

Iranian court hands down four death sentences in connection with July student protests

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On September 12 an Iranian court sentenced four people to death in connection with protests which erupted in Tehran and other cities in July. The names of those sentenced have not been released. Gholamhossien Rahbarpour, head of the Tehran Revolutionary Court, said that the country's supreme court had approved the death sentences in two of the cases.

Judge Rahbarpour said additional death sentences might be handed down among the approximately 1,000 arrested during the protests. "There are other dossiers with heavy punishments under investigation," he said. These suspects have been handed over to the Revolutionary Court. While 20 have been reportedly cleared of any wrongdoing, the rest remain under investigation. The judge indicated that the most severe sentences would be targeted against those responsible for the demonstrations. "The people who laid the grounds ... for the riots .. are definitely criminals," Rahbarpour said.

Manuchehr Mohammadi, a leading member of the National Association of Students and Graduates, remains in detention. At the end of the July, Iranian state television broadcast his "confession," in which he reportedly said he had coordinated his activities with a "counterrevolutionary agent," a crime punishable by death.

The television report also named Gholamreza Mohajeri-Nezhad and Maryam Shansi as close colleagues of Manuchehr Mohammadi. Four members of the Iran Nation Party—Khosrow Sayf, Ahmad Namazi, Farzin Mokhbar and Mehran Mir Abdol-Baghi—are also believed to still be in custody. The lives of all of these prisoners should be considered to be in extreme danger.

The July protests were sparked by the passage of a law further restricting freedom of the press in Iran, particularly an order by the Special Clerical Court banning publication of the liberal newspaper *Salam*. Hundreds of students gathered July 9 in a Tehran University dormitory to protest the shutdown of the newspaper, and were brutally attacked by police and members of Ansar-e Hezbollah, an Islamic fundamentalist militia. More than 100 students were arrested and dozens injured. Students were beaten, and some were thrown out of second- and third-story windows. Many students who were arrested and subsequently released reported that they had been tortured.

Widespread protests took place throughout Iran in response to the attack on the students. Thousands of students marched on university campuses and participated in sit-ins. Students responded to a government ban on demonstrations by widening them, and townspeople joined in the protests as well. For the first time since the 1979 Revolution, slogans on the protests openly criticized the supreme Islamic authority, illegal under Iran's Islamic law. Students chanted, "Down with the dictator!" referring to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the successor to Ayatollah Khomeini.

Student and human rights organizations reported that in subsequent demonstrations over the weekend of July 17-18 up to a dozen people were killed by police, 1,400 were arrested and many "disappeared." In the aftermath of the protests, the ban on *Salam* has remained in effect, and demonstrations have been prohibited.

While President Mahammed Khatami originally expressed sympathy with the student protesters, he

quickly moved to moved to defuse them and endorsed their suppression. He claimed that following the "unfortunate" killings of student protesters, the movement came under the influence of forces "from abroad" and was aimed at overthrowing the Islamic state. Khatami was elected in May 1997 in a victory over the more conservative candidate backed by Khamenei, and favors a relaxation of strict Islamic rule and concessions to foreign capital.

The Human Rights organization Amnesty International has condemned the death sentences, and the Committee for the Defence of Iranian People's Struggles is organizing a picket in London to protest the death sentences. The picket will be held on Saturday, September 18, from noon until 2 p.m. outside the Iranian Embassy, London SW7 (Knightsbridge tube).



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