



Spotlight on Iran



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Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Unusual criticism over execution of two young men accused of armed robbery

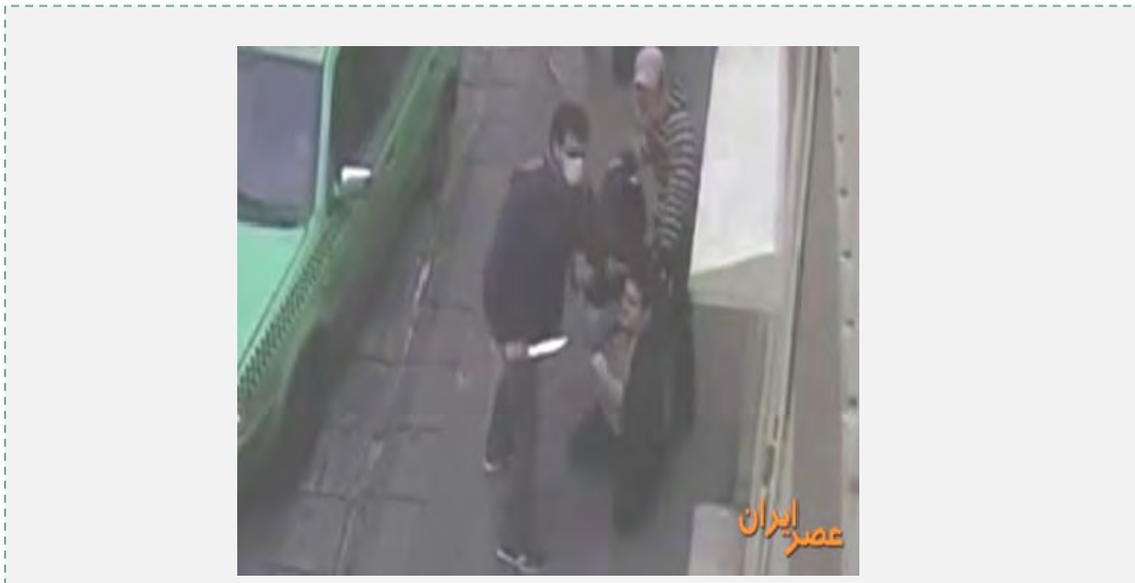
The public execution of two young men accused of armed robbery has drawn unusual criticism from the Iranian media and social networks in recent days. The criticism revolved around the severity of the punishment compared to the severity of the offense and its circumstances, the gap between the forgiving approach taken by the judiciary to those involved in economic corruption scandals and the aggressive approach to young criminals, and the disregard for the authorities' responsibility for the economic crisis which led to the increase of crime.

Government critics took advantage of the incident to once again slam the government's economic policy and accuse it of responsibility for the increase of crime and violence in society. The Alef website said that creating inflation also constitutes an armed robbery, and that those in charge of running the economy need to be put on trial as well.

Many reactions to the execution focused on the circumstances which allegedly led to the robbery. One of the young men said that he was forced to commit the robbery to obtain medical treatment for his sick, poverty-stricken mother. The vast majority of web users had reservations about the severe punishment imposed on the two young men and demanded the prosecution of the "big criminals" involved in acts of corruption in Iran.

The public execution of two young men accused of committing an armed robbery has drawn unusual criticism from the Iranian media and social networks in recent days. The two men, accused of robbing and injuring a resident of Tehran this past December, were put to death by hanging in Tehran on January 20. The robbery, committed by four motorcyclists, captured considerable public attention at the time after security camera footage of the incident was posted on websites and social networks. During trial, one of

the accused men said that he had been forced to commit the robbery to obtain medical care for his sick mother.



“Creating inflation is an armed robbery as well”

The execution of the two men drew strong criticism from media affiliated with government critics as well as from bloggers, website readers, and social network users. The criticism revolved around the severity of the punishment compared to the severity of the offense and its circumstances, the gap between the forgiving approach taken by the judiciary to those involved in severe economic corruption scandals and the aggressive approach to young criminals, and disregard for the authorities' responsibility for the economic crisis, which led to the increase of crime.

