

# MERIA

## **The Contemporary Iranian News Media, 1998-1999+**

By A. W. Samii\*\*

*Control of the press has become one of the central battlefields for the factional political struggle within Iran. Newspapers supporting President Muhammad Khatami are closed or harassed, as are those whose criticisms of government policy or the regime's ideology go too far in the eyes of the powerful conservative faction there. Examining developments regarding the media is an excellent way to understand current social and political attitudes in Iran, as well as the changing power balance between factions and opinions.*

In August 1999, Iran's Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance announced that its press policy is based on "expanding legalized freedoms and increasing the number of publications." (1) A week later, however, Neshat, a Tehran daily newspaper, was banned from publication on the orders of the Press Court. (2)

Factional issues play a big part in press closures. The hardline judiciary closes reformist publications, while hardline ones that commit similar violations are rarely punished. Furthermore, many reformist publications, plus a few hardline ones, are closed through the judiciary's enforcement of vaguely worded rules and regulations. Editors and publishers are told there is a "red line" that they must not cross, but that "red line" is ill-defined. This led one reformist publication to ask in a headline: "How Should We Write the News?" (3)

This article will discuss Iranian press developments in 1998-1999. First, it will describe newspaper closures in 1999, particularly those linked with factional disputes. Because the Iranian judiciary is the institution most closely linked with newspaper closures, the article will describe the newly adopted press law and debates surrounding it. Then, to provide some context, this article will examine how state radio and television cover issues. Because the Ministry of Islamic Culture and

Guidance is responsible for issuing press licenses, the article will examine attempts to remove its chief. It will conclude with a discussion of the internet's role in Iranian press and media issues

### **PRESS DEVELOPMENTS**

After a brief respite following President Hojatoleslam Mohammad Khatami's 1997 inauguration, there was a "clampdown against the more vocal press" because of the factional struggle in Iran, according to the 1998 Annual Report of the Committee to Protect Journalists, entitled "Attacks on the Press." To look at the issue purely in terms of hardliners versus reformists, or conservatives versus pro-Khatami moderates, however, is overly simplified. By examining five of the more significant cases, one sees that only twice, in the cases of Salam and Khordad, was the issue so clear-cut. The cases of Zan, Hoviat-i Khish, Neshat, and many others demonstrate the many complex factors involved in silencing Iran's more outspoken media.

### **SALAM**

On July 7, 1999, Salam daily 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 (see below for details). The MOIS said that the Salam report was false; the MOIS had no such plan and the letter cited by Salam was a fake. (4) But, the MOIS dropped the complaint against Abdi and he was released.

It was too late, though. 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 on July 25, 1999. He faced charges of spreading fabrications, disturbing public opinion, and publishing classified documents. This latter charge referred to the MOIS plan for a crackdown on the reformist press. The report about the plan was published the day before parliament approved the new press law.

Khoeniha was found guilty and sentenced to a three-and-a-half year jail term and a flogging. Due to his revolutionary background, however, 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. (5) Meanwhile, the Islamic Revolution Court in Qom started hearings against Abdi on the basis of complaints that he insulted a mob chanting "Death to America" by calling them "thugs."

These actions were politically driven. By restricting Khoeniha and Abdi's media access, hardliners eliminated some of the institutional support for the Second Khordad (the date of Khatami's election) 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 Guard 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. (6) The Islamic Culture and Guidance Ministry sent written warnings to these publications' managing editors for publishing a classified document. (7) The trial of the *Kayhan* manager, however, was postponed indefinitely after the judge dismissed the jury. And all three publications are still active.

