



SUBMISSION

FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE REFERENCES COMMITTEE
INQUIRY INTO HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT VIOLENCE IN IRAN

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Preamble

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA) is the union representing Australian journalists.

We welcome this opportunity to discuss the state of human rights in Iran and particularly the state repression of journalists and media workers.

We note, on information collated by global human rights organisations and our own international partners, that conditions have significantly worsened since September 16, 2022 when Mahsa Amini died.

As the subcommittee will be aware, Ms Amini, was taken into custody by Iran's "Morality Police" on a charge of failing to properly wear hijab as required under Iran's interpretation of Islamic Law and suffered injuries whilst in custody, which led to her ultimate death.

Mahsa Amini died four days short of her 22nd birthday.

Our focus in this submission is the state repression of journalists within Iran as they seek to report on her death and subsequent protests. It is crucial that media workers are able to report on what is happening in Iran without fear of favour.

Our focus on journalism reflects our particular responsibilities and in no way signals a lesser concern for general human rights in Iran, particularly those affecting women.

Conditions for journalists as currently understood

It is impossible to obtain a complete picture of the number of journalists arrested or their current status within the Iranian system. We are relying on our partner organisations and human rights agencies to piece together what is happening.

The main international agencies we work with are the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters Without Borders (also known as Reporters Sans Frontières or RSF).

Another useful resource is HRANA, the Human Rights Activists' News Agency, which is active in Iran.

In addition to more general repression, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on December 5, 2022 that "Iran's state-backed hackers are aggressively using sophisticated social engineering and credential harvesting tactics (to target) journalists and human rights defenders" in Iran and across the region.

This is extremely concerning, particularly for the high number of women journalists who have been detained for simply doing their jobs.

On December 2, the IFJ reported the detention of 55 journalists in Iran since the death of Mahsa Amini.¹

Among them was Niloofar Hamedi, the journalist who first broke the news of Mahsa Amini's death, and Elahe Mohammadi who traveled to the town of Saqez to report on Ms Amini's funeral, which became the first major protest site. There has been little update as to their condition, after their arrests between September 20 to 29, accused of "colluding with the intention of acting against national security and propaganda against the state" and labelled "CIA foreign agents".

Of the 55 journalists and media workers the IFJ reports as detained, 22 had been released by December 2, but their freedom has been limited by onerous bail conditions as they await trial.

Ahmadreza Halabisaz, an Iranian photojournalist with an international reputation from his work in Afghanistan, has already been sentenced to five years jail, according to the IFJ.

HRANA's website, updated on December 8, lists 61 journalists and media workers that it says have been imprisoned since September 16.²

Reporters Without Borders reported on November 9 that 47 Iranian journalists were in prison.³

RWB noted that "almost half the newly arrested journalists are women, including two facing the death penalty."⁴

It identified those two as Niloofar Hamedi and Elahe Mohammadi (see above).

Last month, the CPJ reported 51 Iranian journalists had been arrested since Mahsa Amini's death.⁵

CPJ is currently preparing an updated report. It has called for the release of all journalists currently in prison.

We might never know the exact number of journalists who are at the mercy of the Islamic Republic. However, we do know that Iran has a very poor record on freedom of the press. The World Press Freedom Index, assessed annually by RSF, places Iran on the very lowest level. Its ranking has slipped from 174th out of 180 countries in 2021 to 178th in 2022. Only Eritrea and North Korea are worse.

Every Iranian journalist not slavishly reproducing state propaganda risks harassment, imprisonment, opaque judicial proceedings and harsh sentences including the death penalty.

We fear that a systemic crackdown on journalists – to prevent the publicising of atrocities – will only worsen.

¹ <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/iran-ifj-renews-its-call-for-the-immediate-release-of-all-journalists-in-jail.html>

² <https://www.en-hrana.org/a-comprehensive-report-of-the-first-82-days-of-nationwide-protests-in-iran/21/#id022>

³ <https://rsf.org/en/country/iran>

⁴ <https://rsf.org/en/unprecedented-number-women-journalists-are-now-detained-iran>

⁵ <https://cpj.org/2022/11/cpj-renews-call-for-iran-to-release-all-jailed-journalists-amid-anti-government-protests/>

Any assessment of Iran’s appalling human rights record must, in our submission, include specific mention of the worsening situation for journalists and media workers.

