



## **SISYPHUS' NEWSSTAND: THE IRANIAN PRESS UNDER KHATAMI**

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*Despite the election of President Muhammad Khatami, Iranian conservatives continue to target the press there, using the institutions they control. Indeed, arrests, persecutions, and harassment of the independent-minded and reformist media has increased as the anti-Khatami faction struggles to hold onto power. Khatami has been unwilling or unable to respond. This is a case study of how effectively those opposing democracy and change can wield their assets.*

Iranians have won a great deal of recognition for their journalistic activities recently, but it probably is not the kind of recognition they want. The U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) placed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at the top of its annual "Enemies of the Press" list in May 2001, and he was the runner-up the previous year. Iranian publisher Shahla Lahiji was awarded the 2001 PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award last April as she faced a three-and-a-half year prison sentence for acting against national security and another six months for describing the dangers faced by Iranian writers. Iranian editor Mashallah Shamsolvaezin's first year in prison was marked that same month and he was already in jail when he received the International Press Freedom Award from the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists. There are at least 20 Iranian journalists in prison now, and about 50 Iranian publications have been closed by the government in the second half of 2000 and the first half of 2001.

Four years ago it looked like things would turn out much differently.

The election of Hojatoleslam Mohammad Khatami in May 1997 and his appointment of Ataollah Mohajerani as Islamic Culture and Guidance Minister led to expectations of a blossoming of the Iranian press. Indeed, in the first year of Khatami's presidency, 226 publications received licenses. But at the same time, newspapers were closed for violating vague and unevenly enforced

regulations. As one editor complained: "Every time the press in Iran is warned by officials, we are told that we have crossed a red line, although no one has bothered to tell us where that red line is."<sup>(1)</sup> Journalists were tried, incarcerated, and sometimes prevented from practicing their profession. Others were murdered or just vanished from the face of the earth.

Shortly before its final session, the fifth parliament strengthened the press law and defined the "red line" more clearly. The new law was used to close some 13 publications in one week in April 2000, and at least 44 publications by April 2001. And when the new, predominantly-reformist, sixth parliament tried to change the press law in August 2000, Supreme Leader Khamenei blocked the debate.

The state of the Iranian press over the last four years will be described in the following pages. One sees that publications and journalists took on more and more controversial subjects during that time. One also sees that there were numerous press closures, especially in the last year. These two developments led to the creation of what Iranian conservatives term the "serial newspapers" and Iranian reformists could term the "serial plaintiffs." The conclusion of this article predicts short-term developments in Iranian politics and describes the possible impact of those developments on the Iranian press.

### **HIGH EXPECTATIONS**

When President Khatami was elected on May 23, 1997, there were expectations of increased press freedom for several reasons. After all, Khatami himself had been forced out of office in 1992 after almost ten years as Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance after accusations that he was too lax with the media and had advocated relations with the United States. Then he selected Ataollah Mohajerani as Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance, and there were early predictions that Mohajerani would not win parliamentary approval.(2) One parliamentarian criticized Mohajerani for being too "culturally tolerant and politically weak vis-a-vis the West," another asked Mohajerani if he would kill Salman Rushdie if he met him, and a third one said that "[a]ll the shrewd and cunning foreign media are supporting Mohajerani's nomination. Let us all disappoint them."(3) At that time Mohajerani displayed the resolve that showed itself in his later encounters with the legislature: "I disagree with almost all of the present practices in the culture ministry. We have to protect artists and provide an atmosphere for creativity, tranquility, and freedom." He added, "Everybody who has accepted the Islamic Republic and its constitution must be subject to tolerance...I condemn the burning of bookshops, the beating of university lecturers and attacks on magazine offices."(4)

During his presidential campaign, furthermore, Khatami promised increased openness, civil society, and governmental accountability and transparency. A free press is essential if these conditions are to be met. A free press provides a voice for the average citizen. Journalists keep an eye on the government, serving as the proverbial watchdogs that can detect corruption and abuses of power. And in Iran, many publications serve as party mouthpieces, especially when contrasted with state broadcasting, which is heavily biased in favor of hardline political tendencies.

