

Evaluating Human Rights in Iran: Comparing Women's Rights, Women in Activism, and Students in Activism from 2013-2024

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November 2025



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Introduction

Iranian law violates numerous treaties based on human rights regarding the treatment of women and activists, primarily including women activists and student activists. While there are human rights enshrined in the Iranian Constitution, it comes with the caveat that rights must follow along with Islamic values. As Iran's interpretation of Islam appears to be severely patriarchal, women are commonly not afforded equal rights as that does not follow along with Islamic values and principles. This also goes for the rights to free speech and freedom of the press. Opposition against Iranian law is typically seen as a threat to the Islamic principles that the government claims to represent. In the Iranian Constitution, it is common to see an article claiming the "right" to certain behaviors and actions, but it follows with the admonition that it must follow Islamic principles, making many of these rights inherent fallacies. Iran has signed on to a number of treaties that are meant to progress human rights within the state, but they remain violated through Iran's domestic laws that were created on the basis of Iran's interpretation of Islam. This paper will first look at applicable treaties in the context of human rights in Iran since 1948, which is when Iran voted in favor of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Then, human rights and compliance with treaties will be compared across three presidencies, which are Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), Ebrahim Raeesi (2021-2024), and Masoud Pezeshkian (2024-present). Presidencies will be compared on the basis of women's human rights violations and activism, including women's activism and student activism.

Human Rights & Applicable Treaties

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was established in 1948 as a global human rights framework for States to follow, even though it is technically not legally binding. While it is necessary to keep in mind that the UDHR was based from Eurocentrism, Western liberal democracy, and Western imperialism, Iran voted in favor of the UDHR in 1949. What is legally binding; however, is treaties that Iran has signed on to. This includes the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) (1975), International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) (1968), International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR) (1975), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1994) (United Nations Human Rights Databases). Iran also held their first and only United Nations human rights conference in 1968 to discuss the progress in human rights standards related to the UDHR (United Nations Population Fund 2025).

[International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#)

The Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in particular is consistently challenged by Iran's domestic laws, which I compared and contrasted by looking at Iran's Penal Code and US documentation of Iranian violation of the CCPR. Article 19, freedom of expression, is violated through laws regarding the wear of hijabs for women. Women who violate this law are often subjected to imprisonment or fines, some of which being up to sixteen years in prison. Additionally, Iran's Article 17, protection to the right to privacy and unlawful interference, is violated through laws that restrict what can be accessed online by Iranian civilians, as well as the monitor of Iranian activity online. Article 21, freedom to peacefully assemble, is also commonly violated through severe crackdowns on protests within the law if the protests are opposed to Islamic values. In some cases, the death penalty has been given to protesters. This also lends



itself to the violation of Article 7, no cruel or unusual punishment or treatment, in which the Penal Code of Iran allows for flogging and amputations as valid and lawful punishments. Lastly, Article 18, freedom of religion, is violated through laws that a practicing Muslim can't legally change or renounce Islam, and only a few religious minorities are accepted, like Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrian.

Hassan Rouhani, 2013-2021

Women

Many people were hopeful that Rouhani would better the lives of women in Iran, but his 8 year presidency showed consistent violations of treaties. Under Rouhani, marriage and family laws restricted women's access to move freely, and this especially affected athletes, some of whom were unable to travel due to the laws. There were "72 cases of self-immolation, 3,048 suicides, 20 claims of workplace discrimination, 2 reported cases of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), 553 honor killings, 33,210 child marriages (girls under the age of 18), and 460 reported acid attacks against women" (Human Rights Activists News Agency 2021). Forced child marriage remains a large human rights issues affecting girls in Iran, with the official age of consent being 16 for girls (Age of Consent 2025). Interestingly, the Convention of the Rights of the Child, says in Article 1 that the international standard for age of consent is 18, however, the article also leaves a gap for states to allow for the majority age to be obtained earlier than 18, which is what Iran has done for girls, but not boys (Child Human Rights Defenders 2024).

Activism

Rouhani's presidency from 2013-2021 allowed for activism to routinely be viewed as a threat to national security. It has come with a harsh backlash against journalists who opposed laws under Rouhani, even though Rouhani promised positive improvement with human rights upon election. He even promised to release oppositionist activists who were imprisoned in 2011, but they remained in prison until at least 2017 (Naji 2017). When looking at the freedom of the press enshrined in the Iranian Constitution (as long as it follows Islamic principles), journalists who opposed the government were routinely imprisoned, arrested, threatened with and given lawsuits, shut down, and faced bans on speech (Center for Human Rights in Iran 2013). Journalists who wrote pieces arguing for human rights were also commonly seen to violate the rights of the public, meaning that the public seemingly must be protected from views that do not follow Islam.

