

Briefing

Crushing Creativity

Iran's Hardliners Crackdown on the Fashion Industry



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About us

The **Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI)** is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of human rights in Iran. CHRI investigates and documents rights violations occurring throughout Iran, relying on first-hand accounts to expose abuses that would otherwise go unreported. We bring these violations to the attention of the international community through news articles, briefings, in-depth reports and videos, and work to build support for human rights inside Iran as well. CHRI engages in intensive outreach and international advocacy aimed at defending the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Iranian people and holding the Iranian government accountable to its human rights obligations.

Introduction

A crackdown in Iran has been underway over the last year, in which security forces have relentlessly targeted and pursued members of the country's fashion industry. Designers, photographers, models and other industry professionals have been harassed and interrogated, and have had their businesses closed and social media sites taken down. They have been arrested and prosecuted for violating vague laws limiting freedom of expression in Iran. And they have been sent to prison—some for sentences as long as six years. Many of these individuals were operating with licenses and permits, and thus baffled at their prosecution.

As a result, many industry professionals have fled the country, depriving Iran of the rich and varied talents of its young and talented designers, photographers and fashion professionals, and accelerating the brain drain that has already severely weakened many other professional, academic and commercial sectors in the country. Indeed, Iran is considered to have one of the world's most severe rates of brain drain, as its young and educated professionals flock to other countries in order to pursue their art and professions freely.

This crackdown represents two disturbing trends in Iran. One is the ever-narrowing space for cultural freedom and expression. Hardline officials, led and supported by the country's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, are determined to impose their insular vision of the world on the entire Iranian population, and see any alternative view as an existential threat to the state. This has meant that artists, writers, poets, musicians, filmmakers and others have been restricted, banned and prosecuted, and prevented from pursuing their work and art. It has meant that freedom of expression, regardless of its peaceful and lawful nature, is denied in Iran, in violation of both Iranian law and international obligations.

Secondly, the crackdown reflects a continuation of the deterioration in the rule of law in Iran. Vague and broad laws stifling creative expression are open to official whim and arbitrary interpretation, security agents carry out the intimidation and arrests with impunity, and judicial officials finish the job with prosecutions egregiously lacking in due process.

Recommendations

The Center for Human Rights in Iran urges the authorities in Iran to:

- > Review, clarify, and, where necessary, amend the laws governing artistic and cultural expression in Iran in such a manner so that these laws are clear, defined, and in line with international norms regarding the right to peaceful freedom of expression.
- > Review the cases of all those who have been detained and immediately release any individual who has been unjustly detained and/or denied due process.
- > End the harassment, prosecution and detainment of fashion industry professionals, including designers, models, photographers and others, as well as all individuals pursuing the peaceful and lawful expression of their cultural, artistic and professional work in Iran, allowing them to conduct their work, promote it freely on social media, and pursue their professional lives with freedom and vigor.

Methodology

This report by the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) draws upon the testimony and eyewitness accounts of eight members of Iran's fashion industry based primarily in Tehran, Mashhad and Shiraz, and Iranian press reports describing the arrests of at least 100 people in 2016. The interviews by CHRI were conducted in November 2016. To the extent that CHRI could without compromising the security of its sources, it has identified the names, locations and occupations of its witnesses and the cases discussed in press reports.

Iran's Brain Drain Spreads to the Fashion Sector as Professionals Emigrate to Escape Raids and Arrests

A crackdown by security forces on Iran's growing fashion industry has been underway and intensifying over the past year, forcing its members to seek employment outside the country to escape vague laws that are landing workers in jail, an investigation by the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) has revealed.

The campaign is being led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Intelligence Organization, in concert with the judiciary, and follows Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's repeated exhortations for Iranians to repudiate all forms of perceived western culture.

In the latest attack at the time of this writing, a court in Shiraz sentenced 12 fashion industry professionals to prison terms ranging from five months to six years in December 2016.

Following raids organized by the IRGC, dozens of people were also interrogated in 2016 about alleged "modeling networks" while businesses that included studios and salons were shuttered in the cities of Tehran, Qazvin, Arak, Shiraz and Zahedan.

"After they're summoned, the authorities first order them to log into their Instagram page and delete their account," said a Tehran-based industry source who spoke to CHRI about four colleagues who were summoned in November 2016 to answer questions about alleged "immoral" activities.

"The authorities also identify people as potential targets by looking at the detainee's list of Instagram followers and contacts," added the source.

A women's dress designer in Tehran told CHRI that those who have been detained usually keep quiet about their ordeal to protect themselves and their businesses.

