

The Situation of Press Freedom 9 Months after Rouhani*

by Rasoul ASGHARI

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am glad to have the opportunity to talk to you. Today, I will try to give an insight into my experiences as a journalist during the past 18 years and point out the issues which I have seen concerning the situation of the journalists and media in Iran since 1992.

During all these years, there have been different administrations in power in Iran. All of them have been talking attractively in the beginning: they have promised to enhance political and social freedom and improve the economic situation while pretending to be moderate abroad. Each time the Western Media was excited and tried to join the business delegations along with foreign ministries' representatives to discover the signs of these progresses. But well, this effort happened in vain. You would try to keep up appearances however the content remained unchanged!

During these years, freedom of expression and the people's right to be informed and have access to free information just as the freedom of newspapers and social media have been the first victims of change which has never been realized. The government's propaganda was modernized and up to date but the political and social landscape were more and more repressed and our liberties as journalists were more and more limited. My colleagues have a common expression to describe the pressure and the limitations put on, they say: "To be a journalist in Iran is like wondering in a minefield." You make a single wrong step and you will melt into the air by a mine which would not be found even on maps.

I have been working in the editorial of the Iranian press and have as a journalist been to different parts of my country. I have been there during internal crises and have published reports during the 90s about wars and conflicts such as Afghanistan war, Iraqi Kurdistan conflicts, the Balkan crisis and the war in Kosovo. I have seen the internal war in Lebanon and have travelled to the farthest villages of Pakistan to make a report on drug trafficking. I have been active in the closed syndicate of journalists and have been the understudy of board of directors there. I have been working in 11 closed newspapers some of which were only 1 day old and were closed right after the first newspaper was published while others could continue their work for months or maybe years. I was working for "Tous", "Jamee", "Iranian" and "Gozaresh-e-Rouz" newspapers in 1999 and all of them were closed after some months. In a single day of April 2001, 20 newspapers were closed, hundreds of people lost their jobs and some were arrested. Repressing the newspapers continued without stopping and got to the highest point in summer 2009 when there were almost no opposing sounds remaining anymore. This repression has been followed by Rohani's administration more rapidly. Since his accession as president 13 newspapers were

closed. Some of them had not even published their first newspaper. You can take a look at the background of the newspapers in Iran and see that despite 170 years of journalism the newspapers are all only some years or even months old. Except the 2 governmental newspapers and some futile and unpopular publications which are the official ideological tribune of the main and the most powerful fraction of the government the others die very young like the journalists themselves, like a young sapling which meets the axe before being able to grow up.

Maybe this part of the annual report of the “Reporters without Borders” which names Iran as one of the five biggest prisons of journalists in the world could clear the issue. The report is about the few months of Rohani’s administration which claims to be moderate and has made attractive promises on the issue of freedom of expression. We saw those who had illusions about the Islamic Republic took his promises seriously. Iran is the 173rd of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index 2014. The report states: “There has been no change in the situation of freedom of news coverage compared with the year before. The Iranian authorities continue to control news coverage strictly. Reporting on the nuclear issue, human rights and prisoners of conscience, is also censored. At the end of 2013, Iran continued to be one of the world’s biggest prisons for media personnel, with 50 journalists and netizens detained.”

“...Hassan Rouhani has not kept his campaign promises to ‘release all political prisoners’ and bring about a change ‘in favor of free speech and media freedom’.” Said Reporters without Borders

There were 71 imprisoned journalists by the time of the presidential elections in June 2013 and 42 others have been arrested since then. I know almost all the reported imprisoned journalists personally and have been working with some of them for a long time. Some of them had been arrested several times so far and 2 are members of the board of directors of the syndicate of journalists and have been spending years in prison only because of their activities in media and the syndicate.

I have seen my colleagues on the official television program of the Islamic Republic several times but not as host or expert but as people who have been broken under the pressure of interrogations confessing against themselves. Those who accept to participate in these TV shows usually introduce themselves as corrupt and unreliable people in their personal lives who have betrayed their wives. They even accept heavy allegations like espionage. Espionage and contact with foreign governments are common crimes you have to face if you decide to be a journalist in Iran. The reason given for these charges is cooperation with non-governmental or opposition websites or TV channels abroad which are the most normal things every journalist does all over the world. However, it is considered as espionage in my country. If you talk to the Iranian journalists in exile they will tell you that the main reason of their arrest and the harassment of their family members is sending reports to the news networks abroad. In the view of the dictators ruling Iran any news - even if it is about the danger caused by the drying up of the Uremia Lake in North-West of Iran - endangers the very bases of the regime.