Indeed, on the day that Khatami's victory was announced his spokesman said that "of course Mr. Khatami will not continue the present restrictions on the press and media. He will have an open policy toward them."(5) In his first extended remarks after winning the

election, Khatami said that it was time to insure more democracy in Iran. Khatami said that the Islamic Republic was stable enough and had recovered sufficiently from its war with Iraq to begin guaranteeing its citizens full constitutional rights, including free thought, life, employment, assembly and association. "We hope to gradually witness a more legal society," he said, "with more clearly defined rights and duties for citizens and the government."(6) And in his first address after taking office, Khatami also called for the creation of an independent press.(7)

### SOME EXPECTATIONS MET

The first year of the Khatami presidency saw the emergence of a reinvigorated press.(8) Notable was the publication of *Jameah*, which was the first to report the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) commander's closed-door speech in which he threatened to "cut the necks and tongues" of political opponents. The daily also ran interviews with Abbas Amir Entezam, who had served 15 years in prison as an American spy, in which he described torture in the prison system and the need to separate religion from politics.(9) Publications like this questioned the status quo, and they also served as vehicles for reform-oriented political figures to express their views.

Simultaneously, one saw trends that would gain momentum later. Student leader Heshmatollah Tabarzadi was beaten up and his newspaper was closed in late 1997 after he said that the supreme leader should be elected directly by the people for a limited term, rather than by the Assembly of Experts, a directly-elected 86-member clerical body. *Jameah* had its license suspended in June 1998, and the next month it resumed publication with the same staff under the name *Tus*. Editor Mashallah Shamsolvaezin opined that "We are a test case of how much openness the government can tolerate."(10) The answer came in August, when the judiciary ordered the closure of *Tus* for "publishing lies and disrupting public order," and members of the hardline Ansar-i Hizbullah vigilante group beat up Shamsolvaezin.(11) And the daily was

permanently closed in September for questioning Tehran's tough policy towards the Taliban, a rather unwise move at a time when the regime to the east had just murdered a group of Iranian officials (who were diplomats and intelligence officers).

Just as press closures and violence against people in journalism took on a pattern, so did the continued publication of a banned newspaper under a new name and using an unused press license. After its closure, *Jameah* started coming out as *Tus*, and after that license was revoked the newspaper came out as *Neshat*. After its closure, *Neshat* took over the dormant license of *Akhbar* and resumed publication as *Akhbar-i Eqtesad*, employing *Neshat* staff. Other *Neshat* personnel were employed by *Asr-i Azadigan*, which after its closure was succeeded by *Gunagun* weekly. Until its closure, this weekly employed staff from *Tus*, *Neshat*, *Asr-i Azadigan*, and other reformist publications. Other *Jameah* alumni created *Aftab-i Imruz*. Hardline political commentators complained about the "serial newspapers." (12)

Some of the 1999 press closures clearly were factional and linked with the publications' support for the reformists. Examples of this situation were the cases of *Salam*, *Neshat*, and *Khordad*. Nevertheless, the issue was not always purely one of hard-liners versus reformists, or conservatives versus pro-Khatami moderates. The cases of *Zan*, *Hoviat-i Khish*, and many others were not so clear-cut and demonstrate the complex factors involved in silencing Iran's more outspoken media.

On July 7, 1999, *Salam* was closed and its editor-in-chief, Abbas Abdi, was arrested on the basis of a complaint from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). The complaint stemmed from a July 6 *Salam* report about a MOIS plan to restrict the press. The MOIS said that the *Salam* report was false; the MOIS had no such plan and the letter cited by *Salam* was a fake. (13) Even though the MOIS dropped the complaint against Abdi and he was released, a July 8 student demonstration against the *Salam* closure and the press bill, catalyzed by anger over the earlier arrest of students protesting the detention of officials from a weekly

magazine, *Hoviat-i Khish*, escalated into some of the worst violence in the Islamic republic's history.

The managing director of *Salam*, Hojatoleslam Mohammad Asqar Musavi-Khoeniha, was tried by the Special Court for the Clergy in July 1999 on charges of spreading fabrications, disturbing public opinion, and publishing classified documents. Khoeniha was found guilty and sentenced to a three-and-a-half year jail term and a flogging, but the sentence was suspended and Khoeniha was fined instead. He was banned from publishing activities for three years, and *Salam* was banned for five years. (14)

Actions against *Salam* were politically driven. By restricting Khoeniha and Abdi's media access, hard-liners eliminated some of the institutional support for the pro-Khatami Second Khordad movement. Khoeniha is a co-founder of the pro-Khatami student group called the Office for Strengthening Unity, which is a member of the Second Khordad movement. Khoeniha also is a leader of the Student's Following the Line of the Imam, the organization that occupied the U.S. Embassy in 1979 and held the American hostages. Abdi is a member of the latter group, and he is a founder of Khatami's Islamic Iran Participation Party. Leaders of the Office for Strengthening Unity, such as Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, are also one-time members of the Students Following the Line of the Imam.

