

26 June 2020

Iran: Labour rights defender Sepideh Gholian imprisoned after refusing to request a pardon from the Supreme Leader

On 21 June 2020, labour rights defender **Sepideh Gholian** began serving a five year prison sentence on the charges of ‘assembly and collusion against national security’, after refusing to request a pardon from the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. She was sentenced by Branch 36 of the Appeals Court in December 2019, along with nine other labour rights defenders. She remains the only one who has not been granted amnesty after requesting a pardon.

[Sepideh Gholian](#) is a woman human rights defender and a freelance journalist, with her human rights work focusing primarily on labour rights. She has worked closely with the [Syndicate of Workers of Haft Tappeh Cane Sugar Company](#), a trade union established in 1974 for the workers of the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Agro-industrial Complex. Leaders of the union have long been persecuted and harassed by the authorities, with several members of the Board of Directors being tried with ‘propaganda against the State’ and ‘acting against national security’ since 2009.

On 21 June 2020, Sepideh Gholian began serving a five year sentence in Qarchak prison, the charges for which date back to 2018. On 16 June, the defender had appeared before a judge in the courthouse of Evin prison, and was instructed to write a letter to the Supreme Leader, requesting a pardon, and they would “see what they could do for her”. She was told that if she did not request pardon, she would begin serving her five year sentence that Sunday in Qarchak prison. Sepideh Gholian insisted on her innocence and dismissed the offer, surrendering herself to the authorities on 21 June to serve her sentence. Since May 2020, the labour rights defenders that Sepideh Gholian was initially detained with in 2018, have all been granted amnesty.

On 18 November 2018, Sepideh Gholian was arrested, along with a group of labour rights activists, whilst reporting on a protest organized by the Syndicate of Workers of Haft Tappeh Cane Sugar Company. She was released on bail in December 2018.

On 9 January 2019, Sepideh Gholian published a detailed account on social media about her experience and the experiences of the other labour activists she was arrested with, whilst in the custody of the police and the ministry of intelligence in the cities of Shush and Ahvaz. She detailed the torture and daily interrogations they were subjected to, the interrogations lasting from the morning until the early hours of the next. Sepideh Gholian was regularly subjected to sexual insults too, called a ‘whore’, accused of having sexual relationships with some of the members of the Syndicate, and threatened to make sure that her family are informed of her actions, threatening that she may then be killed for ‘honour’.

A little over a week later, on 19 January, a documentary was aired on the state broadcaster the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), on its news programme “The Burnt Plan”. The documentary, using video footage of confessions made by the defender while in detention, posited that Sepideh Gholian and other activists were connected to the Trump administration, communist groups and the Iranian diaspora who, it alleged, are attempting to overthrow the Iranian regime. The defender replied to the claims made in the programme on Twitter, saying that this defamation was in itself proof of further torture against her. The day after the documentary was broadcast, Sepideh Gholian’s family home was raided by officers of the Security Forces. She and her brother were physically assaulted and then arrested, and the officers threatened the father that his children

would be killed. Her brother was released soon after being detained, whilst Sepideh Gholian was held in arbitrary detention.

On 7 September 2019, Sepideh Gholian was initially sentenced to 19 years and 6 months in connection to her involvement with the Haft-Tapeh Syndicate and participation in the protest in 2018. She was sentenced on charges of 'assembly and collusion to act against national security', 'membership in an illegal group of Gam', an online publication, 'propaganda against the state', and 'publishing false news'.

On 26 October 2019, she was released on bail after going on hunger strike to protest the unbearable conditions in Qarchak prison. Gholian was subsequently rearrested during protests in Iran in November 2019. Although she was released on bail after one day, she was charged with 'acting against national security by planing and colluding' and 'disrupting the public order'.

On 14 December 2019, Sepideh Gholian's original sentence of 19 and a half years was reduced to five years' imprisonment by Branch 36 of the Appeals Court. However, she still faces the charges from November 2019.

On 26 December 2019, Sepideh Gholian filed a lawsuit against IRIB for televising misinformation and defamatory content against her, however the IRIB was acquitted soon after the case was filed. Subsequently, IRIB filed a lawsuit against her in the 24 Branch of the Revolutionary Court and she was charged with 'anti-Islamic Republic regime propaganda' for publishing news about Iranian-Arab prisoners and 'disseminating fake news' for exposing the IRIB reporter who had interrogated her while she was detained. The first hearing for these charges took place on 9 February, the next hearing is yet to be scheduled.

Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned by the arbitrary detention, judicial harassment, physical assault and defamation attempts against Sepideh Gholian. It is particularly concerned by the latest charges brought against the defender, seemingly in reprisal for her attempts to hold IRIB to account for its defamation of her character on national television. Front Line Defenders believes that Sepideh Gholian has been targeted solely as a result of her peaceful and legitimate human rights work in defense of labour rights and exercising freedom of expression in Iran.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Iran to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Sepideh Gholian, quash her convictions and drop all charges against her, as Front Line Defenders believes she has been targeted solely as a result of her legitimate human rights work;
2. Ensure that the treatment of Sepideh Gholian, while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the 'Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;
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 without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.