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The Persian Impediment: An ARTICLE 19 Campaign against Internet Censorship in Iran

ARTICLE 19 is launching an interactive campaign, *The Persian Impediment*, on a pivotal day in Iran's history – as election results are announced from nationwide elections to local councils and the Assembly of Experts, Iran's most powerful religious body. According to partial results announced by the Interior Ministry, moderate conservatives and reformists are leading in both the local and Assembly elections. The Assembly elections are crucial for the future course of the Islamic Republic, since the clerical and congressional body has the power to elect and supervise Iran's highest ranking political and religious authority, the Supreme Leader.

ARTICLE 19's interactive website will expose the organisational structures behind Iran's censorship system, assess recent trends in Internet-related detentions, and provide an opportunity for an online discussion on, and action against, censorship.

In 2003 Iran became the first country ever to imprison a blogger for views expressed online. Iran has developed a highly efficient 'system of oppression,' and censorship to control the exponential growth of online communities. **The system of oppression in Iran is composed of institutions that enforce censorship, vaguely worded laws and regulations, and social and cultural restrictions.** The institutions consist of a conservative conglomerate of six primary organs within the political organisational structure, including The Supreme Cultural Revolution Council, the Iranian Judiciary, Ministry of Intelligence and Security, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, and Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics. Together, they form one of the most efficient systems for suppressing free expression in the world.

Despite the extensive filtering regime, Iranian cyberspace has seen an extraordinary growth in Internet usage amongst its citizens, as well as a substantive increase in the number of citizens who write online in Persian. However, since Iran's system of suppressing expression has intensified under hardline President Ahmadinejad, evidence suggests fewer bloggers and online journalists are willing to challenge the status quo.

ARTICLE 19's Executive Director Dr. Agnès Callamard expressed deep concern about the systematic censorship of bloggers and online journalists in Iran. *"While statistics suggest fewer are now being imprisoned for opinions expressed online than in the recent past, this does not mean that Iran has eased its online censorship campaign. On the contrary, the situation shows how criminalisation of expression engenders self-censorship."*

Notes to Editors:

- The campaign website can be found at: <http://www.PersianImpediment.org>
- For further information, please contact Sarah Richani, Middle East and North Africa Program Officer, at +44 20 7278 9292 or by email: Sarah@article19.org
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.