Women Activism

Throughout Rouhani's presidency, there was a harsh crackdown on activism that supported women's rights. From 2013-2021, 84 women's rights activists were arrested for a number of charges that Iranian authorities associated with activism, resulting in 1,627 months of imprisonment. Some of those charges included propaganda against the regime, disturbing peace and public order, and assembly and collusion against national security (Human Rights Activists News Agency 2021). Any form of women's rights activism in journalism and media received backlash, and it was prohibited for women to voice their concerns and needs through the criticism of Iranian laws, including starting campaigns, writing articles, and defending women activists. (Parsa 2021). In one case in 2018, a human rights lawyer, Nasrin Sotoude, was sentenced to 38 years in prison for defending women's rights activists.

Student Activism

During his campaign, Rouhani made a pledge to allow expelled political students to be reinstated, but that remained unfulfilled for at least the first couple years of his presidency (Center for Human Rights in Iran 2016). Rouhani actually held a legacy before presidency of calling for the executions of political students in 1999 for supporting democracy (Amnesty International 2013). Rouhani's presidency saw a rise of "herasat offices" in universities, which is a group of Iranian officials designated to find threats of public safety primarily within educational facilities. In Iranian universities, herasat offices suspend and expel students for being involved in activities disapproved of, such as engaging with politics that are different from the state through the expression of their own opinions. The right to education is revoked for many students due to this kind of conduct (Center for Human Rights in Iran 2013).

Ebrahim Raeesi, 2021-2024

Women

Rouhani's eight years of presidency did a number on the violations of treaties and human rights violations of women. Women's agency was severely inhibited through domestic law. Iran's patriarchal interpretation of Islam maintained laws where women were not able to move freely without her husband's permission under the premise that actions may violate family values. Only the husband may choose a place of living, what occupation their wife has, if any, and if their wife is allowed out of the country. If a husband gives their wife permission to leave Iran, at any time can the permission be revoked (Human Rights Watch 2024). Between 2018-2019 alone, 13,000 girls aged 13 years old were married, according to a UN report (Rauf 2024). Similar to Rouhani, girls under age 18 are commonly married off with 13 remaining the legal age for a girl to be married in Iran (Rauf 2024). It was also under Raeesi's administration that there was a surge in femicide, which is the killing of female family members by a man in the family, typically the father/husband. From 2021-2023, there was a case of femicide once every four days. Put another way, in a matter of 28 months, roughly 213 women were killed by a male family member (Human Rights Watch 2024).

Activism

Raeesi holds a history of violence against protestors, including perpetuating the executions of 30,000 political prisoners in 1998 (NCRI Women's Committee 2021). In 2021, Amnesty International officials called for the immediate investigation of said crimes against humanity against political opposition (IranWire 2021). When Raeesi came to power in 2021, in addition to the crackdown on women and student activism, it was also especially minority activism that saw breaches of treaties. People of ethnic and religious minorities were commonly arrested and prosecuted for protesting on the basis of "vague national security charges," and their trials typically did not match up to international standards (Human Rights Watch 2024). During 2022 protests, the UN Human Rights Council found that protestors of Kurdish and Yarsan communities were disproportionately arrested and prosecuted by Iranian forces (Voices of America 2024).

Women Activism

Under Raeesi were the Women, Life, and Freedom protests of 2022 that were triggered after a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini, was killed in police custody for not properly wearing a hijab. The consequences of the protests saw grave treaty and human rights violations. For those who were arrested, many received the punishment of execution, although it was sometimes made to look like suicides. At least two women were executed at gunpoint, and at least one woman was executed by firing squad (UNOCHA 2025). It has been claimed by officials within human rights organizations, like Fact-Finding Mission, that these killings are crimes against humanity. Raeesi oversaw the slaughter of at least 400 women in response to a 2019 uprising for human rights, including the torture of female environmental activists, cultural activists, and civil society activists. Additionally, female journalists, lawyers, and street protestors were sentenced to a cumulation of over 1,000 lashes (NCRI Women's Committee 2021).

Student Activism

Students under Raeesi saw a rise in charges relating to “propaganda against the state” for protesting about women's rights issues, such as advocating for accountability for the poisoning of schoolgirls that were supposedly going unchallenged (Human Rights Watch 2024). Raeesi made several remarks about wanting to keep the “evil” out of universities, referring to leftist ideas and ideology that opposed government values. Despite this, students continued advocating for free speech and protection of rights. During the 2022 protests, students in universities in Tehran chanted “get lost” to Raeesi while he visited the universities (ABC News 2022). As the crackdown on protesting continued, students remained vigilant.

