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Imprisoned Dissident Rapper Toomaj Salehi, Voice of Iran's Protests, Faces Possible Execution



Sources Close to Toomaj Urge International Community to Demand His Release Before Trial Begins

Imprisoned Unjustly Since October 2022, in Urgent Need of Medical Care

April 6, 2023 – The international community, including music and arts institutions as well as freedom of speech and expression organizations, should urgently call for the release from arbitrary imprisonment of dissident rapper Toomaj Salehi, who is widely considered the voice of Iran's protest movement, said the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI).

“Toomaj rapped about political and social issues that Iranian authorities have long tried to conceal from domestic and foreign audiences to ward off criticism of their repressive policies,” said CHRI Executive Director Hadi Ghaemi. “Toomaj took extreme personal risks by further exposing issues that the state wants to hide, like child labor and political repression, through his art.”

“For peacefully criticizing state policies through his music, and because he has a large audience inside Iran, Toomaj has been in jail since October 2022, facing charges that could carry the death penalty,” added Ghaemi.

“He is in urgent need of intense and coordinated international pressure for his freedom, as are the many other detainees and political prisoners in Iran,” said Ghaemi.

Widely revered inside Iran as an underground rapper who directly addressed the denial of human rights in the Islamic Republic, Salehi, 33, known among his fans by his first name and from the city of Shahin Shahr, Isfahan Province, has been detained in isolation from all other prisoners in the province’s Dastgerd Prison—in a high-security ward controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) intelligence organization—since October 31, 2022.

Another rapper, Saman Yasin, an ethnic Kurd, also remains jailed in Iran after being arrested in October 2022 amid street protests. He was initially facing charges that could carry the death sentence but that charge has since been dropped. In February 2023, he went on hunger strike against the uncertainty of his situation.

Facing Multiple Charges, Possible Death Sentence

In interviews with CHRI, sources close to Toomaj said the rapper required urgent medical treatment that cannot be provided from within the prison.

They also stressed the importance of international pressure for Salehi’s release before his trial begins—in which he was initially denied a lawyer of his choice, and denied the right to prepare a proper defense—due to the severity of the charges he’s facing, including one that carries the death penalty.

He has only been allowed to meet with his lawyers three times in the last five months, sources told CHRI.

“Toomaj always used to quote [the poet] Ahmad Shamlou’s famous words that “an artist must always be ‘above’ power, not ‘with’ power,” said a source with detailed knowledge of his case who requested anonymity for security reasons.

“I can confidently say that if it weren’t for the media and international pressure in the early days and weeks, Toomaj might not be alive today,” added the source, stressing that the support has since faded.

“Toomaj’s trial has not yet been held, so it is very important to act now before it starts,” the source said.

Toomaj was arrested after joining street protests that had erupted across the country in mid-September 2022 after Jina Mahsa Amini, 22, was killed in state custody following her arrest by the so-called “morality police” for her alleged improper hijab.

He had previously been detained in September 2021 and was released after 8 days.

After moving from one safe house to another, he was detained shortly after the Canadian Broadcasting Cooperation aired an interview with him in which he described what it's like to live in Iran: "You are dealing with a mafia that is ready to kill the entire nation...in order to keep its power, money and weapons."

Medical Treatment Urgently Needed



A screenshot of a video aired by Iranian state media, in which Toomaj, half his face covered by a blindfold, made a forced apology. Sources tell CHRI that his face was severely injured and that's why the blindfold is so large, to cover evidence of trauma to his face.

State media then published a video purporting to show the rapper blindfolded, with bruising on his face, apologizing for his words.

Family members and supporters accused the authorities of torturing Salehi in prison to force him to make a false confession.

Directed by Islamic Republic intelligence agents, state media has a documented history of aiding the country's intelligence and security apparatus by broadcasting false forced "confessions" that have been extracted under torture, in order to defame political prisoners in the public eye.

Toomaj is facing a charge that could carry the death penalty, "corruption on earth," as well as charges that each carry 1-10 years of imprisonment: "propaganda against the state," "formation and management of illegal groups with the aim of undermining national security," "collaboration with hostile governments," and "spreading lies and inciting violence through cyberspace and encouraging individuals to commit violent acts."

His court date has not been set.

Call to Action

CHRI urges governments, UN bodies, organizations dedicated to promoting art, music, freedom of speech and expression, and other basic human rights, and concerned citizens worldwide to publicly demand Salehi's freedom and publicize his case by sharing this article and signing a [petition](#) calling for Toomaj's freedom.

Social media users can also produce content on their channels calling on others to join in sharing Toomaj's story and demanding his freedom along with all other prisoners of conscience detained in Iran.

A sample caption: "Toomaj Salehi, a dissident rapper who spoke about social issues, has been unjustly detained in Iran since October 2022 under charges that could carry the death penalty.

Iranian authorities should #FreeToomaj and all prisoners of conscience who have been jailed for peacefully raising their voices."

Interviews

Following are two interviews CHRI conducted with sources who have detailed knowledge of Toomaj's case.

