



RAP IN IRAN 'THEY KILL ARTISTS SOFTLY'

With lyrics channelling the anger of a nothing-to-lose generation, many rappers have been arrested and tortured, or forced into exile, as morality police patrol the streets

Lorraine Mallinder

When rapper Toomaj Salehi shot to fame in Iran, tearing strips off the regime with his lacerating lyrics, people wondered if he was for real.

Songs like Soorakh Moosh (Mouse-hole), in which he warned the regime and its stooges to find a hiding place before an imminent day of reckoning, were political dynamite.

"There is no neutrality in this war," he rapped. "Remember, blood can only be washed with blood."

He released the track in 2021, a year before the protests that convulsed the country after the death in custody of Mahsa "Zhinah" Amini, arrested for wearing her headscarf in a way that showed her hair.

Weeks into the protests, Salehi released Fal (Omen). "Someone's crime was having hair that flows free in the wind," he rapped, in his rapid-fire staccato delivery. "Someone's crime was having a brave heart and a sharp tongue."

Living on the run, posting videos alongside protesters, the music of this 32-year-old welder from Esfahan had become the soundtrack to the uprising. "If we don't dare go out into the streets, who are we? Slaves?" he asked in an Instagram post.

The regime finally caught up with him at the end of October, charging him with "corruption on earth" and "war against God", crimes punishable by execution. Badly beaten, at risk of losing sight in one eye, he has received no medical treatment. At the time of writing, he had been in solitary confinement for months.

"It is unimaginably cruel to hold someone [in solitary] for so long," says German MP Ye-One Rhie, who is acting as his sponsor.

"It shows what kind of standing he has. They are afraid of what will happen if he communicates with people."

Kurdish rapper Saman Yasin (27) is also behind bars. He was sentenced to death in October for "war against God" and for allegedly firing a gun into the air, a charge his lawyer has refuted. He won an appeal against his death sentence in December, shortly after trying to take his own life.

Carlos Kasper, his sponsor in the German parliament, says that he is having trouble breathing and suffers from constant nose bleeding as a result of injuries sustained under torture.

Yasin is from Kermanshah in the Kurdish region of Iran. In the video for his song Haji, he acted out his arrest, led away from his wife and child in handcuffs – a harrowing foretaste of what would follow. "They've turned me crazy. They've searched me. They treat me like an animal," he rapped.

Language of protest

Banned by the authorities, rap is the language of protest in Iran. Over the past two decades, from the relative reformism of Mohammad Khatami to the iron-fist rule of incumbent Ebrahim Raisi, rappers have braved the threat of prison and torture, their tracks providing an alternative draft of history.

Rappers Salehi and Yasin are speaking truth to power, their lyrics channelling the anger of a nothing-to-lose generation ready to face the regime's bullets – 527 protesters were killed in the recent protests, UN figures show.

"Music really does foretell what is to come," says Nahid Siamdoust, author of *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran*. "When you listen to the music you see the political sentiment unfolding."

Rapper Bahram Nouraei, known as Bahram, was there when it all started in the early 2000s. "We had no social capital, no cul-

tural influence. No specific media outlet except for Yahoo chat rooms and similar platforms...," he told *The Irish Times* in an interview conducted by email.

He and his fellow rappers would hang out in the basement of his friend's grandmother's house, which had a computer and a dial-up internet connection, making music using downloaded beats.

"Sometimes, we'd press on that green 'talk' button in chat rooms and rap about something, just to mess with someone else in the room or to act like a rapper, just to have fun," says Nouraei.

With the growth of the internet, the movement soon began organising, led by Soroush Lashkari, known by the stage name Hichkas (Nobody), founder of the 021 gang, named after Tehran's postcode.

Often referred to as the godfather of Persian rap, Hichkas's 2006 debut album *Jangal-e Asfalt* (Asphalt Jungle) fused hip-hop rhythms with classical instruments such as the santour, giving the genre a distinctive local flavour.

It featured the hit track *Ekhelaf* (Disparity), summing up the dog-eat-dog world of the capital city with a lyricism worthy of the country's centuries-old poetic heritage: "This is Tehran/A city that tempts you till it saps your soul/And makes you see you were always meant to be/Nothing more than dirt."

In the midst of George W Bush's war on terror, which saw Iran named as part of an "axis of evil", the threat of a US invasion was never far away. The hostile outside world, with its negative depictions of the country, was at that point more threatening than the regime in Iran.

Home-grown style

Unlike "wannabe" US gangsta rappers, Hichkas cultivated a home-grown style, dressing like any other guy on the city streets, drawing his themes from everyday life. His music and his punchy but profanity-free lyrics alluded to national pride and an old-fashioned code of honour.

