

Iran publicly hangs second anti-government protester after show trial

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In a gruesome attempt to intimidate the populace, Iranian authorities executed an anti-government protester early Monday morning—the second such execution in four days—and publicly circulated photos of his corpse hanging from a construction crane.

Twenty-three-year-old Majidreza Rahnavard was hanged “in the presence of a group of Mashadi citizens,” reported the Islamic Republic judiciary’s own Mizan news agency.

A court in the northeastern city of Mashhad had convicted Rahnavard of stabbing and killing two Basij security officers and wounding four others in an incident it termed a “terrorist attack.” According to the Oslo-based group Iran Human Rights, Rahnavard “was sentenced to death based on coerced confessions after a grossly unfair process and a show trial.” He was hanged just 23 days after his arrest.

Four days earlier, Mohsen Shekari became the first person to be executed for his role in a three-month-long wave of protests that has been the target of ruthless state repression and punctuated by violent clashes between some protesters and security forces.

Shekari, also just 23, paid with his life for what an Iranian court said were the crimes of participating in the blocking of a Tehran street and stabbing a Basij security guard, who survived the attack and required just 13 stitches. While the authorities claimed Shekari had confessed, his relatives said he was not allowed legal representation, his trial was held in a closed court, his face showed signs of bruising and his body had not been released.

In neither case did the Islamic Republic authorities link their two victims, at least publicly, to the “outside entities,” meaning US imperialism, Israel, and the Saudi absolutist monarchy, which they accuse of fomenting the protests.

Elsewhere, five men have been sentenced to death for killing a member of the Basij in the city of Karaj west of Tehran, with 11 others, including three minors, sentenced to long jail sentences. As many as 25 people have been charged with offences that carry the death penalty. Given that Iran has already executed more than 500 people this year, their lives must be considered to be in extreme danger.

The executions have sparked popular outrage, with a Farsi hashtag for Shekari hitting four million on Friday, with many Iranians noting that the execution was a “declaration of war” on the protesters. That in turn prompted a group of scholars and senior clerics from theological seminaries in the city of Qom to condemn the executions. They criticized the speed of the trials and the disproportionate nature of the punishment and called for a halt

to further executions.

The hangings underscore the degree of crisis and fear within Iran’s bourgeois clerical regime. Some voices within the Shia clergy-led political establishment have called for attempts to mollify the anti-government protesters, including by dissolving the regime’s “morality police.” But the current administration, headed by President Ebrahim Raisi; the police, which report directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei; and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps appear determined to stamp out the movement through ever-escalating state violence.

The protests—which began in the Kurdish provinces under the slogan “Women, Life, Freedom”—have been ongoing since the police-custody death in mid-September of a young Kurdish woman, 22 year-old Mahsa Amini, who was detained for wearing the hijab “improperly.” The protest movement began and continues, at least outside the predominantly Kurdish northwest, to be centered among students and youth. In recent weeks some small traders have responded to calls for anti-government “strike” days by closing their shops and businesses in the bazaars. Teachers and some workers at major industrial facilities, including steel works in Isfahan, have staged walkouts in conjunction with the anti-government protests.

The authorities have responded to the protests, which have denounced the political privileges of the Shia clergy and the endemic corruption of the institutions of the Islamic Republic and increasingly called to overthrow (“Death to”) Supreme Leader-for-life Ayatollah Khamenei, with repression. They have shut down access to social media; mobilised tens of thousands of the Basij—the voluntary police force affiliated with and led by the politically and economically powerful IRGC; carried out mass arrests and intimidated and threatened potential strikers with the loss of their livelihoods, while calling for speedy “justice” to be meted out to those whom the regime claim have committed “crimes against the security of the nation and Islam.” According to the authorities’ own figures, security forces have killed at least 200 people. NGOs outside the country, many of them oriented to the western imperialist powers, put the death toll at more than double that and arrests at around 18,000.

The regime’s harsh repressive measures are rooted in its fear that under conditions of ever deepening poverty and ever-widening social inequality, and after decades in which all factions of the ruling elite from the conservative Principlists to the Reformers have joined together in rolling back the social concessions made

after the 1979 Revolution, the working class will erupt onto the scene. Recent years have seen a wave of strikes and protests against the non-payment of wages, privatization, precarious contract-labour jobs, and subsidy cuts.

