

# THE IRAN NOTES

The Iran Notes is a series of short thematic briefing notes produced by FIDH and LDDHI to analyze the key aspects and root causes of Iran's ongoing human rights crisis.  
For feedback: [asia@fidh.org](mailto:asia@fidh.org)

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جامعه دفاع از حقوق بشر در ایران  
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League for the Defence of Human Rights in Iran



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## PROTESTS IN IRAN: SYSTEMATIC AND VIOLENT REPRESSION OF FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in 1979, the authorities have systematically and violently repressed numerous waves of large-scale and mostly peaceful protests that were not approved by the government. Violent crackdowns have targeted protesters whose demands ranged from the adoption of political and institutional reforms to the respect of human rights, including economic, social, and cultural rights and women's rights. These crackdowns, which generally involved unnecessary and disproportionate use of force, arbitrary arrests and detentions, extrajudicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances, and sexual and gender-based violence, have been criticized by multiple United Nations (UN) human rights mechanisms. For example, the UN Human Rights Committee voiced its concern over the severe limits on the right to freedom of assembly [1] and the imposition of death sentences on demonstrators and the execution of protesters.[2] Various UN human rights experts criticized the Iranian authorities' frequent use of lethal force and firearms against protesters.[3]

## No comprehensive law on public assemblies

While Article 27 of the 1979 Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of “unarmed” assembly, provided that its exercise does not “violate the foundations of Islam,” Iran has failed to enact a comprehensive law that codifies the rights and duties of all those involved in public assemblies. The only existing legislation containing provisions related to public assemblies is the Law on Procedures of Operation of Political Parties and Groups, enacted in 2016. This law is limited to events organized/held by political parties and groups, and imposes draconian restrictions on their exercise of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Under Articles 11 and 13 of the law, the Parties Commission<sup>[4]</sup> has the power to “deliberate and decide on requests to hold assemblies and demonstrations.”

In May 2023, the government introduced in Parliament the Bill of Law on Holding of Assemblies and Demonstrations. The bill places restrictions on the right to freedom of assembly that are incompatible with international law, including a ban on public assemblies that “disrespect Islam, its principles and its sanctities and/or contravene Islam’s rulings.” The proposed legislation requires assembly organizers to apply for permission to city governors, which have the authority to approve or reject the applications, and grants police extensive powers to disperse any assembly. In addition, the bill stipulates that assemblies may be held only in certain designated locations, and are prohibited in the vicinity of health, military, security, and police facilities. Parliamentary consideration of this proposed law remains pending. If approved, the bill would replace the relevant provisions of the above-referenced law of 2016.

The government also adopted legislation that allows for the unchecked use of firearms by law enforcement officials involved in the management of assemblies. The Law on the Use of Arms by Members of Armed Forces in Necessary Instances, enacted in 1995, authorizes police to use firearms in cases concerning “illegal demonstrations and rebellion, riots, and disturbances that cannot be controlled without the use of arms.” In June 2022, a bill to amend the 1995 law was considered by parliamentary committees. If approved, its Article 1 would allow “other persons authorized by law to carry arms” to use them. This provision could be invoked to justify the use of firearms by ununiformed personnel of the Basij [See below, *Repression of public assemblies in law and practice*] in the context of public assemblies. The fate of this bill remains unclear.

## Repression of public assemblies in law and practice

In the absence of a specific legal framework for the management of public assemblies, Iranian authorities have regularly enforced provisions of the Islamic Penal Code (IPC) to crack down on protests, with complete disregard for due process. Protesters have been frequently charged, tried, and convicted under the IPC’s provisions relating to: “assembly and collusion to commit crimes against national security,” (Article 610); “spreading propaganda against the system” (Article 500); “cooperating with hostile foreign states” (Article 508); “insulting the founder of the IRI and the Supreme Leader” (Article 514); and “encouraging corruption or prostitution” (Article 638). In many cases, such prosecutions resulted in long prison sentences. Some protesters also faced the death penalty after being charged under three other provisions of the IPC related to *moharebeh*, corruption on earth, and insurrection (Articles 279, 286, and 287, respectively).<sup>[5]</sup>

Assemblies that were not approved under Article 11 of the Law on Procedures of Operation of Political Parties and Groups [See above, *No comprehensive law on public assemblies*] have often been brutally suppressed by the authorities through the use of disproportionate and unnecessary force, in many cases involving firearms.