Application of the law in this case clearly showed political-factional motivations. Hardline publications--the weekly *Javan* and the dailies *Kayhan* and *Jomhuri-yi Islami*--printed copies of a letter from 24 Islamic Revolution Guards Corps commanders to Khatami in which they threatened to take the law into their own hands if the president did not act against the demonstrators. (15) The publications received warnings from the Islamic Culture and Guidance Ministry for publishing a classified document, (16) but nothing else happened.

The September 1999 closure of *Neshat* was politically motivated, too, although the charges brought against it did not indicate this clearly. The paper was closed on the orders of Press Court Judge Hojatoleslam Said Mortazavi after a complaint from the public

prosecutor. The charges against the daily stemmed from its publication of an open letter urging Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to distance himself from hard-liners, as well as two articles criticizing capital punishment.

*Neshat* seemed destined for a bad end from the outset. Its staff consisted of personnel from the previously banned *Tus* and *Jameah* newspapers. In April, just three months after getting its license, managing director Latif Safari had to appear before the Tehran Revolutionary Court on charges of questioning the Islamic Revolution and supporting the monarchy.(17)

In August, complaints were filed against *Neshat* by the Law Enforcement Forces, state broadcasting, the state prosecutor, Qom's Special Court for the Clergy, the Islamic Open University, and some parliamentary deputies. *Neshat's* managing director had to appear in court, as did *Neshat* columnist Ebrahim Nabavi.(18) When *Neshat* was banned in September, the Tehran Justice Department pointed out that "repeated summons and bails [sic] have proved ineffective in preventing the daily from repeating its offense."(19)

And once again, the law was unevenly applied. *Neshat* officials apologized for any offense their articles might have caused,(20) but they were not forgiven. When *Qods* was charged with offending two Shia sources of emulation, however, it published an apology and the Press Supervisory Board only issued a written warning.(21)

Hearings before the Special Court for the Clergy in the case of *Khordad* managing editor Hojatoleslam Abdullah Nuri got underway in October 1999. This case, more so than that of *Salam* and Musavi-Khoeniha, was based on the pro-Khatami leanings of both Nuri and the publication. Nuri served as Khatami's Interior Minister until his June 1998 interpellation. He was elected to Tehran municipal council in February 1999, and after announcing his intention to run for the legislature he was seen as a possible speaker of the parliament.

Nuri faced charges of publishing reports that insulted officials and institutions of the system, reporting lies and waging a

propaganda war against the system, insulting Father of the Revolution Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his views, publishing reports contrary to religious principles, and insulting religious sanctities. Other charges included backing ties with America, promoting dissident cleric Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri's political views, and urging recognition of Israel.(22) The contents of *Khordad*, the Special Court for the Clergy's special prosecutor said, "smack of conspiracy and hostility."

Nuri's defense undermined many long-standing hardline values with clear logic, and the Tehran media covered the case extensively. This may have earned him popular support, but it did not help Nuri's case. The prosecutor in the case said that the more Nuri talks, "We realize that our opinion about him was right and his guilt becomes more certain."(23) The jury found Nuri guilty on 15 of the infractions and recommended against any leniency in sentencing. He was sentenced to five years in prison and barred from journalistic activities for five years after that.

The *Salam*, *Neshat*, and *Khordad* cases were obvious attempts to eliminate reformist newspapers and to limit the influence of reformist political figures. Reasons for the closures of *Zan* and *Hoviat-i Khish* were factionally related, too. Their closures were not, however, related to their relationships with Khatami or their reformist tendencies.

The Judiciary closed Tehran's *Zan* daily in April 1999. It was punished for publishing a letter from the ex-empress of Iran and for publishing a cartoon ridiculing the current Iranian interpretation of the principle of "blood money." (In Iran, the compensation one must pay to a murdered woman's family is less than that which must be paid to a murdered man's family.)

The case against *Zan* was not so much an attack on a Second *Khordad* publication, although Faezeh Hashemi herself is a Khatami supporter. There was resentment over her apparent personal ambition. It was also an attempt to lessen the influence of Hashemi's father, Expediency Council chairman Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. He is identified as the leader (in

loose terms) of the Executives of Construction Party that is connected with Khatami's successful election campaign. In addition, there is a great deal of resentment over the cronyism, nepotism, and corruption associated with his family.