Alef, a website affiliated with Majles member Ahmad Tavakoli, one of President Ahmadinejad's most prominent opponents in the conservative camp, discussed the reservations many Iranians had about the execution of the two young men. An article posted by the website on January 22 said that, even though the expectation was for public opinion to support the arrest, trial, and swift execution of the two robbers, it appears that the Iranians are not happy about it. This is not because of the criminals' young age or because the crime they committed is not severe. A severe punishment for an armed robbery is an appropriate way of guaranteeing public safety, and the citizens support an offensive against criminals led by the police and the judiciary.

One question that needs to be asked, however, is why the authorities were so quick to conduct the two men's trial and carry out their sentence, which does not happen in other cases. For instance, the trial of those involved in bribe and economic corruption

scandals lasted a very long time. Furthermore, those involved in the incident at Kahrizak (a detention facility where several detainees died from torture and abuse after the 2009 riots) have yet to be put on trial, even though it has already been three years since the incident. Do the authorities take quick and determined action only in cases where the accused are not well known? The citizens want to see justice and a strong and quick action against thieves and people involved in corruption, Alef said, but they do not want to see discrimination when it comes to the administration of justice.

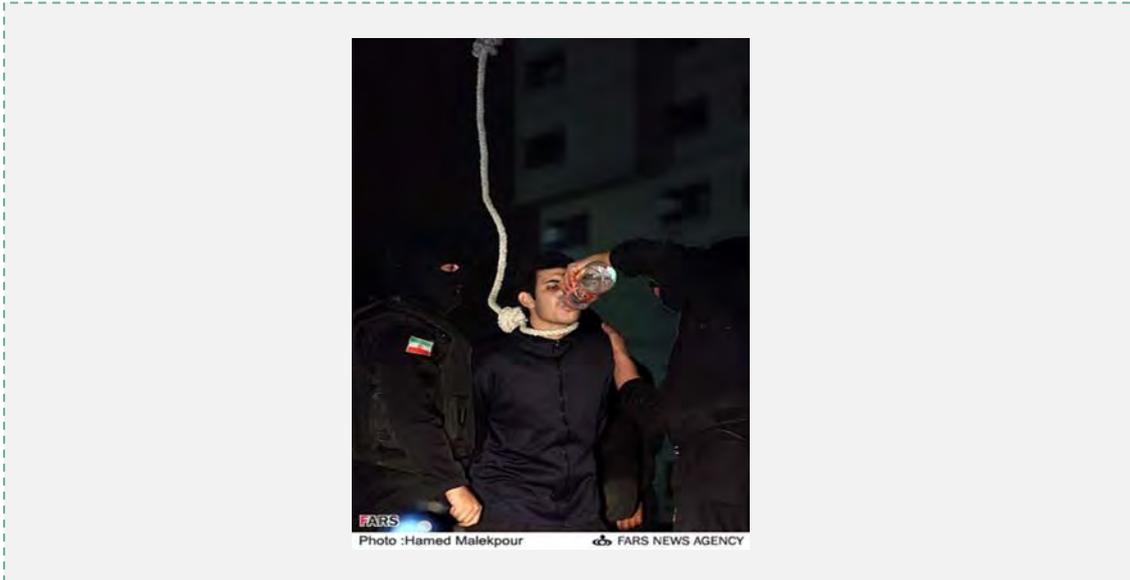
Another article posted by Alef strongly criticized the government for contributing to the rise of crime with its economic policy. An article titled "Creating high inflation is also a kind of armed robbery" said that the arrest and swift trial of the two young men can be a lesson for thieves and improve public safety, but it is impossible to ignore the factors that led to these crimes and to the spread of violence in society.

Studies indicate that most thieves and criminals are young people who have no jobs. Even though unemployment and poverty cannot be an excuse for stealing, the fact that most robbers have no jobs should be a wake-up call for those in charge of Iran's economy to turn their attention to the fact that the unemployment crisis calls for a solution.

