FREEDOM TO PUBLISH UNDER SIEGE IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

A Report by the International Publishers Association (IPA)

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I: Introduction & Background:

The International Publishers Association (IPA), the international industry federation representing all aspects of book and journal publishing, has been following the policies that restrict freedom to publish in Iran for a number of years. A visit to the Tehran International Book Fair (TIBF) 2009 was a welcome opportunity to research and verify a number of concerns that have been raised by publishers concerned with the situation in Iran. This 4 day-mission combined several aspects including promotion and investigation of two of IPA’s main pillars: Copyright and Freedom to Publish.

IPA was to send a fact-finding mission to Iran in May 2007 on the occasion of TIBF 2007, but it eventually decided to postpone the mission due to the will of the Iranian authorities to separate the domestic and the international publishers by having them exhibit in two different locations, set miles apart from one another. In parallel IPA spearheaded an international campaign, which helped lead to the reunification of the Book Fair, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) cancelling its segregation plans at the last minute. In May 2008, IPA was occupied with the preparation for its 28th IPA Publishers Congress in Seoul, Korea so it was not until May 2009 that IPA could send its fact-finding mission to Iran.

The love for books still exists in Iran, but these days the average print run is around 3000 copies at best, down from 5000 a few years ago. There are many reasons for this, but the main reason is: Censorship. People have lost faith in the content made available to them for when it is available it is likely to have been carved up. Readers want high quality books and the destruction of authenticity by censors devalues the books published in Iran.

The present report describes the mechanisms of book censorship used in Iran and formulates an IPA Road Map for Freedom to Publish, making specific recommendations to move towards greater freedom of expression and freedom to publish in Iran. (See Road Map, p. 10).

II: Facts about the Iranian Book Market:

A. The Market:

According to official statistics, 40’000 new titles are produced a year in Iran (half being first editions, translations representing a quarter). An important publisher mentioned a figure of 15’000 titles. Whatever the actual figure, the number of titles a year is clearly on the rise, which is one of the reasons why print runs are overall decreasing. Under the previous regime, before the revolution of 1979, print runs were high (very often above, or way above, 10’000). But there were few titles a year in the 1970s. These days the average print run is around 3000 copies at best, down from 5000 a few years ago. This downward trend can be explained by various factors: Increase in the number of titles, competition of the Internet. Above all, censorship as appears to be the main factor for there is less and less trust, throughout the country, in the content made available to readers.

Officially, there are 8000 publishers in the country. According to various sources, only 2000 are really active, and more than half of these active publishers are members of the TUBP. To be able to be a publisher, one needs to be issued a publisher licence by MCIG.

Literacy is not really an issue in Iran as the average (adult) literacy rate is close to 90%.
According to various sources, there is no VAT on books in Iran, but the government may introduce one in the near future.

There are three distributors in the country for non-academic books, and one distributor for academic books.

Book sales are evenly divided between Tehran and the rest of the country.

Transferring money from/to Iran is extremely difficult.

Finally, Iran has not yet adopted a Bern-compliant copyright legislation.

B. The Institutional Landscape:

The institutional landscape is quite complex. There are numerous publishers’ associations, including: an educational publishers’ association, a children’s book publishers association, or a women publishers’ association.

The main two cross-sector publishers’ associations are:

- The Publishers’ Cooperative (the government-supported union) (I);
- The Tehran Union of Publishers and Booksellers (TUPB; independent union) (II).

(I): Iran’s Publishers’ Cooperative:

Iran’s Publishers’ Cooperative is the official Union of Publishers in Iran. It enjoys the full support of the Government. It has 9 branches in the various Iranian States. Its members are the regional branches, not the individual publishers. A regional branch may have up to 100 members. Since President Ahmadinejad came to power 4 years ago, Iran’s Publishers’ Cooperative has been responsible for organizing the national section of TIBF. It also runs the Iranian collective stands in international book fairs like the Frankfurt Book Fair. In theory these collective stands are open to all Iranian publishers, but the practice is seemingly quite different.