In the video for 2008's *Yeh Mosh Sazab* (A Bunch of Soldiers) the rapper stands with his gang, rapping about solidarity and survival in the mean streets. "The flag is flying high," he raps, beside Iranian flags flapping in the wind. He is ready to lay down his life for "God, nation, family and friends".

But the pressure was mounting. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had come to power, his rule marked by ideological zeal and crippling sanctions. Nouraei voiced the growing dissatisfaction of young Iranians targeted by the newly instituted morality police in his 2007 breakout hit *Nameyee Be Rayeys Jomhoor* (A Letter to the President).

He introduced the track with samples of Ahmadinejad's utterances in a televised interview before his election in 2005. In a bid to capture the middle-class vote, the presidential candidate had projected a more moderate style that proved to be a sham.

"Almost instantly after he got the power, morality police cars started patrolling in the streets, arresting women for how they look and what they were wearing," says Nouraei.

"At that time, I was about 18 years old or so, just about the age that I could vote for the first time. So, my mind was pretty sensi-

■ A woman holds a portrait of Iranian rapper Toomaj Salehi during a demonstration on the 44th anniversary of the Iranian revolution in Paris in February and (right) Farima Habashizadehasl, a rapper known as Justina, has fled Iran. PHOTOGRAPHS: TERESA SUAREZ/EPA, YASMIN ASHA

tive and curious, looking for clues and arguments to form a political opinion."

Keen to avoid sounding like "an angry teenager venting his emotions", Nouraei aimed to strike a "ruthless but respectful" tone. "People still go to mosque, but to steal shoes. By God, this much pretence deserves mockery," he rapped.

Despite having struggled to find websites that would feature the track, it exploded into the national consciousness, establishing him as one of rap's most important voices.

Soon after the track was released, state television aired a documentary called *Shock*, conflating youth fashion, rock and rap music with Satan-worship, opening the way to a full-scale criminalisation of artists.

In 2009 Nouraei was jailed for a week in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison. "After getting released, I was still under interrogations for two years. I was being watched all the time which put a lot of pressure on me mentally," he says.

He fled to Sweden, where he created a network called *Peeleh* (Cocoon), bringing together artists and producers inside and outside Iran.

Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009 ignited a storm of protest, millions of Iranians who had placed their faith in the ballot box taking to the streets for months amid claims of electoral fraud. The elite Revolutionary Guard and their voluntary force, known as the *Basij*, fired into the crowds, killing dozens.

By 2010 Hichkas had fled the country, dropping the anthem *Yeh Ruz-e Khub Miyad* (A Good Day Will Come) as his flight took off from Mehrabad Airport. According to testimony in Siamdoust's *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, Hichkas had been nudged to leave by the regime.

"The state kills artists softly," says Arash Shahrokhi, a member of London-based activist group *United4Mahsa*. "They encourage artists to leave the country, hoping they get disconnected from Iranian society."

Shahrokhi was turned on to rap in the schoolyard in the 2000s, when fans with an internet connection were downloading songs and burning them on to CDs. In his view, rappers are the intellectuals of his generation, replacing the thinkers purged by the regime in the "bloody decade" of 1981-1989, and in the "chain murders" of the 1980s and 1990s.

Farima Habashizadehasl, a rapper known as Justina, fled the country after being arrested by the Revolutionary Guard for flouting the regime's ban on solo women singers, moving first to Georgia then to Sweden.

Originally from the conservative city of Qom, the poet-turned-rapper made a name for herself in the crowded hyper-masculine scene with her feminist stances in songs like *Beh in Azadi Beckhand* (Laugh at This Freedom). "She was



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very radical from the beginning," says Siamdoust.

The regime offered Habashizadehasl a choice: she could sing what they wanted and become more famous or stop. "I have a personality that if someone forcibly prohibits something from me, I will go towards it more," says the rapper in an emailed interview.

Living as an artist in exile has brought its own challenges. "Honestly, my relationship with my fans is not the same as before because I am no longer in the situation they are living in," she says. But her 2020 track *F**k U Arab* (F**k U Master) sent an unmistakable message to the regime in the wake of the 2019 protests. "Get off my ass," she snarls.

Struggles of women

Those protests would come to be known as "Bloody November". In less than a fortnight, security forces had shot dead as many as 1,500 people. Provoked by a sudden tripling of petrol prices, they sparked the calls for regime change that have since grown louder.

In exile Habashizadehasl started collaborating with Salehi, most notably on last year's *Shallagh* (Whip), which talks about the struggles of women in the protest movement. Salehi had contacted her online.