In June 1999, the Revolutionary Court detained *Hoviat-i Khish* weekly's editor-in-chief, Heshmatollah Tabarzadi, and director, Hussein Kashani. Tabarzadi's real crime, it seems, was his role as a leader of the Islamic Union of Students and Graduates, a more radical student group. The July 8 student demonstrations were catalyzed by the arrest two days earlier of students who gathered to protest Tabarzadi and Kashani's detentions. The Revolutionary Court judge later said that members of the Islamic Union of Students and Graduates were being prosecuted for their parts in the July demonstrations.(24)

In 1999, other publications and their personnel encountered "legal" problems for reasons that were not political or factional. For example, the director of the provincial publication *Kosar Kavir Kerman* claimed that his offices were set ablaze in reaction to articles about the improper use of nationalized property in Kerman Province.(25) The publisher of Sanandaj's Kurdish-language *Sirwan* weekly was summoned "for publishing falsehoods and slander against an adviser of the head of the judiciary," although it is more likely that the real issue was publication of an article about financial mismanagement in the Kurdistan Province governorate.(26) The situation in Gilan province seemed especially bad. Ali Sebati, director of the provincial publication *Payam-i Shomal* was arrested by the Gilan province headquarters of the MOIS.(27) Two months later, seven Gilan journalists were imprisoned.(28)

### THE CLOSURES BEGIN...

Events in the first two years of the Khatami presidency pale in comparison to what happened in 2000 and 2001, when about 50 publications were closed in a fifteen-month period. This trend started in March-April 2000, when Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei gave several sermons and

speeches that criticized advocates of reform generally and the reformist press specifically.

In one sermon, Khamenei complained about unnamed promoters of "Americanized reforms" and seemed to indicate that they were acceptable targets of violence.(29) And in another, he said that the West first attacked Iran via its radio stations, but now it is building a "stronghold" in Iran. He said the press is creating anxiety, discord, and pessimism. "It seems as if 10 or 15 newspapers are being directed from the same center to publish articles with similar headlines. They make mountains out of molehills...kill the hope among the youth...weaken the people's trust...offend and insult." The Supreme Leader added that President Mohammad Khatami is unhappy with the press too. "We are trying to stop the enemy from realizing his propaganda conspiracy."(30)

Such statements inspired the IRGC to say that "if necessary, our enemies, be they small or large, will feel the reverberating impact of the hammer of the Islamic revolution on their skulls and the impact will be so strong that they will never be able to engage in hatching plots or committing crimes."(31) Then the new press law was passed.(32) In just one day, 12 publications were closed. And it was quite clear that the closures related to the publications' criticism of the hard-liners and support for reformist causes.

### TABLE 1: THE ORIGINAL CLOSURES; 23 APRIL 2000

Dailies: *Guzarish-i Ruz*, *Bamdad-i No*, *Aftab-i Imruz*, *Payam-i Azadi*, *Fath*, *Arya*, *Asr-i Azadigan*, *Manateq-i Azad*

Weeklies: *Payam-i Hajar*, *Aban*, *Arzesh*

Monthlies: *Iran-i Farda*

After the initial closures, an unnamed Judiciary official explained that a committee formed to investigate the press concluded that "despite frequent warnings given to them, they continued with their anti-Islamic and anti-revolutionary activities," and "the tone of material in those papers had brought smiles to

the faces of the enemies of the Islamic Republic and hurt the feelings of devout Muslims at home and even the leader of the Islamic revolution." The Judiciary official warned, "We are also trying to detect the foreign links of some of these newspapers."(33)

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei continued his criticism of the media during a 26 July speech in northwestern Meshkinshahr.(34) He said that "a number of journalists in Tehran wait for opportunities in order to make a mountain out of a molehill in the political arena. They wish to keep the government, the officials, and the people engaged with political and factional issues." Khamenei accused them of treason and cooperating with foreign intelligence services. "The journalists stop the officials from carrying out their duties and this is an act of treason. Talking about matters that are desirable by the CIA and Mossad; or writing about issues in order to please them [CIA and Mossad]; or taking stances for their benefit, do not serve the people's interests."

In August, Khamenei put a stop to parliamentarians' debate on the press law.(35) He warned that "should the enemies of Islam, the revolution and the Islamic system take over or infiltrate the press, a great danger would threaten the security, unity and the faith of the people and, therefore, I cannot allow myself and other officials to keep quiet in respect of this crucial issue." Khamenei went on to say that "The current [press] law, to a degree, has been able to prevent the appearance of this great calamity, and [therefore], its interpretation [amendment] and similar actions that have been anticipated by the parliamentary committee are not legitimate and not in the interest of the country and the system."

