

MIDDLE EAST

For protesters pardoned in Iran, freedom comes with no guarantees



By [Miriam Berger](#)

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The news arrived last month by text message: Case closed.

After 101 days in jail, 43-year-old Nazanin became one of thousands of anti-government protesters in Iran to be released or have their charges dropped following an [amnesty](#) issued by Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in February.

But Iran's judicial system is [notoriously opaque and arbitrary](#), and there are no guarantees of safety for those detained during the uprising, rights groups say. The Washington Post spoke to three Iranians affected by the pardons about their precarious freedom, as the country's ruling clerics and security services seek to restore order after months of tumult. All shared their stories on the condition of anonymity or asked to withhold personal details, fearing government reprisals.

Nazanin, a mother from Tehran, was sentenced to two years in jail this winter for demonstrating — in a hasty trial without a lawyer. She was temporarily out on bail pending her appeal when the news arrived. Her family wept with joy.

She was still worried, though, unsure if she had been pardoned or just had her appeal accepted. Nazanin consulted three lawyers. There was no consensus. Adding to the confusion, many others have had to post bail or sign apology letters to qualify for a pardon, said Rebin Rahmani, a board member of the France-based Human Rights Network of Kurdistan.

It remains unclear exactly who is covered by Khamenei's amnesty. On [April 12](#), the judiciary said nearly 90,000 Iranians were pardoned but did not specify how many had been accused of protest-related crimes. In March, the judiciary said 22,000 people connected to the protests were pardoned — a figure far higher than the official number of arrests.

“There’s no doubt a large number of people have been released,” said Hadi Ghaemi, executive director of the New York-based Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. “But you can’t rely on government numbers,” he added, in part because there is often no official confirmation of releases.

A spokesman for Iran’s mission to the United Nations in New York did not respond to a request for comment.

Hundreds of activists and others facing serious charges remain imprisoned. They include the two female journalists who broke the news of 22-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini’s death in police custody in September, which sparked the uprising.

And even as prisons empty out, people are still being arrested — or fear rearrest.

Shortly after Nazanin’s case was closed, she said, an intelligence agent knocked on her door and demanded that she come in for questioning. She refused to go without a warrant. He left, promising to return. Before he could, Nazanin and her daughter left the country.

“I only wanted her and I not be afraid anymore,” she said.

Since the start of the unrest, officials have provided no credible figures for arrests, trials and deaths, said Shiva Nazarahari from the Volunteer Committee to Follow-Up on the Situation of Detainees, an informal network of activists in Iran and abroad. Security forces have killed more than 500 people and injured thousands more, according to the [Human Rights Activists News Agency](#), based in Washington.

It is not uncommon for Iran to pardon tens of thousands of prisoners, typically ahead of holidays such as the Persian new year and Ramadan, said Hadi Enayat, a political sociologist specializing in Iranian law.

But the scale of the arrests during this round of protests was unprecedented, Ghaemi said, and the state was unequipped to deal with so many political prisoners. Pressure on the regime also grew as members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the country’s most feared military force, had family members arrested, he added.

“The government wanted to cool down the anti-regime atmosphere dominating the country,” said Rahmani, and to reduce “pressure from rights groups abroad that have been watching the killings and arrests.”

A human rights advocate in Tehran, sentenced to six years, estimated that 90 percent of prisoners were released from his last jail. He was pardoned in February while out on bail.

To qualify, he said, he had to fill out a one-paragraph form stating he had no prior offenses, never destroyed public property and was unarmed.

“I ask for [a] pardon and I won’t break the law in the future,” the form read.

His case was closed a week later.

A 40-year-old political activist in Tehran who was imprisoned for 31 days said he was told to sign a similar “letter of repentance” to qualify for a pardon, but refused. He was bothered by the seeming arbitrariness of the process, he said; other activists he knew had not been required to sign anything.

The prosecutor’s office “threatened that they’ll send the case to the court,” said the man, who was out on bail at the time. “With my legal knowledge, I said doing so was illegal.”

Soon afterward, he was indicted and is now awaiting trial, he told The Washington Post.

“Some friends and relatives harshly criticize me for not having signed what they call ‘just a simple letter’ to save myself,” he said.

Demonstrations have waned this spring amid the brutal government crackdown. But state repression has not abated.

Authorities have installed surveillance cameras in public places recently to catch violators of mandatory veiling. And the judiciary has warned that anyone who encourages women to remove their headscarves will be prosecuted without the right to appeal.

For many who have been through the justice system, and for their families, the fear never goes away. When Nazanin was sent to prison, her teenage daughter was hospitalized for anxiety. The day the intelligence agent knocked on their door, her daughter broke down again.

Nazanin has struggled too since her release, often forgetting basic dates and details. She vacillates between optimism and despair over Iran’s future. She wants to return, she said, when her daughter feels safe again.

“I don’t think this movement, this wave that has started, will stop,” she said. “We have seen what unity can do. ... None of us can go back to before.”