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Iran: End pressure on women's rights defenders campaigning for an end to discrimination

Two years after the launch of the Campaign for Equality on 27 August 2006, Amnesty International is renewing its demand that the Iranian authorities cease harassing and imprisoning women's rights defenders and allow them to freely continue their campaigning for the repeal of laws and policies which discriminate against women in Iran.

The second anniversary of the Campaign for Equality is occurring as women's rights defenders face increasing repression as they try to take their demands for equal treatment to the broader population, as the authorities continue to impose restrictions on their use of public space to carry out their peaceful and legal activities. Other developments, meanwhile, may further entrench discrimination against women in Iran.

In particular, a new Family Protection Bill passed in July by the Law and Legal Affairs Committee of Iran's parliament not only fails to address discrimination against women in relation to marriage, divorce and child custody but, if passed into law, would also lift the condition requiring a man to get the permission of his first wife before taking a second wife. The bill still needs further parliamentary approval and to be agreed by the Council of Guardians, but it represents a very worrying trend.

Amnesty International is urging the Iranian government and parliament not to entrench discrimination but to move ahead with a package of reforms in order to end those laws and practices which continue to discriminate against women, who make up half of the population of Iran, and to deny them access to their human rights. As well, Amnesty International is urging the Iranian government to ratify, without reservation, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and to bring Iran's laws and practices into conformity with this Convention.

This year also marks the 10th Anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which affirms the protection of human rights defenders from violence or threats as a result of their work. In Iran, however, such defenders face constant harassment and are frequently arrested and imprisoned. Amnesty International is urging the Iranian authorities both to protect human rights defenders and value the work that they do, and is calling for the immediate release of all prisoners of conscience, including activists in the Campaign for Equality who are currently being detained.

Since the launch of the Campaign, Amnesty International has collected information on the harassment of the Campaign for Equality activists. They face threatening phone calls by persons identifying themselves as Ministry of Intelligence officers warning them not to hold planned meetings; they are prevented from organizing peaceful meetings or demonstrations and to date, the website of Campaign for Equality has been blocked on at least 11 occasions.

Some campaigners have been sentenced or are facing charges for their peaceful campaigning for women's rights and Amnesty International calls for such charges to be dropped and for their immediate and unconditional release of those serving prison sentences.

- Amir Yaghoub-Ali was sentenced in May 2008 to one year's imprisonment for

collecting signatures in Daneshjou Park, Tehran in July 2007. He is currently free pending the outcome of an appeal against his conviction and sentence.

- The sentencing in June 2008 of Hana Abdi, a member of Iran's Kurdish minority, and member of the Campaign in Kordestan province and of the Azad Mehr NGO to the maximum five years' imprisonment, to be spent in internal exile after conviction of "gathering and colluding to commit a crime against national security." Hana Abdi was summoned to the Prosecutors Office in August 2008 and was cautioned about passing news outside prison, if she does so she would be further charged with "propaganda against the state".
- Ronak Safarzadeh, a colleague of Hana Abdi, remains detained pending trial on the charge of "moharebeh" (enmity against God), which can carry the death penalty.
- Zeynab Bayzeydi, a Kurdish women's rights activist and a member of the Human Rights Organisation of Kurdistan (HROK) was sentenced in August 2008 to four years' imprisonment, and internal exile. Her sentence has been upheld by the appeal court in August 2008. She was arrested on 9 July 2008, after the police ordered her to present herself for interrogation at a police station in Mahabad. Zeynab Bayzeydi was charged with membership of unauthorised human rights associations, and on account of her activities in support of women's rights, which she has denied, except the one arising from her work on the Campaign for Equality.
- Delaram Ali was among 70 people arrested during a demonstration against legalized discrimination against women in June 2006. In June 2007, Delaram Ali was sentenced to 34 months' imprisonment and 10 lashes on charges of "participation in an illegal gathering", "propaganda against the system" and "disrupting public order and peace". The sentence was reduced to 30 months' imprisonment on appeal. Although her sentence was suspended and her case is under review, she remains at risk of imprisonment
- Nasrin Sotoudeh, a well-known human rights lawyer and Mansoureh Shoja'i, a member of the Campaign were charged on 14 July 2008 with "acting against state security by having unauthorized contacts with Iranians abroad". They had been prevented from travelling to Dubai in March 2008 where they were due to attend a celebration of International Women's Day, organized by Iranian women living in Dubai.
- Nasim Khosravi and Raheleh Asgarzadeh were tried in Branch 13 of Revolutionary Court in Tehran for collecting signatures. They were arrested on 14 February 2008 and held for almost two weeks before being released on bail. No verdict has yet been announced.
- Mahboubeh Karami, journalist and women's rights defender, was charged in mid August 2008 with "acting against national security," and the Revolutionary Court in Mahabad has scheduled her next hearing for 1 November, according to her lawyer. She was held in Evin Prison in Tehran from 13 June 2008 and released on bail on 25 August 2008 for the amount of one billion rials (approximately US\$110,000).
- Maryam Hosseinkhah, Parvin Ardalán, Jelveh Javaheri and Nahid Kesharvarz were summoned to trial on 2 August for charge of "acting against national security", their lawyers were present for their defence, but their trial was otherwise closed to the public.

Background

The Campaign for Equality is a network of individuals working to end legal discrimination against women in Iran. The Campaign informs women of their rights, and is aiming to collect one million signatures from the Iranian public to a petition against discriminatory laws.

The tireless campaigning of women's rights defenders has succeeded in stirring debate about discrimination against women at all levels of society – among women themselves, in the press and even among the religious establishment. However, the Iranian authorities appear to be paying little attention to these legitimate demands of Iranian women.

See *Iran: Women's rights defenders defy repression*, published on 28 February 2008 at:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/report/women-act-against-repression-and-intimidation-iran-20080228>

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