Iran jails couple in viral dancing video: activists

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By AFP

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An Iranian court has handed jail sentences of over 10 years each to a young couple who danced in front of one of Tehran's main landmarks in a video seen as a symbol of defiance against the regime, activists said on Tuesday.

Astiyazh Haghighi and her fiance Amir Mohammad Ahmadi, both in their early 20s, had been arrested in early November after a video went viral of them dancing romantically in front of the Azadi Tower in Tehran.

Haghighi did not wear a headscarf in defiance of the Islamic republic's strict rules for women, while women are also not allowed to dance in public in Iran, let alone with a man.

A revolutionary court in Tehran sentenced them each to 10 years and six months in prison, as well as bans on using the Internet and leaving Iran, the US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) said.

The couple, who already had a following in Tehran as popular Instagram bloggers, were convicted of "encouraging corruption and public prostitution" as well as "gathering with the intention of disrupting national security", it added.

HRANA cited sources close to their families as saying they had been deprived of lawyers during the court proceedings while attempts to secure their release on bail have been rejected.

It said Haghighi is now in the notorious Qarchak prison for women outside Tehran, whose conditions are regularly condemned by activists.

Iranian authorities have clamped down severely on all forms of dissent since the death in September of Mahsa Amini, who had been arrested for allegedly violating the headscarf rules, sparked protests that have turned into a movement against the regime.

At least 14,000 people have been arrested, according to the United Nations, ranging from prominent celebrities, journalists and lawyers to ordinary people who took to the streets.

The couple's video had been hailed as a symbol of the freedoms demanded by the protest movement, with Ahmadi at one moment lifting his partner in the air as her long hair flowed behind.

One of the main icons of the Iranian capital, the gigantic and futuristic Azadi (Freedom) Tower is a place of huge sensitivity.

It opened under the rule of the last shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the early 1970s when it was known as the Shahyad (In Memory of the Shah) Tower.

It was renamed after the shah was ousted in 1979 with the creation of the Islamic republic. Its architect, a member of the Bahai faith which is not recognised in today's Iran, now lives in exile.