This outraged reformist deputies. Scuffles broke out in the chamber, and there was a walkout. Speaker of Parliament Hojatoleslam Mehdi Mahdavi-Karrubi reacted by reminding the protestors that the Supreme Leader's action was legally permissible. As he later told state radio, "The constitution emphasizes the Absolute Rule of the Jurisconsult [Vilayat-i Motlaq] and this is how it is. And, you voted for it."(36)

At least one hardline cleric approved of this development, saying that Khamenei "issued a warning to these nonsense-babblers. As a result they retreated one step. But if the people cooperate with us, the nonsense-babblers will be banished to the desert where Arabs play flute."(37)

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Persian Service asked reformist journalist Masud Behnud why the press law had been made so strict in the first place. Behnud explained: "When the hard-liners discovered that they were losers of the last elections, they made a few major changes to the press law at the end of the fifth parliament. These changes were based on one point only. They discovered they lost the election solely due to the presence of the press. Therefore, press has the power of making up the people's mind and they can be the determining factor, and observed the effect of the press campaign and advertisement in the past months. They changed the press law so that these things will not take place."(38)

#### **TABLE 2: TOTAL CLOSURES, APRIL 2000 - AUGUST 2001**

Dailies: *Aftab-i Imruz, Ahrar, Arya, Asr-i Azadigan, Bahar, Bamdad-i No, Bayan, Dowran-i Imruz, Fath, Gonbad-i Kabud, Guzarish-i Ruz, Hambastegi, Ham-Mihan, Manateq-i Azad, Mellat (reopened July 2001), Mosharekat, Nosazi, Payam-i Azadi, Ruzdara, Sobh-i Imruz, Talieh*

Weeklies: *Aban, Amin-i Zanjan, Arzesh, Ava, Ava-yi Varzish, Bazar-i Ruz, Cheshmeh, Farda-yi Roshan, Golbang-i Iran, Gunagun, Iran-Javan, Hadis-yi Qazvin, Harim, Iran Javan, Jahan-i Pezeshki, Jameh-yi Madani, Jebheh, Khalij-i Fars, Mihan, Milad, Mobin, Nakhl, Payam-i Hajar, Qeseh-yi Zendigi, Ruzdaran, Sepideh Zendegi, Sobh-i Omid, Tavana*

Monthlies: *Iran-i Farda, Javanan-i Qorveh, Kiyān, Payam-i Imruz*

Note: this list does not include student publications--such as *Mowj, Kavir*, and *Farda-yi Azadi*--or publications that have

closed due to financial problems, and it may not include some provincial publications that have been shut down. Also, the licenses of *Ayadin*, *Danesh-i Hisabresi*, and *Nava* were revoked by the Press Supervisory Board, but they had not been published for a "long time," *Jomhuri-yi Islami* reported on 3 October 2000.

### ... AND SPREAD TO THE PROVINCES

Press closures and persecution of journalists were most noticeable in Tehran, but these phenomena existed in the provinces, too. Editors from Rasht, Shiraz, and Tabriz described some of the problems they face in a roundtable organized by RFE/RL's Persian Service.(39) The most pernicious problem is self-censorship. After seeing what happened in Tehran and noting how long their colleagues have been unemployed, provincial journalists have become very cautious. The provincial publications have other problems, not least little money from sales, advertising, or state subsidies. There is also a dearth of modern printing facilities. This means that the provincial publications have a low circulation and limited reach.

Provincial journalists face legal problems, too. Reformist journalist Masud Kordpur, who has been associated with *Arya*, *Khordad*, *Fath*, *Neshat*, and *Asr-i Azadigan*, was in court in September 2000. Kordpur told RFE/RL's Persian Service that he faced charges of spreading falsehoods because during a recent speech he criticized the disproportionate presence of non-Kurds in Bukan, Kurdistan Province. Kordpur pointed out that there were no Kurdish officials at his hearing, and their absence was particularly painful given the high level of unemployment in the province.(40)

Davud Bayat, managing editor of Zanzan's *Farda-yi Roshan* weekly, appeared in court to face charges of printing defamatory articles, publishing falsehoods to divert public opinion, and vilifying institutions, and Tehran's Justice Department and the public prosecutor were the plaintiffs.(41) (The court ordered the weekly's closure almost a year later, in August 2001.) Meanwhile, Mohammad Reza Nabaie, the managing editor of the weekly *Andalib* was summoned

to the court following a complaint from former Malayer parliamentarian Hassan Zamani. Zamani claimed that an article in *Andalib* was defamatory, insulted the people of Malayer, distorted his words, and contained lies.(42)

### THE SERIAL PLAINTIFFS

What could be called the "serial plaintiffs" are another development in the Iranian media's problems, and they are, effectively, the four horsemen of this press apocalypse. The original four horsemen were pestilence, war, famine, and death. The new ones are the IRGC, the MOIS, the counterintelligence unit of the Law Enforcement Forces, and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). They and similar bodies file most of the complaints that lead to press trials. And if there is a Grim Reaper, it would be the Judiciary, which actually revokes the press licenses and sentences people to prison.

