

IRAN

ISSUE

Despite international pressure and Iranian claims of an evolution in the internal political climate since the election of President Mohammed Khatami, there has been little evidence of action to match his stated intentions. The regime continues to resist the implementation of certain internationally recognized human rights norms. State-sanctioned executions have increased, religious persecution remains a problem, and limits on freedom of expression foster a restrictive social climate.

BACKGROUND

Serious individual human rights abuses are attested to by the UN Special Representative for Iran, Human Rights Watch International, Amnesty International, and various religious bodies such as the international Bahai communities and the Pentecostal Assemblies of God. Abuses are occurring with regularity. Individuals who suffer the most persecution, particularly restrictions to freedom of expression and of assembly, questionable judicial proceedings, random killings, and ostracism applied to family members in areas such as higher education, often do so because of their affiliation with specific groups or communities.

Persecution of individuals often appears to be carried out at the local level under the auspices of revolutionary courts, military commanders and religious figures. The imposition of the death penalty for criminal behaviour has risen in the past year and there are concerns that this punishment is used for political reasons. Particularly worrying are the extrajudicial and random killings of Bahais and Evangelical Christians and the subsequent lenient treatment of the perpetrators by the courts. Insufficient transparency, fairness and independence of the court system protecting individual human rights has been noted by the UN Special Representative as a problem needing serious attention.

The relatively open political debate which took place during last spring's presidential election and the victory by a candidate not supported by the establishment, reflected a level of democratic development. However, pro-regime mobs can still be mobilized to intimidate opponents as was done to Ayatollah Montazeri when he challenged the authority of the Supreme Leader.

Discrimination against women arises largely from the principles entrenched by the Islamic republican revolution. It manifests itself most immediately in a strict dress-code for women, separation of the sexes in many areas of daily life and a bias within the legal system in certain family law matters. The UN Commission on Human Rights Special Representative reported that a lively discourse about the role of women is underway, but there is little evidence of progress. He added that senior members of the governing circles continue to incite violence in support of discriminatory conduct against women. Homosexuality is forbidden under the Sharia but severe persecution appears to be rare.

Since the election of Mohammed Khatami, there has been an expectation of changes to the regime's human rights behaviour. While there have been some encouraging developments in

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