

Iranian government accused of 'sham trials' and 'torture' as protestors face executions

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Mohsen Shekari was just 23-years old when he was hanged in a prison in Karaj, near Tehran, on December 8. *(Supplied.)*

Before Mohsen Shekari was hanged in a Tehran prison, sources say he cried out, "janam fadaye Iran", meaning, "I sacrifice my life for Iran".

About 500 civilians have been killed and more than 18,000 arrested since the anti-Iranian government protests began in September, according to estimates by the Human Rights Activist News Agency.

Mr Shekari was just 23 years old when he was hanged in a prison in Karaj, near Tehran, on December 8, after what Amnesty International described as a "grossly unfair sham trial".

He was the first known execution in relation to the protests triggered by the [death in custody of Mahsa Amini](#).



Executions have begun taking place in connection with protests in Iran linked to the death in custody of Mahsa Amini. *(Reuters: IranWire)*

Mr Shekari was accused of blocking a street and wounding a member of the pro-regime Basij militia on September 25, during the early phase of the protests.

Weeks later, he was found guilty by a revolutionary court in Iran for "moharebeh", translated in English as "enmity against God" or "waging war against God".

The charge, which the Islamic Republic introduced after the 1979 revolution, is often levied against people who are accused of committing acts against the government.

Amnesty International have [identified at least 20 other people](#) who face similar charges in connection with the protests and are at risk of execution, some of whom are teenagers.

On Thursday Iranian soccer player Amir Nasr-Azadani was also accused of "enmity against God" and other offences.



Iranian soccer player Amir Nasr-Azadani is accused by Iran's government of "enmity against God" and other offences. (Wikipedia: Jinjiyanazadi)

Iran is only second to China in the number of executions carried out annually, according to a report released last year by Amnesty International.

Human rights groups like Amnesty argue Iran's government is using, and has long used, executions as a tool of repression, one that is designed to spread fear and quell the protests.

But, they argue, it could have the opposite impact, further enraging Iran's young population and fuelling the uprising.



Mr Shekari's grave site in Iran. (Supplied.)

'My world fell apart when they killed Mohsen'

ABC News spoke to Mr Shekari's family members, some who wish to remain unnamed, as they say they have been threatened by Iran's government and told not to speak to media. They say they are currently being monitored closely by the regime.

One of them tells ABC News that Mr Shekari's arrest, trial and execution was unjust, taking place within less than two and a half months.

"He really suffered a lot during his life," the family member tells ABC News, speaking in Farsi.

"When I heard of the news, my world fell apart. He was innocent. He was a good kid."



Mr Shekari's family say he was always striving for justice. (Supplied.)

"He really helped his grandmother a great deal while she was still alive. He liked to help his family who are poor. He was the main breadwinner and was always looking after his mum and his sister."

Mr Shekari had worked in fashion boutiques and restaurants and cafes, was social and very physically active.

"He had wanted to succeed in life ... he was always striving for justice," the family member says, rejecting the Iranian government's account that Mr Shekari had during the protest used a machete to attack and injure a Basij militiamen.

"It's all lies," the family member claims, noting Mr Shekari was forced to make a confession because of the brutality and threats he faced in prison.



Mr Shekari's family says he was forced to confess to a crime he did not commit. (Supplied.)

"They told him (Shekari) if he doesn't confess, they will hurt his sister, they will take all his close family and imprison them.

"When his mum visited him in prison before his execution, she saw his body was covered in bruises."

The family member says his mother didn't speak out publicly in the hope Iran's government wouldn't execute him.

Sydney resident Bijan Pouryousefi Markhali says Mr Shekari was related to one of his family members. Mr Pouryousefi Markhali left Iran in 2015 to study in Australia and has been actively blogging against the regime.

He says he was in communication with members of Mr Shekari's immediate family before and after the execution. One of the stories he was told was of how Mr Shekari, a barista, and would make coffee for other prisoners detained in the jail.



Bijan Pouryousefi Markhali protesting in Sydney against Iranian government's brutality against protesters. (Supplied.)

