



How to cite this article:

Yaghoubi, A. A., Shakeri, A., & Rabbani, M. (2026). Achievements and Challenges of Pardoned Crimes in the Law on Reducing Ta'zir Imprisonment Sentences (2020). *Journal of Historical Research, Law and Policy*, 4(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jhrp.114>



Article history:
Original Research

Dates:

Submission Date: 28 August 2025
Revision Date: 22 November 2025
Acceptance Date: 29 November 2025
First Publication Date: 30 November 2025
Final Publication Date: 01 March 2026

Achievements and Challenges of Pardoned Crimes in the Law on Reducing Ta'zir Imprisonment Sentences (2020)

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ABSTRACT

The Law on Reducing Ta'zir Imprisonment Sentences, enacted with the aim of moderating the criminal justice approach and prioritizing rehabilitation and reform over mere punishment, has brought remarkable transformations to Iran's legal system. This law, particularly in the field of pardonable crimes (offences requiring the victim's complaint for prosecution), introduces mechanisms to decrease the judiciary's reliance on imprisonment, thereby creating new opportunities and challenges for legal scholars and society. Examining the achievements and shortcomings of this approach requires a precise analysis of its impact on reducing the prison population, expediting judicial proceedings, and its social and economic consequences. Accordingly, the central research question is: What criminological achievements do pardonable crimes have under the Law on Reducing Ta'zir Imprisonment Sentences? This study was conducted using a library-based (documentary) method and a descriptive-analytical approach. The findings indicate that the scope of pardonable crimes—regarding specified instances, the requirement of a victim's existence, and various forms of criminal liability—faces several ambiguities. Under the Law on Reducing Ta'zir Imprisonment Sentences, pardonable crimes offer achievements such as enabling active victim participation in the adjudicatory process, improving the quality of offences relating to property, and considering the offender's age when determining whether an offence is pardonable. However, this category of crimes also faces challenges, including lack of clarity in identifying the full range of applicable offences, ambiguities arising from the requirement of a victim in property-related offences, and complexities stemming from different forms of criminal liability. Additionally, the conditions established in Article 11 of the Law on Reducing Sentences and the role of the complainant's pardon create further challenges, particularly in cases involving multiple similar material offences.

Keywords: *pardonable crimes; ta'zir imprisonment; punishment; challenges and achievements*

Introduction

The Law on Reducing Ta'zir Imprisonment Sentences constitutes a turning point in recent developments within Iran's legal system. It was enacted with the aim of revising the country's macro-level criminal policy and shifting toward more treatment-oriented and rehabilitative approaches, rather than punitive ones. This law, by reducing the maximum imprisonment terms for many ta'zir crimes, seeks to decrease the judiciary's reliance on imprisonment as the first and sole solution and instead emphasize alternative punishments and restorative approaches. This



paradigm shift, particularly regarding compoundable crimes—where the victim's consent plays a central role—has produced significant implications (1-3).

The legislative history of compoundable crimes in Iran reflects a gradual transformation from a purely punitive and retributive system to a restorative framework grounded in social interests. In pre-revolution laws, the victim's forgiveness was primarily regarded as a mitigating factor or a basis for extinguishing the private claim and had only a limited role in the criminal process. After the Islamic Revolution, with the enactment of the Islamic Penal Code in 1991 and later the more comprehensive version adopted in 2013, the concept of "compoundable crimes" entered the criminal system as an independent category with specified instances (4, 5). Subsequently, with the enactment of the Law on Reducing Ta'zir Imprisonment Sentences in 2020 (and the amendment of Article 104 of the Islamic Penal Code), the scope of these crimes expanded from 22 to 59 categories, enhancing the victim's role in initiating, continuing, or stopping prosecution (6-8). This trajectory demonstrates that over the past three decades, Iran's criminal policy has increasingly moved toward reducing reliance on punishment and elevating the role of the victim and forgiveness.

