

Iran executes opposition supporters

- Activists hanged for trying to topple 'Islamic establishment'
- Pair apparently unconnected to post-election protests

Iran has made its first two executions of people sentenced to death since massive opposition protests over June's disputed presidential election.

Mohammad Reza Ali Zamani and Arash Rahmanipour were hanged this morning after being convicted of being "enemies of God" and members of an outlawed pro-monarchist group.

The semi-official ISNA news agency said the two were charged with plotting to topple the government and had been tried in August – apparently implying that they were part of the protest movement. But opposition sources said the two were arrested three months before the elections.

Analysts said the executions were likely to increase tensions ahead of a new wave of anti-government demonstrations expected next month when Iran will mark the 31st anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution that led to the shah fleeing and Ayatollah Khomeini coming to power.

"It is an attempt to make sure that the radicals within the opposition movements are not going to take the lead on the anniversary of the revolution," commentator Baqer Moin told al-Jazeera.

Amnesty International warned: "These executions highlight how the justice system is used as an instrument of repression. The authorities are sending a warning to those who may wish to exercise their right to peacefully demonstrate against the government not to go out in the street."

The lawyer for Rahmanipour, 19, described the charges as "political" and the verdict as "illegal, unjust" and designed to intimidate opposition supporters. "He was never granted the right to defend himself freely and I could not defend him (adequately)," Nasrin Sotoudeh told Reuters.

June's vote, in which the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was declared the winner, was followed by mass protests by supporters of Mir Hossein Mousavi, the leader of the Green movement who had been expected to win. It plunged Iran into its worst crisis since 1979 and exposed divisions within the regime.

In the most serious violence since June, eight people were killed and 1,000 arrested in clashes between opposition supporters and security forces during the Ashoura holiday in late December. The green movement has adopted a successful strategy of mounting protests on public holidays and anniversaries that are too important for the government to cancel.

Iran's English-language Press TV said the executed pair had been found guilty of belonging to Iran's Kingdom Assembly of Iran. State broadcaster IRIB said Rahmanipour confessed to links with western countries and receiving training in how to foment instability in Iran during the election.

"Two weeks before the election we had a mission to put bombs in various places and we were ordered to carry out terrorist acts on election day," IRIB quoted him as telling a court. But opposition sources said the two were arrested three months before the elections.

"The Green movement condemns these executions regardless of the allegiance of the victims alleged by the Iran prosecutor because the trials were never fair and ... a total shambles that would have made Stalin proud," said an opposition website.

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