

Iran dead last in human freedom index

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The Islamic Republic of Iran is rated dead last the least free country in the world—on a new Human Freedom Index compiled by three think tanks in Canada, the United States and Germany.

The study says it is a measure of human freedom, “understood as the absence of coercive constraint.” That definition works against the Islamic Republic, with its dress rules, restrictions on men’s hair styles, enforcement of moral codes and multitude of state efforts to direct personal conduct and not simply rule over people politically as most dictatorships routinely limit themselves.

However, Saudi Arabia, the one other country that tries to impose strict moral standards on its public, came in 141st or 12th from the bottom.

The index is for 2012, the most recent year for which sufficient data was available globally. That means the judgments on Iran apply to the Administration of President Mahmud Ahmadi-nejad. President Rohani only took office in 2013. However, many of the judgments in the index—such as the functioning of the courts—are beyond the authority of Iranian presidents.

Normally Iran ranks near the bottom on such freedom rankings, but not at the very bottom. Iran’s last-place ranking this time may be partly due to the fact that North Korea was among the four dozen countries—mostly island microstates—that were not rated.

However, Iran was never in last place in the three previous rankings published by this trio of think tanks. Iran ranked 135th of 141 countries in 2008, 148th of 153 in 2010 and 148th of 152 in 2011. In the newest index, for 2012, Iran comes in 152nd of 152 countries.

First place was also a surprise, going to Hong Kong, despite the fact that it is ultimately run from China and got low rankings on press freedom.

Canada ranked sixth overall while the United States ranked 20th in the Human Freedom Index, released Tuesday by the three think tanks.

“Our intention is to measure the degree to which people are free to enjoy classic civil liberties—freedom of speech, religion, individual economic choice, and association and assembly—in each country surveyed,” said Fred McMahon, research chair in economic freedom at Canada’s Fraser Institute and editor of study.

“We also look at the rule of law, which is essential for freedoms, as well as indicators of crime and violence, freedom of movement, limits on freedom due to sexual orientation, and women’s freedoms.”

The report gave Iran high marks for safety, a reflection of the low crime rate in the country, and—as with some other studies—gave it a high rating for civil justice, a reflection of clerical care in settling disputes among individuals.

But it gave Iran an abysmally low score on procedural justice, reflecting the lack of any standards in the Revolutionary Court system, and it also gave Iran a low score (zero) on “laws and regulations that influence media content,” in other words, censorship. It also gave Iran a very low score on allowing citizens to form organizations and to protest.

Why does Canada rank higher than the United States? According to the data, Canada has better scores on security and safety, the rule of law and economic freedom, which is based on personal choice, trade openness, freedom to compete, security of private property and judicial independence.

“Over time, the United States has seen an erosion of property rights and an expansion of quasi-judicial regulations. The data also points to a significant weakening in the rule of law,” McMahan said of the 116-page report.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong’s placement atop the list may surprise some, but McMahan notes that Hong Kong’s ranking benefits from its high economic freedom score, although China does not allow free elections in Hong Kong.

“While the freedom index doesn’t measure democracy, democracy has shown to be the best safeguard of personal freedoms. So, if China, which ranks 132nd in the world, encroaches on its one-country, two-system relationship—where liberty is protected under Hong Kong’s system—then we can expect Hong Kong’s ranking to deteriorate as some more recent data already suggest,” he said.

The Human Freedom Index is a joint project of the Fraser Institute in Canada, the Liberales Institut of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom in Germany, and the Cato Institute in the United States, a leading American libertarian group.

The 10 most free countries in the index include three of the five Scandinavian countries and five of the six main English-speaking nations.

- 1—Hong Kong
- 2—Switzerland
- 3—Finland
- 4—Denmark
- 5—New Zealand

6—Canada

7—Australia

8—Ireland

9—United Kingdom

10—Sweden

The 10 least free countries on the index include six in Africa and three in Asia, plus Venezuela. (Cuba was among those not ranked.)

143—Chad

144—Venezuela

145—Ethiopia

146—Algeria

147—Central African Rep.

149—Yemen

149—Zimbabwe

150—Myanmar

150—Congo (Dem. Rep.)

152—Iran