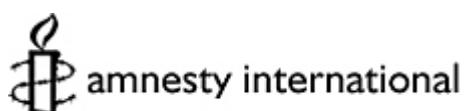


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Iran executions send a chilling message

Recent developments in Iran have prompted fears that the Iranian authorities are once more using executions as a tool to try and quell political unrest, intimidate the population and send a signal that dissent will not be tolerated.

There was a noticeable surge in the rate of executions at the time of mass protests over last year's disputed Presidential elections. Although many of the executions were for criminal offences committed before the unrest, they sent a chilling message to those involved in protests.

One hundred and twelve people were put to death in the eight weeks between the June election and the re-inauguration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in early August - almost a third of the total for the entire year.

In 2009 as a whole at least 388 people were put to death in Iran - the largest number recorded by Amnesty International in recent years. Figures collated by various human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, suggest the annual number of executions has almost quadrupled since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was first elected five years ago. Many of those executed did not receive fair trials.

"The continuing surge in executions at a time when Iran has experienced the most widespread popular unrest since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, combined with numerous statements by officials threatening protestors with execution, indicates that the Iranian authorities are again using the death penalty to try and cow the opposition and silence dissent," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"SHOW TRIALS"

A series of "show trials" led to two men being hanged in January; the first executions which the authorities linked directly to the current unrest; although it later emerged that the pair were already in detention at the time of last June's presidential election.

Among other things, they were convicted of "mohabareh", or "enmity against God". Nasrin Sotoudeh, lawyer for one of the men, Arash Rahmanipour, told Reuters "An execution with this speed and rush has only one explanation ... the government is trying to prevent the expansion of the current (opposition) movement through the spread of fear and intimidation."

An increasing number of people have been charged with "moharebeh", a vaguely-defined offence. According to Philip Alston, the UN's Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, it is "imposed for a wide range of crimes, often fairly ill-defined and generally having some sort of political nature."

At least nine other people, sentenced to death following the popular demonstrations which began last summer and were continuing at the end of 2009, are believed to be on death row.

Recent comments by Tehran prosecutor Abbas Ja'fari Dowlatabadi served to fan suspicions that the sentences were politically motivated. Referring to the imposition of death sentences on a group of protesters, he said: "Today the Islamic system has firmly put its opponents and dissidents in their place. The people will not allow such incidents to reoccur in the country."

EXECUTIONS UNDER PREVIOUS GOVERNMENTS

This is not the first time that Iran's leaders have been accused of using summary executions or the death penalty as a tool of political control. Executions were used extensively under the Shah, and in the early days of the Islamic Republic as a way of eliminating political enemies and suppressing opposition.

In the 1970s, an increasingly unpopular Shah used the mass arrest of political opponents to eliminate political enemies and suppress opposition. At the time, Amnesty International criticized the Iranian authorities for what it described as the "extremely high number of executions" conducted after unfair trials by military tribunals.

In 1979, more than 600 people were summarily executed by firing squad in the months following the Islamic Revolution. Many were former ministers, officials or army officers under the Shah. Some were executed after grossly unfair trials lasting only a few minutes. By 1982, Amnesty International had recorded well over 4,000 executions since the time of the Revolution.

But the largest number of summary executions came in 1988. Up to 5,000 people - many of them political prisoners - are believed to have died in the so called "prison massacre" between 1988 and 1989, in what Amnesty International described at the time as a "purposeful mass killing of political opponents." Many were members of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, an opposition organization accused of collaborating with Saddam Hussain's Iraq during the eight year Iran-Iraq war. But others were members of secular, left-wing political parties regarded as a threat to Iran's Islamic system. In many cases, their "trials" consisted of a few questions put to them in their prison cells by members of what prisoners dubbed "The Death Commission".

A REVIVAL OF THE DEATH PENALTY

The number of executions decreased in the 1990s. (Death sentences were handed down in the wake of student unrest in 1999, but were not implemented.) But they rose rapidly again after President Ahmadinejad was elected in 2005, pledging to improve public order, take action against "thugs and hooligans" and return Iran to the original values of the Islamic Revolution.

There was also a rise in the number of executions of juvenile offenders - people sentenced to death for crimes committed when they were under the age of 18. Iran is one of only a handful of countries to continue such executions, in clear violation of international law. According to UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston "No state really tries to defend it as a matter of principle - it's clearly outlawed. And yet Iran continues to not only charge juveniles, but to execute them in significant numbers."

Even before last summer's unrest, there were signs that President Ahmadinejad's government was increasingly using the death penalty as a way of stemming unrest in areas with large ethnic minorities. Bomb attacks in the predominantly Arab province of Khuzestan and ethnic Baluch areas of Sistan-Baluchistan province in recent years were followed by a wave of often public executions. Some of the condemned men were shown

on state television making "confessions" that are believed to have been extracted from them under torture or other duress.

Ehsan Fattahian, arrested in 2008 and convicted of being a member of a Kurdish opposition group, was executed last November. In a letter sent two days before he was hanged, he said his original sentence had been increased because he refused to appear on camera confessing to crimes he had not committed. He alleged that this move was "a result of pressure from security and political forces outside the judiciary." Since last year's unrest, the number of Iranian Kurds being sentenced to death for political offences has continued to rise.

UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston adds that "International law says very clearly that the death penalty can only be carried out for the most serious crimes. I have shown very clearly that that phrase was intended to refer to crimes which result in an intentional death of some sort - homicide - and that any lesser crimes cannot be punished by the death penalty. Again, that is a prohibition that the Iranian courts and the Iranian government have consistently neglected or ignored."

Hundreds, probably thousands, of individuals are currently on death row in Iran. Sometimes their ordeal can last for years. Amnesty International spoke to one prisoner who spent years on death row before his sentence was eventually commuted. In a telephone interview from jail he said:

"Have you ever experienced receiving a death sentence? Have your partner, parents, brother, sister and relatives been told that tonight a close relative of yours is going to be executed? Can you understand the horror and shock of hearing such news? But me, two of my close relatives and our families have been going through this - not for a night or two or few nights, but for a period of over two thousand nights."

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