He says he is devastated about Mr Shekari's death and the family had been desperately holding hope it wouldn't happen.

"There is no due process or anything like that," he tells ABC News.

"Everybody (in the family) wanted to do something, but nobody knew what they could do."

Mr Pouryousefi Markhali says Iran's regime is "nihilistic" and will do everything it can to hold power.

He also says Mr Shekari had not been allowed a lawyer of his own choosing and faced a sham trial and forced confessions.

"They threatened the family that they will do something to his (17-year-old) sister (if Shekari didn't confess)," he says.

"They also tried to deceive the family and say, 'Oh, don't tell anybody about this story. If you don't speak out the sentence will change', and stuff like that.

"Even the day before this execution, his mother thought that they may change the sentence to something else. They had no idea that he would be executed."

Rahnavard before being hanged: 'Don't pray, play celebrating music'

On December 12, four days after Mr Shekari's execution, Iran's government hanged Majidreza Rahnavard in a public street.

It happened just two days after his death sentence was issued and two weeks after the start of his trial.



Majidreza Rahnavard just two days after his death sentence was issued and two weeks after the start of his trial. (Supplied.)

Iranian activist network 1500tasvir said Mr Rahnavard's mother was allowed to visit him the night before he was hanged but was not made aware of his imminent execution. The group posted a photo on Twitter of the two hugging and smiling.

The authorities had accused him of fatally stabbing two Basij on November 17, but Amnesty International says that before his court session, state media broadcast videos of Mr Rahnavard giving forced confessions.

Since his death, a video has circulated on social media showing his executioners asking for his final words minutes before he was hanged.

Blindfolded and asked, "What did you write in your will", he responds: "Don't pray (to the Quran). Just celebrate and play celebrating music."

Abbas Milani, an Iranian-American historian, educator, and author, says that the fact that the regime interviews someone minutes before they're executing them and would force them to have that conversation is medieval.

Mr Milani, the director of Iranian studies at Stanford University says Mr Rahnavard reflects everything that Iranian people risking their lives for freedom despise about Iran's regime.



Abbas Milani says the Islamic Republic celebrates death over life. (Supplied: Stanford)

He says the Islamic Republic believe in martyrdom and celebrate death rather than life.

"He (Rahnavard) says, 'I don't want you to recite Quran on my deathbed. I don't want people to mourn me, I want people to have music'. That's why woman, life and freedom is the slogan (of the protestors)."

"It [the regime's beliefs] is a ban on music, it's a ban on a woman singing, solo women being able to walk freely on the streets. People are sick and tired of this. And the regime has both the audacity, brutality and stupidity to show what it thinks is an indictment of this person."

How Iran uses the death penalty and denies fair trials

Nassim Papayianni, Amnesty International's Iran campaigner, notes the Islamic Republic uses the death penalty for so-called offences that include consensual sexual relations between adults.

"Oftentimes when people are arrested by the authorities, and during interrogations, they are systematically denied access to lawyers," she says.

"And then, they are oftentimes tortured, to make false confessions. These confessions are then aired on state television via propaganda videos in advance of trials, which violates the right to the presumption of innocence, and not to make incriminating statements.

"And then during trial, these forced confessions are then relied upon as evidence to convict them."



Protests have spread around the world — including in Sydney. (ABC RN: Nick Baker)

When it comes to the 20 Iranians facing the death penalty in connection with the protests, Ms Papayianni says Amnesty International have documented "serious allegations of torture and other ill treatment" against at least six individuals in this group.

"For example, Saman Seydi, who is of Kurdish origin and was a rapper, was subjected to severe beatings and forced exposure to the extreme cold so that the authorities could extract a forced confession."



Saman Seydi was sentenced to death just weeks after his arrest on October 2 in a sham trial, Amnesty International says. (Supplied.)

"In the case of Hamid Ghare Hasanlou — sentenced to death for corruption on earth on the fifth of December, which was less than a week after his sham trial taking place — he was tortured to extract a force confession.

"His ribs were broken, and he had difficulty breathing. He was taken to hospital and he required three surgeries as a result of internal bleeding in his lungs as a result of the broken ribs."



