

Iran: death sentence sparks protests and coup threats

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Following a week of student protests, the Iranian government has apparently lifted a politically motivated death sentence. The decision, however, has done nothing to dampen severe social tensions, which have been exacerbated by pressure from the US.

Hashemi Aghajari, a professor of history, was accused of blasphemy by a provincial court in the city of Hamadan and condemned to death. Aghari's offence was to make the remark that Moslems are not "apes" and as a result are not obliged to "blindly" follow their religious leaders. Following the sentence, students demonstrated and boycotted classes at a number of universities last week. Thousands of university students joined the protests in Hamadan itself and in other cities—including Täbriz, Isfahan, and above all in Tehran.

The political atmosphere in Iran was tense even before the protests. Conflicts between the two main rival factions of the Islamic government have escalated dramatically in recent months. The so-called "reformers" around President Mohammed Khatami, who dominate the Iranian parliament, have introduced two laws into the parliament aimed at limiting the power of their conservative rivals.

One of the laws would enable the president not merely to criticise, but also punish, violations of the constitution, in particular those committed by judges. Another law seeks to limit the power of the Council of Guardians (a sort of Islamic constitutional court) to reject candidates wishing to stand for election.

The Iranian judiciary, the Council of Guardians as well as the Expediency Council, are, together with the country's media and military forces, dominated by conservative clerics. Approval of the Council of Guardians is required to enact any new laws. Should the council refuse to give its approval, then the draft laws are passed on to the Expediency Council. The last and most decisive decision is made by Iran's religious "leader" Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is also regarded as a conservative.

The conservative Iranian press and clergy carried out an inflammatory campaign against the proposed laws. At the same time, the judiciary banned newspapers of the "reformers" and imposed an extraordinary number of death sentences in "ordinary" criminal cases. These executions were carried out in

particularly barbaric fashion, with the condemned publicly hanged from building site cranes. The sentence against Aghajari was merely the last straw in this series of political provocations.

President Khatami and his supporters in parliament threatened to organise a referendum should the laws be rejected. In the event of a rejection of the referendum demand, they were prepared to withdraw from all political institutions—a move equivalent to delivering their widely hated opponents to angry popular reaction.

Both sides are opposed to any broad mobilisation of the population, knowing very well that this could rapidly undermine the basis of their rule. Both factions were concerned that the student protests not extend beyond the universities, embrace broader popular layers and become uncontrollable.

Ayatollah Khamenei reacted in two ways. At the beginning of last week, he threatened to intervene—if necessary "with the power of the people"—should the three state organs prove incapable of solving the crisis. The warning was interpreted as a threat to instigate a coup by paramilitary militias—"revolutionary guards" and the "Basij".. Secondly, he criticised the sentencing of Aghajari and last weekend ordered a review of the sentence. He undertook this measure even though Aghajari himself had demonstratively refrained from appealing the court's decision. Observers assumed that the death sentence would probably be reversed.

The conservative faction is split on this issue. Khamenei's instruction came shortly after a demonstration of 1,000 religious fanatics who, at the end of Friday prayers, called for Aghajari's execution. According to rumours, a hard-line faction led by the powerful head of the Expediency Council, Hashemi Rafsanjani, was working towards imposition of the sentence, the intervention of the Iranian military against any protests, and the subsequent establishment of an emergency regime.

The government's nervousness over the student protests was noted by the British newspaper *Financial Times* in a November 14 report. According to this report, the police chief in Tehran personally took to the streets in front of the city's main university—officially "to control traffic"—with the aim of preventing the protest's spreading beyond the campus.

According to the *Financial Times*: “Iran’s establishment (is) well aware that many ordinary Tehranis are waiting to join the university movement. ‘I know I won’t be able to keep my two sons away if the students come out,’ said one middle-aged mother, who took herself to the streets in the 1979 revolution.”

