

Rap music in Iran: 'Crossing the red line into politics makes you a target'

Dozens of rappers have been arrested in Iran since the rise of hip-hop in the country in the early 2000s. But the death sentence pronounced on April 24 against the rapper Toomaj Salehi marks a turning point in the Iranian regime's intolerance of artists with a political message. Exiled rap artists Justina and Ghogha told FRANCE 24 of their admiration for Salehi, "who scares the powers that be".

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6 min



Iranian rappers Toomaj Salehi and Justina collaborated on a track in July 2022. © Youtube screengrab @ToomajSalehi @justinaofficialll

By: Bahar MAKOOI

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The last time Justina spoke to [Toomaj Salehi](#) was in November 2023. The dissident rapper had just been released on bail after spending more than a year in prison.

"It was brief, I just wanted to check on him, but I didn't want him to get into trouble for having been in contact with me. So we didn't talk much," recalled Iranian rap artist Justina, who lives in exile in [Sweden](#).

Less than two weeks later, after making a video where he denounced his detention conditions, Salehi was arrested again. In the footage, the emaciated but determined rapper directly faced the camera and recounted how his hands and legs were broken. "They hit me in the face. I tried to protect myself with my hands, but they broke my fingers," he said of his torturers.

"No one, no authority should be above the law. It is the people who decide the laws," he continued, before passing on a message of hope to his fans: "I hope that better days will come. I think we can build a beautiful [Iran](#) together."

But on April 24, the verdict was pronounced: Salehi was sentenced to death by a revolutionary court in the southern Iranian city of Isfahan, despite an international campaign calling for his release.

The authorities accused him of "[corruption](#) on earth" for his support of the protest movement unleashed after the September 2022 death in police custody of [Mahsa Amini](#), 22, who was detained for allegedly breaking Iran's strict hijab rules.

"I'm still deeply shocked," said Justina in a trembling voice. Normally resolute, she was shaken by the judgement. "I hope they don't carry out their sentence. It's psychological [torture](#). First and foremost for Toomaj and for all those who support him. Many fans love him because he is the voice of ordinary people and he promised them that he would stand up for them."

'He will never give up, that's what scares the powers that be'

Known for her committed feminist lyrics, Justina first collaborated with Toomaj on the track "Pichak", released in July 2022. The track was produced between Isfahan and Sweden with lyrics that are a cry of freedom from Iranian youth: "We are Phoenixes who will rise from the ashes. We are the fire that will rise from the ice. We are as infinite as the earth."

[Read more](#) **Iran sentences rapper Toomaj Salehi to death: Who is he?**

Toomaj had had previous run-ins with the authorities, including an arrest in 2021 when he was charged with [propaganda](#) against the regime.

"He had already been arrested before Mahsa Amini's death," Justina noted, "but he never gave up."

"And that's why he's still in prison today. He will never give up, and that's what scares the authorities. They're afraid of him because they know he won't shut up and he'll never leave Iran," she explained.

Other rappers have chosen exile after coming under pressure from the regime. Justina was one of them. "Six years ago, my house was raided, all my belongings were searched and I was questioned for three days. They told me I was a woman and that I had no right to sing," she recalled.

The rapper, who found herself accused of "encouraging corruption of morals and depravity", decided to flee to [Georgia](#) and then Sweden.

"I thought it was ridiculous that I was prevented from singing."

"She sings, she raps, she's a feminist and she filmed herself without the veil. Her very existence is considered illegal. If you rap and you're a girl in Iran, it's twice as bad," said Ghogha, an Iranian hip-hop singer who found refuge in Sweden in 2010.

In Iran, the authorities banned solo female singers from recording tracks of their voices or performing alone in public.

For Ghogha, who was one of the first young girls to rap in the 2000s, it was a struggle. "A lot of studios didn't let me record my tracks at the time, because they were taking on an extra risk with me. And that's what happened in 2010 when they raided one of these underground rap studios. They found my voice on the hard drives and people were arrested because of me."

"I was 20 years old," she continues. "I loved music and poetry more than anything else, and I thought it was ridiculous that I was prevented from singing."