"It's hard to estimate how many have been summoned and harassed by the Revolutionary Guard because it's bad for business and they're afraid of losing customers, so no one talks about it," she said.

"Only a few might tell their friends that the authorities have contacted them, otherwise, they're careful not to get trapped," she added. "Probably the only way you can find out something has gone wrong is when there's a sudden change on someone's Instagram page."

For security reasons, the sources interviewed by CHRI for this report asked to remain anonymous.

Stifling Regulations

To legally work in Iran's fashion industry, including in the fields of modeling, photography, design and hairdressing, people must apply for professional permits.

State organizations, led by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, regulate the industry under broad laws that are open to highly subjective and arbitrary interpretations of notions such as "national patterns" and "Iranian culture."

Iran's Law to Regulate Fashion and Clothing, passed by Parliament on May 14, 2006, states in Article 1:

"To protect and strengthen Iranian-Islamic culture, to respect, define, consolidate and promote native and national patterns, to guide the production and distribution of clothing based on domestic designs and to discourage people from consuming products foreign and unfamiliar to Iranian culture, the Culture and Islamic Guidance Ministry is obliged to lay the foundations for the administrative structure subject to this law by forming a monitoring Working Group consisting of one plenipotentiary representative from each of the following ministries: Culture and Islamic Guidance, Education, Commerce, Industry and Mines, and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization, and the Management and Planning Organization, and three representatives of related guilds (designers and producers), and one representative from the parliamentary Committee on Cultural Affairs."

With Iran's traditional print and broadcast media controlled by the state, fashion workers have increasingly turned to the internet and social media to promote their businesses.

While social media is also monitored by state authorities, and those who post content deemed inappropriate are vulnerable to state prosecution, many fashion workers have nevertheless launched pages on the social media app Instagram to promote their work and businesses. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, Instagram has not been blocked in the Islamic Republic.

With local police units tasked with monitoring public places and businesses, fashion industry members enjoy a sense of freedom online that they cannot nurture in physical places of business. In doing so, they are also pushing the boundaries of permissible forms of self-expression in Iran.

As a result, conservative officials have been targeting fashion workers, interrogating, fining and detaining them in a campaign of intimidation designed to rein them in.

The increasing pressure and restrictions have forced many people to leave the

fashion industry or emigrate to freely pursue their profession—a development that has plagued many sectors of Iran’s professional, academic and commercial spheres.

Indeed, in 2009, the International Monetary Fund estimated that Iran had one of the world’s highest rates of “brain drain”—emigration of highly educated individuals—with an annual loss of 150,000 to 180,000 specialists. Iranian officials have acknowledged the problem: “Every year, about 150,000 of our elite emigrate from Iran, costing our economy \$150 billion,” said Iranian Minister of Science and Technology Reza Faraji Dana in January 2014.

“As in any profession, when there are restrictions [in your country], or when there are better opportunities elsewhere, there’s a greater chance you will think about emigrating,” Iranian fashion photographer Kourosh Sotoodeh, who left Tehran in 2009 and settled in New York City, told CHRI in November 2016.

“In the last few decades, many scientists, engineers and even businessmen have moved to countries like Turkey or the United Arab Emirates where there are fewer constraints,” he added. “Photographers have been no exception in seeking better opportunities.”

Mass Arrests and Heavy Prison Sentences in Shiraz

According to CHRI’s investigations, the IRGC and judiciary’s joint crackdown on Iran’s fashion industry began in Tehran in September 2015 and escalated in March 2016, spreading to Shiraz and Mashhad.

In most cases, arrests were followed by the forced closure of the detainees’ online and social media pages, as well as their physical places of business.

After being questioned by security forces, “suspects” in the crackdown in Shiraz were also hit with criminal charges.

Defense attorney Mahmoud Taravatrouy told the semi-official Iranian Labor News Agency (ILNA) on December 5, 2016 that his clients—eight female and four male fashion workers—were sentenced to terms ranging from five months to six years by Branch 117 of the Criminal Court for engaging in their profession.

The court also banned some of the defendants from resuming their work in the industry and from leaving the country for two years.

The defendants faced charges such as “promoting corruption and depravity” for



CHRI photo by Hossein Fatemi.

allegedly publishing “indecent” and “immoral” images on the internet, organizing Western-style fashion shows, modeling, and promoting the Western culture of nudity, said Taravatrouy, adding that he would appeal the sentences.

The names and specific occupations of the defendants were concealed from the press.

