

With sham trials and executions, Iran's rulers intensify repression of anti-government protests

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Dozens of people demonstrated outside Rajaei-Shahr prison in Karaj, near Iran's capital Tehran, on Monday in a bid to stop the executions of two young men convicted in sham trials for allegedly attacking security personnel during the now months-long wave of anti-government protests.

There were also reports of demonstrations in multiple Tehran neighborhoods last Saturday night following the execution earlier that day of two other protesters. Crowds reportedly exclaimed, "For every person killed, there are a thousand others behind him."

Protests were also held in other Iranian cities last weekend in response to the executions. According to press reports, participants chanted "Death to Khamenei" (the ayatollah who has served as the country's Supreme Leader since 1989), "We do not want the government that kills children," and "Death to the Basij," the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps volunteer force that has been front and centre in the repression of the anti-government protests.

Monday's angry protests calling on the government to stop the executions followed rulings by Iran's Supreme Court confirming death sentences for 22 year-old Mohammad Ghobadlou, who allegedly ran over several members of the security forces with his car, killing one, and 19 year-old Mohammad Boroughani, who was convicted of "moharebeh" or "waging war against God" for allegedly killing a member of the security forces with a knife.

Iran's crisis-ridden bourgeois clerical regime has branded the protests "riots" and repeatedly accused protestors of acting at the instigation of foreign governments, particularly the United States, Britain and Israel.

It has increasingly resorted to barbaric methods, including death sentences, a public execution, sham trials and torture, to terrorise the Iranian people and stomp out the mass demonstrations that erupted after the police-custody death in mid-September of a young Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini. Its greatest fear is that under conditions of ever deepening poverty and ever widening social inequality, the working class will erupt onto the scene

The latest protests follow the execution over the weekend of two young men, Mohammad Mahdi Karami and Seyed Mohammad Hosseini, for allegedly killing a member of the Basij force in Karaj last November during the nationwide protests. Both men denied the charges and said they were tortured and denied access to their own lawyers. The UN Human Rights Office said they were victims of "unfair trials based on forced confessions."

The US and its allies, who remain silent in the face of mass executions by their brutal ally Saudi Arabia, lost no time in excoriating the Islamic Republic.

Together with last month's executions of two 23 year-olds, Mohsen Shekari and Majidreza Rahnavard, after similar sham trials, Saturday's hangings bring the total number of anti-government protesters executed to date to four. At least 17 other people have been sentenced to death, according to the United Nations Human Rights Office, among them a doctor, a bodybuilding champion, a rapper and a barber, for purported crimes ranging from burning a trash can to killing security forces.

So far, at least 519 protesters and 68 security personnel have been killed in the unrest, according to the Human Rights Activists' News Agency (HRANA). The government puts the number at just over 300 killed. HRANA says that another 19,290 protesters have been arrested, of whom 111 face charges for capital crimes.

Iranian authorities have also targeted well-known personalities, including filmmakers, lawyers, actors, athletes and activists as well as 84 journalists, for voicing their support for the protesters, jailing some and imposing severe restrictions and travel bans on others.

Among those imprisoned is Faezeh Hashemei, a former legislator and the 60 year-old daughter of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the late two-term president who long led a faction of the Islamic Republic's Shia clerical political establishment eager for rapprochement with Washington and the European imperialist powers.

Hashemei was accused of "propaganda," "instigating protests" and actions against public order and national security, and sentenced to five years in jail, said her lawyer, Neda Shams. She has long been an outspoken critic of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Last May, she called on the United States to keep the IRGC on its list of foreign terrorist organizations, prompting demands for her immediate prosecution.

The anti-government protests began in Amini's home town, in the predominantly Kurdish northwest, under the slogan "Women, Life and Freedom," popularized by Kurdish nationalists. But they spread rapidly across the country, particularly among the country's youth and students, and are fueled by anger over the political privileges, social control and endemic corruption of the clerical elite, the mismanagement of the pandemic, the soaring cost

of living—inflation is running at 50 percent a year—and widespread unemployment, particularly among young people. Some 50 percent of Iran’s 86 million people live below the poverty line according to the government’s own statistics. This is the outcome, on the one hand, of the punishing economic sanctions Washington has imposed against Iran with the aim of crashing its economy, and, on the other, the regime’s rolling back and elimination of the price subsidies and other social-welfare measures implemented in the wake of the 1979 revolution that toppled the bloody dictatorship of the US-backed Shah.

