

Iranian filmmaker sentenced to six years in jail

Richard Phillips
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In a major assault on democratic rights and freedom of artistic expression, internationally acclaimed Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi, 50, was found guilty in a Tehran court on Monday of “conspiring against national security and spreading propaganda against the system”. He was sentenced to six years’ jail and has been banned from making films, writing scripts, giving interviews or travelling abroad for 20 years.

Panahi and his lawyers reject the charges and will appeal at the filmmaker’s next court hearing in January. Filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof, also on trial with Panahi, was given the same harsh sentence.

The decision is a blatant attempt by the Shiite fundamentalist regime of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to silence the two directors and politically intimidate any other artistic critics of the regime. It must be opposed and a campaign mounted by filmmakers, writers, artists, workers and youth everywhere to demand that the sentence be overturned immediately and all other filmmakers and artists be released from Iranian jails.

Panahi defiantly told the court that he and Rasoulof were “being punished before committing a crime... for making a film, that at the time of my arrest, was only 30 percent shot”.

“If these charges are true, you are putting not only us on trial but the socially conscious, humanistic, and artistic Iranian cinema as well, a cinema which tries to stay beyond good and evil, a cinema that does not judge or surrender to power or money but tries to honestly reflect a realistic image of the society.”

Panahi rejected the various allegations levelled against him in the court—that he made a film without permission, spoke to Persian-language foreign media, had not given his script to actors in advance, and had signed an open letter “voicing concern” about increasing repression in Iran—and declared:

“History testifies that an artist’s mind is the analytical mind of his society. By learning about the culture and history of his country, by observing the events that occur in his surroundings, he sees, analyzes and presents issues of the day through his art form to the society. How can anyone be accused of any crime because of his mind and what passes through the mind?

“The assassination of ideas and sterilizing artists of a society has only one result: killing the roots of art and creativity. Arresting my colleagues and I while shooting an unfinished film is nothing but an attack by those in power on all the artists of this land. It drives this crystal clear however sad message home: ‘You will repent if you don’t think like us’.”

Panahi began his film career under the tutelage of director Abbas Kiarostami. His deeply humane and socially-conscious works include *The White Balloon* (1995), *The Crimson Gold* (2003) and *Offside* (2006). Almost all of these movies, which powerfully expose the reality of life for ordinary people in Iran, have been banned by government censors.

Panahi is a supporter of the US-backed Green Movement and like many artists and intellectuals supporting this bourgeois formation, naively believes that the Washington-supported movement is a political

alternative to the current Islamic regime.

Headed by big business politician Mir Hossein Mousavi, the Green Movement, however, can provide no way forward for the Iranian working class or serious filmmakers and artists, but represents another wing of the Iranian capitalist class who are seeking to strike a deal with the US and other imperialist powers. If Mousavi's Green Movement comes to power it would be implementing the demands of Washington and the international banks. Notwithstanding Panahi's political illusions, harassment of the director by Iranian authorities in the past 18 months has been unrelenting.

Panahi was arrested in July 2009, along with others mourning the death of a young woman shot and killed by Iranian police during anti-government protests. He was released soon after but had his passport revoked and in February was denied permission to participate in the 60th Berlin film festival.

On March, 2010 Iranian military intelligence officers raided the director's home where he was making a film. Panahi, his wife and daughter, and 15 other filmmakers and technicians, including Mehdi Pourmoussa and Rasoulof, were arrested, the police claiming they were making an "anti-regime" documentary.

While most of the group were released from Tehran's Evin prison within two days, Rasoulof and Pourmoussa were held in the notorious jail until March 17. Panahi, however, remained incarcerated for almost three months, until May 25, and only released on \$US200,000 bail after he began a hunger strike.

The ongoing persecution on Panahi and other artistic critics of the regime—filmmaker Mohammad Nourizadeh is currently on a hunger strike in Evin prison, while renowned traditional singer Mohammad Shajarian is banned from performing—is part of an intensifying class assault on the democratic rights of working people.

Panahi's sentencing came two few days after Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced that it was phasing out petrol and food subsidies. The

cutbacks will be systematically introduced over the next five years. Ahmadinejad said that the subsidies were unsustainable and the "biggest surgery" on Iran's economy in 50 years was necessary. The government, anticipating riots, immediately began stationing police and other security forces at scores of petrol stations in Tehran.

According to some estimates, the government annually provides over \$30 billion in oil subsidies and \$4 billion assigned for food. Removal of these subsidies is expected to lead to a rapid increase in the current 20 percent annual inflation rate. On Monday, in fact, petrol prices rose by up to 400 percent, with bread prices expected to increase tenfold in the next weeks.

These measures will heavily impact on ordinary workers and the poor and make clear that the fight for freedom of expression and democratic rights is a class question.

While Iranian filmmakers and artists have been jailed and witch-hunted in the past, the prosecution of Panahi is the most serious assault on freedom of expression since the hated US-backed regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, which was overthrown in 1979.

The frame-up and sentencing of Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof must be unequivocally opposed by filmmakers, workers and youth around the world. This must be the first step in the struggle to push back increasing censorship and other escalating attacks on freedom of artistic expression in every country.



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