IRAN

Voices Struggling to be Heard

United States Department of State

DEPARTMENT OF STATE PUBLICATION 11284
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
with the Bureau of Public Affairs
Revised November 2005

Cover: Iranian women hold banners during an Iranian Women's Movement rally in front of Tehran University. AP Photo

Iran: Voices Struggling To Be Heard

"The Iranian people are heirs to a great civilization - and they deserve a government that honors their ideals and unleashes their talent and creativity. The Iranian people deserve a genuinely democratic system in which elections are honest - and in which their leaders answer to them instead of the other way around. The Iranian people deserve a truly free and democratic society with a vibrant free press that informs the public and ensures transparency. They deserve freedom of assembly, so Iranians can gather and press for reform and a peaceful, loyal opposition can keep the government in check. They deserve a free economy that delivers opportunity and prosperity and economic independence from the state. They deserve an independent judiciary that will guarantee the rule of law and ensure equal justice for all Iranians. And they deserve a system that guarantees religious freedom, so that they can build a society in which compassion and tolerance prevail…

"America believes in the independence and territorial integrity of Iran. America believes in the right of the Iranian people to make their own decisions and determine their own future. America believes that freedom is the birthright and deep desire of every human soul. And to the Iranian people, I say: As you stand for your own liberty, the people of America stand with you."

— President George W. Bush, June 2005

The Iranian people have a tradition of expressing their views and feelings through art, literature, film, news media, or the political process. Unfortunately, Iran is ruled by a government that seeks to stifle the voices of the Iranian people as they call for their rights to be protected and their beliefs to be respected.

Iran's theocratic regime will not be successful in silencing Iranians who are fighting for their freedom. As President George W. Bush has said, "before history is written in books, it is written in courage: Those who place their hope in freedom may be attacked and challenged, but they will not ultimately be disappointed, because freedom is the design of humanity and freedom is the direction of history."

The Iranian people deserve to live in freedom and democracy, without fear of government repression, integrated into the community of nations.

Voices of Democracy – The Political Struggle

"The recent Iranian presidential elections were a triumph for the principle of one man, one vote. And the man with the vote this time, as always, was the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei."

—*The Times* via *Iran Press News*

The political situation in Iran is a story of two drastically different worlds occupying the same reality. Throughout Iran there is widespread political alienation. Corrupt and oppressive government policies have consistently failed to address Iranians' yearning for liberty and an accountable, democratic system of government that will pursue policies that improve their daily lives.

After a series of elections in the late 1990s in which Iranians expressed their desire for change, recent trends point to a deterioration in Iran's political climate. In the June 2005 presidential elections, more than 1,000 aspiring candidates, including prominent dissidents and all of the female candidates, were disqualified from running by clerics. Candidates who campaigned on reformist platforms complained of massive election irregularities. In the run-off election, the conservative former Tehran mayor and former Revolutionary Guard officer, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, got 62 percent of the vote,

An Iranian student raises his fist during a pro-reformist rally in Tehran. AP Photo

nearly twice that of his opponent, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, former president of Iran. Conservative hardliners now control every elected and unelected government institution in Iran.

In February 2004, deeply flawed elections were held for the 290-seat Iranian Majlis legislative assembly. More than 1,800 prospective candidates, including more than 80 reformists who held Majlis seats, were disqualified, limiting the democratic alternatives available to voters. Ultimately, conservative candidates did not face a reformist opponent in 132 of 290 seats. The Guardian Council exclusion of reformist voices in Parliament was the culmination of a four-year campaign against the reformist press.

What these elections illustrate is that increasingly in today's Iran the political aspirations of the public for a greater role in charting the direction of their society are only tolerated when they coincide with the wishes of entrenched conservative elites.

Iran's unelected clerical elite has systematically subverted the democratic process, eliminating viable competition and undermining the authority of Iran's elected institutions. This unelected ruling clique denies the Iranian people freedom of expression, freedom of association and the right to freely choose their representatives.

The extent of control the unelected clerics exercised over the June 2005 presidential election is one more sign that they are out of step with the changes happening around them.

Iran's Constitutional Legacy

"The problem is that the underlying framework of the existing constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran is structurally incompatible with achieving the goals the reformers have set – democracy, human rights and secular pluralism. In this constitution the leader is all-powerful. He can ratify everything and can veto anything – and the people are at his mercy. … No democracy can be made out of Iran's constitutional law."