President Khatami criticised the death sentence in unmistakable terms, but called at the same time for calm and against any escalation of tensions. In particular, students should refrain from further protests or at least ensure that any action was strictly limited to the campuses, he said.

The biggest and most important student organisation, the Office for the Consolidation of Unity (OCU), heeded this demand. All demonstrations took place inside the universities. It was then made known that, following Khamenei’s order to review the judicial sentencing, all protests planned for this week have been cancelled.

It is worth noting that even the OCU distanced itself from the “reformers” after the latter had so thoroughly discredited themselves with their cowardly and hesitant reaction. In contrast to previous demonstrations, students this time shouted slogans aimed directly against leading representatives of the government—the Supreme Judge Ayatollah Mahmood Hashemi-Shahroodi, the religious leader Khamenei and also against Khatami.

With the right wing of the government showing definite signs of weakness and disunity, the next confrontation is already in the cards. On the same weekend that Khamenei demanded a review of the death sentence against Aghajari, the Council of Guardians exercised a veto of the two laws passed by parliament.

American pressure on the government is playing a crucial role in the growth of tensions in Iran.

In military terms, Iran is almost completely encircled by US troops. American military personnel are stationed in the Persian Gulf, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and more recently in Afghanistan as well as in Central Asia. Following a US war against Baghdad, American forces would also confront Iran across its long border with Iraq.

The US is exercising enormous political pressure on the country. In January, President Bush declared Iran part of an “axis of evil” together with Iraq and North Korea. In July, he broke with existing US policy and clearly distanced himself from the reform wing led by Khatami. Since then, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in particular, has repeatedly accused Iran of supporting terrorists.

Some sections of the Iranian population labour under the illusion that they can rid themselves of the despised Mullah government with the help of the US and achieve democracy and prosperity via links to the western powers. “Down with the Taliban, in Kabul and in Tehran”, was one of the students’ slogans. According to a poll carried out in September, a large majority of Tehran’s population favours re-establishing

relations with the US, with most expecting economic improvement as a result.

The Iranian government has reacted to foreign pressure by turning increasingly to the West. The country is discussing a trade and cooperation deal with the European Union, which has sought to encourage the reform wing in Iran and has criticised American plans for an Iraq war. Most European countries already enjoy lucrative trade relations with Iran. The EU failed to make any public comment on the sentencing of Aghajari. Instead Denmark, which currently occupies the EU council presidency, confirmed last week that the EU parliament seeks “critical dialogue” with Iran.

Behind the scenes, Iran is cooperating with US plans for war with Iraq. Tehran has assured the US that it will accept the violation of its airspace by American fighter planes involved in hostile action. Iran will also come to the aid of any planes or ships shot down or damaged in Iranian territory in the course of conflict. Additionally, according to American newspapers, the Iranian navy recently helped in imposing the oil embargo on Iraq. The Iranian-based opposition group “Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq” (SCIRI), meanwhile, has received a green light from Iranian official circles to coordinate its activities with the American military.

According to a November 11 report by United Press International, the collaboration goes further. The report states that contact officers have been appointed by US Central Command to discuss logistical issues with Iran, such as the dispatch of heavy bridge components through Iran enabling US troops to cross the Euphrates river. In addition, there are “strong rumours inside the Special Forces community that Iranian specialist troops have been inserted alongside US and British Special Forces teams now in the marsh districts of southern Iraq.”

The article also claims that Syria’s recent support for the United Nations resolution on weapons inspections in Iraq was largely the result of pressure from Iran. In the meantime, the Lebanese-based Hezbollah movement has openly sided with Iran and notably refused to meet with Iraq’s foreign minister during his recent visit to Lebanon. Hezbollah is supported by both Syria and Iran.

Despite these developments, Washington is continuing to pressure Iran. The US State Department sharply criticised the death sentence against Aghajari. Meanwhile, a meeting planned for this week in New York between Iran’s ambassador to the UN and members of US Congress has been called off for the time being.



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