Historically, the concept of victim's forgiveness was primarily addressed within private crimes and considered alongside other mitigating factors. However, with the enactment of laws related to reducing ta'zir imprisonment sentences, this approach has taken a more prominent place in the legal system and has become one of the principal mechanisms for reducing crime and rehabilitating offenders. This evolution has yielded achievements such as reducing the prison population and increasing attention to victims' rights; nevertheless, it has also created challenges—such as defining the precise boundaries of compoundable crimes, ensuring the authenticity of the victim's consent, and preventing misuse of this legal mechanism—that require continuous evaluation and solutions (9-11).

In light of this law, promising achievements are evident in reducing the prison population and establishing opportunities for offender reform and rehabilitation. Facilitating the application of alternative punishments—such as community service, fines, and conditional release—allows judges to impose more appropriate penalties based on the offender's personality and the nature of the crime. This not only alleviates pressure on prisons but also creates greater opportunities for the offender's dignified reintegration into society. Additionally, with greater emphasis on the victim's role in compoundable crimes, an increase in attention to victims' rights and efforts to compensate damages is expected (12-14).

However, implementation of this law has not been without challenges. One of the most significant challenges is the practical distinction and precise definition of compoundable versus non-compoundable crimes; some jurists argue that further clarification is needed. Ensuring the victim's genuine and uncoerced consent and preventing the potential exploitation of legal mechanisms for irrelevant purposes are additional concerns. Moreover, enhancing legal literacy and familiarizing citizens with their rights and obligations in this domain play essential roles in achieving the legislature's objectives (15-17).

The 2013 Islamic Penal Code provided various punishments for compoundable crimes, many of which remained in effect until recently. Following the enactment of the 2020 Law on Reducing Ta'zir Imprisonment Sentences, changes emerged in these punishments, particularly reductions in imprisonment terms. Therefore, this article focuses on compoundable crimes under the new law. The aim is to examine whether, considering the implementation of hadd punishments in three stages, the fourth-stage penalty of *hadd al-qazr*—which is execution—becomes compoundable upon the victim's forgiveness; whether offenses involving private and public property are

compoundable; and whether fifth-degree ta'zir crimes committed by juveniles against government officials are compoundable. This article endeavors to provide a better understanding of compoundable crimes under the Law on Reducing Ta'zir Imprisonment Sentences (18-20).

1. The Concept of Compoundable Crimes

In Persian vocabulary, the term “crime” denotes a legal offense, violation, or act for which the legislator has prescribed punishment (Mo'in, 2005) (21). “Compoundable” refers to something that may be waived, forgiven, or overlooked (Dehkhoda, 1993) (22). Thus, in its literal sense, compoundable crimes are those legal violations whose prosecution or punishment may be waived by the person who has the right to forgive. This concept indicates that in certain crimes, the will and consent of the injured party play a significant role in the prosecution and sentencing process (4).

In legal terminology, compoundable crimes (or crimes with a private aspect) are offenses whose prosecution, continuation of prosecution, and execution of punishment depend on the complaint or forgiveness of the private complainant (the victim). In contrast, “non-compoundable crimes” (or crimes with a public aspect) are those in which—even in the presence of a private complainant—the prosecution and punishment proceed because the offense harms public order, and forgiveness has no effect unless the law expressly provides otherwise (23).

Crimes initiated by the victim's complaint and terminated by the victim's forgiveness fall under this category. In these cases, the victim's forgiveness halts prosecution, and the case is closed by the prosecutor's office or court. Importantly, this feature applies only to certain crimes; some offenses remain prosecutable and punishable even if the victim consents (24).

Compoundable crimes generally involve less severity and importance than non-compoundable crimes. In such offenses, the legislator has minimized the public aspect and focused primarily on the private right. Prosecution depends entirely on the victim's complaint; without it, judicial authorities do not proceed (25).