Even before the protests triggered by Mahsa Amini’s death, Amnesty International reported that torture in Iran was “widespread and systematic.” The death penalty is “used widely. (Other) judicial punishments (include) floggings, amputations and blindings.”⁶

The New York-based Centre For Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) reports hundreds of students have been arrested in protests since September and both male and female detainees have been subjected to “torture and sexual abuse.”⁷

Journalists and media workers are not exempt from torture, abuse, cruel, degrading treatment and excessive punishments – techniques that are understood to be widespread. Further we fear media workers receive some of the harshest treatment by the regime, given that their professional work exposes the cruelty of the regime.

What should the Australian Government do?

At the time of writing this submission, a multitude of other submission have already been made to the Committee by both individuals and organisations, including leading human rights NGOs, United Nations bodies and other experts.

Whilst the suggestions are wide and varied, the collective theme includes submissions:

1. That the Australian Government continues to speak up in support of the people of Iran and in condemnation of the actions of the Iranian regime, both within the borders of Australia as well as in the international arena, where the opportunities arise;
2. To impose sanctions, in targeted form, on individuals and organisations who are perpetrators of violence against the people of Iran (under Australia’s Magnitsky sanctions legislation);
3. To take all reasonable steps to hold the Iranian regime to account, not only for its mistreatment of people and organisations within Iran, but also through its proxies outside of its borders, including the threats against journalists, human rights activists and other supporters of the Iranian people in the West.

MEAA supports any of the above which the Australian Government might take, which has the effect of holding the Iranian regime to account and minimises the loss of innocent life or freedom of the Iranian people.

MEAA also submits that the Australian Government should make very clear to the Iranian regime that the mistreatment of journalists and media professionals will not be tolerated and that journalists

⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/>

⁷ <https://iranhumanrights.org/2022/12/iran-protests-children-killed-and-tortured-to-crush-dissent/>

arrested on trumped up charges – including Niloofar Hamedei and Elahe Mohammadi who are facing the death penalty – ought to be released immediately.

Conclusion

A free press is essential for human rights. We are seeing consistent, credible reporting about state-sanctioned repression of journalists in Iran and the muzzling of legitimate reporting – including restricting access to the internet – and we cannot stay silent. We believe it is incumbent on all people of good faith to raise their voices and take whatever action they can to signal that “enough is enough”. It is imperative that the Iranian authorities come clean on who they have detained and why and what processes are in place to deal with these people fairly and expeditiously. It is of great concern that the Rule of Law has been discarded in Iran. Police and judicial proceedings need to be transparent.

We urge the Australian Parliament to make a clear stand against torture and state repression in Iran, and the imprisonment and repression of journalists be highlighted in whatever action the Parliament takes.

While currently there are no reports of journalists and media workers escaping Iran, we seek a commitment from the Australian Government that it will provide relevant visa and other support to ensure the safety of media workers who might flee the current violence.

Further, we seek support and protections for media members of the Iranian diaspora who are currently living in Australia. They too are at possible risk from a regime that shows no signs of respecting international laws and conventions. There have been reports that activists living in Australia and elsewhere are being monitored by the Iranian regime. Journalists reporting from here are also likely to be targeted. This kind of activity on our shores needs to be investigated and stopped.⁸

We note what has been happening in Britain, where armed police have been guarding the TV studios of a UK-based Persian language media company, after credible threats were confirmed by various security agencies.⁹

While we note the recent announcements of Australian sanctions against a few members and two companies connected to the Iranian regime, we urge the Australian government and the Parliament to not let up until Iran's leaders end the human rights and press freedom abuses.

⁸ https://twitter.com/iranintl_en/status/1600778086315761665?s=46&t=fTt0fZKZPcpDSsdGWMoRQ

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/19/armed-police-guard-iranian-tv-studios-in-london-after-tehran-threats>