— Mohsen Sazegara, reformist newspaper publisher and founder of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

The right of Iranian citizens to change their government is restricted significantly. According to Iran's post-revolutionary Constitution, the Supreme Leader, the recognized Head of State, is elected by the Assembly of Experts and can only be removed by a vote of this same Assembly. The Assembly is restricted to clerics, who serve an eight-year term and are chosen by popular vote from a list approved by the government. There is no separation of state and religion and clerical influence pervades the government, especially in appointed positions. The government controls the selection of candidates for elections. The Council of Guardians, which reviews all laws for consistency with Islamic law and the Constitution, also screens candidates for election based on ideological, political, and religious suitability. It accepts only candidates who support a theocratic state; clerics who disagree with government policies or with a conservative view of the Islamic state also have been disqualified. Regularly scheduled elections are held for the Presidency, the Majlis, and the Assembly of Experts.

Voices Suppressed: Attacks On The Free Press

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression…. To hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

— Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The independent media in Iran is under constant attack. According to Reporters Without Borders' 2005 Annual Report, at least 14 journalists, editors, and publishers remained in prison. The most prominent is Akbar Ganji, sentenced to six years in prison in 2000 for reporting on the "serial murder" of prominent reformists by elements within the Intelligence Ministry **(see Voices of Hope)**.

There is a clear pattern of interference and harassment of the press by government officials with dozens of reporters, editors, publishers, and web bloggers arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, harsh physical punishments, excessive fines, and suspensions of journalistic privileges. The following cases illustrate the types of abuses prevalent in Iran:

- Over 100 independent media outlets have been closed since the passage of the 1995 Press Law that established a supervisory board and court with authority to impose various penalties, including closure and suspension of operating privileges. Nearly 10,000 web sites have been blocked from inside the country, many of them with political content, such as the *Amir Kabir University News* website, according to Reporters without Borders.

- Web blogger Mojtaba Saminejad has been in custody since February 12, 2005, sentenced to two years in prison for "insulting the Supreme Guide" and reporting on the arrest of three fellow bloggers. His appeal has so far been denied and he is leading a hunger strike from his cell in Gohar Dashat prison outside Tehran.

- Another web blogger, Mohamad Reza Nasab Abdolahi, was reportedly released in late August 2005 after serving over 6 months in prison. He is a student human rights and democracy advocate and editor of the student paper *Noghteh Sare Khat*. He was accused of posting an open letter to the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, on his blog and of working for foreign radio stations.

- According to Human Rights Watch, since September 2004, more than 20 Internet journalists and civil society activists have been arrested and held in a secret detention center in Tehran.

- On April 25, 2005, Tehran police arrested Yusuf Azizi Banitaraf, author of 20 books on ethnic minorities in Iran, during a press conference held by the nongovernmental Center for the Defense of Human Rights. Banitaraf was criticizing the government's brutal crackdown on protests by ethnic Iranian-Arabs in Khuzistan's capital, Ahwaz, where, according to human rights activists, at least 50 people were killed by the government's security forces.

Journalists of the Iranian reformist daily *Vaghaye Etefaghyeh* look at a print of the last version of their newspaper which has been temporarily banned by the hard-line Judiciary in Tehran.
AP Photo

- Two reformist newspapers, *Eqbal* and *Aftab-e Yazd,* were closed in June 2005 on the eve of their publication of an incendiary letter by Hojjatoleslam Mehdi Karroubi, former speaker of the parliament and candidate in the 2005 presidential election. Karroubi criticized the Supreme Leader and alleged massive interference in the first round of voting.

- In February 2004, prior to the parliamentary elections, the newspapers *Sharq* and *Yas-e No* were shut for publishing extracts from a letter by reformist parliamentarians to the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ali Khamenei. The letter blamed Khamenei for the electoral "coup d'état" and the current political crisis. In July, *Jumhuriyat,* a morning newspaper started by reformist and human rights activist Emadeddin Baqi, was closed after publishing only one issue.

- In January 2004, journalist Ensafali Hedayat was arrested when he returned from a conference in Germany organized by a group advocating a democratic and secular state. He faces charges relating to national security, as well as defamation charges for an article he wrote on a website. While attempting to appeal his sentence during a prison leave in early December 2004, Hedayat was returned to prison and his application to

extend his leave from prison was denied, due to "political activities" while on leave.