In addition, the Cooperative declares its activities to be as follows:

a. To train publishers;
b. To buy paper and other publisher supplies for their publishers;
c. To organise regional book fairs in Iran.

From the Cooperative perspective, the copyright issue is in the hands of the government. The Cooperative is encouraging its members to respect and accept international copyright. As far as pre-publication censorship is concerned, it is seen rather positively as it takes place before the actual printing. The censorship targeting books between print runs is seen as more problematic. Censorship per se is not called into question, and the existing two-stage censorship procedure is considered beneficial, as print runs rarely need to be destroyed.

(II): The Tehran Union of Publishers and Booksellers (TUPB):

TUPB is the oldest publishers’ association in the country. It was founded 51 years ago. All of its members are active publishers and/or booksellers. They make up about half of Iran’s active publishers (1000 out of 2000). Some of its members are among the
The strongest, more experienced and developed private publishers in the country. These publishing houses publish a number of translated works. Around 100 members of TUPB are also booksellers. TUPB gains new members every year.

TUPB has 10 commissions, including a training commission and an international book fair participation commission. The latter one also deals with copyright issues. TUPB supports freedom to publish and copyright.

TUPB’s income relies on membership fees only.

TUPB managed TIBF for 3 years before President Ahmadinejad took power in 2005. Many publishers remember this period as a “golden age”.

The Women Publishers’ Association, which was created 12 years ago, forms a section within TUPB. It has 52 members. It used to organise book fairs once a year in Tehran, but in recent years this has not been possible, the cultural centres refusing to give them access to their premises for their book fairs. They were also unable to have access to an appropriate space to celebrate their 10th year anniversary. Actually, it has been more than 2 years that they have been trying to organise their 10 year anniversary. Censorship is seen as a major issue.

MCIG is said to have created an official Women Publishers’ Association with the exact same name as the independent one in order to compete with the independent Women Publishers’ Association, whose members had access to TIBF this year, but usually in too small and ill-located stands.

C. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG):

The meeting with the representative of the MCIG was an opportunity to raise three important issues: The location of the Book Fair (seen as problematic by many stakeholders), the adoption by Iran of a Bern compliant copyright legislation and the permission system at play at MCIG. This permission system amounts to censorship, which is contrary to Iran’s international obligations to protect Freedom of Expression under Article 19 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by the Republic of Iran in 1975. The Ministry representative provided at best elliptic answers both on Bern and censorship. Additionally, the Ministry representative informed us that the Book Fair would remain in the Mossalah Mosque.

Two years ago, the government stopped paper subsidy to replace it by consumer subsidies. Students are provided with electronic cards entitling them to a 50% discount on the books they buy. Additionally, the government buys 60 copies of each title which is produced in Iran. Often, the government seems to buy many more than 60 copies, usually from governmental and religious publishers.

Nowadays, it takes about two years to obtain the publisher license. A commission delivering the licence exists within the MCIG. The Cooperative of Publishers is represented at high level on the Commission delivering the publisher licenses. Many publishers think that the publisher licence should not be delivered by the government, but instead by TUPB.

III: A Book Fair and Publishers under Control:

The Tehran International Book Fair (TIBF) is a popular event attracting 3 to 4 millions visitors over a 10-day period. The participation range is based on estimates, but it looks
quite credible as the exhibition space is huge and the Book Fair alleys are constantly packed. The Frankfurt Book Fair describes TIBF as the largest book fair in Central Asia and the Middle-East. The exhibition space is the Grand Mossalah Mosque. It is still under construction. Both its original purpose and the state of construction make this venue less than ideal for a book fair. It certainly does not meet key IPA criteria for efficient professional book fairs.

The Publishers’ Cooperative has been responsible for the national section of TIBF since President Ahmadinejad came to power four years ago. The international section is directly managed by MCIG.