Taravatrouy described some of the sentences to ILNA: “One man and woman were each sentenced to five years in prison and banned from employment in the production and design of clothes for two years after the end of their prison term. Another man was sentenced to six years in prison and banned from state employment or journalism activities for two years.”

“They were all also issued a two-year travel ban that would begin at the end of their prison terms,” he added.

Crackdown in Mashhad

Agents of the IRGC’s Intelligence Organization also rounded up members of the fashion industry in Mashhad, Iran’s second largest city, in 2016.

“Many photographers and hair dressers would like to have a greater professional presence on social media, but the authorities are too cynical and as result, many are seriously doubting whether they can continue in this business,” an industry source in Mashhad told CHRI.

“These people have no interest in politics and don’t want to hurt anyone,” added the source. “All they want to do is carry on in a profession they love, but these summons and arrests and surveillances and threats are pushing our business underground, like alternative music.”

Indeed, leading distributors of Iran’s vibrant alternative music scene have also been prosecuted and imprisoned, and many other members of Iran’s artistic and cultural community—filmmakers, artists, poets, writers—have been prevented from pursuing their work indicating the broad nature of cultural repression at present in Iran.

A fashion photographer arrested in Mashhad in September 2016, currently free on bail, told CHRI that he was operating with an official permit prior to his arrest. “I was accused of being in an ‘organized network,’ but there was no such thing,” he said. “I was arrested on my own and I didn’t know any of the other detainees.”

On October 3, 2016, Mehdi Khodabakhshi, the assistant prosecutor in Mashhad, announced the arrests of three women and three men “in charge of an

organized modeling network” and the closure of nine photo studios and beauty salons for “promoting promiscuous Western culture” and “destroying society’s religious norms.”

Officials typically link fashion workers to a “network” in public statements about arrests to create the impression of fighting organized crime.

Hassan Heydari, Mashhad’s assistant revolutionary prosecutor, said in an interview with the hardline Tasnim News Agency on September 7, 2016 that modeling business workers were waging a “soft war” aimed at “changing Iran’s identity.”

If found guilty, they could be sentenced to one to 10 years in prison, he added.

A “soft war” is the term hardliners in Iran typically use to refer to alleged Western, especially US, attempts to infiltrate and undermine the Islamic Republic.

“We want to preserve the foundation of the Iranian family and to that end we will confront any activities in the opposite direction,” he said. “The [IRGC], which has a duty to preserve the honor of the Islamic Republic, is involved in the fight against modeling.”

A professional photographer currently free on bail in Mashhad described his arrest to CHRI in November 2016: “I had just opened my studio with an official permit. I posted the portraits I took of some of the models on Instagram to promote my business. I had no idea I was doing something illegal and would be arrested. Then, one day, agents of the Revolutionary Guard from Mashhad’s Imam Reza Unit came and took me away along with all my cameras and computers and shuttered my office. I was questioned for 20 days and then released on bail. I’m waiting to go to court and meet my fate. Meanwhile, my personal and professional pages on Instagram have been blocked [by the IRGC].”

“The arrest warrant included the names of nine other people,” he added. “They had no connection to one another and were in the photography, clothing, design, hairstyling, cosmetics and wedding businesses.”

Widening Campaign

In addition to Tehran and Mashhad, fashion businesses and professionals in the cities of Qazvin, Arak and Zahedan were also targeted by the IRGC’s Intelligence Organization in 2016.

On October 18 of that year, the Ruhollah Army, a unit of the IRGC in Iran’s Central Province, issued a statement announcing the summons of 41 people in



The 24th Islamic-Iranian Fashion Exhibition and first Islamic-Iranian Fashion Festival in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, February 2016, in the city of Zahedan.



An Iranian model poses for a photo. Photography and modeling are becoming increasingly popular among young Iranians even though vague regulations heavily restrict the professions. CHRI photo by Hossein Fatemi.

connection with the fashion industry in the city of Arak.

Twenty-four of the people who were summoned were arrested and nine “ateliers, studios and women’s beauty salons” were shut down, according to the statement.

Two days earlier, on October 16, the IRGC’s Intelligence Organization arrested 11 people and closed three fashion businesses in Zahedan in Sistan and Baluchistan Province.

In Qazvin, local prosecutor Sadegh Niaraki confirmed the arrests of dozens of people from a “modeling network” on November 14: “In addition to the people arrested, a large number of others were summoned, seven places of business including ateliers as well as photo and film studios were sealed, and computer equipment, cameras, laptops, flash memory drives, lighting equipment and other electronic devices were confiscated.”