- Zahra Kazemi, a Canadian-Iranian photo-journalist, was murdered in July 2003 while in government custody (**see Voices Extinguished**).

Voices Persecuted –Religious and Ethnic Minorities

Religious Minorities

The Constitution of Iran establishes Islam as the official religion, specifically that of the Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism doctrine, and recognizes other Islamic denominations, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. However, the freedom to practice other religions is restricted by the Iranian Government. Followers of minority religions are subject to harassment, intimidation and discrimination. With the exception of Sunni Muslims, religious minorities are prevented from serving in the judiciary and security services. Applicants for public sector employment are screened for their adherence to and knowledge of Islam.

- According to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, since 1979 more than 200 Baha'is have been killed and 15 additional members are missing and presumed dead. At least four Baha'is are serving prison terms for their religious beliefs.

- An Iranian Ministry of Justice policy issued in 2001 directed government officials to restrict the educational opportunities of Baha'is by expelling them from public and private universities and purposefully enrolling members of the Baha'i faith in ideologically stringent schools.

- The government's anti-Israel policies create a hostile environment for the Jewish community.

- The legal system discriminates against religious minorities in injury and death lawsuits. According to law, Baha'i blood (along with women's blood) is considered "Mobah," meaning it can be spilled with impunity.

Ethnic Minorities

Even though Iran is a multi-ethnic country in which minorities comprise approximately 50 percent of the population, minority rights are not fully respected. The lack of public school education in the Kurdish language remains a source of Kurdish frustration, and the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) claims at least seven Kurdish party members have been executed.

There are new reports of Iranian Government repression of ethnic Kurds.

- According to multiple news reports, throughout much of the summer of 2005, the Iranian Government cracked down on ethnic Kurds in northern Iran and in the southwestern province of Khuzestan, killing several people, and arresting many more, perhaps hundreds.

- In June 2005, security forces killed Shovan Ghaderi, a Kurdish youth activist who was participating in a peaceful protest in Mahabad, a predominantly Kurdish city in West Azerbaijan province. Humans Rights First alleges that after he was shot, Iranian soldiers tied Ghaderi's body "to a military vehicle and dragged it through the city in a clear attempt to intimidate the population and deter further protests."

- In May 2005, Reporters Without Borders condemned "a wave of harassment of Kurdish journalists by local [government] authorities." Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance closed down *Achti*, a daily newspaper, and *Asou*, which published weekly.

Kurds are not the only repressed ethnic group. Some Azeris complain of ethnic and linguistic discrimination, including banning the Azeri language in schools, harassing Azeri activists and changing Azeri geographic names. Ahwazi Arabs lack the right to study and speak Arabic.

Voices Extinguished

In July 2005, Iranian authorities arrested Abdolfattah Soltani, the lawyer representing the family appeal of Zahra Kazemi, the Canadian-Iranian photojournalist who died in police custody in July 2003. Soltani was officially charged with unlawfully divulging Iran's nuclear secrets, to which he had no access. However, just days earlier, Soltani had stated before the court of appeals that judiciary

The mother of Zahra Kazemi, the late Canadian journalist of Iranian origin, and her lawyer, Iranian Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi, leaving the court after a session of the trial of Intelligence Ministry agent Mohammed Reza Aghdam Ahmadi, who is charged with the murder of Kazemi in Tehran, Iran. AP Photo

and security agents had Kazemi in custody when she was murdered, and that the Judiciary's continued inaction two years after her death was a cover-up. He also demanded that former prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi appear for questioning. But the appellate court rejected Soltani's allegation, saying that a lower court had already ruled Kazemi's death unintentional. Soltani is co-founder with Shirin Ebadi of the Center for the Defense of Human Rights in Tehran.

The Iranian Government has repeatedly stated that Kazemi's death must have been an accident, despite forensic reports that stated otherwise. Over a year after Kazemi's death, Mohammad Reza Aqdam Ahmadi, a Ministry of Intelligence official, was tried but acquitted after two days. International observers – including UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of opinion and expression, on the independence of judges and lawyers, and on torture – condemned the grossly flawed investigation and trial.