The Concept of Ta'zir Imprisonment

Linguistically, “imprisonment” refers to incarceration, detention, or confinement (Dehkhoda, 1993) (22). The term derives from the Arabic root *h-b-s*, meaning to restrain or prevent (Ibn Manzur, 2002) (26). “Ta'zir,” in its literal meaning, refers to discipline, reprimand, or punitive correction (Mo'in, 2005) (21). Thus, ta'zir imprisonment means incarceration as a disciplinary and corrective measure imposed by the authority to reform the offender and prevent recidivism (4).

In legal terminology, ta'zir imprisonment refers to all forms of imprisonment other than *hadd* imprisonment. Its instances and limits are determined by the legislator, and the judge may aggravate or mitigate the punishment within the prescribed range (Mosaddegh, 2020) (19). Ta'zir punishments apply to acts not covered by *hadd*, *qisas*, or *diyya* and are imposed for violations of religious prohibitions or governmental regulations. The type, degree, execution method, and rules governing mitigation, suspension, dismissal, and other aspects of ta'zir punishments are defined by law (13).

Ta'zir imprisonments in Iran's criminal system, under Article 19 of the 2013 Islamic Penal Code, are divided into eight degrees based on the severity and importance of the crime. This classification determines the type and level of punishments, judicial authority jurisdiction, and eligibility for grants of leniency. Higher degrees (one through four) represent more severe punishments with limited possibilities for mitigation or suspension, while lower degrees (five

through eight) constitute lighter punishments with broader alternatives and restorative mechanisms. This categorization also supports new policies such as imprisonment reduction and qualitative improvement of punishments under the 2020 Law on Reducing Ta'zir Imprisonment Sentences (27).

The 2020 Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences

The reduction of the legislator's criminal protection of individuals' property, assets, credit, and personality in Article 11 of the 2020 Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences (amending Article 104 of the Islamic Penal Code) is more visibly apparent. This is mainly reflected in the increase of compoundable crimes from 22 instances in the former Article 104 to 59 enumerated cases. Likewise, the reduction by half of the minimum and maximum ta'zir imprisonment terms of degrees four through eight for compoundable crimes indicates a shift in legislative criminal policy toward limiting state intervention in property- and asset-related offenses. These changes have diminished the role of the state in many offenses and transferred the responsibility for filing complaints, collecting evidence, and pursuing prosecution of compoundable crimes to the private complainant. The amendments to Article 104 of the Islamic Penal Code (in accordance with Article 11 of the 2020 law) may, on the one hand, have advantages, but in some instances they are also subject to criticism (1).

Since every statute naturally conveys certain messages to citizens as its addressees, this law is no exception. There are signs of support for white-collar offenders in its provisions; furthermore, in the parliamentary preparatory works, the lack of a clear religious precedent for imprisonment as a punishment was invoked as part of its justification. Consequences such as the teaching of crime, the increase in the number of offenders, the waste of material and spiritual resources, high costs, family breakdown, the aggravation of poverty and class inequality, and other social harms are important factors that render the continued expansion of prisons and the growth of this undesirable structure unsound and unacceptable (9). While accepting the reality that imprisonment in Iran is not implemented in an optimal manner, this fact cannot justify abandoning this type of punishment. Imprisonment remains a recognized penalty worldwide, and international experts recommend its continued use as long as humanity has not found an effective substitute. Especially in serious crimes, viable alternatives to imprisonment are extremely limited: if an individual who commits large-scale embezzlement, forgery of official documents, espionage, or major theft is merely subjected to alternative sanctions that are substantially less severe than imprisonment, social order will not be properly maintained (11).

Criminal policy is significantly influenced by the prevailing ideas, schools of thought, and cultural and political currents in each society. These general doctrines are manifested in legislative, judicial, and executive policies and define the fundamental strategies for controlling criminal phenomena. In addition, the findings and achievements of criminal sciences—such as criminology, penology, and sociology—together with international norms and the human rights system, play a key role in shaping and guiding states' criminal policies. Accordingly, depending on the type of government and the particular functions of each society, multiple classifications of criminal policy exist, inspired by scientific findings and ideological teachings (1).

