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### **Iran: Judicial harassment of directors of Imam Ali's Popular Student Relief Society (IAPSRs) (IAPSRs) following its disbandment in the appeals court**

On 31 May 2022, a hearing for a new charge of “propaganda activities against the state” against woman human rights defender Zahra Rahimi took place at Shahid Moqadas 33 district (Evin) Court. This charge is in addition to the charge of “gathering and colluding with the intention of disturbing national security” for which she and three other human rights defenders, and the directors of **Imam Ali's Popular Student Relief Society (IAPSRs) Sharmin Meymandinejad, Zahra Rahimi, Katayoun Afrazeh, and Morteza Keymanesh** have been under investigation by the same court for the last two years. According to the lawyer of IAPSRs, Sharmin Meymandinejad is facing additional charges of “encouraging people to commit immorality and/or prostitution” and “insulting the sacred” because of holding capacity building workshops and psychosocial training for children and adults in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Katayoun Afrazeh is also facing the charge of “assisting the encouragement of immorality and/or prostitution” by organizing the same workshops.

[IAPSRs](#) is a volunteer-based NGO established in 1999. With over 12,000 young members according to its website, mostly university students or graduates, the main focus of the organisation is promoting social and economic justice by identifying the root causes, and the people affected by, poverty. IAPSRs is currently supporting over 7,000 children and women in marginalized and under-represented regions in over 40 IAPSRs centres across Iran. IAPSRs also campaigns against the death penalty for child offenders and has been able to halt 50 cases of execution of minors on death row. IAPSRs earned special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in 2010 and general consultative status in 2018.

[Zahra Rahimi](#) is a woman human rights defender and the executive director at IAPSRs since 2020. She is also a board member of the Iranian Network for the Protection of Children in Labour, which is an umbrella group of over 30 NGOs working in the field of protection of the most vulnerable children across Iran. [Sharmin Meymandi Nejad](#) is a human rights defender, a prolific writer, winner of national literary prizes and the founder of IAPSRs. On 21 June 2020, the human rights defender was arrested together with two other board members of IAPSRs. [Katayoun Afrazeh](#) is woman human rights defender, compliance officer and a member of the IAPSRs board of trustees. She directed the IAPSRs Qarchak centre, in one of the unprivileged neighbourhoods of Tehran for five years, with the aim of supporting the children's education and providing social work support to the women and girls, especially those exposed to the risk of addiction. She delivered an oral statement on behalf of the IAPSRs in March 2017 at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, which has incurred reprisal attacks against the woman human rights defender. [Morteza Keymanesh](#) is a human rights defender, the head of public relations and a board member of the IAPSRs. He has been working with the IAPSRs in different capacities since 2005, including as head of the media department, editor-in-chief of the IAPSRs internal journal (2009- 2017) and the IAPSRs liaison in Mashhad and Isfahan provinces.

On 21 June 2020, Sharmin Maymandi Nejad was arrested together with Katayoun Afrazeh, and Morteza Keymanesh in Tehran. While Katayoun Afrazeh and Morteza Keymanesh were released after one month of arbitrary detention on 21 July 2020 and 22 July 2020 respectively, they were denied access to a lawyer during detention. Sharmin Meymandi Nejad remained detained for four months in a solitary confinement until 27 October 2020. While in detention, his access to medical care and a lawyer were denied. The human rights defender also carried out in-person workshops with a creative and theatrical approach for the children in underprivileged neighbourhoods, for which he has reportedly incurred charges of “encouraging immorality and/or prostitution”. Katayoun Afrazeh is facing the charge of “assisting the encouragement of immorality and/or prostitution” by assisting in the organization of those same workshops.

On 17 August 2020, the Ministry of the Interior set a 20-day deadline for the NGO to change its internal management structure, which IAPSRS refused, arguing that the independence of the NGO was at stake. On 6 September 2020, following the expiration of the deadline, Zahra Rahimi, the IAPSRS's executive director and the wife of Sharmin Meymandi Nejad, was arrested, detained for three days and then released on bail. On 4 March 2021, the IAPSRS announced that the Iranian Ministry of Interior had given the NGO until 12 March 2021 to dissolve the organisation according to a verdict granted by Branch 55 of Shahid Beheshti Judicial Complex in Tehran on 3 March 2021. IAPSRS appealed the court decision and on 24 May 2022 Branch 28 of the Appeals Court upheld the ruling to dissolve the organization. However, IAPSRS [announced](#) that the organisation reserved “the right to pursue all remaining legal channels to change this unjust ruling and, as much as possible, continue to provide aid to our country’s children. False diversions and political intolerance will not end acts of charity or the hope for a brighter tomorrow...”

Front Line Defenders expresses grave concerns about the disbandment of the IAPSRS as one of the most prominent civil society actors in the field of children’s rights in Iran as well as the judicial harassment of human rights defenders and directors of the IAPSRS. Front Line Defenders reiterates its grave concerns about the judicial harassment of Sharmin Meymandi Nejad, Zahra Rahimi, Katayoun Afrazeh and Morteza Keymanesh and believes that they are being targeted as a result of their legitimate civil society activities and peaceful human rights work in defence of children's rights and women’s rights in Iran.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Iran to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally quash charges against human rights defenders Sharmin Meymandi Nejad, Zahra Rahimi, Katayoun Afrazeh, and Morteza Keymanesh;
2. Adhere to the principles of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), especially Articles 22 of the ICCPR where “everyone shall have the right to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests”;
3. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Iran and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities.