

Iran's Execution Spike under Rouhani: Who Is Pulling the Chairs?

Written by Sajjad Safaei

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Moderation, one would agree, is inherently at odds with execution binges. And yet since Iranian President Hassan Rouhani—whose election ran on the promise of “moderation” and “prudence”—took office in August 2013, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of hangings in the country.

So significant was the spike in Iran's execution figures that it, along with Iraq, accounted for the sharp increase in global executions in 2013, according to Amnesty International. It prompted the organisation's Secretary General to call the “killing sprees we saw in countries like Iran and Iraq...shameful.”[1] “The high rate of executions”, observed the *New York Times*' Nick Cumming-Bruce, “is in sharp contrast to the signs of political moderation that followed Mr. Rouhani's inauguration”. [2] Expressing *his* dismay, Ahmad Shaheed, the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Iran, said that he was “still at a loss to understand how a reformist president should be in office and see such a sharp rise in executions. The government hasn't given an explanation, which I would like to hear”. [3]

The marked rise in executions was not limited to 2013. In November 2014, Ravina Shamdasani, the spokeswoman for the UN high commissioner for human rights, voiced her deep concern “about the reported spike in executions in Iran since the beginning of this year”. The figures, one commentator claimed, “indicate not only that Rouhani has not delivered on his promises (not even keeping the status of human rights similar to that of his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's era), but that the condition of human rights has significantly worsened in Iran.”[4]

As we fast approach the halfway mark of Rouhani's four-year presidential term, the lingering questions resurfacing in the minds of both supporters and critics of the president bear an uncanny resemblance to the types of criticisms aimed at the former reformist President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005).

Indeed, if president Rouhani really is a so-called moderate, what then accounts for the alarming rate of executions in Iran? Is his administration capable, or even willing, to bring about genuine change? Does the power to bring about real change lie elsewhere? Or worse yet, is he, as Benjamin Netanyahu famously pleaded the world to believe, just a “wolf in sheep's clothing”[5]? Have the hopes for political reform been dashed yet again? Are we doomed to witness the grim prospect of yet another presidency blemished by its seeming failure to carry out long-lasting reform?

A brief glance at Amnesty International's statistics on the number of executions in Iran might help a great deal in shedding some light on the political economy of capital punishment and explaining the Judiciary's recently whetted appetite for further tarnishing Iran's human rights image.

According to the organisation, 369 people were executed in the country in 2013. Significantly, in terms of the number of executions, this falls between two other years: 2009 (388)[6] and 2010 (252)[7]. While it is understandable that in the aftermath of the widely disputed 2009 elections and the ensuing nationwide protests, the authorities would resort to all available means, including capital punishment, to send a clear and uncompromising signal to the protesting “secessionists”[8], the sudden drop in execution figures in 2010 is not. Despite the unacknowledged hanging of hundreds of drug-related convicts in 2010[9], and as shown in Amnesty's figures, the total number of death penalties carried out in 2010 remained remarkably low: 252! In fact, as we now know, the late theologian and political prisoner

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Ahmad Ghabel exposed how authorities at Vakil Abad prison—where the majority of the summary executions took place that year—went to great lengths to suppress news of the hangings.

In other words, the same Judiciary, whose priority was to appear unrelenting in the face of the opposition Green Movement in 2009, would go to great expense to not make life on the international stage more difficult for the government of a domestically embattled Ahmadinejad, which at the time was politically aligned with the judiciary.

What accounts, albeit partly, for the sudden spike under Rouhani?

The imminence of a final deal over Iran's nuclear deal is becoming ever more pressing. If Rouhani succeeds in reaching a deal with the US and other world powers over a nuclear deal, he will have succeeded in delivering on one of his most important promises during the 2013 election campaign: reversing the sanctions that have devastated the Iranian economy.

Understandably, the prospect of change under Rouhani has whipped up unease in two main camps: (a) Those who zealously oppose any rapprochement between Iran and world powers, and favour an ongoing animosity—and, ideally, military action—against Iran. The current Israeli government, their hawkish allies in Washington, and exiled political groups that seek the downfall of the Islamic Republic. (b) Hardline factions inside Iran that fear that their relevance to the political landscape is being diluted on an unprecedented scale.

To counter this trend, the president's domestic opponents seem eager to convey the message that not much has changed since Rouhani's election in June 2013 and he does not necessarily call all the shots.

Looking at recent developments within the Iranian justice system, one is more inclined to credit as plausible the link between the high rate of execution and an attempt to discredit Rouhani ahead of the looming nuclear deal. For instance, in October 2014, the head of Iran's judiciary, entrusted Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei, not best known for his judicial restraint or impartiality, with the authority to take decisions with regards to capital punishment cases involving drug offences.[10] The significance of this authority is better understood when we take into account the fact that, to the admission of Iran's own human rights Chief Mohammad Javad Larijani, drug-related executions amount to more than seventy percent of the total number of executions in Iran.[11] As a result, the decision to execute the vast majority of Iranian's death row prisoners now rests on Ejei. If his past judicial performance and association with the more hardline currents in Iran's political system serve as a prologue, a further rise in execution figures in the near future should not come as a surprise.

In addition to the rise in death penalty figures, the timing of certain death sentences also indicates a willingness within the judiciary to humiliate the Rouhani government's human rights image. In September 2014, just as Rouhani arrived in New York for the United Nations General Assembly, the judiciary decided to go ahead with the execution of Mohsen Amir-Aslani, who had been accused of heresy and insulting the Prophet Jonah, [12]—a charge virtually unheard of, even within the bounds of Iran's judicial norms. Nine years after his initial arrest, and despite the extremely suspicious circumstances surrounding the case, the timing of Amir-Aslani's execution seemed to be motivated more by political expedience than any solemn desire to safeguard religious sensibilities.