When the *Ava* weekly from Najafabad, Isfahan Province, was suspended in April 2000, it faced complaints from the MOIS, the Press Supervisory Board, the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance, the Special Court for the Clergy in Qom, and the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps in Qom and Najafabad. *Ava* editor Mustafa Izadi was sentenced in early-July. Attorney Mohammad Aghassi told RFE/RL's Persian Service that Izadi's chief fault was the perception that he is a supporter of Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri-Najafabadi.(43)

The managing director of Tabriz's *Ahrar* weekly faced complaints from LEF counterintelligence chief Brigadier-General Mohammad Reza Naqdi, the IRGC, and the East Azerbaijan Basij of the Dispossessed.(44) *Bayan* Managing Editor Hojatoleslam Ali Akbar Mohtashemi-Pur was summoned by the Special Court for the Clergy to face complaints from the counterintelligence unit of the LEF, IRIB, the Tehran municipality, and hardline cleric Hojatoleslam Ruhollah Husseinian.(45)

In the hearing of *Arya* publisher Mohammad Reza Zohdi, the plaintiffs included the MOIS and LEF counterintelligence. *Omid-i Zanzan* weekly was accused of insulting the IRGC and its

commander, General Yahya Rahim Safavi, by writing in 1998 that the military organization was planning a coup, referring to the IRGC headquarters in Zanjan as a "den of vampires," and accusing the IRGC of involvement in the March 2000 attempt to kill reformist ideologue Said Hajjarian.(46) Fereidun Verdinejad, chief of the official Islamic Republic News Agency, appeared before the court in July to face complaints by the LEF, Ansar-i Hizbullah, Basij Mobilization Forces, IRIB, and private individuals. And in the trial for the banned daily *Manateq-i Azad*, the plaintiffs included IRIB and the LEF. Qafur Garshasbi, editor of the banned reformist daily *Asr-i Azadigan*, faced charges of spreading rumors and of publishing false and defamatory reports that were filed by the prosecutor general; the LEF intelligence unit, intelligence deputy, and legal department; the Judicial Organization of the Armed Forces; the Guardians Council; the student Basij of Imam Sadeq University; Ansar-i Hizbullah, and IRIB.(47)

Nor did these four horsemen confine their actions to filing criminal complaints that led to press closures. Some twenty journalists--at a very conservative estimate--have been imprisoned in the last year, and Reporters Without Frontiers refers to Iran as the biggest jail for journalists in the world.(48) And often people disappear in a prison system that is run by a myriad of unaccountable security agencies. Other journalists have been murdered (for example, Majid Sharif, Mohammad Mokhtari, Mohammad Jafar Puyandeh) or have disappeared (for example, Piruz Davani).

## CONCLUSION

Khatami won reelection in 2001 by another big margin but with a smaller overall turnout. He once again has a mandate for reform, albeit a weakened one. His mandate and his prestige were undercut further when he was temporarily blocked from taking the oath of office until parliament approved the nomination of conservative jurists to the Guardians Council in August 2001. Nevertheless, he has had other mandates with which he has done nothing. On the one hand, he may see himself as a lame duck who has

nothing to lose by aggressively promoting freedom of the press and defending the print media. He might, therefore, appoint a Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance who is as tough as Mohajerani. On the other hand, he may continue his current policy, which on the surface amounts to little more than subdued complaints about repression.

Irrespective of Khatami's being president, the Judiciary, Revolutionary Courts, and the Special Court for the Clergy will continue to target the press, journalists, publishers, and reformist politicians. The IRGC, which has adopted a more aggressive stance in the last year, will continue in this vein, too. Indeed, the Judiciary's closure of the reformist *Hambastegi* daily on 8 August 2001, the very day that Khatami took his oath of office, is a pretty clear indication that this will be the case.

Moreover, the use of the *shabnameh* (literally "night letter," a kind of samizdat) will increase if the current press situation persists. So far, most of these night letters have been produced by hard-liners and used to attack members of the reformist movement. Among the night letters' producers are so-called "research institutes" in Qom, the Qom Seminary Theological Lecturers Association, and hard-line pressure groups, and the allegations that appear in the night letters reappear in hardline publications like *Kayhan*, *Siyasat*, and *Yalisarat al-Husseini*.

