



*A police motorcycle burns during a protest over the death of Mahsa Amini, a woman who died after being arrested by the Islamic republic's "morality police", in Tehran, Iran September 19, 2022*

## Iran Imposes Harsh Punishment on 'Protest Leaders'

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Since the Mahsa protests, Iran's courts have prosecuted dozens of individuals, issuing harsh sentences for alleged leadership of protests and labor strikes, without any basis in existing laws.

Iranian authorities and state media invariably refer to anti-government protests as "riots", so the accused are always dubbed as "leader of riots" or "leader of strikes".

Informed sources in Iran say those who are accused of "leadership of riots" are usually held incommunicado for long periods in solitary confinement and are deprived of the right to have legal counsel or phone calls to their families.

In most cases, the accusation of leadership is based solely on participation in anti-government protests, lacking concrete evidence of any unlawful organized activity. Often, the only evidence presented is social media posts calling for peaceful protests on platforms like Instagram.

Earlier this week **the BBC published a report** about teenage protester Nika Shakarami. The report confirmed allegations that she was molested by security forces during her arrest and was killed by them.

The report relies on a leaked document purportedly authored by security agents. This document referenced suspicions of the teenage girl being a "leader" of the protests. According to the leaked document cited by the BBC, the arresting team deployed one of its operatives disguised as a protester to confirm Nika's alleged leadership role within the demonstration.

A report by the IRGC-linked Fars News Agency in October 2023, for instance, claimed that journalist Elahe Mohammadi had "confessed to leadership of street riots". Fars has close ties with security bodies and access to court documents unavailable to other media.



Niloufar Hamedi and Elahe Mohammadi, journalists accused of reporting on Mahsa Amini

**Mohammadi who was arrested** a few days after the protests began in September 2022 for her role in reporting on Mahsa Amini's death in the custody of the morality police, was accused of collaboration with foreign services including the CIA and "anti-revolutionaries".

Fars published a wiretapped conversation, acquired from security bodies, between Mohammadi and a friend. In the conversation, Mohammadi mentioned encouraging people to chant "Woman, Life, Freedom" during a protest and discussed making calls to protest with other activists. However, there was no indication of any incitement to riot or engage in armed activity.

“Participation in peaceful protests is not a crime and therefore being a leader in peaceful protests is also not a crime,” Musa Barzin, a Turkey-based human rights lawyer, told Iran International.

Arshia Takdastan, an 18-year-old protester from Nowshahr in northern Iran who was sentenced to death for “war against God” and “corruption on earth” was also dubbed as a “leader of riots” by another IRGC-linked news agency.

Authorities alleged that Takdastan and two others, Javad Rouhi and Mehdi Mohammadifard, had acted as “leaders” and “incited riots” by dancing, clapping, chanting slogans, and burning headscarves of the female protesters for them. The three young men were all sentenced to death. “The activities [of the accused] resulted in the gathering of about 3,000 people” at a protest rally at one of the squares of the city, the court ruling in Takdastan’s case said.

Rouhi who had been subjected to extensive physical and psychological tortures died in suspicious circumstances in prison in August 2023. His lawyer maintained that Rouhi had only danced at a protest gathering and burned the headscarves of some female protesters for them and had no role in organizing protesters.

Any contact with foreign-based Persian language media such as Iran International has also been cited as evidence of being “leader of riots”.

In January 2023, the Public and Revolutionary Prosecutor of Tehran Ali Salehi said one of the “leaders of riots”, a member of the **underground United Youth of Iran (UYI)**, had confessed to “continuous contact” with Iran International TV and foreign intelligence services and alleged that he had been paid money in the form of cryptocurrency to incite riots. The name of the accused was not mentioned and there has been no further reference to the case.

“Leadership” of labor strikes is also considered a crime. “Eight leaders who had a direct role in organizing labor strikes in South Pars and Asalouyeh [gas fields] through social media and their activities have been arrested,” Akbar Pourat, the political-security deputy governor of Bushehr Province, told the media on May 14, 2023.

Iranian authorities claim they have been able to identify “leaders” of protests even outside Iran by conducting extensive surveillance of expatriate Iranians’ rallies in various countries.

Unlike charges of “corruption on earth”, “war against God” and “propaganda against the Islamic government” which have been brought against numerous political prisoners and have clear definitions in

the Islamic Penal Code of Iran, there is no reference to “leadership of riots” in the laws.

“Judicial authorities use this vague term to make the crimes allegedly committed by the accused look weighty and significant so they can meet out heavier sentences to them,” Barzin said.

“The term ‘leader of riots’ entered the jargon of courts from security bodies’ reports and is now being routinely used in the rulings of Revolutionary Courts across the country,” he added.

The use of terms like "leader of riots" and "leader of strikes" by Revolutionary Courts was uncommon before the anti-government protests of December 2017-January 2018. These courts were established after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 to handle political, security-related cases, blasphemy, as well as other crimes like drug trafficking and large-scale financial corruption.

On November 30, 2019, the head of the Justice Department of Lorestan Province, Mohammad Razm, told the media that those arrested in the protests were divided into “leaders” as well as, disruptors of public order and those with possible connections with foreign intelligence services. “Severe legal punishments is awaiting the leaders of recent riots,” he said.

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