Iran’s Supreme Court upholds journalist’s death sentence

December 8, 2020

AP

<https://apnews.com/article/iran-journalists-media-judiciary-courts-9e1248f3431229b439d73b311e194b21>

Iran’s Supreme Court upheld the death penalty of a once-exiled journalist over his online work that helped inspire nationwide economic protests three years ago, Iranian media reported on Tuesday.

The semiofficial Tasnim news agency quoted judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Esmaili as saying that the country’s Supreme Court confirmed Ruhollah Zam’s death sentence. It was not clear precisely when the court made its ruling.

It is also not clear when Zam’s sentence will be carried out. Under Iranian law, Zam has another chance to appeal and the judiciary chief has the power to cancel the ruling and order a retrial if he finds it in violation of Shariah law.

In June, a court sentenced Zam to death, saying he had been convicted of “corruption on Earth,” a charge often used in cases involving espionage or attempts to overthrow Iran’s government.

Zam’s website and a channel he created on the popular messaging app Telegram had spread the timings of the protests and embarrassing information about officials that directly challenged Iran’s Shiite theocracy. Those demonstrations, which began at the end of 2017, represented the biggest challenge to Iran since the 2009 Green Movement protests and set the stage for similar mass unrest in November of last year.

The initial spark for the 2017 protests was a sudden jump in food prices. Many believe that hard-line opponents of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani instigated the first demonstrations in the conservative city of Mashhad in eastern Iran, trying to direct public anger at the president. But as protests spread from town to town, the backlash turned against the entire ruling class.

Soon, cries directly challenging Rouhani and even Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei could be heard in online videos shared by Zam. Zam’s channel also shared times and organizational details for the protests.

Telegram shut down the channel over Iranian government complaints it spread information about how to make gasoline bombs. The channel later continued under a different name. Zam, who has said he fled Iran after being falsely accused of working with foreign intelligence services, denied inciting violence on Telegram at the time.

The details of his arrest still remain unclear. Though he was based in Paris, Zam somehow returned to Iran and found himself detained by intelligence officials. A series of a televised confessions aired earlier this year over his work.