Culture War

In May 2016, CHRI published its first report on the IRGC’s crackdown on Iran’s fashion industry, detailing the shuttering of salons and fashion studios, forced deletions of social media pages, and widespread arrests that reflected the intensifying campaign, launched by the IRGC and the judiciary and heavily promoted by Khamenei, to control lifestyles and culture in Iran. As this report attests, that crackdown has only intensified.

Since the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to force its citizens to conform to its rigid interpretation of Islamic principles. While these efforts have, in particular, focused on issues concerning women—dispatching so-called “anti-vice” squads to force women to properly wear the mandatory hijab, segregating men and women in public, restricting relationships between the opposite sex to family or marriage—in recent years there has been a renewed focus on broader cultural control, encompassing many areas of artistic and cultural life.

This intensification has arguably been triggered by the Iranian electorate’s clear preference for the more outward looking President Hassan Rouhani, who has encouraged Iran’s professional and cultural exchange with the world. Hardliners fear such an exchange will loosen their control over society.

However, millions of Iranians continue to express themselves by sharing content online and on social media with each other and the world. Indeed, every day Iranians who use the internet—an estimated 44 percent of the country’s 80 million people—are exposed to ideas and lifestyle choices that differ from state-enforced ideals and notions. The internet has accordingly made the state’s aim

of suppressing artistic and cultural trends, especially among young people, increasingly difficult. As a result, the authorities have focused increased attention on trying to monitor, police, censor and control online communication.

Khamenei's Decree

In a speech on May 2, 2016, Khamenei denounced security officials for failing to control the internet.

“I have a bone to pick with the Intelligence Ministry,” he said. “Why are we letting the internet roam free? Nobody is trying to shut down cyberspace. That would not make sense. But other countries are setting boundaries to protect their culture. So why aren't we?”

Khamenei, who was appointed as Iran's supreme leader in 1989, has regularly warned about a so-called Western “cultural invasion” during his speeches, which often include decrees that the entire country, including all branches of government, are expected to follow.

“This is a fact I warned about many years ago and today we're witnessing its undeniable manifestations,” he said in a speech on October 11, 2013. “There are hundreds of audio, visual, print and online media outlets around the world with the specific aim of influencing the minds and characters of the Iranian people.”

“Cultural independence means we should choose to live an Iranian-Islamic lifestyle,” said Khamenei on June 14, 2016. “Today [the West] is working on making new devices in order to dominate other cultures. I am not saying we should get rid of these devices. No, these devices can be beneficial. But we must prevent the enemy from dominating us through these devices.”

“For instance, you cannot allow the enemy to run your radio and television stations,” he continued. “The same applies to the internet. You cannot hand it over to the enemy. Today the enemy uses these devices for cultural penetration.”

Khamenei's persistent exhortation to guard against Western culture, and his depiction of it as an intrinsically hostile force, has effectively given the IRGC a green light to launch attacks on any perceived threat against “Islamic-Iranian” culture, including the country's fashion industry.



The tattoo artist Siavash. Tattoos have been part of Iranian culture since ancient times, but today they are often seen as copies of Western culture. CHRI photo by Hossein Fatemi.

Systematic Repression

In line with Khamenei's persistent calls to push back against western cultural influences, the IRGC's cybercrimes unit initiated an operation in 2015 under the code-name "Spider," which sought to monitor social media for any content deemed subversive or inappropriate.

In March of that year, Operation Spider-1 resulted in the arrest of 12 people in connection with some 350 Facebook pages allegedly promoting "corruption" and Western-inspired lifestyles.

On June 19, 2016, Judiciary Spokesman Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei encouraged the ongoing crackdown by urging local prosecutors to take swift action against alleged online manifestations of "corruption."

"We cannot sit back and allow depravity and indecency to take over our society," he said.

"We will get much better results if other organizations coordinate with the judiciary."

In May 2016, Operation Spider-2 resulted in cases being opened on more than 170 fashion industry workers, many of whom had allegedly posted photos and videos on their Facebook and Instagram pages allegedly showing themselves in "un-Islamic" poses. The social media accounts of some of the alleged "suspects" had a few thousand to as many as half a million followers.

"In the past two years, we have done a good job with Spider-1 and 2 cybercrimes operations in fighting against beauty salons and fashion houses involved in modeling activities," said Tehran Prosecutor Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi on May 15, 2016.

"These days the enemy tries to penetrate the minds of young people in cultural and social arenas through sexual and financial incentives," he added. "Therefore, we have to find serious solutions for these online threats."

