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Iran Cracks Down on Dissent

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR
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[Iran](#) is in the throes of one of its most ferocious crackdowns on dissent in years, with the government focusing on labor leaders, universities, the press, women's rights advocates, a former nuclear negotiator and Iranian-Americans, three of whom have been in prison for more than six weeks.

The shift is occurring against the backdrop of an economy so stressed that although Iran is the world's second-largest oil exporter, it is on the verge of rationing gasoline. At the same time, the nuclear standoff with the West threatens to bring new sanctions.

The hard-line administration of President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#), analysts say, faces rising pressure for failing to deliver on promises of greater prosperity from soaring oil revenue. It has been using American support for a change in government as well as a possible military attack as a pretext to hound his opposition and its sympathizers.

Some analysts describe it as a "cultural revolution," an attempt to roll back the clock to the time of the 1979 revolution, when the newly formed Islamic Republic combined religious zeal and anti-imperialist rhetoric to try to assert itself as a regional leader.

Equally noteworthy is how little has been permitted to be discussed in the Iranian news media. Instead, attention has been strategically focused on Mr. Ahmadinejad's political enemies, like the former president, [Mohammad Khatami](#), and the controversy over whether he violated Islamic morals by deliberately shaking hands with an unfamiliar woman after he gave a speech in Rome.

Mr. Khatami, the lost hope of Iran's reform movement, felt compelled to rebut the accusation because such a handshake is religiously suspect, but contended that the crowd seeking to congratulate him for his speech was so tumultuous that he could not distinguish between the hands of men and women. Naturally a video clip emerged, showing the cleric in his typical gregarious style bounding over to the first woman who addressed him on the orderly sidewalk, shaking her hand and chatting amicably.

The dispute over the handshake occurred during a particularly fierce round of the factional fighting that has hamstrung the country since the 1979 revolution. Far more harsh examples abound.

The country's police chief boasted that 150,000 people — a number far larger than usual — were detained in the annual spring sweep against any clothing considered not Islamic. More than 30 women's rights advocates were arrested in one day in March, according to [Human Rights Watch](#), five of whom have since been sentenced to prison terms of up to four years. They were charged with endangering national security for organizing an Internet campaign to collect more than a million signatures supporting the removal of all laws that discriminate against women.

Eight student leaders at Tehran's Amir Kabir University, the site of one of the few public protests against Mr. Ahmadinejad, disappeared into Evin Prison starting in early May. Student newspapers had published articles suggesting that no humans were infallible, including the Prophet

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Muhammad and Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah [Ali Khamenei](#).

The [National Security Council](#) sent a stern three-page warning to all the country's newspaper editors detailing banned topics, including the rise in gasoline prices or other economic woes like possible new international sanctions, negotiations with the United States over the future of Iraq, civil society movements and the Iranian-American arrests.

The entire campaign is "a strong message by Ahmadinejad's government, security and intelligence forces that they are in control of the domestic situation," said Hadi Ghaemi, an Iran analyst for Human Rights Watch. "But it's really a sign of weakness and insecurity."

At least three prominent nongovernment organizations that pushed for broader legal rights or civil society have been shuttered outright, while hundreds more have been forced underground. A recent article on the Baztab Web site said that about 8,000 nongovernment organizations were in jeopardy, forced to prove their innocence, basically because the government suspects all of them of being potential conduits for some \$75 million the United States has earmarked to promote a change in government.

Professors have been warned against attending overseas conferences or having any contact with foreign governments, lest they be recruited as spies. The Iranian-Americans are all being detained basically on the grounds that they were either recruiting or somehow abetting an American attempt to achieve a "velvet revolution" in Iran.

Analysts trace the broadening crackdown to a March speech by Ayatollah Khamenei, whose pronouncements carry the weight of law. He warned that no one should damage national unity when the West was waging psychological war on Iran. The country has been under fire, particularly from the United States, which accuses it of trying to develop nuclear weapons and fomenting violence in Iraq.

President Ahmadinejad and other senior officials have dismissed all the criticism as carping. The president blames the previous administration for inflation or calls it media exaggeration, while Tehran's chief prosecutor, Said Mortazavi, said Iranians who oppose the Islamic Republic look for an excuse to criticize it.

After a meeting of senior police and judiciary officials in Tehran on June 19 to review what was described as "the public security drive," the Iranian Labor News Agency quoted Mr. Mortazavi as saying that if the state did not protect public security, then "louts" and criminals "would be safe in society."

The three Iranian-Americans are being held in the notorious Section 209 of Evin Prison, the wing controlled by the Intelligence Ministry, and have been denied visits by their lawyers or relatives. Iran recognizes only their Iranian nationality and has dismissed any diplomatic efforts to intervene. A rally to demand their release is set for Wednesday outside the [United Nations](#).

The three are Haleh Esfandiari, the director of the Middle East program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; Kian Tajbakhsh, an urban planning consultant with the Open Society Institute; and Ali Shakeri, of the Center for Citizen Peacebuilding at the [University of California](#), Irvine. A fourth, Parnaz Azima, a journalist who works for Radio Farda, an American-financed station based in Europe, has been barred from leaving the country.

"People don't want to come to conferences, they don't even want to talk on the phone," said Abbas Milani, the director of the Iranian studies program at [Stanford University](#). "The regime has created an atmosphere of absolute terror."

To the political crackdown, Mr. Ahmadinejad adds a messianic fervor, Mr. Milani noted, telling students in Qom this month that the Muslim savior would soon return.

The appeal of such a message may be limited, however. Iran's sophisticated middle class wants to be connected to the world, and grumbles that the country's only friends are Syria, Belarus, Venezuela and Cuba. But it might play well with Mr. Ahmadinejad's main constituency.

"They are the poor, the rural," said Vali Nasr of the [Council on Foreign Relations](#). "They don't travel abroad, they don't go to conferences. He is trying to undermine the social and political position of

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his rivals in order to consolidate his own people.”

Most ascribe Mr. Ahmadinejad’s motives to blocking what could become a formidable alliance between the camps of Mr. Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani, both former presidents. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for early next year, and the next presidential vote in 2009.

“Having to face a single pragmatic conservative and reform block is extremely threatening,” Mr. Nasr said, hence the intimidation of all possible supporters.

Not that everyone has been intimidated. More than 50 leading economists published a harshly worded, open letter to the president saying his policies were bringing economic ruin. High unemployment persists, there has been little foreign investment and inflation is galloping, with gasoline alone jumping 25 percent this spring.

Gasoline rationing is expected within a month, with consumers so anxious about it, reported the Web site Ruz, financed by the Dutch government, that skirmishes broke out in long lines at some pumps on June 17.

Iran can prove a difficult country to separate into black and white. Amid all the recent oppression, for example, last week the public stoning of a couple — the punishment for adultery — was called off. Women’s rights advocates had been agitating against it.

Also, two recent movies touched off controversy as too racy. One depicted an extramarital affair, and the hero of the second was an [abortion](#) doctor who drank and gambled, and yet was so beloved of the patients he had seduced that they sent him bouquets on his wedding night.

In an attempt to deflect criticism that its standards had grown loose, the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, which vets all books, movies and gallery exhibits, issued a statement noting that both scripts had been approved under the former administration of Mr. Khatami.

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