Poet Arrested as Iran Targets Free Speech: Rights Group

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An Iranian poet who backed a reformist candidate in 2009's disputed presidential election has been detained amid a crackdown on artists and activists, a U.S.-based rights group said.

The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) said late on Friday that Hila Sedighi had been arrested at Tehran's Imam Khomeini Airport on Jan. 7 as she returned from the United Arab Emirates.

Dozens of journalists, activists and artists have been arrested on charges such as "propaganda" since October in an apparent crackdown on free expression and dissent ahead of next month's election to parliament and the assembly that will choose Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's successor.

Iranian officials have not commented on Sedighi's case. The ICHRI said her arrest was likely linked to an earlier suspended jail sentence she received in 2011 for her activism two years earlier.

Sedighi was an active supporter of reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi in the 2009 presidential election. After hardline incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was returned to office, demonstrators took to the streets claiming the election was fraudulent, and Sedighi recited poetry at the protests.

The hardline Revolutionary Guards and judiciary cracked down on the protests and placed Mousavi under house arrest, alongside fellow candidate Mehdi Karroubi, where they both remain.

Conservative factions describe the events of 2009 as "sedition". Khamenei on Saturday said the protests were an "unsuccessful coup d'etat" orchestrated by Iran's enemies abroad.

Sedighi was awarded the Hellman/Hammett prize for free expression by Human Rights Watch in 2012. Another Iranian recipient of that prize, journalist Isa Saharkhiz, was arrested in November.