On the other hand, the negative consequences of imprisonment have drawn the attention of criminologists and penologists. Today, despite numerous efforts to improve prison conditions, achieving the reform and rehabilitation of offenders—one of the primary goals of this punishment—faces serious challenges and doubts (2). Experience and statistics on recidivism show that repeated and professional offending is more frequently committed by individuals with a prior history of imprisonment (23). Thus, imprisonment not only has limited impact on rehabilitating

offenders, but also harms the national economy, turns prisons into schools of crime, and plays a significant role in transmitting criminal subculture to novice offenders and converting them into professional criminals (16).

Attention to the right to liberty as a fundamental human right, on the one hand, and the negative and harmful effects of imprisonment, on the other, have prompted criminal justice officials to adopt measures aimed at reducing the prison population. For this reason, alongside policies of decriminalization and diversion from the courts—each of which in its own way reduces individuals' entry into the criminal justice system—the policy of de-penalization has also attracted the attention of the Iranian legislator (9). De-penalization, as a modern approach within a systematic criminal policy framework, seeks to achieve objectives such as moderating the severity of criminal sanctions, reducing or eliminating the criminal aspect of certain behaviors, and substituting non-criminal measures. This approach focuses on the reform and education of the offender and strives to align with societal needs and requirements (28).

From the analysis in this section, it can be inferred that in Article 11 of the 2020 Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences, by significantly expanding the scope of compoundable crimes and lowering the limits of their punishments, the legislator has perceptibly shifted from a state-interventionist criminal policy toward a more individual-centered model and privatization of criminal justice. This change reflects a legislative inclination toward de-penalization and replacing imprisonment with restorative measures. Nevertheless, from a criminological perspective, concerns have been raised regarding the potential reduction of deterrence in financial and economic crimes. While the new law, by entrusting the pursuit and ultimate fate of the case to the victim, provides fertile ground for the growth of restorative justice, it may also be interpreted in favor of individuals with social influence and financial power, thereby weakening criminal protection of economic order and public trust. Overall, this reorientation of Iranian criminal policy represents an effort to balance the right to liberty with the need to preserve social security, although its successful implementation requires greater precision in distinguishing serious offenses from those that can be appropriately addressed through restorative mechanisms.

Criterion for Enumerated Instances of Compoundable Crimes under the 2020 Law

The 2020 Law Amending the Islamic Penal Code with Respect to Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences constitutes an important step toward moderating the punitive approach of the judicial system and reducing reliance on imprisonment, particularly in less serious offenses. One of the key instruments of this law is the reconsideration of the concept and instances of “compoundable crimes” and the expansion of their scope. Article 104, by enumerating and setting criteria for compoundable crimes, seeks to facilitate the use of mechanisms of forgiveness and pardon while respecting victims' rights (7). The main general criterion considered by the legislator in determining instances of compoundable crimes is the degree of harm the offense inflicts on public order and the nature of the victim's private rights and interests in that crime (18).

Crimes enumerated as compoundable in Article 104 of the Islamic Penal Code (as amended in 2020) are predominantly those offenses that:

Limited Harm to Public Order

Crimes classified as causing “limited harm to public order” have relatively minor negative impacts on public order and security compared with other offenses. Unlike violent crimes or those that seriously endanger national security, these offenses inflict more moderate and contained harm on the social structure. Consequently, the legislator's

approach to such crimes generally aims to reduce imprisonment and emphasize corrective and preventive aspects, thereby preserving public order while alleviating excessive pressure on the judicial system and prisons (17).

Emphasis on the Victim's Private Rights

In the context of offenses against property, the victim's private rights hold a special place. These rights, which primarily concern the victim's financial and proprietary interests, play a crucial role in defining the nature of the offense. Accordingly, the victim's will and preferences—which are directly affected by these rights—can significantly influence the outcome of the case and the determination of punishment. This approach, while not disregarding the public aspect of the offense, underscores the importance of compensating the victim and vindicating his or her rights and allows the victim to play a more active role in the judicial process (8).

