

IRAN

ISSUE

Despite hopes for improvement in the internal political climate in Iran since the election of President Mohammed Khatami, internal struggle continues over the implementation of Khatami's stated objectives of building a civil society and respect for the Rule of Law. The regime continues to resist the implementation of internationally recognized human rights norms, and religious persecution remains a problem. While Iran is making progress in the field of human rights, this progress is uneven and a number of recent setbacks have occurred.

BACKGROUND

Serious individual human rights abuses in Iran are reported by the UN Special Representative, international NGOs, and various religious bodies such as the Baha'i. Abuses occur with regularity. Iranians continue to suffer persecution, particularly restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, unfair judicial proceedings, random killings, and ostracism in areas such as higher education, often because of their affiliation with specific groups or communities like the Baha'i.

Judicial System: Persecution often appears to be carried out at the local level under the auspices of revolutionary courts, military commanders and religious figures. There are concerns that the death penalty continues to be imposed for both political and religious reasons. The death penalty for criminal behaviour also continues to be imposed in large number of cases. Insufficient transparency, fairness and independence of the court system in protecting individual human rights remains a problem.

Particularly worrying are the recent **extrajudicial killings** of writers, intellectuals and opposition figures. In the last few months of 1998, five writers and opposition figures were murdered or have disappeared. At least ten people, including some from the Government security forces, have been arrested for involvement in the murders. We are now awaiting the trial and any political fallout that may transpire.

Press: Many new newspapers, journals and magazines have opened since Khatami's election and there is a wide debate of issues, expressing a range of viewpoints. However, the conservatives have forced the closure of many reform oriented publications and have arrested a number of journalists, editors and publishers for printing stories critical of conservatives or of government behaviour. Divergent viewpoints which begin to reach a larger audience are subject to conservative censorship and intimidation. Television and radio, which are controlled by the conservatives, have not had the same type of expansion of sources and viewpoints, and remain very conservative in their content.

Democratic Development: The relatively open political debate which took place during the 1997 Presidential election and the victory by Khatami over the establishment's chosen candidate, reflected an encouraging improvement in democratic development. However, elections held in the autumn of 1998 for the Assembly of Experts, (the body responsible for choosing a new Supreme Leader) were interfered with by conservatives. Many reform minded

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