Vague Laws Give Security Forces a Free Hand

One of the central difficulties facing those whose artistic or professional work may lie outside the parameters set by hardline Iranian officials is the vague and broad nature of the state's regulations, which allow subjective and arbitrary interpretation.

Iranian fashion photographer Kourosh Sotoodeh, now based in New York City, told CHRI that the biggest problem his business faced in Iran was the lack of clear legal guidelines.

“There’s no consensus among government officials on how to deal with fashion photographers and models,” he said. “What was certain in Iran was that you could not take nude or erotic photos, but the law’s position on all other kinds of photography is not clear.”

While substantial resources have been poured into regulating the industry, very little has been directed towards clarifying regulations through the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

According to official budget figures for the Iranian year 1395 (ending March 20, 2017), 87 percent of the six trillion tomans (\$1.87 billion USD) set aside for cultural affairs were allocated to conservative religious and cultural organizations.

The remaining 13 percent was earmarked for the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which, with a minister appointed by centrist President Hassan Rouhani, is often accused of not doing enough to resist Western cultural “infiltration.”

In comparison, Iran’s Environmental Protection Agency, which has been struggling to deal with the catastrophic impact of severe drought conditions and crisis-level air pollution in the country, was budgeted 174 billion tomans (\$54 million USD).

There are no official guidelines explicitly defining the Iranian-Islamic lifestyle that Khamenei promotes. Many victims of the IRGC and judiciary’s crackdowns told CHRI that they were not aware that their work or posts on social media violated any laws. They believed they were engaging in legitimate professional work that conveyed and enhanced their art and Iranian lifestyles.

Moreover, CHRI’s investigations indicate that the vast majority of fashion industry members who were questioned or intimidated by the IRGC and judiciary had not engaged in nude or semi-nude photography or modeling—the most clearly defined illegal act in the industry.

“Most of the work the authorities condemn as ‘fashion photography’ are actually photos of people in normal, everyday clothes,” a Tehran-based photographer told CHRI. “These are natural images in the eyes of ordinary people.”

“The gap between the lives and thinking of people and the authorities is so wide that really typical photos on Instagram anger the authorities, who then go after people for something so simple,” added the photographer.

Despite spending vast amounts on “religious education,” the Islamic Republic continues to struggle to force the population as a whole to accept its interpretation of an “Iranian-Islamic lifestyle.” Iranians, especially youth and members of the



Many photographers and models have self-censored their art or left Iran to freely pursue their careers abroad. Iranian fashion photographer Kourosh Sotoodeh immigrated to Dubai and then New York City to escape censorship in Iran. CHRI photo.

artistic community in Iran, continue to find ways to express themselves.

For example, Iranian women, especially those living in the wealthier areas of Tehran, will abide by the hijab law by wearing a head scarf that nevertheless allows substantial hair to show in the front. Similarly, while women are banned from wearing form-fitting clothing in public, many continue to follow the latest Western fashion trends to the extent that they can by allowing their ankles to show while wearing tight American-style jeans under their “manteau,” a knee-length coat.

In an endless cat and mouse game, the security establishment continues to attempt to suppress new trends by blocking websites and apps, or threatening people who follow them with arrest, and policing public spaces.

The crackdown on Iran’s fashion industry is only one frontline among many struggles between state and societal preferences in Iran, and highlights the state’s reliance on arbitrary interpretations of vaguely defined regulations in the absence of legal clarity.

“There are no regulations that say how much hair a woman can expose in a photo or how large or red a woman’s lips should be,” Sotoodeh told CHRI. “It’s difficult to work when I don’t know the limits,” he said. “Even the officials have differences of opinion.”

“They all worry about un-Islamic cultural activities, but there’s no consensus about what Islamic culture is,” he added.

Conclusion

The crackdown underway in Iran against the fashion profession—and which extends to many other cultural and artistic areas such as filmmaking, music, the visual arts, writing and book publishing—reflects a repressive domestic environment in which artistic and cultural views that depart from the state's official line are forbidden and freedom of expression is denied. This denial violates both domestic Iranian law and international covenants. The crackdown also raises fundamental questions of the rule of law. Many of those being arrested are operating lawfully with permits and licenses. Moreover, regulations so vague that their interpretation and enforcement is up to individual and arbitrary state whim is not congruent with the rule of law. Nor are campaigns of intimidation and harassment by security forces, unlawful monitoring and the forced shut-down of social media accounts, or prosecutions that deny due process. These are fundamental violations of citizens' rights, and they are costing Iran dearly, as the best and brightest continue to increasingly leave the country to pursue their life's work elsewhere.

