

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Unfair Trials, Impunity, Pressure to Silence Victims

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(Beirut) [Iranian](#) judiciary authorities are prosecuting human rights defenders for reporting abuse in detention, Human Rights Watch said today. Since September 2020, the authorities have brought charges against two imprisoned activists who had published letters alleging mistreatment.

On October 18, Emtedad online news channel [reported](#) that in the previous week, authorities had charged Niloufar Bayani, an environmental conservationist serving a 10-year sentence after an [unfair trial](#), with publishing false information. In a separate case, the Human Rights Activists Agency (HRANA) [reported](#) that on October 11, the authorities charged an imprisoned student activist, Parisa Rafiee, with propaganda against the state after she published a letter about her detention conditions.

Punishing people reporting mistreatment in Iranian detention facilities shows a warped sense of justice, said [Tara Sepehri Far](#), Iran researcher at Human Rights Watch. The judiciary's recent rhetoric on transparency rings especially hollow if prosecutors silence alleged torture victims rather than impartially investigating their claims.

In February, the BBC Persian website [published](#) a detailed account of the alleged mistreatment of Bayani by prison authorities based on her letters, including 1,200 hours of interrogations, long hours of interrogation while standing, threatening with a hallucinogenic injection, and sexual insults.

On February 24, Iran's presidential cabinet [tasked](#) Alireza Avayi, the justice minister, to investigate the allegations of torture and report back. More than nine months later, there has been no information about such an investigation.

In January 2018, the Revolutionary Guards Intelligence Organization arrested Bayani and seven of her colleagues, all members of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, a local conservation nonprofit group, on accusations of using environmental projects as a cover for espionage. On February 10, 2018, family members of Kavous Seyed Emami, one of those arrested, reported that he had [died in detention](#) under suspicious circumstances.

The environmentalists' trial began in January 2019 but was halted multiple times. The defendants were not allowed to have access to a lawyer of their choice. Bayani had interrupted a trial session in February, saying that the defendants had been under psychological torture and were coerced into making false confessions.

On February 18, 2020, Gholamhossein Esmaili, Iran's judiciary spokesman, [confirmed at a news conference](#) that a court of appeal had upheld sentences ranging from 6 to 10 years against seven of the group's members for cooperating with the hostile state of the US. Esmaili said the court also upheld a 4-year sentence for Abdolreza Kouhpayeh, another member of the group, for assembly and collusion to act against national security. Authorities [released](#) Kouhpayeh in March.

The court upheld the 10-year sentences for Niloufar Bayani and Morad Tahbaz, two of the seven, and ordered them to return allegedly illicit income. The court ordered Bayani to return US\$360,000 in illicit funds; authorities calculated this amount by multiplying Bayani's last annual salary from the United Nations Environment Programme, where she worked prior to joining the wildlife group, by the six years she worked at the UN, a source told Human Rights Watch.

Over the past two years, several senior Iranian government officials have indicated that they did not find any evidence to suggest that the detained activists are spies.

HRANA reported that the authorities arrested Rafiee, a student activist at the University of Tehran, on February 25, 2018 and released

her on bail after 23 days. On August 26, 2018, Saeed Khalili, Rafiees lawyer, [told the Iranian Student News Agency \(ISNA\)](#) that branch 26 of Tehrans revolutionary court had sentenced her to seven years in prison on charges of assembly and collusion to act against national security, propaganda against the state, and disturbing public order.

The lawyer said the charges were brought for activities such as participating in peaceful demonstrations on campus after dormitory curfew hours. In November 2019, Rafiees sentence was [reduced](#) to one year after a clemency order by Ayatollah Khamenei.

In a letter [published](#) on May 9, 2019, Rafiee wrote that she had been kept in solitary confinement for 21 days without knowing her location. She also wrote that her interrogator sent her for a virginity test, which she refused. But she said she was not allowed to file a complaint about this degrading treatment.

On June 7, 2020, the authorities arrested and [transferred](#) Rafiee to prison to serve her sentence. On August 19, HRANA reported that the prosecutors office at Evin prison had opened a new case against Rafiee, charging her with propaganda against the state because of the letter.

On October 15, Ayatollah Ebrahim Raeesi, the head of Irans judiciary, [published](#) a document on judicial security as part of the judiciarys obligations under the countrys sixth development plan. Among other things, the document emphasizes several key human rights issues, including the prohibition on torture and arbitrary arrests and the right of access to a lawyer. The document also commits the judiciary to publishing final court opinions while respecting privacy rights.

If the judiciary actually wants to curb ongoing abuse, it can start by quashing abusive charges against human rights defenders who are already unfairly behind bars, investigate their torture allegations, and hold those responsible to account, Sepehri Far said.

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