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Iran criticized over executions

Human rights groups charge Ahmadinejad regime has used death penalty excessively.



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ISTANBUL, Turkey — The first time Siamak, a private sector employee who participated in Iran's post-election protests, witnessed a killing was last June, one day after Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei warned demonstrators he was escalating the government's repression of street protests.



A protestor wears a noose as another waves an Iranian flag during a demonstration against Iranian executions. Photo was taken in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 5, 2008. (Nicholas Kamm/AFP/Getty Images)

Siamak was out on the streets of downtown Tehran where groups of protesters seeking to link up with each other pelted the security forces with stones. Then, gunshots rang out.

"The first bullet hit an iron door and made a huge sound, the other got a guy near me on his arm, and the third one hit a middle-aged man in the chest and dropped him to the ground," Siamak recollected as he sipped tea in an Istanbul cafe. He fled the country after several of his friends were arrested in Tehran in February.

"No one moved for three or four seconds," Siamak said, remembering the shocked silence that temporarily blanketed police and protesters. "We didn't even run."

Ten people were killed that day, according to state-run television. It was the bloodiest day of clashes in the eight-month confrontation after Ashura, a nationwide religious festival during which 15 people lost their lives in clashes.

Human rights campaigners are calling these and other incidents "murder" and they are charging that Iran's rate of state executions is much too high. Iran refuses to allow independent human rights monitors to visit the country. (Read a Q&A with Amnesty International about how the [use of the death penalty is decreasing](#) worldwide.)

"It's murder, even under Iranian law," said Renee Redman, the executive director of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC) which recently published a report on post-election abuses. "They're breaking their own laws, using excessive force against largely peaceful demonstrators."

Iran's human rights record began deteriorating after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power in 2005. Today Iran is second only to China in capital punishment — 270 people were hung in 2010 and another 12 so far in 2010. Total executions in the Persian year, which started on March 21, 2009, passed 440 according to the Mojahedeen-e Khalq (MKO) organization, a Paris-based opposition group whose tally is based on executions reported by state-run media.

On March 5, a U.S. State Department spokesman criticized "this disproportionate punishment" and urged Iran to free a student said to face the death penalty for participating in Ashura demonstrations.

Opposition websites reported that an appeals court confirmed a death sentence for 20-year-old Mohammad Amin Valian for "waging war against God" by throwing stones at security forces during December protests.

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