

# Creating Effective International Pressure for Human Rights in Iran

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## Brief Analysis

On November 2, the UN General Assembly's Third Committee is due to consider a Canadian resolution condemning Iran for human rights violations. A similar resolution was approved by the General Assembly in 2004 by a vote of 71-54 with fifty-five abstentions. Iran's human rights violations have recently worsened, and the Iranian government is becoming less concerned about international complaints on the matter.

## Human Rights Violations in Iran

There are two kinds of violation of human rights in Iran. One is the systematic violation of human rights through Islamic law, such as the execution of minors, surveillance on the private life of citizens, cruel methods of punishment for transgression of Islamic laws on sexual relations, and the unequal treatment of religious minorities. This type of violation of human rights stems from discrepancies between the principles of religious law and those of modern, secular law.

The second kind of violation, however, is in contradiction to the laws of the Islamic Republic. It seems that Iranian judiciary, under the supervision of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, obeys the law only when it is compatible with its own political positions and can be applied in the political framework without any negative consequences for Khamenei's absolutism. Judicial authorities have violated the law in closing more than one hundred newspapers and magazines, banning journalists from their work, and arresting them along with political activists and bloggers. Ironically, in Iran the judicial authorities are the worst criminals.

After the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad as president, Iranian democrats are deeply concerned about the condition of human rights. Ahmadinezhad's administration mostly comes from the Revolutionary Guard and the Ministry of Intelligence, a fact that has created a fearful atmosphere in Iran's social and political environments. To illustrate this reality, the former deputy minister of intelligence, Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, has recently been appointed interior minister. He is allegedly one of the main intelligence agents involved in the killings of Iranian intellectuals and political activists, as well as the murder of Fatima Borghei, a woman killed in Qom for her knowledge of Pour-Mohammadi's secret activities. In his new post, Pour-Mohammadi appoints the governors of provinces, and he evidently has chosen his men from within the intelligence body and Revolutionary Guard. The

governor of Isfahan, for instance, was Morteza Itemad al-Islam Bakhtiari, former chief of Iranian prisons.

Information about the human rights situation in Iran has become difficult to obtain. Without independent newspapers, with severe restrictions on news websites, and with a reduced presence of international watchdog groups inside Iran, it has become much more difficult to hear the voices of human rights victims. In the current atmosphere, official reports are unlikely to reflect the realities on the ground. Indeed, Iran provides further proof for the proposition that in the absence of democratic institutions and free media, there are few means for defending human rights and protesting government actions.

### International Pressure on Human Rights

Human rights violations, support for terrorism, and nuclear ambitions have become the three U.S. charges against Iran. American officials reiterate that the Bush administration prefers diplomatic solutions through a consensus with its European allies and the broader international community. Reaching a global consensus on the proper reaction to the Iranian nuclear program is not simple, due to doubts about the extent of Iranian nuclear ambitions and a lack of clear evidence of Iranian violations of treaty commitments. On the other hand, of all the U.S. complaints against Iran, the most amenable to the creation of international consensus is human rights, thanks to many official and private reports of severe human rights violation in Iran. Making Iranian human rights a U.S. policy priority can help Western countries create a better understanding of Tehran's lax attitude toward its international commitments.

Focusing on the human rights issue can bring out Iranian support as well. Human rights are one of the main Iranian social concerns, more than other issues in the Ahmadinezhad era. Campaigning against the Islamic Republic's negligence of human rights is more understandable and acceptable to Iranian public opinion than pressure over Iran's nuclear program. Whereas the Iranian regime can claim that Iranian nuclear activity has popular support inside Iran and even among some parts of the opposition abroad, Iranian violations of human rights have little if any support among Iranians.

Promoting democracy in Iran has become a main concern for Western countries in recent years. Yet it is difficult to find appropriate ways to assist democratic movements and support liberal opposition groups inside Iran without interfering inappropriately in Iran's internal affairs or providing fresh excuses for government suppression of democratic activities. Making cases of human rights violations the bases for diplomatic pressure on Tehran can help Iranian democrats as well as Western countries in their efforts to promote Iranian democracy. In fact, the Iranian government has much more difficulty justifying its negligence of human rights than defending its undemocratic system of rule. After nearly three decades of living under the Islamic Republic, the Iranian people have suffered greatly from the government's human rights violations and its widespread violence, and they have reached a new state of awareness that these abuses are not legitimate means of governing. It is for this reason that pointing a finger at government crimes and human rights violations will resonate with the Iranian people and prove the government's illegitimacy.

Tehran considers its resistance against Western pressure regarding human rights to have been successful. In recent years, Europe and the United States have repeatedly accused Iran of human rights violations without implementing any specific diplomatic response. When imprisoned journalist Akbar Ganji's life was endangered during a prolonged hunger strike, calls for his release came from President George W. Bush, French president Jacques Chirac, UN secretary general Kofi Annan, the European Union, and intellectuals from around the world -- including many, like the American scholar Noam Chomsky, who rarely agree with Bush. Yet the Iranian regime has continued to harm Ganji's family and has prevented them from visiting him during his five-year political imprisonment. In the two months since Ganji was relocated from hospital back to prison after breaking his hunger strike, there has been no word about his condition.

## Ottawa Leads the Way forward

Despite widespread outcry over the Ganji case, international political pressure has been neither consistent nor timely. An exception has been the Canadian government, which has pressed Iran hard since the 2003 murder in an Iranian prison of the Canadian-Iranian journalist Zahra Kazemi. In May 2005, Canadian foreign minister Pierre Pettigrew announced, "We will limit our encounters with Iranian officials to the Kazemi case, Iran's human rights record, and Iran's nuclear nonproliferation performance. No visits or exchanges by Iranian officials to Canada will be permitted, nor will Canadian officials engage with Iran, except relating to these issues." It would be interesting to see Tehran's reaction if other Western countries adopted a similarly tough stance.

The United States and the European Union should cooperate with Canada to form a united international position against human rights violations in Iran by taking some practical diplomatic measures. A first step could be diplomatic sanctions against Iranian officials who have been involved in human rights cases, like Said Mortazavi, the Tehran prosecutor who closed more than one hundred newspapers and magazines in recent years, or Pour-Mohammadi, the repressive interior minister. Preventing officials implicated in human rights abuses from traveling to Europe or North America, and blocking their foreign bank accounts, could have a considerable and positive effect on Iranian behavior.

Meanwhile, Western countries at the UN should press for international investigators to be sent to Iran to document human rights violations, expanding on the call in the 2004 General Assembly resolution for a visit by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. In particular, investigators should follow up on the General Assembly's call on Iran to end amputations, execution by stoning, torture, and flogging. By gradually reinforcing its pressure in this manner, the international community might be able to overcome Tehran's increasing contempt for basic human rights.

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