This was only one part of the suffocation of the Iranian media. We have been always under a huge and obvious censorship. I have had brave colleagues who used and still use any opportunity especially when the inner conflicts among different fractions of the government rises to point out issues. They have paid the price of unemployment or imprisonment and a large number had no way but to censor their minds themselves.

Ladies and Gentleman!

This self-censorship is so strong that I have not been able to free my mind even after being 4 years out of Iran.

Another issue I would like to mention here is that the permission for a publication or news website will not even be granted to even a neutral citizen in Iran. Only those who are fully trusted by the regime and represent the interests of the governors may get a permission. These are normally people who are related to special circles in the regime and they usually get involved in the conflicts of these circles which may put them in trouble, too. Most of these people who are the owners or the concessioners of the publications are actually the ones who begin the censorship in Iran but the journalists have no consistence with this idea.

Let me explain you my personal experience of the official censorship process in Iran:

The press deputy of the Islamic culture ministry clarifies the forbidden issues not to be discussed in the newspapers by the circulars being sent to the concessioners and editors which may include even some particular words. For instance I was not allowed to use the word “syndicate” or other words that could be associated with gathering and associations during a large period of my work for the newspapers and in necessary cases I should have used some other words like “Islamic Associations” or “Islamic councils of workers”. The more common example is “Political Prisoner” which is totally denied by the regime. The reformists who are the full-fledged and so-called moderate form of the Islamic Republic have solved this problem with dividing the prisoners into “political” and “security” ones. Those who accept the four corners of the Islamic Republic and have been arrested which means those who are of the eliminated fractions of the regime are the political prisoners and the others who believe that no reform is possible inside the regime and demand change and the establishment of a new secular and democratic republic are considered as the “security prisoners” and should not be called as the political prisoners. So they have not the rights of a political prisoner. The names of the opposition organizations or activists are also considered as red lines. This list can be expanded to the news about the ethnic and religious minorities, women’s rights and maybe hundreds of other issues.

The official censorship was intensified along with the deterioration of the atomic crisis and the increase of the challenge with the west so much that the official circulars are now issued by the highest authorities which means “The national security council”. These circulars are about 2 main issues. One is the red lines and what should not be spoken of. The second is the issues which must be pointed out and how they must be written. It might be hard for you to believe that

one of the circulars by the national security council was issued to prohibit any news about the price of tomatoes when it became more expensive in 2008. My colleagues say after the crisis of air pollution in Tehran and some other big cities, they have received several orders demanding them not to write about the environment. Since last year the unbelievable amounts of peculations were exposed because of the conflicts among different fractions in the regime – the problem which has put the neighborhood country also in trouble – the journalists have been officially prohibited of writing anything about this matter. The regime says that they are exaggerating and discouraging the people by their reports. This means, the journalists are not allowed to talk about billions of Dollars of peculation and bribery in a country where the people have lost 50% of their purchasing power during the last 4 years and where there are new groups pushed under the poverty line every day.

Before, the publications were targeted after publishing something which the government did not like but since the beginning of Ahmadinejad's second administration and especially after the uprising of the people in 2009 it became normal to control the publications before them being printed or even put through to the printing office.

You are probably aware of the wide control on the cyber space in my country. According to the regime itself thousands of IRGC and MISIRI officers are concentrated full time on this issue. They are completely military organized and are known as "Cyber Army". This army along with tons of other institutions are controlling the activities of the internet users and monitoring the filtering of the websites blogs and news networks.

SattarBeheshti, an Iranian youngster, was arrested and killed under torture last year just because of publishing some opposing articles in his blog which were maybe read by a few people. The control on the internet is so huge that almost all international news networks are filtered, even Facebook and Twitter and the citizens need to use anti-filters to use these websites. Despite the presence of the necessary technical requirements the Iranians are using the slowest internet of the world which is cut off when the regime is in a critical position or the people are demonstrating. This also happens also to the mobile phones. They cut off the mobile phones when there are demonstrations.

To turn a blind eye on the repression of a totalitarian regime while retreating in foreign policies is currently the on-going situation in Iran. The Iranians may be right and have enough reasons to think that the world is not willing to see the realities of their pitiful lives. They almost believe that as the regime is propagating the problem of the west and that the government is none of their business. The increasing terror and oppression in their daily life has no place in the pragmatic policy of the international community. The regime is consciously and obviously propagating that the problem of the west with them and even the atomic crisis is a financial deal which has nothing to do with the people. They spread the feeling in society that nobody is hearing them that you have been abandoned and therefore have to deal with it. The regime wants to create ghosts who are neither seen nor heard, men and women who have lost their voices: voiceless people.

- Rasoul Asghari is an Iranian journalist and the analyzer of the political situation in Iran.

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