

World

Iranian rapper facing possible death sentence also accused of colluding with Canada

A verdict in Toomaj Salehi's case could come as soon as Sunday

[Ashley Burke](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jul 08, 2023 4:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: 2 hours ago



Prominent Iranian dissident rapper Toomaj Salehi in an undisclosed location in Iran. (Submitted by Negin Niknaam)

A popular Iranian rapper facing a possible death sentence in Iran has also been accused by Iranian authorities of colluding with a hostile foreign government — Canada — because of an interview he gave to CBC News last year.

Toomaj Salehi is known for using his lyrics to openly criticize Iran's regime. He has amassed hundreds of thousands of fans online, including many Iranian-Canadians.

Salehi's lawyer, Amir Raesian, told an Iranian media outlet earlier this week after his client's court appearance that Salehi faces multiple charges under Iranian law, including inviting chaos and disorder, spreading propaganda against the Islamic Republic system, disturbing order, insulting the founder of the revolution and spreading lies.

The most serious charge he faces is that of spreading lies causing "corruption on earth," which could lead to the death penalty, Raesian said.

He said he was given 30 minutes to meet with Salehi at the Isfahan Intelligence Detention Centre but didn't have enough time to explain all the charges to his client. Raesian said he presented defences to each of the allegations.

Salehi also faces a charge of colluding with a hostile foreign government. That charge is linked to a rare interview he gave CBC News in October 2022.

- [Family fears Iranian dissident rapper Toomaj to be charged with crime punishable by death](#)
- [Iranian dissident rapper reportedly remains defiant under torture by regime](#)

- [Meet Iran's dissident rapper helping youth circumvent regime internet crackdown](#)

Raesian told the Iranian media outlet Ham-Mihan that interview is being cited as evidence of his client's cooperation with the Canadian government.

"Since the Canadian government is considered a hostile government in the eyes of the Isfahan Prosecutor's Office, as a result of this interview, it is an example of cooperation with the hostile governments," he recently told [Ham-Mihan in Persian](#).

While CBC receives public funds, the federal government has no involvement in its editorial content or journalism. That independence is guaranteed under the Broadcasting Act.

Salehi's cousin Ava Salehi addressed a rally in the Toronto area this week.

"I came here to beg you, let's not lose our Toomajs," she told the crowd in Persian, referring to Iranians who, like her cousin, continue to push back against the regime.

Jonathan Wilkinson, Canada's natural resources minister, recently signed a letter voicing his support for Salehi, pledging to advocate for his release and demanding a moratorium on executions in Iran. Salehi is the fourth detainee Wilkinson has supported in his capacity as MP like this, and other B.C. MPs have also [pledged to advocate](#) on behalf of a number of other prisoners in Iran.

Before Salehi was imprisoned, [he spoke to CBC News](#) in Persian about his role in an underground movement fighting online censorship in Iran amid growing protests. The protest movement emerged after 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died in Iranian police custody following her arrest for allegedly not wearing her hijab properly.



In this photo taken by an individual not employed by the Associated Press and obtained by the AP outside Iran, Iranians protest the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in Tehran on Oct. 1, 2022. (Middle East Images/The Associated Press)

Salehi has been in prison for roughly eight months and has been held for most of that time at Isfahan prison, according to a German member of parliament acting as one of his political sponsors.

The German politician, Ye-One Rhie, said she received confirmation of Salehi's detention from the office of Iran's ambassador in Berlin. She said she watched a video of Salehi in which he appeared to be "badly beaten," with indications of broken bones.

"As far as we know, he is innocent," Rhie told CBC News. "Every day that he is in prison is very unfair. It's not lawful."

Rhie said she was relieved to read a report by the semi-official news agency Tasnim this week that suggested Salehi will face a prison sentence rather than execution.

Raesian tweeted on July 3 that Salehi's trial had ended and he was awaiting the judge's official ruling, which could land as soon as Sunday.

WATCH/ Videos coming out of Iran a 'small picture' of what is happening: Toomaj Salehi



▶ **Videos coming out of Iran a 'small picture' of what's happening, says Toomaj**

8 months ago | 2:04

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

Rhie said she believes that even if Salehi's interview hadn't aired in Canada, the "ruthless" Iranian regime would have "found something else" to use against him.

"They tried to frame him with everything and anything," she said. "They want to frame him as somebody who was talking to international media outlets ... as someone who doesn't love his country and will betray his country."

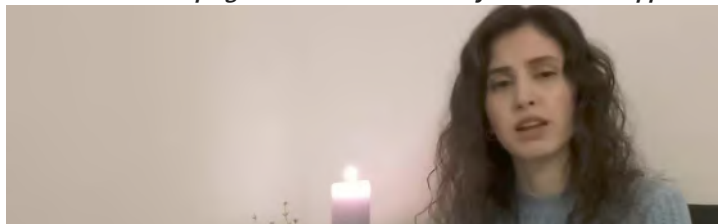
"He spoke very freely of his own opinion, what he thinks or how he thinks a state or government should be. He was very much in solidarity with all the women who went to the streets."

CBC News sent requests directly to Raesian for comment and did not receive a response. Rhie said she is not in contact with Salehi's lawyer because it could endanger him — and speaking with Canadian media could also put him at risk.

Rhie said she has no doubts about the candour of Raesian's rare interview because he has spoken "so frankly" about the Iranian regime.

Salehi's close friend and social media administrator Negin Niknaam is in direct contact with Salehi's family members in Europe and said the information posted on Ham-Mihan is accurate.

WATCH/ Social campaign launched on behalf of jailed Iranian rapper



▶ **Social campaign launched on behalf of jailed Iranian rapper Toomaj**

6 months ago | 1:28

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.

Salehi has had two recent court appearances, including one on July 2 that only lawyers were allowed to attend, said Rhie. The hearing was held behind closed doors, something she called "very unusual."

"Usually the Iranian regime tries to instrumentalize the person as much as possible, to put fear into the hearts of the protesters, to show them what could happen to them," said Rhie. "So it was very unusual that they didn't do that."

The trial came after the U.S. State Department said in April that it was monitoring Salehi's case. It called on "Iran's leadership to release Toomaj

now."

- [Families of Flight PS752 victims breathe a sigh of relief as case goes to international court](#)

"Iran's harsh treatment of political prisoners is meant to intimidate people and suppress dissent, and it simply underscores just how much Iran's leadership fears its own people, particularly young people like Toomaj," State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel [told reporters on April 6](#).

Global Affairs Canada recently sanctioned Morteza Barati, the judge at the Esfahan Revolutionary Court who is reportedly set to release a decision in Salehi's case.

In a statement last month, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said Iran's Revolutionary Courts are closely tied to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Ministry of Intelligence. GAC laid sanctions against multiple judges, including Barati, for their role in gross and systematic human rights violations in Iran's criminal justice system.

"The Revolutionary Courts are notorious for issuing death sentences and harsh prison terms following sham trials and based on evidence gathered under torture," the department said.

Niknaam said Salehi's family members in Europe are "very concerned" about his health and are calling on Iran's regime to provide him with medical treatment.

With files from Nahayat Tizhoosh and Samira Mohyeddin

[CBC's Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) | [About CBC News](#)

[Corrections and clarifications](#) | [Submit a news tip](#) | [Report error](#) ▾

©2023 CBC/Radio-Canada. All rights reserved.

Visitez Radio-Canada.ca