Teachers and some workers at major industrial facilities, including steel works in Isfahan and Persian Gulf oil refineries, have staged walkouts in conjunction with the anti-government protests, while some small traders have closed their shops and businesses in the bazaars in response to calls for anti-government “strikes.”

The protests, while not the largest the Islamic Republic has seen, have lasted longer than the wave of mass protests that rocked Iran in the days immediately preceding and following New Year 2018 and again in November 2019.

In recent years there have been myriad struggles by workers and the rural poor against privatization, the spread of precarious contract-labour jobs, the non-payment of wages, and the lack of government action in the face of a growing water-crisis in many rural areas.

A pamphlet by Keith Jones

However, the protests—due to the political domination within the opposition movement of more privileged layers previously aligned with the “reform” wing of the Islamic Republic’s clerical elite and/or oriented to the western imperialist powers— have articulated no social demands or programme that would appeal to the working class. The movement has consequently remained largely confined to students and other young people.

As mass participation in the protests has declined in recent weeks both because of the state repression and the lack of a viable strategy for opposing imperialism and the bourgeois nationalist regime, young people’s readiness for self-sacrifice has frequently been squandered in clashes between small groups of protesters and security forces.

Iran’s currency, the rial, has been in free fall since the protests erupted in September, plummeting from 316,700 to an all-time low of 440,000 against the US dollar at the end of December. While this has led to bitter attacks on President Ebrahim Raisi’s economic policies from his opponents within the political elite, the implications are truly catastrophic for Iranian workers, with the Faraz news site noting that Iran’s monthly minimum wage has fallen from the equivalent of US \$251 in May 2017—when most sanctions had been lifted under the 2015 Iran nuclear deal—to just over \$90 this month.

The efforts of the regime to rally support via its annual celebration of the supposed “covenant” between the Iranian people and the Islamic Republic’s Supreme Guardian, Ayatollah Khamenei, only served to further expose the erosion of its popular support. On December 30, 2009 the government staged a massive mobilization, including a so-called “million march,” against the US-backed bourgeois opposition Green movement. In subsequent

years meetings and rallies have marked the occasion. This year, the state media promised that there would be huge pro-government rallies across the country on Dec. 30, but to no effect. At most, small gatherings were held, which the media thought it wise to ignore. This was in marked contrast to the large rallies and marches held on November 4, the anniversary of the start of the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979.

Far from making any concessions to the protest movement, amid what is undoubtedly a grave economic and political crisis, Supreme Leader Khamenei indicated in a televised speech Monday that the Islamic Republic intends to continue using savage repression. Those who “set fire to public places,” he declared, “have with no doubt committed treason”—an offence that carries the death penalty.

In a further signal of its bloody intentions, the government last week appointed Ahmad Reza Radan to head the country’s police force. Radan, a former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officer, played an important role in the crackdown on the 2009 Green Movement protests and in 2014, due to the outcry over his savage methods, had to step down from a senior police position. He is notorious for his strict enforcement of the country’s Islamic dress code for women.

This week, the judiciary ordered the police to “firmly punish any hijab violations” and demanded that “Courts must sentence the violators, as well as fine them, to additional penalties such as exile, bans on practicing certain professions and closing workplaces.” This comes just a week after Khamenei appeared to be willing to relax the rules, saying that women with “lax” hijab were still “our children” and should not be viewed as opponents of the Islamic Republic.

Iran’s clerical-dominated government also faces the ongoing aggression and intrigues of US imperialism, which is using the increasing economic and military ties between Tehran and Moscow in the context of the US/NATO provoked war in Ukraine, to further isolate Iran. Both US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken are to visit Israel later this month to discuss Iran. Blinken reportedly said that Washington aims to get its European allies on board with his plans for tightening still further the punishing economic sanctions that are pauperizing the Iranian people and denying them access to critical medical supplies.



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