Possibility of Compensating Damages

In property offenses, there is often greater potential to compensate the victim's losses through mechanisms other than imprisonment. These mechanisms may include fines, restitution of property to its prior state, or other forms of compensation. Focusing on such measures not only facilitates the restoration of the victim's financial rights but also prevents negative consequences of imprisonment, such as family breakdown or employment problems for the offender. In this way, the statute's main objective—returning the situation as closely as possible to its pre-offense condition and compensating the damage suffered—is pursued through more effective and at times more humane means (17).

Article 104 of the Islamic Penal Code, after amendment, sets out a list of offenses considered compoundable. These instances include, among others, the following (with examples for clarification):

- **Ta'zir offenses of degrees seven and eight:** Because these offenses carry relatively light punishments (usually fines or ta'zir imprisonment of up to six months), they are generally deemed compoundable. For example, certain forms of simple insult, non-gross defamation, or verbal abuse may be compoundable if they fall within these degrees.
- **Hadd offenses whose punishment consists solely of flogging:** If a hadd offense is punishable only by flogging and the private complainant forgives the offender, prosecution or execution of the punishment is discontinued (7).
- **Offenses with specific characteristics:** Some offenses, even if they might ordinarily fall within the category of non-compoundable crimes, are explicitly designated as compoundable due to their particular features. For instance, all chastity-related offenses (other than adultery and sodomy), such as "physical contact or coerced conduct in chastity offenses other than adultery and sodomy," as well as "offenses related to unlawful abortion," are considered compoundable where a private complainant exists and grants forgiveness. This reflects the legislator's protective approach to victims' rights in this sensitive domain (8).

The expansion of the scope of compoundable crimes in the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences has positive consequences, including reducing the number of incoming cases to prosecutors' offices and prisons, facilitating reconciliation and settlement, and enhancing the role of victims in determining the outcome of criminal cases. Overall, this approach moves in the direction of "restorative justice" and emphasizes the principle

that in less serious offenses, priority should be given to compensating the victim and restoring social harmony rather than merely punishing the offender (18).

In this section, the authors, by emphasizing the transformation of the punitive approach toward property offenses and less serious crimes, have explained the role of the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences in expanding compoundable crimes. Based on the analysis provided, the legislator, by substituting imprisonment with mechanisms such as fines, restitution of property, or compensation of damages, has sought to achieve the objectives of criminal justice through restorative and compensatory pathways. Under the amended Article 104 of the Islamic Penal Code, the scope of compoundable crimes has significantly expanded, and in addition to ta'zir offenses with lighter punishments, some hadd offenses and certain specific categories are now included. This expansion has, alongside reducing caseloads and prison overcrowding, enhanced the victim's role in the adjudicatory process and furthered the primary aim of restorative justice, namely compensation of harm in place of purely punitive responses.

Achievements of Compoundable Crimes in the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences

The Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences, by expanding the range of compoundable crimes, has produced highly significant achievements which, in addition to facilitating the work of judicial authorities, play a substantial role in realizing the components of justice. These achievements can be outlined as follows.

Active Participation of the Victim in the Adjudicatory Process

The commission of a crime against an individual, in addition to causing diverse physical, financial, psychological, and emotional harm to the victim, involves the victim in complex procedures within medical, police, and judicial institutions. Moreover, the victim faces difficulties arising from the multiplicity of actors and parallel files in criminal, civil, and administrative domains. At the same time, the harms suffered severely diminish the victim's financial and psychological capacity, placing them in an even more vulnerable position. Therefore, the codification of victims' rights within the criminal process must be built upon a solid foundation that accurately takes into account their needs and problems. Undoubtedly, the preservation of human dignity and inherent human worth, as one of the fundamental and inalienable human rights, constitutes a central pillar of such a design (10).

