

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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Trial by camera – “TV confessions” and the death penalty in Iran

It was called “Terror Club” – an hour-long “documentary” that aired on Iranian state TV in August 2012. The 12 individuals – seven men and five women – featured in the show, appeared, one by one, in front of a camera, “confessing” to their involvement in the killing of Iranian nuclear scientists over the past year.

Beyond their starring role on television, no clear details about the arrest and detention of these 12 people are known. It is not known if any of them have been charged or tried – despite the recent announcement that 18 unnamed people will shortly go on trial for these murders. But it is known that all 12 could face the death penalty if they are found guilty of the alleged killings.

Televised confessions

This type of televised “confession” is far from uncommon in Iran.

Suspects are forced to appear on national or local television to admit to alleged crimes – often before their court proceedings have even started. These “confessions” are then accepted as evidence in court, seriously undermining any prospect of a fair trial.

Many defendants have later retracted their “TV confessions”, stating that they were coerced into making them, sometimes under torture.

But these TV “confessions” are part of an overwhelmingly unjust trial system in Iran. The accused frequently face extended pre-trial detention which far exceeds limits provided for in Iranian law. In this time, they are routinely denied access to a lawyer or their family for weeks or months while the “investigation phase” is concluded, during which many are tortured or otherwise ill-treated. In such circumstances, the trial itself – often cloaked in secrecy – is inevitably unfair.

Shocking figures

In Amnesty International’s report on death penalty statistics across the globe in 2012, the section on Iran once again makes for grim reading. The country is the second highest executioner in the world, only behind China.

At least 314 executions were officially acknowledged by the authorities in 2012, but the real number is almost certainly much higher. More than 200 additional executions were reported to Amnesty International by reliable sources.

One highly illustrative example of the use of the death penalty in Iran that features in the Amnesty International report is that of five Ahwazi Arab men who are currently on death row, some of whom were forced to confess on television to “crimes” they later retracted.

The five men – Mohammad Ali Amouri, Sayed Jaber Alboshoka, his brother Sayed Mokhtar Alboshoka, and teachers Hashem Sha’bani Amouri and Hadi Rashidi – are activists for Iran’s minority Arabic-speaking Ahwazi population, which faces discrimination by the central government. In the early 2000s, the men started an organization called al-Hiwar (“Dialogue” in Arabic) to promote Arab culture in the province of Khuzestan in south west Iran.

But after violent protests broke out in Khuzestan in April 2005, the authorities responded with a crackdown on Ahwazis, and revoked the permit of al-Hiwar. Forced underground, the five men reportedly started collecting information on human rights abuses against Ahwazis and spreading it outside of Iran.

After years of harassment by the security services, the five men were finally arrested in early 2011, a few months before the anniversary of the April 2005 protests, when tensions often run high in Khuzestan.

They were initially held in an unspecified location without access to lawyers or contact with their family members. There are reports that several of them were tortured in custody.

Two of the men – Hashem Sha'bani Amouri and Hadi Rashidi – then appeared on the Iranian state TV channel PressTV in December 2011 and were seen “confessing” to national security “offences” including – in the case of Hadi Rashidi - participation in an attack on four officials. But it was more than another six months before they faced trial. All five were sentenced to death after convictions of “enmity against God” and “corruption on earth”.

Kamil Alboshoka, 29, grew up with the five men, two of whom are his cousins and the other three close friends. In 2006, he fled Iran for London where he has become an outspoken campaigner for the right of Ahwazis.

“It was very difficult to see Hashem and Hadi on TV, confessing to something I know they did not do. I know that the authorities in Iran use the death penalty against Ahwazi Arabs to suppress us,” he said.

Mockery of justice

In Iran, death row inmates can be executed at short notice, and there is no need for the authorities to inform the families prior to the execution. Kamil has been badly affected by the stress of knowing that his friends and cousins - handed death sentences in July 2012 - could be killed any day.

“I have not had a balanced life since July. I have had problems sleeping and I can't concentrate. I even had to postpone my university exams because I wasn't able to study,” he said.

“But I know that it is even worse for the families who still live in Iran. Some of their parents have suffered heart attacks. Mohammad Ali's father can barely speak anymore.”

In March 2013 the five men started a hunger strike in protest against their death sentences, as well as against the torture they say they have been subjected to in custody.

“Making someone ‘confess’ to their crimes on national television before their trial has even started makes a mockery of international fair trial standards,” said Ann Harrison, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“The trial of these five men was grossly unfair. We and other human rights organizations have been campaigning for their death sentences to be overturned and for them to be granted a retrial which complies fully with international fair trial standards.”

“And allegations of torture – sadly an all too common occurrence in Iran – must be investigated independently with anyone found responsible for abuses brought to justice.”