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They are not the only ones to have had to flee. Soroush Lashkari, nicknamed Hichkas (Nobody) was one of the pioneers of Iranian rap in the early 2000s. He became famous, in particular, by challenging God in a song, "Ekhtelaf", in which he denounced the poverty, inequality and corruption in his country.

A year after the protests that followed the disputed election of Iranian president [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) in 2009, he released another highly political song entitled "A Good Day Will Come". This was the last song he recorded underground in Iran, before leaving the country for Turkey and then England.

Pro-regime rappers

As Iranian rap gained popularity, the authorities first tried to discredit the genre, describing rappers as "satanists" in a documentary broadcast on state television. A fatwa was even issued in May 2012 against rapper Shahin Najafi, who has lived in Germany since 2005, for his song "Naghi". In this track, the artist attacks one of the twelve imams of [Shiite Islam](#). Najafi was accused of apostasy and a cleric offered a \$100,000 reward to anyone who killed him.

"The Islamic Republic tried various methods to get rid of rap, but they didn't succeed, so they ended up using it to spread their ideology and trying to influence young people," explained Ghogha.

"Today, there are even rappers who work for them, like Sohrab MJ, who poses in photos and shakes hands with ultraconservatives close to the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards."

Some rappers have also sung pro-government songs, such as Amir Tataloo and his track "Energy Hastei" ("Nuclear Energy"), in support of Iran's nuclear enrichment programme. The artist, who is tattooed from head to toe, even supported the current conservative president Ebrahim Raisi during his 2017 campaign before changing his mind and ending up in exile in [Turkey](#). He was deported to Iran in July 2023 and sent to prison. Accused of producing and publishing "obscene" works, his trial is ongoing.

Male and commercial rap encouraged

"As long as rap is about partying, drugs and hooking up, you get the impression that the regime has no problem with it. On the contrary, they advocate depoliticised male rap, which suits them. But the minute you cross the political red line, you become a target," commented Justina.

"Rap is very popular in Iran, as it is everywhere else in the world," says a musician who knows the Iranian hip-hop scene well, and who prefers to remain anonymous. "There's not a car on the street that doesn't play some kind of music. But you have to admit that the dominant rap music is mainly commercial.

"With the development of streaming, some artists are making a lot of money, up to \$10,000 a month. They give concerts abroad and come back to Iran without being hassled because their music doesn't bother anyone. It's not political," added the musician, who is based outside of Iran.

Toomaj's political rap, on the other hand, is rooted in the growing resentment of Iranian society towards its rulers, following the repression of the protests of 2017, 2019 and 2022 – the latter sparked by the death of Amini.

Toomaj is not the only rapper in prison today. Saman Yasin, a 26-year-old Kurd who was arrested during the 2022 demonstrations, is also in prison. In October 2022 he was sentenced to death. Two months later he tried to take his own life because of the harsh conditions in Rajaei-Shahr prison in Karaj, where he was tortured.

According to The [Kurdistan](#) Human Rights Network, the young man was placed in solitary confinement in a room known as "The Mortuary" and was thrown several times from a height. His sentence has just been commuted to five years' imprisonment. And now Salehi's supporters can only hope that he will benefit from a similar decision.

This article has been translated from [the original in French](#).

https://www.wpsdlocal6.com/news/iranian-rapper-toomaj-salehi-sentenced-to-death-for-protesting/article_b7e0daaa-0a55-11ef-8203-072443ca10e5.html

Iranian rapper Toomaj Salehi sentenced to death for protesting

CNN

May 4, 2024



Protesters in support of Toomaj Salehi in The Hague, the Netherlands.

Charles M. Vella/SOPA Images/LightRocket/Getty Images via CNN Newsource

(CNN) — Dissident rapper Toomaj Salehi has been given a death sentence for his involvement in the widespread protests that swept Iran in 2022, according to his lawyer.

“An order for the execution of Toomaj Salehi has been issued,” Salehi’s lawyer Amir Raesian tweeted Wednesday.

The rapper has been detained, held in solitary confinement and was allegedly tortured following his arrest.

In an unprecedented move, a court in Isfahan reversed the higher Supreme Court's decision on Salehi's case on Tuesday, upholding the original verdict of "corruption on earth" and issued the maximum punishment of death, according to Iranian pro-reform outlets Shargh and Entekhab.

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State media said Salehi's sentence is subject for reduction by a pardoning committee if he appeals again.