Although Kazemi was never charged with a crime, after being arrested for taking pictures outside Tehran's Evin prison, she spent 77 hours under police interrogation that included serious physical abuse. According to an Iranian doctor who examined her, Kazemi had suffered a brutal rape and severe beatings, including a skull fracture, two broken fingers, missing fingernails, a crushed big toe and a broken nose. In spite of an initial agreement made in the presence of the Canadian ambassador that Zahra's body would be repatriated to Canada, Iranian officials pressured Ezzet Kazemi, Zahra's mother, to have her buried in Shiraz, Iran, thereby preventing an independent autopsy.

"Whatever the verdict, it will be incorrect because the indictment was flawed."

— Shirin Ebadi, Nobel Peace Prize Winner and Attorney representing the Kazemi family

Other political killings and crackdowns occurred in Iran, including:

- Two political activists associated with the outlawed Komala party, Sassan al-Kanaan and Mohammad Golabi, were executed in February and March 2003. Golabi reportedly was tortured while in detention. The opposition Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI) alleged that the government

executed party member Jalil Zewal in December 2003, after nine years in prison during which he reportedly was tortured. KDPI member Ramin Sharifi was also executed in December 2003 after his arrest in July 2003. KDPI reported that vigilante groups killed at least seven other Kurdish civilians during 2003.

- In February 2004, security forces killed seven persons in post-Majlis election violence in the towns of Andimeshk and Izeh in Khuzestan Province and the town of Firuzabad in the Fars Province.

Voices Of Hope

Imprisoned journalist and critic of the Iranian establishment Akbar Ganji went on an extended hunger strike in mid-June 2005 to protest his prison conditions and the denial of medical care. Ganji was arrested in April 2000 with 17 other Iranian journalists and intellectuals and sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment for taking part in an attempt against national security and propaganda against the Islamic system. The sentence was eventually reduced to six years on appeal. In his book *Republican Manifesto*, Ganji criticizes the authority of Iran's Supreme Leader, claiming that real democracy will never be achieved under the country's current governmental system.

Iran's most prominent investigative journalist Akbar Ganji answers a question from the media as his wife sits by his side at a news conference. AP Photo

Ganji was temporarily released from jail at the end of May 2005 on medical grounds but was returned to jail shortly after calling for a boycott of the June 17 presidential election. According to Ganji's wife, Iranian officials have told him that he will not be released even after his jail term is over unless he recants his views. Ganji, through an open letter published on several websites, insists that he will never do so. After losing significant weight and allowing his health to severely deteriorate, Ganji reportedly ended his 70-day hunger strike in late August. He continues to be denied access to his family or lawyers, and is reportedly being held in solitary confinement.

Ganji is only one victim of a wave of human rights violations by the Iranian regime. Despite the recent declaration by the head of Tehran's Justice Department, Hojatoleslam Abbasali Alizadeh, that Iran has stopped torturing its prisoners and that its prisons are now among the best in the world, political prisoners are still subjected to harsh treatment.

> *"If the Islamic republic has been forced into a retreat under protests from inside the country and international pressure, it does not mean that torture does not exist, that solitary confinement [will] be eradicated, that all the political prisoners [will] be freed and that other prisoners [will] be treated humanely."*
>
> — Hassan Zarezadeh, Student Committee in Defense of Political Prisoners in Iran

A White House statement noted, "Mr. Ganji's courageous efforts to investigate extra-judicial killings by Iranian security forces and his commitment to free speech and democratic government have earned him the respect of many around the world." Other voices of hope include:

- Behrouz Javid Tehrani, a member of the Democratic Party of Iran, who has been in solitary confinement since April 2005, managed to tell his family during a visit that he was severely beaten in prison.

- Manuchehr Mohammadi, accused of helping lead the July 1999 student-led protests and charged with offences relating to national security, had his seven-year prison sentence extended by two years in November 2003 for speaking with foreign media while on leave from prison and issuing "political statements" while in prison. Manuchehr has suffered serious health problems, some reportedly resulting from torture and mistreatment. After starting a hunger strike on July 6, 2005 to protest denial of medical treatment, reportedly he fell into a coma on July 24.

- Arzhang Davoodi was arrested in October 2003 for helping to make a television documentary criticizing the authorities. Reportedly, he was kept in solitary confinement for over three months and extensively beaten during the period. According to Amnesty International, he has not been charged and, although having paid bail in March, has not been released.