## **KHORDAD**

Hearings before the Special Court for the Clergy in the case of "Khordad" managing editor Hojatoleslam Abdullah Nuri got underway on October 30. This case, more so than that of Salam and Musavi-Khoeniha, was based on the publication's pro-Khatami leanings. Nuri served as Khatami's Interior Minister until his June 1998 interpellation. He was elected to Tehran municipal council in February 1999, and he recently announced his intentions to run for parliament. In fact, Nuri was being mentioned 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. (8) 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. While this may have earned him popular support, it did not help Nuri's case. The prosecutor in the case, Hojatoleslam Mohammad Ebrahim Nikunam, said that the more Nuri talks, "we realize that our opinion about him was right and his guilt becomes more certain." (9) The jury found Nuri guilty on 15 of the infractions and recommended against any leniency in sentencing. He was sentenced on November 27 to five years in prison and barred from journalistic activities for five years after that.

### **ZAN, HOVIAT-I KHISH, AND NESHAT**

The Salam 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, Hoviat-i Khish, and Neshat were factionally related, too. Their closures were not, however, related to their relationships with Khatami.

The Judiciary closed Tehran's Zan daily on April 6. It was punished 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.) Tehran Islamic Revolutionary Court Judge Hojatoleslam Gholamhussein Rahbarpour also cited publication of a letter from the ex-empress of Iran.

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 head 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 him.

On June 16, 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. Islamic Revolutionary Court Judge Rahbarpour later said that members of the Islamic Union of Students and Graduates were being prosecuted for their parts in the July demonstrations. (10)

The September 5 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 hardliners, as well as two articles criticizing capital punishment.

From the very beginning, Neshat seemed destined for a bad end. Its staff consisted of personnel from the previously banned Tous 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.(11)

On August 18, 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 Majlis deputies. Neshat's managing director had to appear in court, as did Neshat columnist Ebrahim Nabavi. (12) When Neshat was banned on September 5, the Tehran Justice Department pointed out that "repeated summons and bails [sic] have proved ineffective in preventing the daily from repeating its offense." (13)

Even after the Neshat closure, intense criticism of it and of the press in general continued. In the September 10 Friday Prayer sermon, Ayatollah Mohammad Emami-Kashani warned newspapers: "You may think you can write whatever you wish today. You may boast about your action because you defamed this or that person, but when we are dead and buried in our graves, we shall be together again." Other Friday Prayer leaders voiced similar opinions.

And once again, the law was unevenly applied. Neshat officials apologized for any offense the articles might have caused, (14), but they were not forgiven. When Qods was charged with offending two sources of emulation, however, it published an apology and the Press Supervisory Board only issued a written warning. (15)

## OTHER PUBLICATIONS

Since January 1999, other publications and their personnel have encountered "legal" problems for reasons that are 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. (16)

In another case, 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 (17).

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. (18) Two months later, seven journalists were imprisoned. (19)

Sobh was warned in April about an article titled "Violence and Crisis Creation in Strategic Management," which was critical of government managers. Nasser Safarian, the movie critic from Salam, was held for two days and questioned for signing a letter demanding answers to the murders of dissidents and intellectuals. (20) In a not-so-subtle hint, he was released on the road to Behesht-i Zahra cemetery.

Conservative figures blamed the press for the country's problems. Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps General Yahya Rahim Safavi said: "The influence of the anti-revolutionary elements in the country's press should be stopped." Four senior ayatollahs wrote to President Mohammad Khatami, asking him to confront the press's "violation of religious principles, efforts to

undermine Islamic belief, and distortion of ethics." (21)

## **PRESS LAW**

Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance Ataollah Mohajerani said that although his ministry does not monitor or censor the press, there are limits to what is acceptable. He explained: "The existence of red lines in the press is not a hidden and unknown fact and any managing director should observe his limits in this connection because this is the law and not individual preferences that draw borders of the press." (22)

People in journalism and publishing, however, frequently complain about such vague rules. In an interview with RFE/RL's Persian Service, Ali Nazari, managing editor of Arzesh magazine, said: "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." He continued: "When Tous and Jameah were closed down [in 1998], they gave the same explanation: that these two publications crossed the red line."

