permits the establishment of political parties, professional syndicates, and other civic organizations, provided they do not violate the principles of “freedom, sovereignty, and national unity” or question the Islamic basis of the republic. Human rights discourse and grassroots activism are integral parts of Iranian society. However, human rights and civil society activists face many challenges. The security services routinely arrest and harass secular activists. In August 2006, the interior ministry announced the closure of the Center for the Defense of Human Rights, founded by Nobel peace laureate Shirin Ebadi, for failure to obtain a permit. The action was part of the ministry’s wider effort to control and regulate the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Although permits are not required by law, the ministry has been imposing them and shutting down organizations that do not seek or qualify for them.

Iranian law does not allow independent labor unions to exist, though workers’ councils are represented in the government-sanctioned Workers’ House, the country’s only legal labor federation. In the past year, there were more than 800 protests and demonstrations in Iran, many of which were labor related. In December 2006, a bus strike over the preemptive arrest of 14 bus driver association leaders and wage disputes caused traffic chaos in the capital. Security forces attacked and arrested hundreds of the striking drivers.

The judicial system is not independent, as the supreme leader directly appoints the head of the judiciary, who in turn appoints senior judges. General Courts ostensibly safeguard the rights of defendants, but in practice suspects are frequently tried in closed sessions without access to legal counsel. Political and other sensitive cases are tried before Revolutionary Courts, where due process protections are routinely disregarded and trials are often summary, lasting as little as five minutes. Dissident clerics are tried before the Special Court for the Clergy. The country’s penal code is based on Sharia and provides for flogging, stoning, amputation, and death for a range of social and political offenses; these punishments are carried out in practice.

Although the constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, these practices are increasingly routine. Suspected dissidents are often held in unofficial, illegal detention centers run by a security apparatus consisting of the intelligence services, the Revolutionary Guard, judicial officials, and the police. Allegations of torture are common in such centers and in the notorious Evin prison. Although legislation banning the use of torture in interrogations was promulgated in 2004, allegations of torture persisted in 2006.

Prison conditions are notoriously poor in Iran, and allegations of torture and death in captivity are common. Political prisoners are held in deplorable conditions, and supporters who protest their detention or defend their cause are also prosecuted. Two student activists died in Evin prison in 2006 following mistreatment and hunger strikes. Valiollah Feyz Mahdavi died on September 7, 2006, following the death of Akbar Mohammadi on July 30. Khalil Bahramian, a lawyer defending Akbar Mohammadi, was charged with insulting the system after he commented on the questionable death.

Iran is a world leader in juvenile executions. Even though it has ratified two treaties on children's rights, it has executed more juveniles in the last five years than any other country. Overall, execution of prisoners has risen since Ahmadinejad's election. In 2006 alone, the authorities executed 10 prisoners and condemned 21 to death. Women are again being sentenced to death by stoning.

The constitution and laws call for equal rights for all ethnic groups, allowing considerable cultural and linguistic freedom, but in practice these rights are restricted by the authorities. Ethnic Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis and Azeris complain of political and economic discrimination, as do religious minorities. Kurdish opposition groups suspected of separatist aspirations, such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), are brutally suppressed.

Ethnic tensions and dissent among minorities have been on the rise for the past two years. In March 2006, Baluchis attacked a police motorcade, and clashes erupted in May between Azeris and government forces over an offensive cartoon published in a state-run newspaper. There have also been a number of attacks against the government by ethnic Arabs living in southwestern Iran. However, the most pressing ethnic issue is the "Kurdish question." Approximately 5 million Kurds live in Iran, concentrated in some of the least developed areas of the country. The autonomy of Kurds in neighboring Iraq has inspired Iranian Kurds to agitate for greater independence. KDPI conducted a number of military operations against the government in 2006.

Women are widely educated; 94 percent of secondary school aged girls attend school, compared to only 80 percent of boys, and a majority of university students are female. Although Iranian women currently hold seats in parliament, they do not enjoy the same political rights as men. Women are barred from serving as judges and are routinely excluded from running for public office. Women also face systematic discrimination in legal and social matters. A woman cannot obtain a passport without the permission of a male relative or her husband, and women do not enjoy equal rights under Sharia statutes governing divorce, inheritance, and child custody. A woman's testimony in court is given only half the weight of a man's. Women must conform to strict dress codes and are segregated from men in most public places. Bowing to popular pressure, Ahmadinejad issued a ruling in May 2006 that allowed women to attend soccer matches, but it was promptly overturned by religious authorities.