



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran
Chief Justice Ebrahim Raisi, Head of the Judiciary
c/o Ambassador Hamid Baeidinejad
Iranian Embassy in London
16 Prince's Gate
London SW7 1PT

By email: iranemb.lon@mfa.gov.ir

9 March 2021

Your Excellencies,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our concern with the prosecution and sentencing of Prof. Sedigheh Vasmaghi, poet, writer, formerly tenured professor of theology at the University of Tehran and scholar of Islamic studies. Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. It is committed to supporting academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region, both in the UK and globally.

We are particularly concerned that Prof. Vasmaghi was summoned to the Revolutionary Court on June 24, 2020, as a result of a complaint filed by the Ministry of Intelligence and the Revolutionary Guards' Legal Division for her alleged activities against the regime and she was convicted and sentenced to one year in prison. This conviction is a clear breach of her right to freedom of expression based on the chapter in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic that is devoted to the rights of the people and provides citizens with freedom of speech. Given that Prof. Vasmaghi's appeal against this ruling failed, she is now required to serve the sentence alongside a previous five-year suspended sentence, for a total of six years' imprisonment.

Prof. Vasmaghi is a prominent and esteemed scholar who has taught and published extensively on Islamic law in Iran. She is a formerly tenured Professor of theology at the University of Tehran, with many of her publications, such as her book, *Women, Jurisprudence, Islam* (2014), nationally and internationally recognised. She is also an award-winning poet and her poetry collection, *Praying for Rain* (1989), was awarded the Best Book Award by Al-Zahra University in Tehran. Prof. Vasmaghi's intellectual and scholarly activities are essential to enhancing researchers' understandings of Islamic law regarding women's rights, both within the Islamic Republic of Iran and globally.

Throughout her career, because of her scholarly activities, Prof. Vasmaghi has experienced continued aggravation and investigation, which made her decide to leave the country in 2011. She spent six years in Germany and Sweden while working as a guest lecturer in the Department of Islamic Studies, University of Göttingen and as an International Cities of Refuge resident research fellow at Uppsala

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University. In October 2017 she returned to Iran to, but upon her arrival, she was detained for several hours at Imam Khomeini International Airport. She was asked to appear before the Revolutionary Court in Tehran on 22 October 2017, when she was charged and convicted of propaganda against the state. This verdict was based on a previous ruling issued against her in 2011. In May 2018 the Revolutionary Court sentenced her to five years in jail, suspended; this in turn, resulted in restricting her movement and prohibiting her from leaving the country to attend seminars and conferences abroad in 2019.

Prof. Vasmaghi, along with seventy-six other individuals, signed a statement “Respect the People’s Demands” to object to the November 2019 crackdown on demonstrators protesting the increase in petrol prices in Iran. In June 2020, the Legal Divisions of the Revolutionary Guard’s Intelligence Organization and the Intelligence Ministry filed a complaint against Prof. Vasmaghi, accusing her of “activities against the state” in connection with the petition. She refused to attend the closed Revolutionary Court hearing in protest against its unfounded allegations and the Revolutionary Court’s lack of jurisdiction and improper procedures. She argued that, according to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Revolutionary Court was not competent to deal with legal claims; such litigation must be dealt with by the General Courts and must be open to the public and held before a jury. Nevertheless, in August, the Revolutionary Court sentenced Prof. Vasmaghi to one year in prison. She remained free while her appeal was pending. Then, on 21 October, the Court of Appeals upheld the lower court’s ruling.

Your Excellencies, the Committee on Academic Freedom is deeply concerned that this prominent scholar is in danger of being sent to prison for merely exercising her right to freedom of expression, which Iran’s own laws and Constitution purport to protect. Academic freedom requires freedom of the press and expression, respect for the rule of law, and transparency. Prof. Vasmaghi’s nonviolent activities have continually been subjected to unfair treatment by certain sections of the government of the Islamic Republic, in clear violation of Iran’s domestic and international obligations. By placing restrictions on her ability to attend international academic conferences, and by prohibiting her from publishing her books and papers within the country, her right to academic freedom and exchange is unfairly withheld. We respectfully ask that all charges against Prof. Vasmaghi be dropped and her undeserved prison sentences be cancelled. In the context of her fragile health condition, as well as the current COVID-19 pandemic, requiring her to serve these sentences could endanger and compromise her health and welfare. Finally, we respectfully request that she be allowed to continue her research and to publish her academic works in Iran.

Thank you for your attention. We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Professor the Baroness Afshar OBE
President, BRISMES
on behalf of BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

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