The night letters rarely make direct attacks. They make allusions, or they describe a malfeasance but ascribe it to "Mr. X" rather than naming him. Another tactic is to let the reader draw his own conclusions, with sentences ending in ellipses because the material is too sensitive or possibly too offensive to complete. The research institutes try to make their work seem scholarly and thoroughly researched by using references and endnotes. When one tries to look up the references, however, one discovers that the original source does not exist, people were misquoted or they never actually made the statements attributed to them.(49)

Although they have fewer assets at their disposal, reformists also have resorted to night letters to spread their message. One example is the 80-page night letter about the

serial murders, linking MOIS officials and top regime figures with murders that preceded those of 1998.(50) Distribution of the videotaped confessions of Amir Farshad Ebrahimi, a former IRGC and Ansar-i Hizbullah member, is another example of reformists' use of night letters.(51) Without newspapers to convey their views, it seems likely that they will resort to night letters more often.

Finally, Iranians' interest in foreign media, via short-wave, satellite, or the internet will only increase as they seek unbiased information about developments in their own country. State radio and television already had a powerful role in opinion-making because newspapers and print media have a limited circulation outside the main cities. The closure of so many publications only increased this advantage. Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), however, is criticized for being one-sided in its news reporting, which explains the popularity of foreign radio services. "Considering the limitations of literacy and the even greater limitation in their access to the press, people will turn to Voice of America, the BBC, and Radio Free Europe, which can be heard in the most remote villages with two-band radios," a Tehran journalist warned.(52) Even the April-May 2000 mass closure of publications did not enhance IRIB's popularity. At that time, shopkeepers said that the demand for short-wave receivers in Iran increased after the press closures.(53)

To counter this phenomenon before the February 2000 parliamentary election, Tehran jammed Persian language broadcasts by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the Voice of America, and the BBC. RFE/RL and VOA broadcasts were jammed before the June 2001 presidential election, too. This second round of jamming was justified by a February 13, 2001, statement by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that "the political and security organs which are against the Islamic Republic political system in America and Europe all emphasize in their statements, and in the broadcasts of the radio stations they fund, that their efforts are aimed at countering our political system. The other day, I

accidentally heard this myself, while listening to one of these radio stations...."

And a final note of caution. The Iranian media, if left alone by the state, is not likely to be perfectly objective and unbiased. Many publications serve as party organs and voice the viewpoints of certain political factions and pressure groups. Others are linked with factions within the government. Even the more independent newspapers, like *Salam* and *Khordad*, reflected some of the more populist and reactionary views in foreign policy.

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#### NOTES

1. *Arzesh* magazine managing editor Ali Nazari in an interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Persian Service, cited in RFE/RL Iran Report, v. 2, n. 15 (12 April 1999).
2. Associated Press, 12 August 1997. "Iran's Moderate President Faces Dissent Over Cabinet Choices," *New York Times*, 15 August 1997.
3. Reuters, 20 August 1997.
4. Reuters, 20 August 1997.
5. Khatami spokesman Ahmad Burqani, cited in Stephen Kinzer, "Moderate leader is elected in Iran by a wide margin," *New York Times*, 25 May 1997.
6. Khatami also took the time to criticize the U.S., saying, "We are sorry to see that the United States' policy has always been hostile to our revolution," and adding that "the key to the problem is in their hands and not ours;" Reuters, 27 May 1997.
7. "Iran's Moderate President Faces Dissent Over Cabinet Choices," *New York Times*, 15 August 1997.
8. Some of the information in this article appeared previously in A.W. Samii, "The Contemporary Iranian News Media, 1998-1999," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, v. 3, n. 4 (December 1999).
9. Elaine Sciolino, "Iran's Alternative Voices Now Demand to Be Heard," *New York Times*, 19 July 1998.
10. Elaine Sciolino, "Iran's Alternative Voices Now Demand to Be Heard," *New York Times*, 19 July 1998.