All in all, a number of signs, including the conspicuous worsening of Iran's already dismal death penalty record under Rouhani, point to an increasing willingness in the judiciary to humiliate the Iranian government on the international stage, and more importantly, to send out the message that it's business as usual in Tehran. As though to draw a line between the executive branch and the rest of the Iranian political establishment that currently outweighs the government, Rouhani's cultural advisor recently stated that the president was "singlehandedly" fighting *Iranophobia* and *Islamophobia* in the world.[13]

Indeed, much of the confusion over Rouhani's characterisation as "moderate," on the one hand, and the marked rise in executions on the other, is embedded in a view that refuses to acknowledge—either knowingly or unknowingly—the multiplicity within the Iranian political system. When every single organ of the state is painted with the brush of the "Iranian regime," its many complexities are also denied or overlooked. Subsequently, the judiciary,

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government, parliament, the security forces, etc., all fall into that convenient category of the “regime.” In reality, however, the political rivalries between the executive and judicial branch have at times been some of the most bitter over the years.

This misunderstanding prompted the UN high commissioner for human rights to suggest that “the new government has not changed its approach to the death penalty”. She urged “the government to immediately halt executions and to institute a moratorium.”[14] UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the “new government has not changed its approach regarding the application of the death penalty and seems to have followed the practice of previous administrations, which relied heavily on the death penalty to combat crime”.[15]

If the rise in executions were aimed at conveying the message that Rouhani does not represent a break from the past, this view was also readily accepted by those that oppose a diplomatic resolution of the nuclear standoff and an easing of sanctions against Iran. The *Jerusalem Post's* Benjamin Weinthal claims that “[i]f the past is prologue in connection with Iran's miserable human rights record, there are significant question marks over whether Rouhani's regime can guarantee a nuclear agreement free from weapons development.”[16] “Rouhani's regime”, Weinthal protests, “has failed to fill his preelection human rights promises with meaning, content and hope. It is unclear if the world powers will view the severe lack of any semblance of progress in the human rights realm as a guide for the viability of a nuclear agreement.”

In recent days, US lawmakers have announced their intention to facilitate tougher sanctions on Iran,[17] a provocative move that might result in dire consequences for the fate of nuclear talks. The closer we get to the deadline for a final nuclear deal, its most fervent opponents—in Tehran, Washington or Tel-Aviv—will frantically flail their arms, in a last ditch attempt to stay afloat and relevant. Yet the question remains: how many heads will roll until that deal is reached?

Notes

[1] Amnesty International, “Death Penalty 2013: Small Number of Countries Trigger Global Spike in Executions,” *Amnesty International*, March 27, 2014, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/death-penalty-2013-small-number-countries-trigger-global-spike-executions-2014-03-27>.

[2] Nick Cumming-bruce, “Iran: Surge in Executions Worries Rights Experts,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/23/world/middleeast/iran-surge-in-executions-worries-rights-experts.html>.

[3] Stephanie Nebehay, “Rouhani Has Not Stopped Iran Suppressing Human Rights: U.N. Envoy,” *Reuters*, March 14, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/14/us-iran-un-rights-idUSBREA2D17520140314>.

[4] Majid Rafizadeh, “Surge in Executions and Human Rights Violations in Iran: Evidence of Rouhani's ‘Moderate’ Rule?,” *Huffington Post*, April 4, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/majid-rafizadeh/surge-in-executions-and-h_b_5088955.html.

[5] “Netanyahu Calls Iran's Rouhani ‘Wolf in Sheep's Clothing’ | Al Jazeera America,” accessed November 12, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/10/1/netanyahu-calls-iransrouhaniawolfinsheepsclathing.html>.

[6] “Iran – Amnesty International Report 2010,” *Amnesty International*, 2010, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/iran/report-2010>.

[7] “Annual Report 2011,” *Amnesty International*, 2012, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/iran/report-2011>.

[8] “Sedition” is the *hard-liners' epithet* for the opposition Green Movement that emerged from the 2009 protests.

[9] “Reliable Source Reports Group Executions Inside Mashad's Vakil Abad Prison,” *International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran*, accessed November 19, 2014, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/08/reliable-source->

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[10] *BBC News*, accessed November 18, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2014/10/141006_l39_execution_verdicts_mohseni_ejei.

[11] *High Council for Human Rights: Judiciary of the I.R. of Iran*, May 13, 2011, <http://www.humanrights-iran.ir/news-20217.aspx>.

[12] Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Iran Executes Man for Heresy," *The Guardian*, September 29, 2014, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/iran-executes-man-heresy-mohsen-amir-aslani>.

[13] *Khabar Online*, September 26, 2014, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/377234>.

[14] "UN Concern at Rise in Executions in Iran," accessed November 14, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/02/un-concern-at-rise-executions-iran-201422225754758311.html>.

[15] Nebehay, "Rouhani Has Not Stopped Iran Suppressing Human Rights."

[16] Benjamin Weinthal, "Analysis: If Iran Can't Hold Human Rights Pledges, How Can It Abide by Nuke Deal?," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 12, 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Analysis-If-Iran-cant-hold-human-rights-pledges-how-can-it-abide-by-nuke-deal-378615>.

[17] Patricia Zengerle, "Exclusive: U.S. Lawmakers Push Ahead on Iran Sanctions – Senior Senator," *Reuters*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/15/us-usa-congress-iran-idUSKBN0KO01X20150115>.

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