



IRAN

CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



Photo by Getty Images



INTRODUCTION

A wave of protests that [began](#) in September 2022 as collective action against the country's compulsory head-covering laws, which quickly expanded to articulate broader grievances and demands for fundamental political and social change, has been met with a [ruthless crackdown](#) characterised by use of lethal force, mass arrests, detentions and prosecutions, as well as digital repression. The authorities' heavy-handed response to the protests, which erupted in Iran following the death of an Iranian Kurdish woman - Mahsa Amini - who died in police custody on 16th September 2022 after being arrested by Iran's morality police for breach of the country's strict dress code, show no signs of abating as protesters, activists and journalists continue to face dire consequences for daring to exercise their rights.

On 24th November 2022, the UN Human Rights Council [passed a resolution](#) establishing a fact-finding mission to Iran to investigate human rights violations - especially in relation to women and children - related to the September 2022 protests. Notably however, even as negotiations on the resolution were under way in Geneva, the Iranian authorities continued to reject the findings of [UN experts](#) and human rights organisations and persisted in using widespread and unlawful lethal force, arbitrary detention and calls for the death penalty against protesters.

PROTESTS MET WITH BRUTE FORCE, BUT A RELENTLESS POPULATION POWERS ON

Since the protests erupted in September 2022, Iranian authorities used live ammunition against numerous peaceful protesters, killing hundreds and injuring many others. By 28th October 2022, at least [400 protesters](#) had been killed and, according to HRW, as of 22nd November, human rights groups were [investigating](#) the deaths of 434 people, including 60 children. According to the Centre for Human Rights in Iran (CHIR), authorities have [gunned down](#) over 500 protesters since the protests began in September 2022. The use of excessive and unlawful lethal force against protesters was [documented](#) in dozens of cases in several cities including Sanandaj, Saghez, Mahabad, Rasht, Amol, Shiraz, Mashhad and Zahedan.

Thousands of protesters have been arrested, detained, prosecuted and sentenced. At least [1,000 indictments](#) were issued by the judiciary against protesters as of 31st October 2022, and over [18200 arrests](#) had been made by mid-December 2022. Thousands of protesters have been [detained](#) in overcrowded prisons and deprived of their due process rights. Those arrested also [include](#) human rights defenders, activists, journalists and lawyers who have been targeted for supporting the protests. Many of those in prison are women, including almost 400 women human rights defenders. Among those arrested are over [600 students](#), according to FE-MENA, which says the majority remain in prison, and notes that women students "who are often at the forefront of university protests, are targeted by security forces and universities in a multitude of ways." By mid-December 2022, at least 400 protesters had been handed [prison sentences](#) of up to 10 years by courts in Tehran.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in Iran as "**Closed**".

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED

REPRESSED

OBSTRUCTED

NARROWED

OPEN



AUTHORITIES EMBARK ON A WORRYING CAMPAIGN OF SYSTEMATIC RETALIATION

On 16th November, Amnesty International [reported](#) that the Iranian authorities were seeking the death penalty for at least 21 people in sham trials designed to intimidate those participating in the popular uprising and deter others from joining the movement. By 15th December 2022, [reports](#) from Amnesty International indicated that at least 26 individuals were at risk of execution after facing unfair court trials. As of 5th January 2023, the Iranian authorities had [executed](#) two men based on charges of alleged killing and injuring of security forces, in connection to the protests, following grossly unfair trials. Several more detained protestors are at imminent risk.

The crackdown on protestors after the protests has also been characterised by [suspicious deaths](#) of a number of recently released detainees, which Iranian authorities have labelled “suicides” despite significant evidence indicating otherwise. In many of these cases, family members of the deceased have challenged the cause of death, terming them as staged suicides. According to CHIR, investigations by human rights organisations and journalists also revealed that some of the alleged suicides were cover-ups of murder by state security forces. Strong evidence of torture during detention also raises questions around the events preceding the deaths, and which could point towards extreme emotional distress for some of the victims.

SUPPRESSION OF ONLINE FREEDOM A KEY CHARACTERISTIC OF GOVERNMENT’S CRACKDOWN

Iranian authorities notorious for their tight rein on internet access also targeted online connections, and embarked on a targeted phishing agenda based on social engineering tactics against protestors and HRDs.

In efforts to disconnect people and undermine their capability to mobilise and access information, internet and mobile disruptions, as well as restrictions on mobile applications, were [reported](#) by users, with some fearing that the government could track their activities through their smartphones.

On 5th December 2022, HRW [reported](#) that two of their staff members were targeted by hackers backed by the Iranian government. The two experienced phishing attempts after they received suspicious messages on WhatsApp with malicious links which directed the target to a fake login page that took the user’s email password and authentication code when clicked. At least 18 other high-profile activists, journalists, researchers, academics, diplomats and politicians doing work around Middle East affairs were also targeted with social engineering and phishing attempts in efforts to access sensitive information. 15 of them confirmed that they had received the suspicious WhatsApp message from the same contacts as the HRW staff, and for at least three of them, the attackers gained access to their emails, cloud storage drives, calendars and contacts.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To Iranian authorities:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all those who have been arbitrarily detained, and drop all the spurious charges made against peaceful protesters.
- Investigate allegations of torture against detainees and stop the restriction of detainees' access to legal counsel.
- Refrain from the use of excessive force, physical violence and detention of protesters and journalists.
- Immediately and effectively investigate and hold accountable security officials who have used excessive force towards protesters.
- Stop the targeting of activists, journalists and CSOs with online hacking and phishing mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on the protests.
- Stop the unwarranted persecution of activists and critics.

To the international community

- CCall for the urgent and immediate action to address fundamental violations of the right to peaceful assembly and expression.
- CHold Iran accountable for its human rights violations and ensure that Iran respects its national and international human rights obligations.