11. AFP, 1 August 1998. A useful study on Ansar-i Hizbullah and similar groups is Michael Rubin, *Into The Shadows: Radical Vigilantes in Khatami's Iran Policy Papers No. 56* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy: Washington, DC, 2001).
12. See, for example, Seyyed Jalal Fayyazi, "Elections: Free or Secular," *Qods*, 14 December 1999; Amir Mohebbian, "The Executives of the System Must be Brought Under the Sword of Criticism," *Yalisarat al-Hussein*, 6 December 2000; "Mohajerani's period of ministership, cultural triteness, or cultural corruption?" *Fayzieh*, 3 January 2001; Mohammad Imani, "May God save us from dishonest friends," *Kayhan*, 15 February 2001.
13. *Kayhan*, July 7, 1999.
14. IRNA, August 4, 1999.
15. *Jomhuri-yi Islami*, July 19, 1999.
16. IRNA, July 21, 1999.
17. *Qods*, April 18, 1999.
18. *Sobh-i Imruz*, August 24, 1999.
19. IRNA, September 5, 1999.
20. *Neshat*, September 2, 1999.
21. IRNA, August 9, 1999.
22. *Hamshahri*, October 12, 1999.
23. Hojatoleslam Mohammad Ebrahim Niknam, cited in *Sobh-i Imruz*, November 11, 1999.
24. Islamic Revolutionary Court Judge Gholamhussein Rahbarpur, cited in *Jomhuri-yi Islami*, September 12, 1999.
25. *Kar va Kargar*, January 31, 1999.
26. *Hamshahri*, April 14, 1999.
27. *Khordad*, February 3, 1999.
28. *Neshat*, April 17, 1999.
29. Friday prayer sermon at Tehran University, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Radio 1, April 14, 2000.
30. Live speech by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to a group of young people in Tehran, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Radio 1, April 20, 2000.
31. Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, April 16, 2000.
32. A revision of the press law was proposed in the parliament in October-November 1998, and the parliament approved the draft bill on 7 July 1999. The law said that a complaint against a publication could be filed for an unlimited period. In other words, there is no

statute of limitations. Part of the bill called for a reporter to be held responsible for what he or she wrote, whereas final responsibility rested with the publication's director or chief editor. Granting of press accreditation was made more restrictive. The bill said that a Qom seminarian and the head of the Islamic Propagation Organization would serve on the Press Supervisory Board. Also, the bill said Revolutionary Courts are qualified to hear press offenses, whereas Article 168 of the constitution only permits press courts to do so.

This law was almost identical to an October 1998 proposal for revising the press laws by Deputy Minister of Intelligence and Security Saïd Emami. Emami complained that journalists' activities would "cause security problems for the Islamic Republic of Iran." Whereas the current press law only held license-holders and managing directors responsible for what appeared in publications, Emami wrote, the writers themselves must be confronted "individually, using the law, in order to ban them from writing or publishing." Emami proposed the drafting of a bill that would "lend legality to the security measures." He wrote: "The bill must include the professional nature of the work and eligibility for it." This meant that writers and translators would require licenses. Emami proposed a special disciplinary court to judge press offenses. Emami wrote, "In this way, associations that are acceptable to us can be strengthened and hostile elements driven away." (*Salam*, 6 July 1999.) In January 1999, Emami was arrested for his part in the late-1998 murders of writers and dissident political figures. Little was known about Emami's letter until after his death in June, when he allegedly committed suicide while in custody.

News about Emami's proposed press law was one of the sparks that led to the disturbances of July 1999. Parliament, therefore, postponed acting on it, leading to speculation that the new parliament could overturn it. But in late April 2000, a little more than a month before the new parliament was inaugurated, a new, tough press law was passed. The new law permits Revolutionary Courts to prosecute press cases and prohibits

the reappearance of banned publications coming out under a new name. The new law prohibits criticism of the constitution and it makes journalists, as well as publications' directors, liable for what appears in the press. *Kayhan*, 29 April 2000.

33. Tehran Times, April 25, 2000.

34. Tehran Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Radio 1, 26 July 2000.

35. IRNA, 6 August 2000.

36. Tehran Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Radio 1, 6 August 2000.

37. Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi at a meeting in Qom's Abshar Mosque, Iran, 3 October 2000.

38. RFE/RL Iran Report, v. 3, n. 31 (14 August 2000).

39. Roundtable with Farid Yasamin, editor of Shiraz's *Nim-Negah* daily, Seyyed Hussein Ziavari, publisher of Rasht's *Hatef* weekly, and Hamed Iman, publisher of Tabriz's *Sham-i Tabrizi* weekly, cited in RFE/RL Iran Report, v. 3, n. 36 (18 September 2000).

40. RFE/RL Iran Report, v. 3, n. 36 (18 September 2000).

41. IRNA, 6 September 2000.

42. IRNA, 3 September 2000.

43. RFE/RL Iran Report, v. 3, n. 29 (31 July 2000).

44. *Hayat-i No*, 18 June 2000.

45. Iran, 28 June 2000.

46. *Entekhab*, 13 August 2000.

47. *Kayhan*, 10 October 2000.

48. Reporters Without Frontiers press release, 17 April 2001, <<http://www.rsf.fr/uk/home.html>>.

49. *Bahar*, 27 July 2000.

50. RFE/RL Iran Report, v. 3, n. 45 (27 November 2000).

51. RFE/RL Iran Report, v. 3, n. 38 (9 October 2000).

52. Suleiman Kiai, *Sobh-i Imruz*, March 29, 2000.

53. *Kar va Kargar*, cited by *Iran Daily*, May 2, 2000.