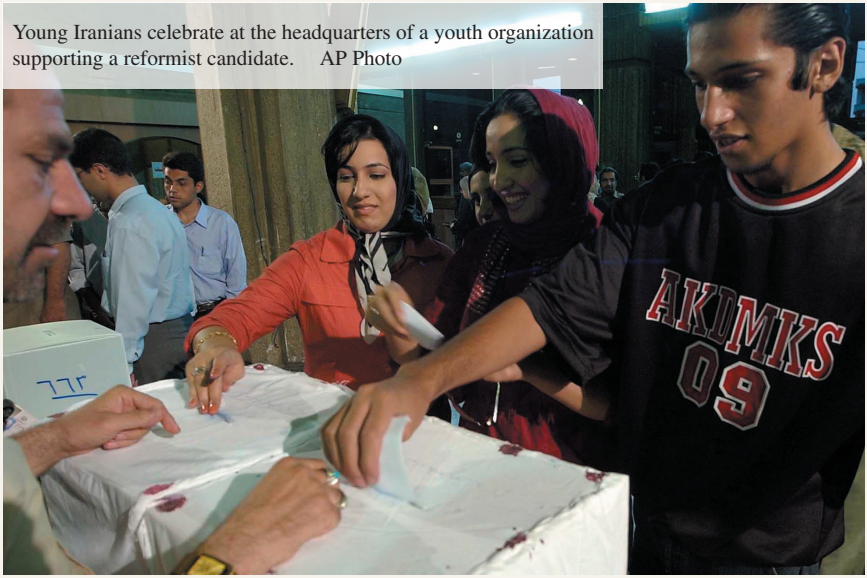
- Nasser Zarafshan was arrested in March 2002 while acting as a lawyer to relatives of Iranians assassinated in the "serial murders" of prominent reformists by elements within the Intelligence Ministry. He has been in prison ever since. In June 2005 he went on hunger strike to protest his detention. During the summer 2005 he was transferred to a hospital to undergo treatment for kidney stones but he has since been returned to prison.

- Siamak Pourzand was initially arrested in 2001 in connection with statements he allegedly made about Iran's political leaders. He was tried in March 2002 behind closed doors and sentenced to 11 years in prison for "undermining state security through his links with monarchists and counter-revolutionaries." After his provisional release in November 2002, Pourzand was re-imprisoned in March 2003. Reportedly, he is currently out of prison on hospital leave, but is prevented from traveling outside of the country for required medical care and from having full access to his immediate family.

Voices of the Future – The Aspirations Of Youth, Women, and Laborers

The power of Iran's young people will play a defining role in the future of the country due to sheer demographic strength (about two-thirds of the population) and their growing drive for personal liberties. Young Iranians are staging a non-violent but potent counter-protest calling for economic and political reforms through demonstrations, fashion, and music. Young people are said to be responsible for the pro-reform victories in the presidential elections in 2001 and 1997. Over the past few years, scores of Iranians have taken to the streets in open rebellion; most of these demonstrations have been led by students.

Women are a potential powerful source in Iran. Countless women have been arrested, imprisoned and executed for their efforts in the struggle against fundamentalism and theocratic government's strict laws that shape political and cultural life. After Iran's Guardians' Council barred 89 women candidates from running for the Presidency in June 2005, representatives from 12 women's rights groups formed Iran's Women Activist Movement. Also in early June, hundreds of women staged an unauthorized demonstration in Tehran protesting



Young Iranians celebrate at the headquarters of a youth organization supporting a reformist candidate. AP Photo

Two Iranian students read a reformist newspaper in Tehran, Iran. AP Photo

sex discrimination under Iran's Islamic leadership. Women also express their desire for freedom through silent fashion statements that pack a powerful message, such as by wearing pink coats, sweaters, headscrarves and bags. Given that women make up 60 percent of all university graduates in Iran, it will be impossible to ignore their growing demands for freedom and reform.

Although Iran is a member of the International Labor Organization, the government does not allow workers the right to strike or bargain collectively. In the face of degenerating economic conditions, the Iranian labor movement has been struggling for the right to form free labor organizations.