Salehi, 32, who has been critical of the Iranian regime and outspoken against the government in rap lyrics and on social media, was briefly released from prison last year before police violently rearrested him and sent him to prison in Isfahan, witnesses said at the time.

He was rearrested after appearing in a video where he revealed that he was tortured and placed in solitary confinement for 252 days following his arrest in October 2022, UN experts said in a statement published by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Another artist, Kurdish-Iranian rapper Saman Yasin, who was also arrested at the height of 2022's protests in Iran, was transferred to a psychiatric hospital two times in less than a year, according to pro-reform news outlet IranWire.

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A court in Tehran sentenced Yasin to five years in prison, according to group focused on Kurdish human rights, Hengaw.

Demonstrations swept the country after the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, which occurred under suspicious circumstances while in police custody. A brutal crackdown on the protests by Iranian authorities targeted the weeks-long protests.

“We strongly condemn Toomaj Salehi’s death sentence and the five-year sentence for Kurdish-Iranian rapper Saman Yasin. We call for their immediate release,” the United States’ Office of the Special Envoy for Iran tweeted. “These are the latest examples of the regime’s brutal abuse of its own citizens, disregard for human rights, and fear of the democratic change the Iranian people seek.”

UN experts also demanded Salehi’s release and urged Iranian authorities to reverse the death sentence.


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“We are alarmed by the imposition of the death sentence and the alleged ill-treatment of Mr. Salehi which appears to be related solely to the exercise of his right to freedom of artistic expression and creativity,” the experts said.

Salehi’s political sponsor in Europe, German Member of Parliament Ye-One Rhie, called the death sentence against Salehi “absurd and inhumane.”

“It is still completely unclear how this verdict came about,” she tweeted Wednesday. “It is unbelievable how irresponsibly and arbitrarily the Iranian regime treats defendants. It is impossible to recognize the rule of law in the chaos of the courts in charge.”



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IN IRAN

La Repubblica islamica applica un di più di sadismo al rapper-operaio condannato a morte

DI CECILIA SALA / 01 MAG 2024

“Toomaj ci rappresenta. Liberiamo lui e l’Iran”, è il nuovo slogan della protesta contro il cappio politico. Operai e maestre in sciopero mentre i dirigenti del carcere proibiscono le telefonate tra il rapper nel braccio della morte e i suoi genitori

Da due settimane la repressione iraniana ha accelerato e i manifestanti come Sadira, che non segue le regole e ha un profilo Instagram pieno di foto al parco con i capelli liberi e foto alle feste con un tubino che lascia scoperte le

gambe, non potendo parlare di “svolta autoritaria” per la Repubblica islamica, dicono che è in corso una “escalation autoritaria”. L’esempio più visibile, non l’unico, è la condanna a morte del metalmeccanico e rapper trentenne Toomaj Salehi. Lunedì i dirigenti della prigione Dastgerd di Isfahan hanno annunciato alla famiglia Salehi un divieto perverso e hanno detto: da questo momento le telefonate a vostro figlio sono proibite. Il braccio della morte è il settore di un carcere dove i guardiani sono più generosi di telefonate ai parenti – non per Toomaj, che è il simbolo di tutto quello che gli ayatollah vogliono cancellare. Poche ore dopo, nella prigione di Dastgerd è stato diramato un comunicato che dice: tutti i detenuti che incontrando Salehi dovessero rivolgergli la parola, “affronteranno punizioni severe”.

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Reza Rasaei facing imminent execution in Iran

Last Minute Calls To Save Two Political Prisoners In Iran From Hanging

Saturday, 04/27/2024

Iran International Newsroom

The families of two political prisoners in Iran are fighting to save them from looming execution amid Iran's killing spree which last year alone saw over 800 people hanged.

Reza Rasaei and Habib Deris are the latest to face imminent execution, a trend which has peaked since the 2022 uprising, sparked by the death in morality police custody of Mahsa Amini, detained for not wearing her hijab according to Iran's strict dress code.

Reza Rasaei was sentenced to death in 2022 amid the protests. He was accused of the murder of Nader Beirami, a senior intelligence officer of the IRGC, with his conviction being upheld by the Supreme Court in early December.

