

Reporters Without Borders

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Middle East/North Africa - Iran

Permanent impunity

Impunity keeps claiming victims, ten years after Zahra Kazemi's still unsolved death in detention

10 July 2013

Reporters Without Borders pays tribute to Canadian-Iranian photographer **Zahra Kazemi** on the tenth anniversary of her death in detention in Tehran as a result of mistreatment, and reiterates its condemnation of the total impunity enjoyed by her torturers.

They include Saeed Mortazavi, former Tehran prosecutor-general and one of Supreme Leader and "Predator of Press Freedom" [Ali Khamenei](#)'s most notorious lieutenants, who has been guilty of many crimes against news providers.

"Zahra Kazemi embodies the violations of fundamental rights that have taken place since the clerics seized power in 1979," Reporters Without Borders said. "She was a woman and a journalist who wanted to tell the world about the terrible conditions in Tehran's Evin prison, a symbol of the regime's relentless repression.

"Kazemi photographed the relatives of political prisoners waiting outside the prison, political prisoners whose very existence the regime denied. She was the victim of a judicial system that is a complete contradiction of human rights values, a system that is corrupt and completely lacking in independence.

"Under article 110 of the Iranian constitution, it is the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic who appoints the head of the judicial system. This aberration is one of the main reasons for the system's failures and the generalized impunity they cause."

The institutionalization of this impunity partly accounts for the restrictions imposed on independent lawyers who defend prisoners of conscience. They include the lawyers **Abdolfatah Soltani**, **Mohammad Seifzadeh**, **Mohamed Ali Dadkhah** and 2012 Sakharov laureate **Nasrin Sotoudeh**, who have represented Kazemi as well as many other currently detained journalists and netizens.

These lawyers were arrested arbitrarily and sentenced to long jail terms on such charges as "meeting and plotting against the Islamic Republic," anti-government propaganda and "cooperating with the Centre for Human Rights Defenders," led by Nobel peace laureate Shirin Ebadi.

Born in Shiraz in 1948, Kazemi lived in Canada and had acquired Canadian citizenship. But she had gone back to Iran and was arrested on 23 June 2003 while photographing the families of detainees outside Evin prison. Badly beaten following her arrest, she was still in detention when she died of her injuries on 10 July 2003.

The authorities issued a report on her death 10 days later that did not specify the cause of her death. Kazemi's mother, an Iranian resident, was pressured into giving permission for the body to be buried quickly on 22 July 2003. Ever since then, Kazemi's son, Stephan Hashemi, a Canadian resident, has been requesting the body's repatriation to Canada so that an independent autopsy can be carried out.

The Kazemi family's lawyers have repeatedly condemned all the judicial proceedings in Iran as a sham. Their requests for senior judicial officials to appear in court have never been satisfied,

depriving them of key witnesses. In particular, Mortazavi, the prosecutor who ordered Kazemi's arrest and was present when she was interrogated in Evin prison, has never been questioned in court.

On 23 June of this year, a Tehran court sentenced [Mortazavi](#) to a derisory five-year ban on working in the judicial system and a 60-dollar fine for his role in the death of demonstrators held in Kahrizak detention centre after the disputed June 2009 presidential election.

Reporters Without Borders adds: "We fully support the civil lawsuit that Hashemi brought against the Iranian government before the Quebec high court, claiming damages for his mother's arrest, detention, torture and death. We urge Canada and the European Union to support this legal action, in order to end the shocking impunity prevailing in this case.

"We think that the now systematic impunity for torturers in the Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the reasons for the increase in violence, killings and repeated acts of torture and cruel and inhuman treatment in its prisons, and for the arbitrary arrests that are so common."

Kazemi is unfortunately not the only victim of the impunity enjoyed by Iran's torturers. The victims include the blogger [Sattar Beheshti](#), who was killed on 3 November 2012 while held at a centre run by the Iranian cyber-police, the FTA.

The Beheshti family's lawyer, Ghiti Pourfazel, has written to the new president, Hassan Rohani, accusing the judicial authorities of doing everything possible to block the complaint filed by the family and suppress the truth about the blogger's death.

"To get the complaint withdrawn, they intimidated the mother by threatening to have her daughter arrested, then they put psychological pressure on the father. These attempts failed and, although we know that Sattar was killed by a police officer, the investigation has been at a standstill for the past eight months."

Ahmad Shojai, the head of the Iranian organization of forensic doctors, said in an interview for the [MeherNews](#) agency on 9 July: "The forensic doctors' report that was sent to the judicial authorities says the cause of [Beheshti's] death was a series of blows and psychological pressure."

The Tehran prosecutor-general nonetheless reiterated at a news conference the same day that that "the investigation is finished and the investigating judge is in the process of taking down the latest version of the facts from the defendants."

In an open letter to President Rohani on 18 June, Reporters Without Borders wrote:

"Mr. Rohani, you are now the Islamic Republic's seventh president, elected thanks to massive support from Iranian reformers and progressives (...) Undertake to end arbitrary actions and impunity. The murders of dissident journalists must not go unpunished. They include the deaths of **Ebrahim Zalzadeh, Majid Charif, Mohammed Mokhtari, Mohammed Jafar Pouyandeh** and **Pirouz Davani**, all executed by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security in November and December 1988.

"They also include the following deaths, in most cases in detention: **Zahra Kazemi** (2003), **Ayfer Serçe** (2006), the young blogger **Omidreza Mirsayafi**, the journalist **Alireza Eftekhari** (2009), the journalist and women's rights activist **Haleh Sahabi** (2011), the Iran-e-Farda journalist **Hoda Saber** (2011) and the blogger Sattar Beheshti (2012). Those who ordered and carried out these crimes must be brought to justice."

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