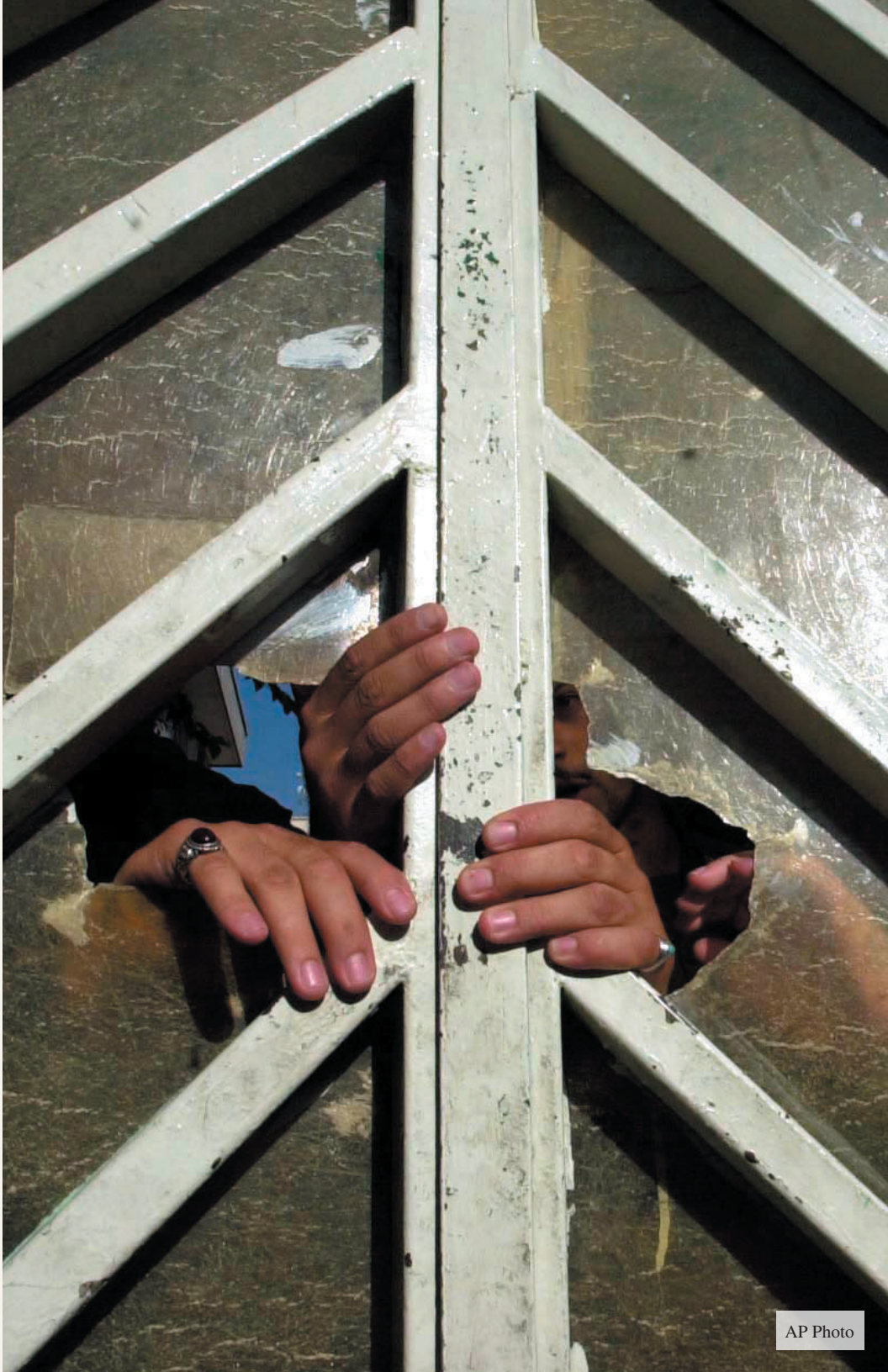
- Teachers have staged a number of demonstrations and sit-ins in recent years to protest low wages and poor working conditions despite threats and the arrest of the director and spokesperson of the Iranian Teachers' Trade Association.

- In early 2005, the Committee for the Creation of Free Labor Organizations obtained several thousand signatures on a petition calling for the right to organize trade unions.

- Despite the events of the 2004 May Day labor rights celebration, in which 40 workers were arrested and seven activists were interrogated for 11 days and now stand trial, Iranian laborers attended rallies throughout the country celebrating May Day 2005.

- Employees of Tehran Public Transit demonstrated in front of their newly organized Union in May 2005 to support their representatives who were attacked and beaten by members of Hezbollah and the Islamic Labor Councils.

Iranian youth, women, and laborers have aspirations for a better future. The United States supports their desires to live in freedom, to enjoy their human rights, and to determine their own destinies.



AP Photo