Amnesty International earlier voiced its concern, urging Iranian authorities to halt the execution, citing a lack of clear evidence and fair trial standards. "I urge you to immediately grant Reza Rasaei access to his family, independently chosen lawyer, and adequate medical care," read part of Amnesty's letter of appeal.

Simultaneously, reports have emerged about Habib Deris being moved to solitary confinement, often a sign of a looming execution. A source close to the family of Deris told HRANA, a news agency of human rights activists in Iran, "He was transferred to solitary confinement without any clear reason provided."

Deris is among six men sentenced to death by the Revolutionary Court in Ahvaz, accused of affiliation with the **Harakat al-Nidal group** and involvement in operations that resulted in the deaths of security personnel.

Also known as the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA), the group is classified by Tehran as a 'terrorist' organization responsible for acts of terror including an attack on a military parade in Ahvaz on September 22, 2018, which killed 25 military and civilians.

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Iranian rapper Toomaj Salehi sentenced to death for protesting

By [Artemis Moshtaghian](#), CNN

🕒 3 minute read · Updated 4:00 PM EDT, Sat May 4, 2024



Protesters in support of Toomaj Salehi in The Hague, the Netherlands. Charles M. Vella/SOPA Images/LightRocket/Getty Images

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CNN's Mostafa Salem contributed reporting.

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World

Court sentences Iranian dissident rapper Toomaj Salehi to death, lawyer says

He was first arrested in 2022 after making public statements in support of the nationwide protests

Thomson Reuters · Posted: Apr 24, 2024 2:04 PM EDT | Last Updated: April 24



Prominent dissident rapper Toomaj Salehi is shown in an undisclosed location in Iran in this undated image. (Submitted by Negin Niknaam)

An Iranian revolutionary court has sentenced well-known Iranian rapper Toomaj Salehi to death for charges linked to Iran's 2022-23 unrest, his lawyer told Iranian newspaper Sharq on Wednesday.

Salehi in his songs supported months of protests in Iran in 2022 sparked by the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman arrested for allegedly wearing an "improper" hijab.

Salehi was initially arrested in October 2022 after making public statements in support of the nationwide protests. In late 2023, just two weeks after [being released on bail](#), Salehi was arrested again.

He was sentenced to six years and three months in prison but avoided a death sentence due to a Supreme Court ruling.

- [Meet Iran's dissident rapper helping youth circumvent regime internet crackdown](#)
- [Iranian dissident rapper reportedly remains defiant under torture by regime](#)

"Branch One of the Revolutionary Court of [the central city of] Isfahan in an unprecedented move, did not enforce the Supreme Court's ruling ... and sentenced Salehi to the harshest punishment," his lawyer Amir Raisian told Sharq.

Iranian judiciary has not confirmed the sentence yet. Salehi has 20 days to appeal the ruling.

WATCH | Social campaign to free Iranian rapper:



Social campaign launched on behalf of jailed Iranian rapper Toomaj

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Supporters of jailed dissident Iranian rapper Toomaj Salehi have launched this campaign on social media to bring attention to his case, saying he's at risk of execution.

Allegations of torture

The outspoken critic of the Iranian regime [previously spent](#) a year and 21 days in detention, including 252 days in solitary confinement, in Isfahan Central Prison in Iran.

Activists and [advocates](#) maintain Toomaj was detained again because of a recent video message he filmed for Iranians and his fans. The [video](#), viewed more than half a million times, was Toomaj's first public address since he was freed on bail on Nov. 18.

- [Prominent Iranian rapper Toomaj freed on bail after over a year of arbitrary detention](#)
- [Prominent Iranian rapper Toomaj arrested again by regime forces, his whereabouts unknown](#)

For almost 15 minutes, he spoke bluntly and in detail about the torture — physical and mental — he says he endured at the hands of regime authorities since his arrest in 2022.

"I was tortured severely at the time of the arrest. They broke my hands and legs. They beat me a lot in my face and head. I tried to stop the punches with my hands, so my fingers broke ... and it was over a very lengthy period," Toomaj said.

WATCH | Movement will only grow, rapper says:



Iran's protest movement will only grow, says Toomaj

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Iranian dissident rapper Toomaj Salehi talks to CBC News about what's happening in his country.

With files from CBC News

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