Due to the Iranian authorities' restriction of Toomaj's contact with his family members and fears that he or his contacts in Iran could be further punished for speaking about his case, CHRI has concealed the sources' identities.

The following interviews were initially conducted in Persian and have been translated into English below.

Interview 1

Toomaj had been threatened and pursued by [security] agents long before the protests began. Toomaj had always voiced his protest and never backed down from his stand. But he didn't like to talk openly about the threats and security pressures because he believed that it could make many people afraid.

With the release of Toomaj's first video after protests began [in Iran in September 2022], the threats started. He was taking part in street protests, and it was possible that he would be identified. At the same time, because he was being threatened and hounded, he was constantly moving around. Every day we were waiting for Toomaj's arrest. He was constantly changing locations and escaping. I can say he changed his location seven or eight times to avoid being caught. In those days, I was in constant contact with Toomaj. He even left me a few voice messages during his escapes, explaining that his hideout had been exposed. If he didn't message back within five minutes, it meant he had been arrested.

The last time we were in contact was on October 31, at 4:25 a.m. We were messaging when suddenly Toomaj went offline. After about half an hour, he messaged that his internet connection had suddenly been cut off and switched from 4G to E mode. Right there and then, we both quickly concluded that Toomaj's [physical] location had probably been discovered, and agents were on their way to arrest him along with two friends. About 20 minutes later, he messaged that a black Peugeot with tinted windows had entered the alley, stopped briefly, and then left. Toomaj wrote that he guessed the car had come to check the location so they could return with more agents to arrest us. It was around 5 a.m. when our connection was completely cut off. Later, I found out that at the same time, 70 armed agents surrounded the house where Toomaj and his friends were staying in the village of Gerd Bisheh, in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province. They stormed the house and arrested everyone, even the caretaker. However, the caretaker was released a few days later.

After the arrest, Toomaj and his friends were transferred to the detention center in Boroujen and subjected to severe physical abuse. The next morning, they separated Toomaj from his two friends and took him to another location, probably a safe house. In those days, state media also publicized a [video of Toomaj](#) showing him on the ground at the time of his arrest, with visible injuries and blood on his face from physical abuse.

Held in Isolation in IRGC-Controlled Ward

It has been more than 150 days since Toomaj's arrest on October 30, 2022. He has been held in solitary confinement in Ward 1-T, which is controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' intelligence organization in Isfahan's Dastgerd Prison.

View this post on Instagram

[A post shared by Iran Human Rights \(@centerforhumanrights\)](#)

Denied Access to Proper Medical Treatment

Toomaj was severely tortured during the first days of his arrest. His left eye was badly damaged due to the blows he received to his head. The condition of his injured eye is not clear. During this time, he has not received proper medical attention. Toomaj's right ankle was also broken as a result of torture and physical abuse and he may need surgery. Due to the fact that our information about Toomaj's medical condition is very limited and we don't have permission to take him to the hospital, we are very concerned about the severity and extent of his injuries.

Location Concealed from Family

In the early days of his arrest, Toomaj's family was told by officials at the prison that he was not being held there. The family suspects that during the first few days of his arrest, Toomaj was being held in a safe house and was not in prison during that time. Unfortunately, during this period, Toomaj was tortured to the point where he either went

into a coma or was unconscious, so when the time came, officials transferred him to prison. Toomaj's physical health was so poor and critical that prison officials refused to accept him because they did not know what was going to happen to him. Finally, he was eventually transferred to that prison.

Toomaj's family spent about a month from the time of their son's arrest until they became sure he was in the Dastgerd Prison. During this time, Toomaj's father visited judiciary offices every day to follow up on his whereabouts. In the first few weeks, the authorities misled him by giving him the wrong addresses. For example, they told him such and such institution had arrested Toomaj and that he should follow up through that channel, or they lied and said Toomaj was being held in such and such detention center when multiple inquiries showed all the addresses were lies. Finally, about a month later, prison officials confirmed that Toomaj was being held in Dastgerd Prison, and they took some personal belongings such as clothes and things to deliver to Toomaj. Thirty-eight days after his arrest (December 8, 2022), Toomaj's father was able to meet him for the first time.

Trumped-Up Charges

The accusations made against Toomaj by the prosecutor in Isfahan were very serious, especially since protesters had been executed for such accusations and lawyers said Toomaj could get the death penalty. The charges include "corruption on earth," "propaganda against the state," "formation and management of illegal groups with the aim of undermining national security," "collaboration with hostile governments," and "spreading lies and inciting violence through cyberspace and encouraging individuals to commit violent acts." The court date has not yet been set and we are still in a state of uncertainty.

Denied Access to Lawyer, Restricted Visits with Family and Books

During the first few weeks of Toomaj's imprisonment, he basically had no access to a lawyer, and all the lawyers he chose were rejected by the judicial authorities. Amir Raeesian and Raza Etemadi, Toomaj Salehi's chosen lawyers, filed their request for legal representation on November 30, 2022, and on December 28th the judicial authorities agreed to their request. Then Toomaj had two brief meetings with his lawyers, and on February 15th he had a long meeting with Amir Raeesian.

