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## In a Death Seen Around the World, a Symbol of Iranian Protests

By NAZILA FATHI

TEHRAN — It was hot in the car, so the young woman and her singing instructor got out for a breath of fresh air on a quiet side street not far from the antigovernment protests they had ventured out to attend. A gunshot rang out, and the woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, fell to the ground. “It burned me,” she said before she died.

The bloody [video](#) of her death on Saturday, circulated in [Iran](#) and around the world, has made Ms. Agha-Soltan, a 26-year-old who relatives said was not political, an instant symbol of the antigovernment movement.

Her death is stirring wide outrage in a society that is infused with the culture of martyrdom — although the word itself has become discredited because the government has pointed to the martyrs’ deaths of Iranian soldiers in the Iran-Iraq war to justify repressive measures.

Ms. Agha-Soltan’s fate resonates particularly with women, who have been at the vanguard of many of the protests throughout Iran.

“I am so worried that all the sacrifices that we made in the past week, the blood that was spilled, would be wasted,” said one woman who came to mourn Ms. Agha-Soltan on Monday outside Niloofar mosque here. “I cry every time I see Neda’s face on TV.”

Opposition Web sites and television channels, which Iranians view with satellite dishes, have repeatedly shown the video, in which blood can be seen gushing from Ms. Agha-Soltan’s body as she dies. By Monday evening, there already were 6,860 entries for her on the Persian-language Google Web site. Some Web sites suggest changing the name of Kargar Street, where she was killed, to Neda Street.

Mehdi Karroubi, an opposition candidate for president in this month’s election, called her a martyr on his [Web site](#). “A young girl, who did not have a weapon in her soft hands, or a grenade in her pocket, became a victim of thugs who are supported by a horrifying intelligence apparatus.”

Only scraps of information are known about Ms. Agha-Soltan. Her friends and relatives were mostly afraid to speak, and the government broke up public attempts to mourn her. She studied philosophy and took underground singing lessons — women are barred from singing publicly in Iran. Her name means voice in Persian, and many are now calling her the voice of Iran.

Her fiancé, Caspian Makan, contributed to a Persian [Wikipedia](#) entry. He said she never supported any particular presidential candidate. “She wanted freedom, freedom for everybody,” the entry read.

Her singing instructor, Hamid Panahi, offered a glimpse of her last moments.

He said the two of them decided to head home after being caught in a clash with club-wielding forces in central Tehran. They stepped out of the car. “We heard one gunshot, and the bullet came and hit Neda right in the chest,” he said. The shot was fired from the rooftop of a private house across the street, perhaps by a sniper, he said. On a [Facebook](#) posting along with the video, an anonymous doctor said he tried to save her but failed because the bullet hit her heart.

“She was so full of life,” said a relative who spoke on condition of anonymity. “She sang pop music.”

The relative said the government had ordered the family to bury Ms. Agha-Soltan immediately and barred family members from holding a memorial service.

The paramilitary forces were quick to stop memorial services elsewhere, too. More than a dozen bearded men on motorcycles dispersed nearly 70 people gathered outside Niloofar mosque on Monday. Authorities ordered the mosques not to hold services for any victims of the demonstrations over the past few days.

“Go, get lost,” they shouted, as the regular police stood by.

But one police officer, watching the militia, said a prayer aloud with the crowd in her honor: “Peace be upon the prophet and her family.”

As Ms. Agha-Soltan’s family held a private ceremony on Monday, they turned reporters away and refused to speak. “They were not allowed to hang even a black banner,” the relative said.

Funerals have long served as a political rallying point in Iran, since it is customary to have a week of mourning and a large memorial service 40 days after a death. In the 1979 revolution, that cycle generated a constant supply of new protests and deaths.

But the narrative of death has also been important in the lore surrounding the existence of the Islamic republic.

The government portrayed itself in the role of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad killed by a far larger army during the seventh-century struggle within Islam, which gave birth to the Shiite sect that predominates in Iran.

Days for prophets and saints believed killed in the service of the faith dot the holiday calendar, taking up 22 days of the year.

So the very public adulation of Ms. Agha-Soltan could create a religious symbol for the opposition and sap support for the government among the faithful who believe Islam abhors killing innocent civilians.

One [poem circulating on the Internet](#) explicitly linked her death to other symbols of the protest movement:

Stay, Neda —

Look at this city

At the shaken foundations of palaces,

The height of Tehran’s maple trees,

They call us “dust,” and if so

Let us sully the air for the oppressor

Don't go, Neda

She has become the public face of an unknown number of Iranians who have died in the protests. While state television has reported 10 deaths and state radio 19, it is widely believed the total is much higher.

A witness said the body of a 19-year-old man who was killed in Tehran on Sunday was given to the family only after it paid \$5,000.

For many Iranians, though, the death of a young woman has special meaning.

“We know a lot of people have died, but it is so hard to see a woman, so young and innocent, die like this,” a 41-year-old who gave his name as Alireza said Monday.

Women were particular targets after President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) began to strictly enforce previously loosened restrictions. Thousands of women were arrested or intimidated because they did not adhere precisely to Islamic dress code on the streets.

[Mir Hussein Mousavi](#), the leading opposition candidate, campaigned along with his wife, [Zahra Rahnavard](#), and other prominent Iranian women rallied to his side as he promised to improve the status of women.

A woman called Hana posted a comment on Mr. Karroubi's Web site: “I am alive but my sister was killed. She wanted the wind to blow into her hair; she wanted to be free; she wanted to hold her head high up and say: I am Iranian. My sister died because there is no life left; my sister died because there is no end to tyranny.”

*Neil MacFarquhar contributed reporting from New York.*

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