

CRACKDOWN ON DISSENT

Rap music in Iran: 'Crossing the red line into politics makes you a target'

Dozens of rappers have been arrested in Iran since the rise of hip-hop in the country in the early 2000s. But the death sentence pronounced on April 24 against the rapper Toomaj Salehi marks a turning point in the Iranian regime's intolerance of artists with a political message. Exiled rap artists Justina and Ghogha told FRANCE 24 of their admiration for Salehi, "who scares the powers that be".

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Iranian rappers Toomaj Salehi and Justina collaborated on a track in July 2022. © Youtube screengrab @ToomajSalehi @justinaofficialll

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The last time Justina spoke to [Toomaj Salehi](#) was in November 2023. The dissident rapper had just been released on bail after spending more than a year in prison.

"It was brief, I just wanted to check on him, but I didn't want him to get into trouble for having been in contact with me. So we didn't talk much," recalled Iranian rap artist Justina, who lives in exile in [Sweden](#).

Less than two weeks later, after making a video where he denounced his detention conditions, Salehi was arrested again. In the footage, the emaciated but determined rapper directly faced the camera and recounted how his hands and legs were broken. "They hit me in the face. I tried to protect myself with my hands, but they broke my fingers," he said of his torturers.

"No one, no authority should be above the law. It is the people who decide the laws," he continued, before passing on a message of hope to his fans: "I hope that better days will come. I think we can build a beautiful [Iran](#) together."

But on April 24, the verdict was pronounced: Salehi was sentenced to death by a revolutionary court in the southern Iranian city of Isfahan, despite an international campaign calling for his release.

The authorities accused him of "[corruption](#) on earth" for his support of the protest movement unleashed after the September 2022 death in police custody of [Mahsa Amini](#), 22, who was detained for allegedly breaking Iran's strict hijab rules.

"I'm still deeply shocked," said Justina in a trembling voice. Normally resolute, she was shaken by the judgement. "I hope they don't carry out their sentence. It's psychological [torture](#). First and foremost for Toomaj and for all those who support him. Many fans love him because he is the voice of ordinary people and he promised them that he would stand up for them."

'He will never give up, that's what scares the powers that be'

Known for her committed feminist lyrics, Justina first collaborated with Toomaj on the track "Pichak", released in July 2022. The track was produced between Isfahan and Sweden with lyrics that are a cry of freedom from Iranian youth: "We are Phoenixes who will rise from the ashes. We are the fire that will rise from the ice. We are as infinite as the earth."

[Read more](#) **Iran sentences rapper Toomaj Salehi to death: Who is he?**

Toomaj had had previous run-ins with the authorities, including an arrest in 2021 when he was charged with [propaganda](#) against the regime.

"He had already been arrested before Mahsa Amini's death," Justina noted, "but he never gave up."

"And that's why he's still in prison today. He will never give up, and that's what scares the authorities. They're afraid of him because they know he won't shut up and he'll never leave Iran," she explained.

Other rappers have chosen exile after coming under pressure from the regime. Justina was one of them. "Six years ago, my house was raided, all my belongings were searched and I was questioned for three days. They told me I was a woman and that I had no right to sing," she recalled.

The rapper, who found herself accused of "encouraging corruption of morals and depravity", decided to flee to [Georgia](#) and then Sweden.

"I thought it was ridiculous that I was prevented from singing."

"She sings, she raps, she's a feminist and she filmed herself without the veil. Her very existence is considered illegal. If you rap and you're a girl in Iran, it's twice as bad," said Ghogha, an Iranian hip-hop singer who found refuge in Sweden in 2010.

In Iran, the authorities banned solo female singers from recording tracks of their voices or performing alone in public.

For Ghogha, who was one of the first young girls to rap in the 2000s, it was a struggle. "A lot of studios didn't let me record my tracks at the time, because they were taking on an extra risk with me. And that's what happened in 2010 when they raided one of these underground rap studios. They found my voice on the hard drives and people were arrested because of me."

"I was 20 years old," she continues. "I loved music and poetry more than anything else, and I thought it was ridiculous that I was prevented from singing."

[Read more](#) **Toomaj: 'Voice of whole country' silenced by Iran regime; battle to free 'symbol of the revolution'**

They are not the only ones to have had to flee. Soroush Lashkari, nicknamed Hichkas (Nobody) was one of the pioneers of Iranian rap in the early 2000s. He became famous, in particular, by challenging God in a song, "Ekhtelaf", in which he denounced the poverty, inequality and corruption in his country.

A year after the protests that followed the disputed election of Iranian president [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) in 2009, he released another highly political song entitled "A Good Day Will Come". This was the last song he recorded underground in Iran, before leaving the country for Turkey and then England.

Pro-regime rappers

As Iranian rap gained popularity, the authorities first tried to discredit the genre, describing rappers as "satanists" in a documentary broadcast on state television. A fatwa was even issued in May 2012 against rapper Shahin Najafi, who has lived in Germany since 2005, for his song "Naghi". In this track, the artist attacks one of the twelve imams of [Shiite Islam](#). Najafi was accused of apostasy and a cleric offered a \$100,000 reward to anyone who killed him.

"The Islamic Republic tried various methods to get rid of rap, but they didn't succeed, so they ended up using it to spread their ideology and trying to influence young people," explained Ghogha.

"Today, there are even rappers who work for them, like Sohrab MJ, who poses in photos and shakes hands with ultraconservatives close to the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards."

Some rappers have also sung pro-government songs, such as Amir Tataloo and his track "Energy Hastei" ("Nuclear Energy"), in support of Iran's nuclear enrichment programme. The artist, who is tattooed from head to toe, even supported the current conservative president Ebrahim Raisi during his 2017 campaign before changing his mind and ending up in exile in [Turkey](#). He was deported to Iran in July 2023 and sent to prison. Accused of producing and publishing "obscene" works, his trial is ongoing.

Male and commercial rap encouraged

"As long as rap is about partying, drugs and hooking up, you get the impression that the regime has no problem with it. On the contrary, they advocate depoliticised male rap, which suits them. But the minute you cross the political red line, you become a target," commented Justina.

"Rap is very popular in Iran, as it is everywhere else in the world," says a musician who knows the Iranian hip-hop scene well, and who prefers to remain anonymous. "There's not a car on the street that doesn't play some kind of music. But you have to admit that the dominant rap music is mainly commercial.

"With the development of streaming, some artists are making a lot of money, up to \$10,000 a month. They give concerts abroad and come back to Iran without being hassled because their music doesn't bother anyone. It's not political," added the musician, who is based outside of Iran.

Toomaj's political rap, on the other hand, is rooted in the growing resentment of Iranian society towards its rulers, following the repression of the protests of 2017, 2019 and 2022 – the latter sparked by the death of Amini.

Toomaj is not the only rapper in prison today. Saman Yasin, a 26-year-old Kurd who was arrested during the 2022 demonstrations, is also in prison. In October 2022 he was sentenced to death. Two months later he tried to take his own life because of the harsh conditions in Rajaei-Shahr prison in Karaj, where he was tortured.

According to The [Kurdistan](#) Human Rights Network, the young man was placed in solitary confinement in a room known as "The Mortuary" and was thrown several times from a height. His sentence has just been commuted to five years' imprisonment. And now Salehi's supporters can only hope that he will benefit from a similar decision.

This article has been translated from [the original in French](#).