The website argued that, in addition to the four robbers, other people that need to be put on trial are those responsible for the perpetuation of the economic policy, which is cause for an increase in crime. The website wondered if hidden cameras could also film the actions of the "economic terrorists", and if the rich who drive luxury cars without any consideration for the economic situation of most Iranians do not contribute to the increasing feeling of poverty among thousands of young people.

According to studies, the average age of those accused of armed crime in Tehran is less than 25 years. Do those entrusted with the culture and education budgets wonder about the cultural conditions in which these youngsters were brought up, or about the extent of their responsibility for educating these young people? One of the accused men said that he needed 4 million tomans to pay for his mother's medical treatment, and when all doors were closed to him, he was forced to commit a robbery. Even if the accuracy of this statement is unclear, the leaders of the healthcare system need to ask themselves what can be done by relatives of sick people who have no money to cover the costs of their loved ones' treatments. Do these people have another choice, or is it

not the case that they are faced with two options: to deposit vast sums into the hospital's account or to die?



The chief of the internal security forces has warned recently that the economic crisis and the rising prices have led to an increase in robbery. Do not those in charge of Iran's economy deserve to stand trial for precipitating high inflation with their policy despite the warnings? Creating inflation and raising the prices of vital food products also constitute an armed robbery, the website concluded, and the people expect the “white-collar criminals” to be judged and punished as well (Alef, January 20).

The Asr-e Iran website also discussed the circumstances that led to the armed robbery committed by the two young men. The website mentioned a statement issued last week by Ali Motahari, spokesman of the Majles Culture Committee, about the committee members' concerns over violating the Islamic moral code when sending image files via cellular phones. The website wondered how is it that the committee members are not concerned, for example, by the fact that young people aged 20 assault others in the middle of Tehran, and instead of going to school, working, getting married, and living a decent life, they find themselves with their head in the hangman's noose (Asr-e Iran, January 22).



In an article posted on gooya news, a website affiliated with the opposition, Mojtaba Vahedi strongly condemned the regime in the wake of the execution of the two young men. The author of the article said that, even though severe economic circumstances do not justify crime, it should be examined how the economic situation has gotten so bad that citizens are forced to harm their fellow men to provide security for themselves and for their families.

One of those executed was born in 1989, the year when Ali Khamenei became the Supreme Leader of Iran. He was 10 years old when the “goons of the regime” attacked the students at the university dormitories, and 20 years old during the riots where the goons attacked citizens whose only crime was wondering about the fate of their vote. It is in such an atmosphere that the young man grew up, Vahedi wrote. The execution of the two men by the judiciary is proof that there is nothing out of the ordinary in their behavior, which has become commonplace among young Iranians. It is an admission by the authorities that a growing number of young people who grew up during Khamenei’s time can become dangerous criminals unless intimidated by capital punishment (news.gooya.com, January 21).

A “small theft” gets you executed; a “large theft” gets you awarded the title “leader of the world’s Muslims”

The execution of the two men also provoked strong reactions from anti-regime bloggers as well as news website readers and social media users. On his personal blog, titled Khodnevis, reformist journalist and cartoonist Nik Ahang Kowsar discussed

the family background of one of the executed men. His father died from an injury in the Iran-Iraq War when he was 12 years old, and his mother was on welfare. She couldn't work, which is why he had to cover the expenses involved in her medical treatment.

Did the judiciary leaders notice, when the young man's sentence was given, that his family had become a victim because of the war and then became a victim again because of the economic and social policy that forced the son of a "war martyr" to steal in order to save his mother? There is no question that every illegal action deserves punishment, the blogger said, but is a death sentence really the appropriate punishment in this case? The regime in the Islamic republic should be ashamed of executing this young man. The father is a martyr of the revolution, the mother is a victim of the regime's economic policy, and the son is yet another victim (<http://www.khodnevis.org>, January 22).

Several bloggers, too, expressed their anger at the authorities of Iran, which put a young robber to death but are forgiving when it comes to perpetrators of serious economic crimes. One of the bloggers wrote, "The meaning of justice in the Islamic republic: 20-year olds are hanged while those involved in corruption amounting to billions of dollars rise to power" (<http://faryad22.blogspot.com/2013/01/20.html>).