For many years, the principal focus of the criminal justice system was on the protection of the accused and their rights, on the assumption that the defendant stands defenseless against a powerful institution such as the prosecutor's office. This view led to a strong emphasis on developing and safeguarding the rights of the accused. Meanwhile, the role of the victim in advancing the preliminary investigation process received little attention and the victim was largely placed in a passive position. With the emergence of a victim-centered approach, the status of the crime victim and their rights gradually attracted greater attention and, in some countries' criminal justice systems, began to be redefined. In this vein, Iran's new Code of Criminal Procedure, drawing on human-rights foundations, has undergone substantial developments in the area of victims' rights. From the very initial stages of the criminal process, the statute provides for victim protection and emphasizes the right to security and preservation of identity. Our analysis indicates that, in comparison with earlier laws, this code recognizes the victim as an engaged and active actor in the preliminary investigation process (29).

The enhancement of the victim's role and status in the criminal process is among the consequences of the development of protective victimology. Examination of the victim's presence in criminal proceedings across different

systems shows that the impact of victim-supportive ideas manifests differently from one system to another. In particular, in criminal systems based on the Romano–Germanic tradition, such as Germany and France, the victim's role in initiating and pursuing criminal prosecution is more significant than in systems rooted in common law. However, in common-law systems, the victim's presence at the sentencing stage is more prominent than in Romano–Germanic systems. In Iran's criminal system as well (in the area of ta'zir crimes), similar to Germany and France, the victim plays a considerable role in initiating and pursuing criminal prosecution, though this role becomes less pronounced at the sentencing stage (30).

In Article 11 of the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences, the legislator, by defining more diverse criteria, has expanded the scope of compoundable crimes more than ever before. This measure reflects the legislator's special attention to the victim's position in such offenses, since the initiation and termination of proceedings depend on the victim's will. In this way, the legislator has granted the victim a more active role in the adjudicatory process, which can be regarded as one of the major achievements of this law (6).

In this section of the research, the authors, by emphasizing the shift in Iran's criminal justice approach from defendant-centered to victim-centered, explain the victim's new status in the adjudicatory process. The text shows that the victim is not only exposed to multidimensional harm caused by the crime but is also entangled in institutional and administrative complexities; therefore, effective protection of the victim must rest on principles of human dignity and restorative justice. In light of recent developments in the Code of Criminal Procedure and especially the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences, the victim has been transformed from a passive element into an active agent. In this respect, Article 11 of the law, by expanding the range of compoundable crimes, strengthens the victim's decision-making role in initiating and terminating proceedings and thereby paves the way for more effective victim participation in the implementation of criminal justice.

Qualitative Calibration of Offenses Against Property

One of the notable results of the Law on Reducing Imprisonment Sentences is the application of a policy of qualitative calibration in dealing with certain common property offenses, such as fraud and related forms, as well as theft and its branches. The qualitative policy articulated in this law is particularly grounded in the principles of restorative justice. Restorative justice, as an alternative or complement to traditional models of criminal justice, instead of focusing solely on the offense (which is the basis of retributive justice) or solely on the offender (which underlies rehabilitative justice), sets its principal aim on repairing the harm suffered by the victim, preventing the offender's exclusion from society, and securing the rights of the community as an entity affected by the crime. This approach, in conjunction with ensuring the principle of individualized sentencing, is one of the salient features of the law. In this part of the research, some of the relevant achievements arising from this shift are examined (3).

Qualitative calibration in light of the amount of property taken from the victim

Today, the concept of private ownership is recognized as one of the fundamental pillars of most societies and forms part of the essential elements of individuals' civil rights and freedoms. Accordingly, just as citizens enjoy personal freedoms and must be able to make free decisions on matters such as choosing their occupation or place of residence, their financial rights and interests also require legal protection and must be safeguarded against any unlawful interference by offenders. To protect individuals' lawful property, the legislator has provided both criminal and civil sanctions (31).