Publishers taking part in TIBF must submit a list of the books they intend to display ahead of the book fair for approval. During the book fair, a book fair security is in charge of enforcing this measure. Even books which have been given prior approval can be withdrawn from the stand by the book fair security. During TIBF 2009, IPA has for instance witnessed the withdrawal of a novel by an Iranian author, translated into a foreign language, from a foreign publisher’s stand.

Twenty independent publishers were banned from attending TIBF 2009. This measure is particularly harsh as TIBF represents a major income-generating opportunity for independent publishers who cannot rely on important subsidies from government, unlike governmental and religious publishers.

One publisher had his publishing license withdrawn because too many of his books had been banned (i.e. had not been delivered the necessary permits). The publisher challenged the decision in court and is said to have eventually won the case. However, whether the judgement will be implemented remains unclear.

IV: A Comprehensive and Arbitrary Pre- and Post-Publication Censorship Mechanism:

Censorship is both comprehensive and arbitrary in Iran. Under the previous regime, before the revolution, politics was the sole taboo subject. Under the current regime the taboos are as follows: Politics, religion, and sexuality. Censorship is both pre- and post-publication. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) acts as the censor.

A. A two-stage process:

In the Iranian context, censorship is a comprehensive two-stage mechanism:

- Stage 1: The publisher sends a copy of the final print of a book to MCIG to obtain a [supposedly] permanent permission to print (A 4 format card – see Appendix 1, p. 11). He or she needs to fill a submission form in which he or she promises not to change anything after getting the permanent permission to print (see Appendix 2, p. 12).

- Stage 2: The publisher sends a copy of the book, once printed, to MCIG to obtain a permission to distribute (see Appendix 3, p. 13). This second stage is aimed at checking that the content of the printed book matches that of the approved version. It takes about a week usually.

In the best case scenario, the publisher gets the permission to print quickly. In the worst case scenario, he or she never hears of MCIG again about the book he or she seeks to publish. After two years without any news from MCIG, the book is considered to be fully
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banned. A publisher or a writer concerned never gets a "no" in writing. It is always given orally. Very often, he or she receives a list of changes (sometimes hundreds of changes are required for a single book) to be made to the text in order to receive the permission to print.

In some cases, a publisher gets the permission to print, but never gets the permission to distribute. At times, the book cover explains why the permission to distribute is not issued. At other times, the authorities do not appreciate the printer which has been chosen to print the book. It could also be that the civil servant dealing with the book has changed between stage 1 and stage 2.

MCIG sometimes reclaims the (supposedly-permanent) permission to print from the publisher after the second permission was issued and the book is already in book shops. Between two print-runs, MCIG on occasion requires a book to be resubmitted for approval and usually does not issue a permission to either print or distribute in that case scenario.

B. Book censorship tightened under President Ahmadinejad:

Book censorship is even more arbitrary and unpredictable since President Ahmadinejad took power in 2005. Before censorship was more or less predictable, enabling publishers to predict which books were likely to face opposition or objection. When President Ahmadinejad came to power, MCIG demanded that all permanent permits be returned for re-submission. This created chaos. Thousands and thousands of books were stuck in MCIG for re-approval. Publishers and authors now inform us that the situation has become much more unstable, uncertain, and arbitrary. To give one example of such instability, uncertainty and arbitrariness, a film which is on the Iranian screens right now has seen the Ministry requiring more than 10 changes to the script, which a publisher seeks to publish as a book. The contrary can also happen: The script is allowed to be published, but the film is banned.

This censorship mechanism is also culturally destructive. One of the books of one of the publishers we met won a prestigious literary award in Iran. The book is now out of print, but still is in the publisher’s catalogue. A MCIG representative came to him/her and said: “You cannot print this book again”. The publisher wanted to know why. S/He even asked which parts of the book s/he had to delete, amend or correct to be able to reprint it again. The Ministry representative answered that he will not tell him/her until he receives a letter from him/her asking this very question in writing, thus confessing the book as such should not go to print again.

