

SCIENTIFIC FREEDOM

Iran Faculty Dismissals Seen as Result of New Policy

Iran's government has begun to remove academics who oppose the authoritarian regime of President Mahmoud Ahmehdinijad, according to human-rights activists in the country. Activists say that the dismissal this month of two electrical engineering professors at the Iran University of Science and Technology in Tehran is consistent with a recent edict by the Iranian science minister to fire faculty members who do not share "the regime's direction."

Science was unable to ascertain the official reason for the 13 April firings of S. Ali-Asghar Beheshti Shirazi, an expert in telecommunications, and his colleague, Alireza Mohammad Shahri, who, among other things, studies the detection of landmines. But human-rights activists say the pair were among 56 faculty members at the university who signed a 10 January letter to the chancellor decrying disciplinary actions taken against students who had participated in political protests on campus. The letter also expressed unhappiness over the beatings of protesters by outsiders, noting that universities needed to be maintained as "a place for political growth and social growth for students."

Hadi Ghaemi, the New York City-based executive director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHR), says



No tolerance. Kamran Daneshjoo, Iran's science minister, says academics who oppose the regime will be fired.

the 5 April ouster of Morteza Mardiha, a philosophy professor at Allameh Tabataba'i University, is another example of the government crackdown. Ghaemi points to a 4 March statement by Kamran Daneshjoo, Iran's minister of science, research, and technology, that faculty members who do not share "the regime's direction" and are not committed to the rule of the Supreme Leader would be fired. In addition to the firings, ICHRI claims that more than 50 prominent faculty members who are sympathetic to the reformist movement have been forced to retire over the past year.

In parallel, the Iranian government appears

to have opened the door to hiring and promoting faculty members who openly endorse the regime. *Science* has obtained a recent directive from the science ministry to universities describing procedures for evaluating existing faculty members and applicants. One form, titled "scientific qualifications," lists academic criteria such as scientific publications and conference presentations. The other, titled "general qualifications," ticks off some 17 criteria, including belief in the system of the Islamic Republic, being active in a local mosque, and cooperating with the institutions representing the Supreme Leader. The memo includes a form addressed to the intelligence ministry, asking for a report on the applicant's political and social background.

This new evaluation process "opens up the system to political influence," says Farhad Ardalan, a physicist who retired last year from Sharif University and is now a researcher at the Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences in Tehran. "They have lowered the minimum so much that pretty much anybody could be hired," he says. "It's the worst thing that has happened to Iranian universities in the past 30 years." Adds Ghaemi, "These policies will cause severe damage to the quality and reputation of Iranian academic institutions."

—YUDHIJIT BHATTACHARJEE

SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

Paul Nurse Chosen to Head Royal Society

Nobel Prize-winning biologist Paul Nurse is stepping down as president of Rockefeller University in New York City to become president of the Royal Society in London, the United Kingdom's science academy.

Last week, the society's council nominated Nurse to succeed University of Cambridge astrophysicist Martin Rees, who ends his 5-year term in November. The society's 1327 fellows will vote in July.

The presidency of the 350-year-old Royal Society traditionally rotates between a biologist and a physical scientist. The council chose Nurse "with huge enthusiasm," says



Home again. Nurse headed for London.

member Matthew Freeman, a cell biologist at the Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge, U.K.

Nurse, 61, a British geneticist and cell biologist, shared the 2001 Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine with Leland Hartwell and Timothy Hunt for studies of cell cycle regulation. He came to Rockefeller in 2003 after serving as CEO of Cancer Research UK. Nurse will return to the United Kingdom at the end of this year but plans to maintain his 14-member yeast genetics and cell biology lab at Rockefeller. In a statement

released by Rockefeller, Nurse said that his position as both leader and researcher at Rockefeller has been "ideal" and that "the decision to step down from the presidency is a very difficult one."

Nurse has an "astute political sense and ability to make a robust defense of the importance of fundamental research," Freeman says. In addition to his scientific and administrative skills, he says, Nurse has also been "very involved" in engaging with the public on scientific issues. University of Oxford theoretical ecologist Robert May, who preceded Rees, calls Nurse "a standout choice."

Although Nurse's predecessors continued to do science, they worked in theoretical areas. Nurse's decision to keep his U.S. biology lab may pose a greater challenge, May says. But "a well-organized person can do both."

—JOCELYN KAISER