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## Iran's Death Penalty Is Seen as a Political Tactic

By [MICHAEL SLACKMAN](#)

CAIRO — A flurry of executions and death sentences in [Iran](#) has raised concern that the government is using judicially sanctioned killing to intimidate the political opposition and quell pockets of ethnic unrest around the nation, human rights groups and Iran experts said.

In Iran, where there is precedent for executions to surge in the wake of a crisis, human rights groups said there was mounting evidence that the trend had emerged in response to the political tumult that followed the June presidential election. This month, a fifth person connected to the protests was sentenced to death.

In at least one instance, a Kurdish activist was hanged after the government added a new charge, raising concerns that cases with political overtones were drawing more serious penalties.

In the short period between the disputed June election and the inauguration of President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) in August, 115 people were executed, according to statistics compiled by human rights groups from Iranian news agencies. Though the executions mostly involved violent criminals and drug dealers, the number and pace of the killings appeared to be sending a message to the opposition, said human rights groups and Iran experts.

“The regime never expected to see people demonstrate so openly since the elections,” said Hossein Askari, a professor of international affairs at [George Washington University](#). “The executions are intended to frighten them. It is absolutely intended for that purpose.”

The executions have taken place amid rising criticism of Iran's postelection human rights record. Former officials, intellectuals and journalists have received long prison sentences after brief televised trials, and some prisoners have said they were tortured, raped and sodomized by prison authorities.

Muhammad Ali Abtahi, a former vice president, was sentenced last week to six years in prison “for crimes against internal national security, propaganda against the Islamic republic, insulting the president and creating public disorder by his presence at illegal protests,” a Web site on Iran reported. He was released on bail, pending appeal.

The [United Nations passed a draft resolution](#) last week criticizing Iran for numerous human rights abuses; the final resolution is expected to pass the [General Assembly](#).

“The recent spike in executions, particularly of political prisoners, is an attempt to sow fear and spread terror through the population, to persuade them that the powers that be are determined to use all means necessary to put down dissent and that participating in the opposition movement can be highly costly,” said Hadi Ghaemi, a former physics professor who runs the [International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran](#).

In recent years, Iran has had the highest rate of executions of any nation except China. That reputation was solidified under President Ahmadinejad, who has presided over a quadrupling in executions, to 346 in 2008 from 86 in 2005, the year he took office, according to [Amnesty International](#).

Iran does not release statistics on executions, so it is impossible to compare monthly or annual rates. But in recent days, there has been a flood of reports from around the country of executions, most involving convicted drug dealers or criminals. On Friday, news reports said that over the previous 10 days, 16 people had been executed in cities including Kerman, Isfahan and Ahwaz.

In mid-October, Behnood Shojaee, who was on death row for committing a murder four years ago at the age of 17, [was executed](#) despite international calls for his sentence to be commuted because he was a minor at the time of the crime.

Drewery Dyke, a researcher with Amnesty International, said that it was not unusual for Iranian officials to step up executions in the wake of a political crisis. In 1988, after Iran agreed to a cease-fire with Iraq, the government executed thousands of political prisoners not initially charged with capital crimes and already serving sentences in prison.

“There does seem to be a greater willingness across the spectrum for the authorities to deploy force in every way, from the police through to the administration of justice,” he said. “There seems to be that much higher level of ruthlessness.”

According to Amnesty International, there were 196 executions in Iran in the first half of 2009. Between the June 12 election and the president's inauguration on Aug. 5, executions surged to an average of two a day, the group said. So far this year, there have been 359 executions, though an exact tally is hard to come by because the group compiles the data based on reports from government-affiliated news sources.

Since the postelection surge in executions, the government has moved aggressively to impose the death penalty on people linked to separatist insurgent groups, even when they have not been convicted of violent activities themselves, human rights groups said.

Concern about executions with political overtones increased with the case of Ehsan Fattahian, 28, who was convicted of belonging to an armed Kurdish group, rights groups said. He was originally sentenced to 10 years in prison, but then the government added the charge of being mohareb, or an enemy of God, and hanged him on Nov. 11.

His parents were not allowed to see his body and the authorities did not permit a public mourning service, opposition Web sites reported.

According to pro-Kurdish rights groups, a special execution team has been sent to the western province of Kordestan, where the groups said 12 Kurdish prisoners were awaiting the death penalty. It was impossible to verify that claim.

After Mr. Fattahian's execution, a group of Kurdish members of Parliament wrote a letter asking the head of the judiciary to drop death sentences against other Kurdish prisoners, Iranian news agencies reported.

A spokesman at the Iranian mission to the United Nations in New York did not respond to two e-mail

messages requesting comment on the use of the death penalty.

Since the election crisis, Iran has not allowed foreign reporters to work in the country. But Iranian officials have defended the death penalty in the past.

“We have laws,” Mr. Ahmadinejad said at an appearance at [Columbia University](#) in 2007. “People who violate the public rights of the people by using guns, killing people, creating insecurity, sell drugs, distribute drugs at a high level, are sentenced to execution in Iran, and some of these punishments — very few are carried in the public eye, before the public eye. It’s a law based on democratic principles.”

But Mr. Ghaemi of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran said that often, death sentences are issued to defendants who have not been given a proper chance to defend themselves, in trials of questionable fairness and merit.

“There is growing fear that another jump in executions is under way,” he said. “Most troubling is that execution of political prisoners has resumed.”

*Mona el-Naggat contributed reporting.*

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