Recently, she denounced his continued detention in an Instagram post, calling the Islamic Republic a "hostage taker". "The only thing I know is that all those people are waiting for us to save them, be their voice and not forget them," she says.

Last month the UN's special rapporteur on Iran stated that the regime's crackdown on the most recent wave of protests, which saw people take to the streets after

Amini's death in September, could amount to crimes against humanity.

The responsibility of senior officials could "not be ignored", he said, reporting that 527 people, including 71 children, had lost their lives. At least four people have been executed.

The regime recently acknowledged that it had arrested 22,000 protesters, granting pardons as part of a wider amnesty – a move denounced by rights groups as a ploy aimed at covering up human violations.

Salehi and Yasin have paid dearly for their music.

Yasin was moved back to Rajai Shahr prison in Karaj, north of Tehran, after going on hunger strike at Evin prison in Tehran in a protest against continued uncertainty over his fate. His sponsor, Kasper, believes the treatment he has received has been especially harsh because of his ethnicity. "Saman Yasin being a Kurd definitely is one reason more for the regime to persecute him," he says.

Salehi, who is from a political family, was aware of the risks he was taking. According to Rhie, he had spent time with his mother in prison as a baby. The rapper's lyrics nailed the mood of a generation that doesn't want to give the regime any more chances – "Yes, yes, sir," he rapped, his voice dripping with sarcasm, on *Normaleh* (Normal), "some sleep in tombs, while others own 10 high-rises."

"Each line has decades of resentment," says Nahayat Tizhoosh, a journalist who interviewed him for Canada's CBC shortly before his arrest. "He's the real deal on the streets calling for protests. He's regular working class. He would literally sell his belongings to make music."

"He felt he had to be the voice of those who are silenced."

How to... be more productive

Expert answers to everyday questions

Finding it hard to get stuff done? Household chores, personal admin, work – it can be hard to summon the energy to start and complete something. We've all been there – a work report is due but you get lost in emails; you should vacuum, but you end up doing laundry. The task you absolutely need to do doesn't get done and it continues to prey on your mind.

The top tip from productivity experts is to stop multitasking. Multitasking is an easy trap to fall into. It may make us feel more productive in the moment, but research shows that it rarely produces the best results, says Keelin O'Dwyer,

behavioural psychologist at online therapy platform Fettle.ie.

"It often impacts the quality of our work and leaves us vulnerable to making mistakes," says O'Dwyer.

"Instead try to focus on one task at a time and that way you will complete that task to a higher standard in less time which gives you more space to move on to the next task," she says.

"Then your work will be better overall and to a higher standard."

Break it down

Whether it's cleaning out the attic or sorting your pension, sometimes the

task is either so boring or seemingly insurmountable we just can't begin.

"If it's a very big task, it can feel intimidating. We can't even see how we can start, so we tend to get overwhelmed and we procrastinate," says O'Dwyer. She recommends breaking down the task into bite-sized milestones. "Then you are more likely to get started and to continue it throughout your week."

Five-minute rule

You can do almost anything for five minutes, even something you don't like. "By promising you will only spend five minutes on a task, you eliminate any of the excuses that stop you from starting," says O'Dwyer. Do five minutes,

then do something nourishing, she advises. Make yourself a cup of your favourite herbal tea or spend time with a pet.

"All these five minutes build up and the task is done before you know it. It's just when the task looks too big and you haven't broken it down, it becomes too overwhelming and you don't know where to start."

Take a break

When you are out the door with work or study, taking a break seems counter-intuitive. Research shows that doing so, however, actually decreases our stress and increases our productivity. If you can get out for a walk, great, but even taking short breaks of 10 minutes at a

time is good. "Stepping away from your work gives your mind a rest and you will return to the task with renewed motivation. It also increases your creativity too, so it improves the quality of your work," says O'Dwyer.

What kind of break?

Scrolling through Insta or stalking LinkedIn doesn't count as a break. Neither does googling how to be more productive. That's not really going to give you the refreshment you need.

"Do something you can do mindfully," says O'Dwyer. "Take a walk mindfully, noticing nature, drink a cup of coffee mindfully away from the desk – so doing anything with your senses will renew your energy," she says. "You

need to be giving your mind a break. If you are at a screen and then just going to another screen, it's not a different kind of stimulus and it's not going to restore you in the same way."

Go with your gut

Some of us are larks, others night owls. Instead of trying to force productivity all day, tune into when you are usually at your most productive, says O'Dwyer. "It's really important that you become in tune with yourself and notice when you hit your stride. Identify when you are most productive and organise your daily schedule around that to get the most out of your time. That's an excellent way to be more productive."

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