The censorship mechanism can also be petty and surreal. IPA has seen a document requiring 66 changes to a given final print about a famous scientist’s life. Change number 11 (line 8, p. 98) demands the deletion of the expression “pork meat” from the final print. Another of the 66 changes demands the complete deletion of anything describing a “ceremony of Jewish tradition” from page 173 to page 178. The book also described how the scientist discovered that wine was better to stop bleeding than the hot oil which they usually used. The censor ordered the reference to wine to be removed. It took the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance more than 6 months to produce this list of 66 “Diktats” after the publisher had submitted the book’s final print. Sometimes MCIG does the corrections directly on paper.

The censorship has become stricter under the new President. One play-write and director had one of his plays censored on the 21st night out of 45. That was the day Mr Ahmadinejab became President of Iran four years ago.
C. A visit of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG):

IPA visited the MCIG in order to witness book censorship at work. It is quite impressive. In a building dedicated to book censorship only (other departments deal with other cultural sectors), many young men and women read the final prints submitted to them and list the required changes, line by line, with application, before sending them to the publishers concerned. As we have seen, this is one of the best case scenarios for publishers and writers who spend hours in the corridors of MCIG, going from one office to the other. One wonders how many civil servants are required to make the whole censorship machine work. The figure is probably quite high.

D. Translations:

Only the document requiring changes is made available to the creator or the producer concerned. In addition, MCIG also produces a secret report about each book, which is submitted to it for approval. One writer we met could have a glimpse at one of his secret reports. It read that his writing was insulting the sacred, that he was making propaganda for infidelity and that he was seeking to expand prostitution.

In an early translation of *American Hunger* by Richard Wright, MCIG demanded many changes, including the deletion of the terms “beer”, and “whisky” in the following sentence: “We were very poor. All we could afford was beer. We wished we had whisky”.

E. The consequences of censorship:

The comprehensive censorship mechanism at play in Iran has created a counterproductive atmosphere of social censorship, as well as self-censorship, in the areas of art and literature. The exhausting bureaucratic hurdles associated with publishing and distributing books in Iran have forced authors and publishers, in the best case scenario, to wait several months for their new books, novels and political essays to be granted permission to be published. Facing what seems to be a hopeless situation, some renowned Iranian writers have started withholding their works, rather than seeking publication, a form of self censorship. One young writer described himself as a “permanent resident” of MCIG when he was seeking publication of his works. When he heard “Come back when we have a new President”, or “Your mind is not suitable for our Islamic Regime” one time too many, he finally gave up. Another writer said he had destroyed hundreds of pages of his writings “to be able to stay alive”.

Other writers seek publication abroad. Sharing the difficulties of many authors the famous writer Mahmoud Doulatabadi is unable to publish two novels and a collection of essays, as they have not received permission from MCIG. Meanwhile a German translation of one of these novels (*The Colonel*, covering Iran’s history during the last century) has been published in German translation by Unionsverlag in Zurich, Switzerland.

As for publishers, censorship jeopardizes the investment that private publishers make, thus putting at risk the very survival of private and independent publishers in Iran.

It is not only Iranian literary culture that is at stake. Access to the internet is routinely blocked (see Appendix 4, p. 14). Censorship also affects other cultural sectors like music, film, theatre or TV. In the film industry for instance it is not uncommon for the Ministry to approve a film only if it can chose part or the entire crew. Some actors are forced to leave the country. Sometimes the permission to produce a film is granted, but the authorities tell the producers not to produce the film. The same happens to book
publishers. “Why do you give your manuscripts to this or that publisher? He or she has got a lot of problems” is a sentence writers often hear.

The censor can be creative in its own way, but as a result of his work, Iranian creativity, Iranian fiction, Iranian literature are being severely damaged by this incredibly comprehensive and arbitrary censorship mechanism. Censorship has had a huge effect on creative writing in the last 4-5 years. Several foundations awarding literary prizes decided to not hand awards this year as a way to protest censorship, and those who have accepted to compromise their work.