Currently, Toomaj meets with his family once a week. Throughout this time, Toomaj's family faced many restrictions on bringing him certain items. For example, after many follow-ups, they finally managed to deliver some books to him in early January. However, they [prison authorities] had given a list of books to the family and said they were only allowed to choose from that list, which did not include many authors and subjects. Despite all these restrictions, and since Toomaj is someone who read books every day, his family managed to get some books for him.

Toomaj says he practices writing poetry in his head; he doesn't always need a paper and pen.

According to his father, in his last visit with Toomaj, Toomaj was very strong and spirited. Essentially, Toomaj's personality has been the same, and he has always been a symbol of strength and resilience for me and other friends. In fact, the family's current greatest concern is his health, especially the serious injuries he suffered as a result of torture.

Although Toomaj has a very strong and admirable spirit, we must seriously consider the fact that more than 150 days of isolation, along with poor physical conditions and severe torture, have had a profound effect on the one's spirit.

Toomaj Salehi: "Son of Iran"

What truly sets Toomaj apart from others is his honesty. Personally, I was amazed to see someone like him, who sings and writes music so courageously, living in a strict society like Iran. When Toomaj produced his song "Soorakh-e Moosh" ("Mouse Hole") that year, there was no news or such an atmosphere like today. This courage and frankness are very evident in Toomaj's work.

Toomaj always used to quote [poet] Ahmad Shamlou's famous words that "an artist must always be 'above' power, not 'with' power." Toomaj always believed that artists have a pulpit and therefore they should use it to defend the people. Toomaj's artistic style, which is rap music, according to him, is the "voice from the bottom of society."

Toomaj always said that what people talk about should be reflected in art. Toomaj believed that the current problem in our society is the intensity of discrimination that persists everywhere. Child labor, poverty, executions, and torture are all part of our society's problems, and we as artists must be the voice of these people and their issues.

Toomaj always spoke with frankness and courage and always asked why an artist should speak in a convoluted manner [as some do in Iran]. He said we must speak our minds clearly, especially in the rap genre. According to Toomaj, the era of talking in a convoluted manner has passed.

Toomaj always said that he was a defender of the oppressed and those who are discriminated against in our society, in his own words, "the voice of the voiceless." He always said that he was a defender of child laborers. In my opinion, these are the points that make Toomaj the voice of Iran. Or as he says in his music, "I am the son of Iran."

Toomaj has reacted to even the smallest forms of discrimination in Iranian society and talked about all forms of oppression in his music. Even after the Sepideh Rashnoo incident [a girl who was assaulted and arrested for not wearing a hijab on a bus], Toomaj started a campaign for her. Toomaj always showed a reaction to the oppression and injustice that people face, regardless of their political leanings, and he was their voice.

Calls for Help from the International Community

I can confidently say that if it weren't for the media coverage and international pressure in the early days and weeks, Toomaj might not be alive today. We know that if the detained individuals remain anonymous, or if no one speaks for them, any disaster could happen to them. Therefore, it is very important that we always be their voice.

I think currently the most important thing that can help Toomaj is a general consensus in the international community to bring broad, all-encompassing, focused and targeted pressure on the government of the Islamic Republic to release him. These broad and united international pressures will certainly have a significant impact on the case. So far, many things have been done, but they have been scattered and not focused.

Interview 2

Toomaj's right ankle was broken during severe torture. He was in a coma for several days. Toomaj's fingers were also broken. Currently, due to the damage to his ankle, he still has difficulty walking. No action has been taken to provide treatment and follow up on his physical condition. On the other hand, due to the numerous blows to the left side of his face and eye, he also has visual problems. Of course, I do not know the exact extent of his eye problem.

Requests

Our most important request is unconditional freedom for Toomaj because as a protesting artist and someone who has been the voice of the people, he has not harmed anyone and has no place in prison whatsoever. There is no place for any artist in prison. Therefore, our request is the immediate and unconditional release of Toomaj. This should happen very quickly because Toomaj needs urgent medical attention, and if this does not happen, his physical problems, such as the condition of his ankle or his eyesight may be affected for years to come. Toomaj has been kept in isolation for over five months now. Our second request is to allow for medical treatment. Our third request is to send a fact-finding committee to investigate the legal and judicial process against him.

See, even now, Toomaj's political sponsors in European countries have put pressure on their ambassadors in Iran, but unfortunately, no action has been taken. There has been no reaction from anyone...

...I personally think that the reason why no information was given about Toomaj's whereabouts during that time [of the first two months of his detention] was because of the severity of the torture that they had inflicted on him, and they had brought him to the brink of death, and that's why they were afraid to inform us about him.

I am sure that many psychological tortures were inflicted on Toomaj. He is a very strong and resilient human being. He has a strong spirit and a strong and resistant body. That's why he has resisted. We must try in any way possible to free him. Toomaj's trial has not yet been held, so it is very important to act now before it starts.

**This article was revised on April 6, 2023, to note that Toomaj Salehi was initially denied access to lawyers of his choice until he was allowed severely restricted access to lawyers he had chosen.*

Read this article in [Persian](#)

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