

# Iran imprisons film directors amid escalating crackdown on dissent and protests

Jean Shaoul  
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In the largest crackdown on its film industry since 2010, Iran ordered internationally acclaimed filmmaker Jafar Panahi, 62, to serve a six-year jail sentence after he criticised the government.

Panahi was arrested on July 11 when he went to the prosecutor's office to follow up on the arrest of Mohammad Rasoulof, another well-known filmmaker, and Mostafa Aleahmad. The two were detained on July 8 after criticising the authorities' response to the collapse of a multi-story building in Abadan, in the oil-rich, southwestern province of Khuzestan, on May 23, that killed 43 people. The Iranian authorities accused the filmmakers of having links to opposition groups outside the country and plotting to undermine state security.

Their imprisonment is part of a broader attempt by the clergy-led bourgeois nationalist regime of President Ebrahim Raisi to silence the filmmakers and politically threaten other critics of the regime. It takes place amid a government campaign of intimidation and repression against any opposition to the soaring cost of living that is making it impossible for workers and rural toilers, not just in Iran but across the globe, to feed their families.

This attack on democratic rights and free speech 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 filmmakers, artists and labour activists be released from Iran's jails.

Following the Abadan building collapse in May, local officials, instead of sending in relief teams to help in the search, deployed anti-riot squads to disperse the crowds of volunteers and mourners and sent in security forces to demolish the building before the search for any survivors was complete. Angry crowds took to the streets to protest at the rampant corruption and breach of regulations that had led to the collapse, demanding the prosecution and punishment of officials.

Protests spread to other cities across the country that soon morphed into anti-government rallies. The authorities responded by shutting down access to the internet, ordering shops to close and sending in riot police to disperse the protests with teargas, warning shots, mass arrests and intimidation. Rasoulof wrote an open letter, signed by other filmmakers and artists, over the "corruption, theft, inefficiency and repression" relating to the building collapse and called on security forces to "lay down their arms."

Panahi and Rasoulof were previously arrested in 2010 for "propaganda against the system," critiquing the government in their films and at protests. Panahi was given a six-year suspended jail sentence after being imprisoned for two months before his trial. For the last 12 years he was subject to a travel ban and barred from making films, although his subsequent films, including his 2015 film *Taxi*, sought to evade these restrictions. He is now in Tehran's notorious Evin prison.

Rasoulof was given a one-year sentence in 2011. Just months after his film *There Is No Evil*, which related four stories touching on the death penalty in Iran and personal freedoms won the Berlin Film Festival's Golden Bear prize in 2020, Rasoulof was sentenced to a year in prison for three films that authorities claimed were "propaganda against the system." While he won on appeal, he was banned from making films and travelling abroad.

Panahi's imprisonment comes two months after security forces arrested Firouzeh Khosrovani (director of *Radiography of a Family* and interviewed by the WSWs in 2021) and Mina Keshavarz, two internationally renowned documentary filmmakers, and Reihane Taravati, a well-known photographer, and raided the homes of at least 10 other documentary filmmakers and producers, seizing their mobile phones, laptops and hard drives. The three women were released on bail after their families surrendered their property deeds as guarantees,

although none of the three have been formally charged.

This crackdown on filmmakers comes as Iran's kleptocracy sits atop a social volcano as poverty soars to encompass 80 percent of Iran's 85 million population and the middle class has all but disappeared.

Iran's economy has been devastated under the impact of years of harsh economic sanctions imposed by Washington. After the Trump administration unilaterally abandoned the 2015 nuclear accords with the major powers aimed at curbing Tehran's nuclear programme, it reimposed sanctions and piled on additional measures targeting Iran's economy, including its oil and gas exports and banking system, to exert "maximum pressure" on Iran.

As a result, Iran's oil and gas exports, a key revenue source, have plummeted. Iran's increasingly beleaguered government responded by incrementally rolling back some of its commitments made under the nuclear accord, including increasing its uranium enrichment up to 60 percent purity, some way off from the weapons-grade level of 90 percent, and turning off the cameras at some of its sites, in a bid to demonstrate its refusal to submit to US pressure and strengthen its bargaining position in the talks with the Biden administration over returning to the accords.

Tehran had hoped that a renewed agreement would rescue its economy, particularly as oil and gas prices soared following the US/NATO-provoked war against Russia in Ukraine. But now, as Washington seeks to cement an anti-Iran alliance as part of its broader preparations for war with Russia and China—with whom Tehran has forged increasingly close relations—such an agreement is looking increasingly unlikely.

The US's ever tighter economic blockade has deepened the poverty of the Iranian masses and strangled the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic which, according to official figures, has claimed the lives of more than 142,000 people. The currency, whose official exchange rate is 42,000 rials to the US dollar, is now trading in the bazaars at about 320,000 rials to the dollar, meaning that Iran's currency is now worth one tenth of its value at the time of the 2015 nuclear deal—making it hugely expensive to source external goods and services and increasing the cost of locally produced goods.

The government has resorted to printing money to compensate for the loss of oil and other revenues and economic activities and to solve its budget deficit. It has dropped the official exchange rate of 42,000 rials for setting the price of necessities and food items in favour of

the bazaar rate or "market approach" which is eight times higher, sending the cost of food sky high.

Iran's official inflation rate has soared, with the monthly inflation rate reaching 12 percent in June, a 50 percent increase on a year ago, with no signs of slowing down. Food shortages and high prices, the drought that has affected the entire region, the decades-long mismanagement of the water system and agricultural production and the chronic shortage of electricity that has led to some factories operating at 50 percent capacity and others at 20-30 percent capacity, have combined to make living conditions intolerable.

The last few months have seen mass anti-government protests across the country, sparked by the government's cuts to subsidies and the now worthless pensions. A major factor in the increasing poverty has been the ninefold increase in housing prices in the last five years that has priced the young middle class out of the housing market. Whereas 40 years ago, only one in five households rented their home, now one in three do so. The number of families renting is even higher in Tehran, where rents have risen by 50 percent this year alone, meaning that up to 60-70 percent of income goes on rent, under conditions where wages are low and often paid months in arrears. A shocking 19 million people are forced to live in slums.

With no respite from its imperialist foes, Iran's ruling elite has responded to the protests with arrests, intimidation, violence and repression as it seeks to preserve its economic wealth and political power. The families of the trade unionists and labour activists imprisoned since May for leading or participating in the recent teachers' protests in support of higher wages say that security agents have threatened them if they persist in publicising the arrests and detention of their relatives, while visits have been banned.



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