Masoud Pezeshkian, 2024-Present

Women

Under Pezeshkian, the treatment of women largely did not progress, but actually got worse in some areas despite what he promised. This especially took form through dress codes, such as a mandatory hijab law put forth that allows for increased punishments if a woman is caught not wearing one in public. Criminal prosecution has increased as part of this, called the “Noor Plan” (UN News 2025). Punishments may include traffic citations, fines, lengthy prison sentences, and restrictions for jobs and other opportunities (Human Rights Watch 2025). Another punishment that continues to happen for women who don't abide by hijab laws is forced business closure. This has included leases not being renewed and threats of the revocation of business licenses. Increased hijab laws have even caused Iranian women to call it a form of gender apartheid. Even though Pezeshkian gave promises to increase the conditions of life for women, officials with the administration have since claimed that their job is to hold laws constant within Sharia and Islamic law (Dehkordi 2024).

Activism

With the transition from Raeesi to Pezeshkian, protests continued to cracked down upon, and it again got worse with certain types of protestors, those being women, ethnic and religious minorities, and those connected to the Women, Life, and Freedom protests of 2022, specifically family members of those killed or arrested during the protests (Human Rights Watch 2025). Regarding ethnic and religious minority protestors, the UN Human Rights Council has found that



they have been especially targeted by Iranian forces (UN News 2025). This has included the Kurdish and Baluch minority protestors, who have been subjected to disproportionate arrests, gender persecution, and forced disappearances (UNOCHA 2024). Once labeled a “reformist,” Pezeshkian proved to be no closer to reform than Rouhani or Raeesi with the oppression of activists.

Women Activism

Pezeshkian continued to target women human rights activists by subjecting them to punishments, sometimes amounting to the death penalty. Other punishments include fines and lengthy prison sentences (UN News 2025). The repercussions of the Women, Life, and Freedom protests have also carried over to Pezeshkian’s presidency with those who supported the movements in 2022 still being found and prosecuted (UNOCHA 2025). On the intersection between gender and religion, an International Fact-Finding Mission in Iran put forth by the UN in response to the crackdown on protests said that women ““belonging to ethnic and religious minorities experience distinct harms that are compounded by pre-existing discrimination and violence against them both as women, as well as by virtue of their status as ethnic and religious minorities,”” which has placed them in a unique context particular to Iran. (UNOCHA 2024).

Student Activism

While there have been negative improvements in treatment of women and women human rights defenders, there has been positive change regarding student activism. One of Pezeshkian’s campaign promises was to prevent students from being suspended for their political beliefs. In September of 2024, Pezeshkian asked Iran’s Minister of Health and Medical Education, Mohammad Reza Zafarghandi, to review all cases of professors and students who were dismissed after the Women, Life and Freedom protests, and to reinstate them. Later, Zafarghandi went further to suspend the rulings of students who had been suspended in 2023 and 2024 for their political stances (Human Rights Watch 2025). While some university presidents, such as Mohammad Moghimi of Tehran University, directly combat this and think students who violate Shari’a law need to be punished, these decisions under Pezeshkian are positive steps in line with international law (Tahavori 2024).

Conclusion

Throughout Rouhani’s, Raeesi’s, and Pezeshkian’s presidencies, there has been little momentum to project an increase in human rights, which are protected by treaties that Iran has signed on to. Violations of the treaties have resulted in countless deaths and other acts amounting to crimes against humanity. As domestic laws are based on Iran’s interpretation of Islam, this has shown to be incompatible in many areas of the treaties. Despite this, Iran is still a duty bearer of international law. Rule of law is not to be only applied in some cases, which brings forth the recommendation that Iranian officials responsible for violations of treaties, including the killings of protesters and strict oppression of women, are held accountable. There have been several investigations by the UN Human Rights Council that have provided evidence and basis for violations of law.



The United States has attempted to get involved with the implementation of sanctions on Iran for their violations of treaties, but significant change has not resulted. The Iranian Constitution rightfully rejects Western imperialism in all its forms, which lends itself to the idea that human rights could be advanced by States, other than Western powers, who are more sensitive to imperialistic tendencies. Based on rhetoric used by both Iranian authorities and US officials, it makes the most sense that if the US were to continue being involved, it should happen with the utmost respect and sensitivity to Iranian culture. There is a place within Iran for there to be an interpretation of Islam that is more compatible with human rights. Global condemnation for Iran's violations of human rights should be framed not through the condemnation of Islam, but through the denunciation of violating international law. It is a matter for officials to determine the most effective way to either separate religion and the state, or to find a version of Islam more compatible with human rights.

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