Worse, the censorship mechanism is so comprehensive that censorship has developed into a culture of its own in Iran. One writer we met said that even if MCIG disappeared tomorrow, Iranian creators and their producers would need time and lots of work to change the culture of censorship they have internalised.

**V: Conclusion:**

Despite the fear, the heavy atmosphere, the blocked sites, the doors locked or the tapped phones, there are glimpses of hope in particular through women writers and women publishers. Some publish without permission and print 50 copies of a book, others refuse to return the permissions to print when they are ordered to, others get organised despite the hard times they are given, others have even sued the authorities in court with Shirin Ebadi as lawyer to challenge pre-publication censorship. Despite the oppression, all creativity has not disappeared. These courageous writers and publishers deserve all the support they can get.

The Iranian government has repeatedly stated its intention to support books and reading. However, we fear that the stringent permit system attached to the publication and distribution of books runs counter to this aim, and undermines the very existence of an independent book industry in Iran. The result is that the local publishing industry is under unreasonable pressure, with some publishers facing bankruptcy or have already gone bankrupt. IPA representing publishers worldwide, strongly condemns this situation, as it may be jeopardizing cultural diversity in the Iranian written sector.

IPA therefore urges that the Iranian authorities implement fair and standardized book policies in line with their international obligations. To do so requires the Iranian government to lift the permit system attached to the publication and distribution of books in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The lifting of the permit system, which is in direct breach of Iran’s obligations under international law, would be seen as an encouraging step in the right direction.

IPA also encourages international NGOs, freedom of expression organizations and international political institutions to keep monitoring the situation in Iran for human rights in general and freedom of expression and freedom to publish in particular over the next years. Such monitoring is particularly important.

IPA therefore urges Iranian and international decisions-makers to consider the following “Road Map for Freedom to Publish in Iran”, including the following recommendations:
VI: IPA Road Map for Freedom to Publish in Iran:

The IPA Road Map for Freedom to Publish in Iran includes the following recommendations:

**To the Iranian Government:**

In order to comply with Iran’s international obligations to protect Freedom of Expression under Article 19 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by Iran in 1975, and Iran’s domestic Law with regards to Freedom of Expression, in particular Articles 24 and 168 of the Constitution:

1. Altogether lift the permit system attached to the publication and distribution of books in the Islamic Republic of Iran; *With immediate effect, formalise all administrative measures impacting freedom to publish & Enable effective and transparent judicial review of all administrative decisions impacting freedom to publish*;

2. End the practice upon which publishers are required to submit for approval the list of books they will display during the Tehran International Book Fair (TIBF);

3. Allow ALL *bona fide* publishers to take part in TIBF;

4. Allow the Independent Women Publishers’ Association to organise a book fair;

5. Lift the publisher license system and/or grant it to the Tehran Union of Publishers and Booksellers (TUPB);

6. Allow TUPB to manage TIBF and the Iranian collective stands in international book fairs (e.g.: Frankfurt, Bologna, etc.);

7. Support religious and non-religious publishers equally; End discriminatory practices in this regard.

**To the International Community and States:**

1. Seek the adoption, by the Iranian authorities, of the measures listed above, including through recommendations made to the Islamic Republic of Iran when it is reviewed next year (2010) during the 7th session of the Working Group on the Universal Periodical Review (UPR) at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

**To the Global Freedom of Expression Community:**

1. Set up an Iran Monitoring Group (IMG) following the model of the IFEX Tunisian Monitoring Group (TMG).
Appendix 1: “Permanent” Printing Permit
Appendix 2: Application Form

Name: ..............................................................
Address: ..........................................................
City: ..............................................................
Country: ..........................................................
Phone: ............................................................
Fax: ...............................................................
Appendix 3: Distribution Permit

[Document content in Arabic]

The appendix contains a form titled "Form of Distribution Permit" with fields for the title, publication details, and regulations. The text is written in Arabic and includes various sections for the distribution permit, such as type of permit, registration, and conditions for use.

The form is signed and the website www.internationalpublishers.org is mentioned at the bottom of the page.