Another blogger listed what he referred to as the accepted punishments in the Islamic republic for theft:

- Minor theft (70 thousand tomans): execution
- Medium theft (embezzlement amounting to several billions): jail

- Large theft (the massive embezzlement in Iran's banking system, which amounted to 3,000 billions): vacation and a trip to Canada
- Very large theft (Ahmadinejad, billions of dollars): appointment to president
- Colossal theft (the Supreme Leader, all the wealth of Iran): designation as "leader of the world's Muslims" (http://greenir7.blogspot.com/2013/01/blog-post_22.html#!/2013/01/blog-post_22.html)

Justice, but not for everyone!

The vast majority of the news website readers who commented on the articles criticizing the execution of the two young men also had reservations about the severe punishment imposed on the two criminals and demanded the prosecution of "the really big criminals". One reader on the Alef website wrote that there was no need to execute the two young men, since the people of Iran are subjected to various kinds of armed robbery committed by government ministries and municipalities. How is it possible, then, to execute two children who were driven to commit an armed robbery by poverty and misfortune? How is it possible to execute them and do nothing against the big thieves, who embezzle billions of tomans?

Another website reader wrote that he wished the judiciary demonstrated such speed and determination in other cases as well. The trick is not to execute these two young men, but rather those who spill the blood of the citizens through speculation, corruption, and profiteering.

Yet another reader wrote that the crimes of those who rob the state treasury in the name of religion exceed the crime of the two youngsters. If you are going to apply the law, you need to start applying it first and foremost against the big, most influential criminals.

A number of website readers strongly criticized the government's economic policy, which, they said, has led to the severe economic crisis and the increase of crime. One of them wrote that most of the Shi'ite clerics believe that carrying out a death sentence or cutting off limbs in accordance with Islamic law is only allowed in a society where justice is upheld and criminals have no reason to commit their crimes. These young people are in fact guilty, the reader wrote, but most of the blame rests with those in

power, the ones who created the severe economic conditions. No one would commit an armed robbery under normal conditions of social justice.

One of the website readers expressed his opinion that the execution will not solve the problem of injustice and social differences. Even if thousands of young people are executed, not a single problem will be solved. Referring to the coming presidential elections, he wrote that the blame rests mostly with the people's representatives in the Majles, who need to demand the prosecution of government members to let the presidential candidates know that, if they do not fulfill their promises and humiliate the people, they will be put on trial.

Photographs posted on Facebook despite expressions of dismay with the execution

On the margins of the media discourse on the execution of the two young men, the Asr-e Iran website presented social criticism of the way the people of Iran behaved with regard to the incident. An article posted by the website said that, when the video was posted of the four men committing the armed robbery, many people demanded that they be severely punished, but when they were executed, many of the same people shed a tear.

The website argued that the Iranian public cannot put all the blame on the government and shrug off its social and civil responsibility. Did the citizens who demanded a severe punishment for the criminals have no part in setting the atmosphere for their execution? Didn't the government feel, given the reactions of the public, that executing the young men could help restore a feeling of safety to Iran's society?

Many of those who watched the video clip documenting the armed robbery criticized the government from the start, saying that it is responsible for the fact that such incidents occur in society. They directed all their anger at the government instead of directing some of it at the criminals. Does every poor person who is not satisfied with the government, the website wondered, have the right to hurt other people? If the answer is no, then why did many web users criticize just the government? The government's weakness does not negate the citizens' responsibility, the website argued.

Asr-e Iran also criticized what it referred to as the hypocrisy of many Iranians who expressed their shock at the photographs showing the public execution of the young men, but distributed these photographs themselves. How can one criticize a society that executes people and, at the same time, post photographs of the execution on the internet? One cannot express dismay with the execution, criticize the government because of it, and, at the same time, post photographs of the execution on Facebook.



Photo : Ebrahim Noroozi

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At least some of those who criticized the public execution were very curious to watch it themselves, the article said. It would be worthwhile for Iranians to think about these contradictions in their behavior so that they can behave in a more rational and healthy manner in the future, Asr-e Iran concluded (January 21).