Under the guise of clarifying these limits, a revision of the press law was proposed in October-November 1998. The Majlis Research Center said that the press law must be revised to eliminate "ambiguous points and defects in the press law". (23)

Although a draft of the new law had been submitted already, the Majlis Research Center admitted that it had "not yet started any independent research on a comprehensive reform of the press law." Mohajerani admitted that there were some ambiguities in the current law, but they were tolerable and could be dealt with. (24)

There was general unhappiness with the proposed amendment, particularly among journalists. A letter from the Press Association said, "Tabling bills which are restrictive and which undermine freedom

would not only not make the press [corps] law-abiding, but would place them under [a] monopoly by a few people and drive society towards samizdats and other methods." (25) Neshat reporter Minoos Badii said: "To attain a civil society and achieve political development we need to have numerous newspapers and publications, [but] if you look at the proposal to amend the press law you will see that it would restrict this trend." (26) Even President Khatami was critical of the proposed press law. Speaking to an audience of judicial officials, Khatami said a jury should hear all press cases. (27)

A hint to how the parliament would vote came when 228 parliamentarians signed a letter in which they declared that "like the leader, they too sense the cultural inroad of the enemy in the form of a plot for transformation and overthrow of the system, ...[and] ... they will spare no effort to foil such a conspiracy." (28) Parliament approved the draft bill on July 7. One hundred and twenty five of the 215 deputies present voted for the draft, which was approved on an open ballot.

The law says that a complaint against a publication can be filed in an unlimited period. In other words, there is no statute of limitations. Part of the bill calls for a reporter to be held responsible for what he or she writes, 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.

Just a day before the voting on the press bill, a copy of an October 1998 proposal for drastic revisions to the press laws by Deputy Minister of Intelligence and Security Said Emami was published by a

newspaper. Emami complained that journalists' activities would "cause security problems for the Islamic Republic of Iran." Whereas the current press law amendment 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." (29)

Emami proposed the drafting of a members bill or government 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."

In January 1999, Emami was arrested for his part in the late-1998 murders of writers and dissident political figures. It would seem that he was implementing part of the plan proposed in his letter. But little was known about Emami's letter until after his death in June, when he allegedly committed suicide while in custody. And, the newspaper that published the letter was shut down less than a month later.

### **ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN BROADCASTING (IRIB)**

Because newspapers and print media have a limited circulation outside the main cities, radio and television has a powerful role in opinion-making. Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, however, receives frequent criticism for its biased coverage of domestic political issues.

For example, its coverage of the 1997 presidential election gave preferential coverage to the heavily favored conservative candidate, Hojatoleslam Ali-Akbar Nateq-

Nuri. On the other hand, its coverage of his chief rival, Khatami, was less frequent and much less favorable. A daily from Rasht claimed that IRIB directed "propaganda attacks" against Khatami. The daily continued: "They called him a 'liberal' and even hinted he was against the Vilayat-i Faqih," the concept of a ruling clerical spiritual guide for the country promulgated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. (30)

Serious unhappiness with IRIB and its director, Ali Larijani, resumed in January 1999. At that time, a guest on the "Cheraq" program said Khatami's allies were behind the murders of intellectuals, dissidents, and journalists the previous autumn. Eighty-eight members of parliament sent a letter to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei requesting reforms in the IRIB. In the letter they complained that state broadcasting was not impartial and "instead of safeguarding national interests, is evidently backing a certain faction." The parliamentarians wrote that such behavior will "encourage tension, discredit the important media to the people, and ultimately deal fatal blows to our holy Islamic system." (31)

And in March 1999, IRIB was criticized for its coverage of Khatami's trip to Italy. Although the president's speech at the European International University in Florence was broadcast live, the applause after the speech was not broadcast in its entirety. This, and the fact that the speech was not rebroadcast nor was it mentioned in news reports the next day, showed that IRIB has an anti-Khatami bias, claimed a newspaper. (32)

The April 1999 motion to remove Mohajerani brought renewed criticism of IRIB. For example, editor Abbas Abdi said that if the parliament wants to fire Mohajerani for what is in newspapers, then it should launch a military attack against IRIB. Abdi said the Islamic Culture and Guidance Ministry does not produce the newspapers, whereas IRIB produces what it



turning away from its conservative tendencies.

