

**Expert, unbiased global coverage.**

Try the FT's award-winning journalism for just £1

Try for £1

Iran

## Dancing Iranian taxi driver becomes unlikely anti-regime hero

Public shows support for 70-year-old after the authorities censure his 'cheerful' and 'positive' viral videos

Najmeh Bozorgmehr in Tehran DECEMBER 13 2023

### Unlock the Editor's Digest for free

Roula Khalaf, Editor of the FT, selects her favourite stories in this weekly newsletter.

Sign up

A white-haired taxi driver whose dance moves at an Iranian fish market went viral has become an unlikely symbol of disobedience after authorities moved to clamp down on his act and labelled them anti-Islamic.

The 70-year-old, known as "Uncle Sadegh" or "Sadegh the hornblower", is a familiar figure in the coastal city of Rasht, where crowds of onlookers gather to watch his lively singing and dancing.

Yet after one of Sadegh's videos unexpectedly took Iranian social media by storm this month, authorities in the Caspian Sea city appeared to take fright and deemed it a violation of Islamic norms. This led to the man's account on Instagram being closed down, and reprimands for those who joined in to cheer him on.

"There was concern that this could turn into a social movement," a reporter in the city said of Sadegh's performance, in which he stamps his feet, mimics firing a bow and arrow, and encourages the crowd to join in.

"But perhaps his intention was just to make people happy," conceded the reporter.

PLAY | 00:13

'Uncle Sadegh' or 'Sadegh the hornblower' is a familiar figure in the city of Rasht © Scopal via reuters

Iranian authorities remain on high alert for any sign of civil unrest, with the mass street protests that followed the death in police custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini still fresh in their minds. There was a concerted attempt to prevent ordinary Iranians from gathering to mark the first anniversary of her death in September.

Yet when details of the censure imposed on Sadegh started to filter out, they caused a wave of public indignation.

Many saw this as just the latest example of the Islamic republic's widespread intolerance, already evident in its hostility to young Iranians' demands for greater social freedoms, but seemingly now extended to the antics of an elderly man.

In the days that followed, people across Iran began posting videos on the internet in displays of solidarity, in which they got together with friends to mimic Sadegh's songs and signature dance moves.

"Should people always cry and mourn? Why are people deprived of happiness?" said Maliheh, a 53-year-old Tehran housewife.

She met Sadegh by chance in Rasht's fish market last month, imploring him to post videos more often. "He has a cheerful vibe and exudes positive energy. What kind of a threat is he? He's not harmed anyone but only made people smile. Plus, he chose a good fish for me."

"I'm from Rasht — I'm so cool," Sadegh, dressed in a cream jacket and chinos, sings in the viral video as he shows off his range of moves and conducts those watching to repeat the chorus of "ow, ow, ow" — a local word used to express excitement or surprise.

The public response to his case underscores how civil disobedience has been transformed in Iran since last year's mass demonstrations and the resultant crackdown. More than 300 people died in the violent response, according to Amnesty International.

Rather than taking to the streets, many Iranians now prefer to harness social media to highlight their positions. Some see it as a matter of principle to oppose anything the regime endorses.

"If the authorities said, 'It's a dark night', I'd say, 'It's a sunny day,'" was one woman's way of explaining the deep-seated mistrust.

Such views stem from perceived injustice and anger over widespread corruption — already inflamed by a financial scandal involving a leading businessman accused of embezzling billions of dollars allocated to import tea.

Iran's judiciary chief accused the owner of Debsh Tea of using government-subsidised foreign currency to enrich himself, with the state inspection organisation saying his company received more than \$3bn to import tea and machinery during 2019-2022.

The sense that high-level corruption goes unpunished by a regime that simultaneously targets citizens such as Sadegh underscores Iranians' perception of how life is very different for those with power than for those without.

Even pro-regime figures have criticised the handling of the Sadegh case. "How have we managed to turn the dancing and singing of fish sellers into an act of resistance?" asked Farhikhtegan, a daily newspaper close to hardliners.

Conservative filmmaker Mikael Dayani said it had distracted attention from more important issues, such as Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza. "When the world is having performances for the Palestinians . . . we have performances with the voice of Sadegh the hornblower," he wrote on Instagram.

Under mounting pressure, authorities this week lifted the ban on Sadegh's Instagram account and allowed his previous fish market performances to be made public again.

In one newly uploaded video, Sadegh assured his followers — including hundreds of thousands of new fans — that he was never arrested and that he was treated well during his ordeal.

One of the replies read: "One-nil to us."

---

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.

---