Washington, under Trump and now Biden, has been mounting a campaign of “maximum pressure” against Iran, imposing punishing sanctions that are tantamount to an act of war. The explicit aim of this campaign is to crash Iran’s economy. Its purpose is to leverage the divisions within the Iranian bourgeoisie so as to engineer a political realignment in Tehran, if not full-scale regime change, and impose on the Iranian people a neo-colonial regime, like that of the Shah, that will serve US imperialist interests in the Middle East and across Eurasia.

The hands of the capitalist elites of the US and its European allies drip with the blood of countless colonial and neo-colonial crimes across the Middle East, including the criminal wars of the past three decades that have razed entire societies from Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen to Libya and Syria. Yet with unbridled cynicism and hypocrisy, they have seized on the bloody repression of the Iranian regime to posture as the votaries of democracy and human rights and impose further economic and geopolitical pressure on Iran. The EU’s top foreign affairs official, Josep Borrell, has announced that the EU is preparing “a very tough” package of sanctions against Iran, adding that this is both because of its human rights violations and supplying of drones to Russia.

Tehran for its part has sought to justify its violent response to the protests by claiming they are being instigated by its “foreign adversaries,” particularly the US and Israel. It has accused them of using their regional allies, including Iraqi Kurds, to arm and support demonstrators.

In recent weeks, Tehran has carried out a series of military strikes on anti-regime Kurdish groups based inside Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, where the CIA, the British Secret Intelligence Service MI6 and Israel’s Mossad spy agency have long been active. It claims these groups have been sending in armed teams to support protesters in the Kurdish areas of northwestern Iran that have seen the most extensive unrest.

Various rival Kurdish exile groups that are based just inside the Iraqi border—including the Kurdish Democratic Party, Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, PAK (Parti Azadi Kurdistan) and PJAK (Kurdistan Free Life Party)—have received funding from the CIA. They have sought to exploit the legitimate grievances of Iran’s 10 million strong Kurdish minority that have long faced discrimination at the hands of the clerical regime, including the banning of their language as the main medium of instruction in schools, to press for some form of regional autonomy that would benefit a tiny handful of families as has happened in Iraq’s corrupt Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that is dominated by the Barzani clan.

A December 9 *Jerusalem Post* article cited officials from these parties interviewed in Iraqi Kurdistan in mid-November as rejecting Tehran’s accusations. It claimed that the Kurdish organizations are not leading the current protests, nor do they claim to do so, although they are involved in activities that assist the uprising. Komala activist Kawthar Fatahi, told the *Post*, “We

have ‘illegal hospitals’,” and “We pay doctors to bring aid to wounded people. We pay the families of wounded people. We assist the movement a lot, but not via armed action.”

This is hard to believe. As the *Post* stated, “All three of these movements (Komala, PDKI and PAK) have light weaponry, including machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), as this author witnessed on their bases. The demonstrators inside Iran, meanwhile, are being killed daily. More than 450 people have now died. The organizations are faced with a dilemma. Why not use the available weaponry in order to defend the protesters? And if not now, when? so to speak.” To which the *Post*’s interviewee responded, “People do call on us to come inside, yes. But we think it’s not yet the time.”

Abdullah Mohtadi, the Komala Party’s Secretary General, has been in Washington in recent days where he has held meetings on the situation in Iran with key members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—including its Democratic Party chairman, Senator Bob Menendez, a leading anti-Iran hawk—and Republican Party Congressman Michael Waltz from Florida. He is one of a large new group of military-intelligence veterans in Congress, and an ardent supporter of the war in Ukraine.

The role of the Kurdish groups allied with Washington is far from unique. A whole series of émigré political forces, from the royalists and the remnants of the bourgeois National Front to the Tudeh Party and the pseudo-left, are in the name of the fight for democracy and women’s rights promoting an “Iranian people’s movement” oriented and beholden to the imperialist powers.

Such a movement would express not the interests and aspirations of Iranian workers and youth to win basic democratic rights and social equality. Rather, it would express the predatory ambitions of sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie and upper middle class who calculate that they can profit handsomely by becoming the local clients and police enforcers of an Iran returned to neo-colonial bondage.

The reality is all talk of a struggle for democracy outside of a struggle against the imperialist powers that have ravaged Iran and the entire Middle East for over a century, waging war, supporting one bloody dictatorship after another, and inciting religious and national-ethnic divisions is a monstrous fraud.

Basic democratic rights, including the separation of church and state, women’s rights, and genuine equality for all ethno-linguistic groups, can only be secured by the working class, rallying the rural masses and all oppressed behind it, in the fight for workers’ power and the mobilization of the masses of the Middle East—Iranian, Kurdish, Arab, Turkish, Muslim, Christian and Jewish—against imperialism.



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