Even after the closure of Neshat, Mohajerani did not abandon his principles. The Islamic Culture and Guidance Ministry said the newspaper's closure did not fall within legal bounds. (39) It then permitted Neshat to take over the dormant license of Akhbar and resume publication as Akhbar-i Eqtesad, employing Neshat staff.

### **INTERNET IN IRAN**

Many Iranian newspapers, such as Hamshahri, Jomhuri-yi Islami, and even Khabar-i Jonub from Shiraz, are available on the internet. So too are weeklies like Donya-yi Varzish. Significantly, although Neshat was not published on September 5, it did produce a partial internet edition that explained its closure.

But this is only one side of the coin. Reporteurs Sans Frontiers identified Iran in its August 9 press release about "Enemies of the Internet." It explained:

"On the pretext of protecting the public from 'subversive ideas' or defending 'national security and unity,' some governments totally prevent their citizens from gaining access to the internet. Others control a single Internet Service Provider or even several, installing filters blocking access to web sites regarded as unsuitable and sometimes forcing users to officially register with the authorities."

Payman Arabshahi, a long-time observer of the Iranian internet scene, however, has said that as of September 1999, there are over 30 Iranian ISPs in various stages of development and only one of these is government-controlled.

In the case of Iran, Reporteurs Sans Frontieres said:

"Censorship of the internet is identical to that affecting other

media and covers the same subjects: sexuality, religion, criticism of the Islamic Republic, any mention of Israel, the United States, and so on. Because of the filters put in place by the authorities, access to some sites is banned: medical students are denied access to web pages that deal with anatomy, for instance."

Arabshahi rejected such claims. He said there are no filters placed on Iranian internet gateways and one can access a variety of sites. He admitted that Iranian users must agree not to access sites that violate Islamic norms. As for the statement that medical students cannot access anatomy websites, that is, "very simply put, a lie." Arabshahi concurred that "certainly there could be some degree of random keyword checking of emails or web addresses by the sole government ISP." An operator of an internet cafe told a recent visitor to Tehran that a condition for getting a license to operate an ISP was a promise to the MOIS to provide a listing of all websites used by any given member at any given time.

The recent expansion of internet cafes points to increasing accessibility of the internet for the Iranian public. Also, the Reporteurs Sans Frontieres report noted that users try to access the internet through mobile telephone networks or by using international ISPs. Such approaches are far from ideal. First of all, the idea of gaining access to sites in other countries through a local call is eliminated. Also, it can be prohibitively expensive for the average person. Finally, the government controls communication with mobile telephones. This latter point was demonstrated during the July 1999 unrest in Iran, when the government shut down the mobile telephone service in Tehran (40).

### **CONCLUSIONS AND PREDICTIONS**

As the February parliamentary elections approach, debate about Iranian media issues continues. Among the issues to be considered is the Guardians Council's role in "advisory supervision," which was recently strengthened in a new election law. This debate will focus on determination of candidates' eligibility to run for the Majlis, and it seems that the new law will permit disqualification of Second Khordad candidates. Other issues that are already on the scene, and which will continue to be seen, are the acceptability of relations with the U.S., and the permissibility of violence under Islamic law.

