

AI Index: PRE 01/243/2009
29 June 2009

Iran: Detained political leaders at risk of torture, possibly to force “confessions”

Amnesty International is gravely concerned that several opposition leaders detained in the wake of the 12 June elections may be facing torture, possibly to force them to make televised “confessions” as a prelude to unfair trials in which they could face the death penalty.

“If our fears are born out, this would be an appalling tactic on the part of the security services to silence high profile political leaders once and for all, and to send a clear message to others with dissenting views that they should expect dreadful consequences if they speak out,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa Programme.

Senior political leaders Mohsen Aminzadeh, Abdollah Ramazanadeh and Mostafa Tajzadeh were taken away from their homes in the early hours of 16 June, coinciding with the arrests of many other opposition leaders and supporters. According to reports received by Amnesty International, all three are believed to be held in Section 209 in Evin Prison in Tehran which falls under the control of the Ministry of Intelligence, and where reports of torture of detainees are frequent. It is not clear whether they have been allowed to contact their families. In ‘security’ related cases, detainees are routinely denied access to a lawyer during the interrogation period which can be prolonged indefinitely.

On Friday 26 June, cleric Ahmad Khatami, who is a member of the Assembly of Experts, in a sermon at Friday prayers at Tehran University, called on the judiciary to punish, “severely and without mercy”, those involved in the demonstrations. He said that “agitations, destructive acts, setting fire to mosques and buses, destroying people's property, creating insecurity and terror, and harassing people” could be considered to be instances of moharebeh or enmity against God, a charge which can carry the death penalty.

This echoes a warning made by Esfahan province’s Prosecutor General, Mohammad Reza Habibi, on 17 June when he reportedly stated that the few elements behind the post-election unrest could face the death penalty.

On 16 June, following the arrest of Mohsen Aminzadeh, Abdollah Ramazanadeh and Mostafa Tajzadeh and other leading opposition figures, Intelligence Minister Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejeie reportedly told the Fars news agency that 26 “masterminds” suspected to be involved in post-election unrest had been arrested. It is not known whether Mohsen Aminzadeh, Abdollah Ramazanadeh and Mostafa Tajzadeh are among the 26 referred to.

“Such statements, including by those in influential clerical positions, add to the already worrying signs that the authorities in Iran are preparing to eradicate any form of peaceful political opposition, including by trying these political leaders on trumped-up and vaguely worded charges,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui. “We call on the Supreme Leader to give clear instructions to all government and judicial officials not to torture people

within their custody, and urge him and the security services to guarantee the safety of every detainee, including by clarifying their whereabouts, allowing immediate access to families and lawyers and any medical care that may be needed.”

Amnesty International considers the three leaders to be prisoners of conscience who should be immediately and unconditionally released. At the very least, those arrested must be promptly informed of any charges and brought before a judge to assess the legality and necessity of their detention.

According to the Iranian authorities, eight members of the Basij militia, a volunteer paramilitary force under the control of the Revolutionary Guards which has been used to crack down on protesters, have died in the demonstrations. While the authorities have not revealed any information about these deaths or named any suspect, Amnesty International is worried that if these deaths are ultimately attributed to detained opposition leaders, it would pave the way to them being sentenced to death and would make more likely their eventual execution”.

Televised “confessions” have repeatedly been used by the authorities to incriminate political activists in their custody. Many have later retracted these “confessions”, stating that they were coerced to make them, sometimes after torture or other ill-treatment.

Several people arrested at the demonstrations that followed the 12 June election have made statements on state television saying they were “influenced” by foreign radio broadcasts. A woman shown on Press TV on 25 June, who admitted to carrying grenades in her bag, had her face digitally concealed. Such televised statements may indicate that other “confessions” regarding the recent demonstrations will be forthcoming.

Background:

Mohsen Aminzadeh, Abdollah Ramazanadeh and Mostafa Tajzadeh were all officials in former President Mohammad Khatami’s government and are supporters of Mir Hossein Mousavi.

Up to 21 people are reported by the Iranian authorities to have been killed in the recent protests. The true number of deaths is likely to be higher, as the Iranian authorities have a history of under-reporting deaths at the hands of security forces during demonstrations.

The charge of moharebeh, dealt with under Articles 183 to 195 of the Penal Code, attracts one of four penalties – execution, cross-amputation, crucifixion or banishment, although the death penalty is the most common punishment applied.

The Assembly of Experts is an elected state body of 86 clerics charged with electing, supervising and if necessary dismissing the Supreme Leader.