The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) and its affiliated paramilitary force, the Basij, have often been responsible for the violent crackdowns on protesters.<sup>[6]</sup> In some protests, such as those in 2018 [See below, *Brief chronology of repression*], Basij members were involved in the destruction of property and arson attacks in various cities in order to subsequently justify the violent suppression of the demonstrations.

Following their arrest, many protest participants have been subjected to torture and enforced disappearance and have been sentenced to long prison terms. Protest leaders and organizers have often faced the death penalty and, in some cases, have been executed. Many protesters have died in custody as a result of summary executions or torture and ill-treatment.

## Brief chronology of repression

Over the past 15 years, Iranian authorities have violently repressed several waves of large-scale and predominantly peaceful street protests, notably in 2009, 2017-2018, 2019, 2021, and 2022-2023.

### **Presidential election protests (2009)**

In June 2009 and subsequent months, protests occurred against widespread allegations of fraud and irregularities in the 12 June presidential election, which resulted in the re-election of incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The largest demonstration was held on 15 June, when it was estimated that more than two million people rallied in the streets of Tehran, despite the authorities' refusal to issue an authorization for it. Large protests continued to be held until at least the end of December 2009 in many cities, including Isfahan, Shiraz, Ahvaz, Zahedan, Urumiyeh, Rasht, Mashhad, and Kerman. In many cases, authorities reacted using lethal force, including sniper fire. According to some political opposition groups, at least 112 people were killed in the crackdown. Thousands were arrested and an unknown number of them were sentenced to long prison sentences. At least three protesters died in custody under torture, and some medical professionals who had helped the protesters lost their lives under highly dubious circumstances. At least two prisoners were executed in January 2010 in connection with their alleged role in the protests, even though they had been arrested before the election.

### **Economic mismanagement protests (2017)**

From 28 December 2017 to 7 January 2018, thousands of people took to the streets in Tehran and around 100 other cities and towns across the country to protest the government's economic mismanagement and corruption, and rising prices of food and basic commodities. Demonstrators also called for greater political freedom, the release of political prisoners, and accountability for long-standing repression, and shouted slogans (such as "Reformists, fundamentalists, this is your end") against the establishment. At least 31 people were killed in the crackdown. Some estimates put the number as high as 50. Security forces said they had detained at least 3,700 people - many as young as 16 - across the country in connection with the protests. Other estimates put the number of those detained at around 8,000. At least four of the detained protesters died in custody and some others disappeared. One protester sentenced to death died in prison, and another was executed in 2020.

### **Fuel price protests (2019)**

On 15 November 2019, mass protests erupted in Iran's southern cities after the authorities raised the price of fuel by up to 250%. Demonstrations then spread to Tehran and hundreds of other cities and towns in 29 provinces across the country, lasting for about two weeks. Security forces fired live bullets and teargas canisters at protesters. Snipers were used to shoot and kill protesters in several provinces. According to government officials, about 1,500 people were killed during the unrest, including about 400 women and at least 18 teenagers. In Khuzestan Province, the IRGC used machine guns to kill at least 100 protesters who had taken refuge in the marshes near the city of Mahshahr.<sup>[7]</sup> Estimates of the number of people killed, based on an analysis of official mortality records, were as high as 7,500. An estimated 8,500-9,000 protesters were arrested, including a large unknown number of children. One protester sentenced to death was executed in December 2023. The death sentence imposed on another protester has not yet been carried out.

### **Water protests (2021)**

In mid-July 2021, extensive water shortages triggered demonstrations in Khuzestan Province. The protests went on sporadically until mid-August. Following the security forces' crackdown using live bullets and tear gas in more than 10 cities, protesters used more political slogans, such as "down with the Islamic Republic" and "death to [Supreme Leader] Khamanei," and protests spread to other provinces including Lorestan, Tehran, Alborz, Kermanshah, Isfahan, Bushehr, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, and Khorassan. At least 14 protesters were killed in different cities of Khuzestan Province, including at least one in custody. There were hundreds of arrests in various cities including children as young as 12.