But because of the proposed press law, debates can be curtailed through the closure of publications or the punishment of journalists. As the second reading of the press bill approached in late September, a parliamentary committee was working to make the proposed law more restrictive by permitting a Press Judge to overrule a jury and close a newspaper without a hearing. (41) Reformist commentators said the timing of this was a clear attempt to influence the upcoming parliamentary election. Second Khordad groups asked that parliament postpone related discussions in order to "eliminate the suspicion that the press laws are being amended to influence the forthcoming parliamentary elections factionally," and 300 journalists petitioned parliament to suspend the bill. (42)

This is not to say that the Iranian media, if left alone by the state, would be perfectly objective and unbiased. As stated previously, 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. And as Professor Sadiq Zibakalam wrote two years ago, even the more independent newspapers, like Salam and Hamshahri, reflect some of the more populist and reactionary views in foreign policy. (43) Zibakalam gave as an example

the use of black-and-white imagery and double standards when international human rights reports about Iran are published. Instead, the authors of such reports are criticized as "agents of Zionism," and the reports are denounced as attacks against Iran's prestige.

As it is, the Iranian press is a lively forum for discussion of many political issues. Under Islamic Culture and Guidance Minister Mohajerani, more publications have emerged that dare to question government policies. This is where the "red line" comes into play: even Iranian newspapers are unaware of how far they can go. The proposed press law may define that red line, but it will become much easier to trip over it. This is why it seems the closures and openings will continue. A Tehran public prosecutor asked Asr-i Azadigan editor Mashallah Shamsolvaezin how long the game of cat-and-mouse must continue. Shamsolvaezin responded for all Iranian journalists: "I told him that I would continue until the cat realized that the mouse had a right to live." (44)

*\*A.W. Samii is a regional specialist with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Inc. An earlier draft of this paper was read at the 4th European Conference of Iranian Studies, of the Societas Iranologica Europaea, Paris, 1999.*

## NOTES

+ Nearly all quotes in the article can be referred back to the most recent citation.

- 1) Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), August 29, 1999.
- 2) Internet version of Neshat, September 5, 1999.
- 3) Neshat, April 7, 1999.
- 4) Kayhan, July 7, 1999
- 5) IRNA, August 4, 1999.
- 6) Jomhuri-yi Islami, July 19, 1999.
- 7) IRNA, July 21, 1999.

- 8) Hamshahri, October 12, 1999.
- 9) Sobh-i Imruz, 11 November 1999.
- 10) Jomhuri-yi Islami, September 12, 1999.
- 11) Qods, April 18, 1999.
- 12) Sobh-i Imruz, August 24, 1999.
- 13) IRNA, September 5, 1999.
- 14) Neshat, September 2, 1999.
- 15) IRNA, August 9, 1999.
- 16) Kar va Kargar, January 31, 1999.
- 17) Hamshahri, April 14, 1999.
- 18) Khordad, February 3, 1999.
- 19) Neshat, April 17, 1999.
- 20) Ibid.
- 21) Jomhuri-yi Islami and Kayhan, April 19, 1999.
- 22) IRNA, September 20, 1999.
- 23) Asr-i Ma, November 18, 1999.
- 24) IRNA, September 29 and November 29, 1998.
- 25) Jomhuri-yi Islami, June 8, 1999.
- 26) Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), July 5, 1999.
- 27) IRNA, June 27, 1999.
- 28) RFE/RL Iran Report, June 7, 1999.
- 29) Salam, July 6, 1999.
- 30) Khabar va Nazar, January 18, 1999.
- 31) Zan, January 20, 1999.
- 32) Iran, March 14, 1999.
- 33) Khordad, April 25, 1999.
- 34) IRNA, September 5, 1999.
- 35) Jomhuri-yi Islami, April 6, 1999.
- 36) Kayhan, April 6, 1999.
- 37) Ettelaat, April 8, 1999.
- 38) IRNA, April 21, 1999.
- 39) IRNA, September 7, 1999.
- 40) Tehran Times, July 18, 1999.
- 41) Arya, September 22, 1999.
- 42) Manateq-i Azad, October 10, 1999;  
Sobh-i Imruz, October 27, 1999.
- 43) Jameh-yi Salem, August 1997.
- 44) Der Spiegel, October 4, 1999.