Hamid Ghare-Hasanlou, a medical doctor, has been sentenced to death and tortured in prison, Amnesty International says. *(Supplied.)*

Mashallah Karami, the father of 22-year-old imprisoned protester Mohammad Mehdi Karami, reportedly told the Tehran-based Etemad newspaper that his son informed him by phone he was facing the death sentence.

"He said, 'Dad, my sentence is death.' He was crying and asking me not to tell his mother," Mr Karami said in the newspaper interview as he described the phone call with his son earlier this month.

On December 5 Mashallah Karami was sentenced to death for "corruption on earth" in connection with the fatal assault of a Basij agent during protests. However, his father rejects the charges and has said his son was forced to make a confession.

On Twitter activist group 1500tasvir said that Mashallah Karami had told his family "he has been under severe physical, sexual, and psychological torture".



Mohammad Mehdi Karami's family say he has been under severe "physical, sexual, and psychological torture". *(Supplied.)*

Iranian rapper Toomaj Salehi subject to beatings and torture

The family of Toomaj Salehi — an Iranian rapper and songwriter whose regime-critical lyrics have made him loved by Iranians and described by many as the "voice of a nation" — also report beatings and torture.

Mr Salehi was arrested at his home in Isfahan in September. He has been charged with propaganda against the government and since his arrest has been denied visits.



Toomaj Salehi is a rapper and was arrested in September for so-called propaganda against the government. (Supplied.)

Mr Salehi's uncle Eghbal Eghbali, who lives in Germany, told ABC News the musician had committed no crime and was one of many young Iranians being tried unjustly.

"Many of Iran's youth know Toomaj and love him," he says.

"They really love the rap music he creates ... because he captures the suffering Iranians face.

"I have not spoken to him, but I know from others that he's been subject to severe beatings and there's been calls to take him to hospital."

Amnesty International's Ms Papayianni says Iran's government will continue using unjust trials, interrogations and executions to stop dissent.

She says it is crucial the international community holds Iranian authorities accountable by investigating all those suspected of crimes and issuing warrants when there's sufficient evidence against them.

Australia has joined other countries in taking some first steps, with Foreign Minister Penny Wong [recently issuing sanctions](#) against members of Iran's morality police for "egregious human rights violations and abuses".

But political leaders globally are being called to do more.



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Will executions quell or fuel the protests?

National Union for Democracy in Iran (NUFDI) policy director Cameron Khansarinia says brutality by Iran's regime angers its population and fuels more protests, which to date have spread to about 160 cities in 31 provinces.

"We're seeing people go into the streets for public mourning of these individuals who have been killed," Mr Khansarinia says.

"So, this time, it is not really working as it has in the past. What's undeniable now is that the protesters on the street — and you see this in their slogans, you see this in what they write on social media — will accept nothing less than the complete overthrow and replacement of the Islamic Republic."

He says the international community — in particular the United States and Europe — need to "impose maximum pressure on the regime" by stopping all funding and support of Iran's regime. That pressure, he says, should be complemented by providing maximum support to the Iranian people.

"And that can come in a variety of forms, for example, the provision of internet access ... VPNs to bypass regime censorship on the Iranian people," he says.

"Support can also be through the creation of things like strike funds, using the regime's ... foreign frozen assets to provide at least a very basic minimal economic sustenance to the families of those workers who may want to join protesters in going on strike."

Iranian-Canadian journalist Samira Mohyeddin, who has been reporting on Iran, says the execution of Mr Shekari was a real turning point in the Iran protests.

She says instead of the regime's violence against protesters and the executions having a chilling effect, "they're just making people more and more angry, and more and more people are coming out into the streets".

"There is a real unification built around the fact that this regime has to go," she told ABC News Radio.

"It's not about reforms. It's not about getting rid of the morality police. People really have a sense of saying, 'enough is enough. We don't want to live under totalitarian policy. We don't want this for the future of our children!'"



Iran's execution of protester 'will anger people more'



Death of woman in custody sparks days of rallies