### **Women's rights protests (2022-2023)**

On 16 September 2022, the most recent wave of daily nationwide street protests was sparked by public outrage at the death in custody of Mahsa (Jina/Zhina) Amini, a 22-year-old woman from the Kurdish minority. She died days after being arrested by the morality police for not complying with the discriminatory and abusive compulsory hijab laws.<sup>[8]</sup> Within a few weeks, the protesters began to voice deeper grievances and demands for political change and respect for human rights. The protests, known collectively as the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, were characterized by the widespread

participation of women, and were mostly led by women, who refused to comply with compulsory hijab rules and burned their scarves during demonstrations. These protests gradually subsided in early 2023, as they were met by increasingly violent repression from the authorities. LDDHI has recorded the names of at least 805 people who were killed in connection with the demonstrations.[9] Lower estimates of detainees stood at 30,000.[10] Several hundred protesters were blinded in one or both eyes by shots fired by the authorities at close range. According to estimates, 2,000-3,000 of those arrested were sentenced to prison terms.[11] LDDHI also recorded the names of several hundred detainees who faced charges for offenses punishable by death. At least 166 of them still face such charges and 23 have already been sentenced to death. At least nine protesters have been executed. A number of detainees were sentenced to death, but the sentences were overturned on appeal. Many others received lengthy prison sentences. Other measures taken by the authorities to repress the protests included: the temporary closure of thousands of businesses and public places where women were found without wearing the hijab; the forced retirement of university professors and teachers and the expulsion of large number of students from universities for their support of protesting students; and poison gas attacks against mostly girls' schools in at least 25 provinces.

## References

- [1] UN Human Rights Committee, 103rd session, *Concluding observations of the Human Rights Committee- Islamic Republic of Iran*, 29 November 2011, UN Doc. CCPR/C/IRN/CO/3
- [2] UN Human Rights Committee, *Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 23 November 2023, UN Doc. CCPR/C/IRN/CO/4
- [3] For example: OHCHR, *Concern grows over violence, internet restrictions in Iran*, 27 September 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2022/09/concern-grows-over-violence-internet-restrictions-iran>
- [4] The seven-member Parties Commission comprises representatives from some government agencies and political parties and has the power to issue licenses to parties and associations of religious minorities and supervise their operation and perform other tasks under the law.
- [5] For more details on these articles of IPC, see *Indefensible: Iran's Systematic Criminalisation of Human Rights Defenders*, <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/obsiran2019web.pdf>, pp. 7-8; and *No one is spared - The widespread use of the death penalty in Iran*, <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/iranpdm758ang-2.pdf>, pp. 12-14.
- [6] Established in 1979, the IRGC is a highly-politicized armed force, independent from the regular army and under the overall command of the Supreme Leader. It has its own ground, air, and naval forces and intelligence service. It has been tasked with law enforcement powers through the Basij ["mobilization"] militia, which is organized via volunteers in neighborhoods, government departments, factories, and other places.
- [7] Reuters, *Iran's leader ordered crackdown on unrest - 'Do whatever it takes to end it'*, 24 December 2019; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-protests-specialreport/special-report-irans-leader-ordered-crackdown-on-unrest-do-whatever-it-takes-to-end-it-idUSKBN1YR0QR/>
- [8] See FIDH-LDDHI, *Iran's women: Discriminated, persecuted, and oppressed*, 28 May 2024; <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/iran/the-iran-notes-iran-s-women-discriminated-persecuted-and-oppressed>
- [9] The real number of people killed in the protests or related occurrences is not known. The number includes: 107 children; 110 women; 67 killed as a result of torture; and 56 killed under dubious circumstances.
- [10] Radio Farda, *Amnesty for a group of prisoners*, 8 February 2023; <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/the-claim-of-pardon-for-those-detained-during-the-protests/32261559.html>
- [11] Radio Farda, *Amnesty for imprisoned protesters; adjusting policy of repression or changing method of repression?*, 22 February 2023; <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/32281551.html>