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Middle East/North Africa - Iran

Investigate Proposed Justice Minister's Role in Killings Withdraw Cabinet Nominee Implicated in Abuses

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(August 8, 2013) – Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani, should immediately withdraw his nomination of **Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi** for the post of justice minister, Reporters Without Borders, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, and Human Rights Watch said today. Rouhani presented the list of his nominees for cabinet posts to the Iranian parliament during his inauguration ceremony on August 4, 2013.

Pour-Mohammadi served as interior minister during former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's first term, from 2005 until 2008. He was deputy intelligence minister from 1990 to 1999, and a deputy intelligence minister from 1990 to 1999. Rights groups have implicated him in abuses that may constitute crimes against humanity, including the executions of thousands of political dissidents in 1988 and the assassinations of several prominent dissident intellectuals in 1998. As justice minister he could play a role in influencing investigations into human rights abuses.

"Throughout his election campaign, Rouhani repeatedly promised to uphold the rights of the Iranian people and to address serious rights violations," said Hadi Ghaemi, executive director at the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. "Instead of installing Pour-Mohammadi as justice minister, authorities should abide by their international obligations and investigate his role in committing egregious rights abuses and parliament should refuse to confirm him if the nomination goes forward."

Human Rights Watch, in a 2005 report, "[Ministers of Murder](#)," documented Pour-Mohammadi's direct role in the extrajudicial executions of thousands of political prisoners. In the summer of 1988, Pour-Mohammadi, then a top deputy to the intelligence minister, sat on a commission charged with interrogating thousands of political prisoners and ordering many of them to the gallows. The death sentences were issued after revolutionary courts had already tried, convicted, and sentenced the vast majority of these people to prison on national security charges following unfair trials.

In the span of several weeks during the summer of 1988, Pour-Mohammadi and other officials sitting on similar commissions throughout the country interrogated thousands of political prisoners, including journalists, to determine whether they continued to hold steadfast in their beliefs, or were willing to repent for their "crimes." After interrogation sessions that often lasted a few minutes and bore no resemblance to actual trials, commission members ordered the execution of those who refused to express remorse for their political activities. Authorities carried out the executions under a fatwa, or religious edict, issued by then-Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini and orders from high-level judiciary officials.

Article 160 of the Iranian constitution states that the justice minister has the "responsibility in all matters concerning the relationship between the judiciary, on the one hand, and the executive and legislative branches, on the other hand." It also states that the justice minister must be chosen by the president from a list recommended by the head of the judiciary. The role and influence of the justice minister is largely administrative.

The planned and systematic manner in which the 1988 executions were carried out could constitute crimes against humanity, Human Rights Watch said in its 2005 report. August 2013 is the 25th anniversary of the 1988 prison massacre, and the families and associates of the victims, as well as the Iranian human rights community, are preparing to mark this anniversary. Iranian government officials have repeatedly harassed, summoned, and arrested family

members of those executed, sometimes preventing them from holding commemoration ceremonies.

"Pour-Mohammadi's nomination would be not only a blow to all those who fight against impunity in Iran, but also one more act of humiliation for the families of the journalists and dissidents killed or tortured while he was in office," said Lucie Morillon, head of the research department at Reporters Without Borders. "One should not underestimate the chilling effect his nomination could have on the ability of journalists and news providers to independently and effectively inform the public."

Pour-Mohammadi was the director of foreign intelligence operations in the Intelligence Ministry from 1990 to 1999, during which dozens of Iranian dissidents were assassinated abroad. Iran has not undertaken any credible investigations into Pour-Mohammadi's possible involvement in these killings.

Pour-Mohammadi may have also been implicated in particular in the assassinations of several prominent intellectuals. In 1998, agents of the Intelligence Ministry assassinated at least five prominent intellectuals, including several journalists, in Tehran in what became known as the "serial murders." The Iranian government under former President Mohammad Khatami opened an investigation into these murders in 2000.

In 2005, two sources with first-hand knowledge told Human Rights Watch that Pour-Mohammadi had been implicated during these investigations and that an arrest warrant for him was set to be issued. Before that could happen, however, authorities instead decided to force him out of office and put an end to the matter, one source said.

Human Rights Watch wrote to Pour-Mohammadi on October 28, 2005, asking for his response to these allegations, but he did not respond.

"Throughout his election campaign, Rouhani repeatedly promised to uphold the rights of the Iranian people and to address serious rights violations," said Joe Stork, acting Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "The choice of Pour-Mohammadi for justice minister sends a terrible message regarding the new president's commitment to respecting Iran's international legal obligations."

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