In criminal regulations, the sanctions prescribed for offenses against property have generally been uniform and applied solely on the basis of proof of the offense's elements, without regard to the amount of damage caused. This approach, in situations where the extent of harm is minimal in some cases and highly significant in others, has created challenges. However, in the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences, the legislator has taken steps to reform this criminal policy. In this statute, for the first time, by considering the amount of damage in certain property offenses, the scope of the victim's power to forgive has been expanded and a distinct criminal policy has been adopted for such cases (20).

Qualitative calibration with regard to the offender's criminal record

Qualitative calibration in criminal law refers to the aggravation of punishment based on specific circumstances that increase the offender's dangerousness and culpability. In this regard, the offender's criminal record is one of the most important factors in qualitative calibration. This issue also has particular significance in Iranian law, and with the amendment of Article 104 in 2023, a new approach has been adopted in this area. This amendment, aimed at making the qualitative calibration process more precise and effective, enables judges to determine more appropriate punishments in light of the defendant's criminal history (7). Thus, factors such as the number of prior offenses, the nature of previous crimes, and the time elapsed since the last offense may contribute to increasing the sentence. This approach seeks to impose more serious consequences on repeat offenders in order to reduce criminality and enhance social security (32).

Qualitative calibration with regard to the form of criminal liability

Different forms of criminal liability, in addition to indicating the offender's role in the commission of the crime, also reflect the extent of harm inflicted on the victim. Accordingly, if the legislator were to treat individuals with different forms of liability identically, criminal justice would not be properly realized (5). The achievement of justice, therefore, requires criminal responses proportionate to each individual's form of liability. In this context, Article 11 of the Law on Reduction, which addresses the characteristics of compoundable crimes, provides that "... attempt and complicity in all the aforementioned offenses ... are compoundable." In fact, the legislator has distinguished between criminal liability arising from direct commission and participation—entailing direct perpetration of the offense—and liability based on complicity. In other words, for the compoundable nature of direct commission and participation in fraud and theft offenses, factors such as the monetary value involved or the offender's criminal record are determinative; but complicity in these crimes is considered compoundable without any additional conditions, owing to the particular nature of complicity-based liability (15).

Another consequence of the Law on Reduction is that the criminal response toward the offender varies in accordance with the extent of the acts carried out. In other words, where an offense has reached only the stage of attempt—such as attempted fraud and its forms, or attempted theft and its derivatives—the legislator, irrespective of any special condition and solely on the basis of the limited extent of the acts performed, has deemed these offenses compoundable (3).

It may be said that the legislator, with the aim of realizing restorative justice and individualizing punishments, has sought to implement a dynamic and flexible criminal response to financial offenses. By taking into account indicators such as the extent of financial loss, the offender's criminal history, and the form of criminal liability, the law departs from a uniform approach to sentencing and creates a qualitative differentiation among offenders. Such a policy

reflects a transition from traditional criminal justice toward a more rational approach tailored to the individual, social, and financial characteristics of both offender and victim. Within this framework, the legislator, while expanding the scope of compoundable crimes, has made it possible to restore damaged relationships and prevent the social exclusion of offenders—an outcome consistent with the principles of restorative justice and the broader objectives of reducing the prison population in Iran's criminal justice system.

Compoundability of Crimes in Light of the Offender's Age

Diverse achievements in the fields of criminology and penology, along with practical experience in dealing with offenders, have clearly shown that a uniform pattern for handling juvenile delinquency is ineffective and may even contribute to entrenching criminal behavior among children and adolescents. In this regard, international human rights instruments and norms, focusing on multiple protective components, have consistently sought to prevent delinquency from becoming habitual in this group. The principle of “the best interests of the child,” which has always been treated as a fundamental guideline in the criminal policy framework of the United Nations, is a key benchmark that encourages domestic policymakers to adopt appropriate measures ensuring the child's and adolescent's permanent separation from criminal proceedings. The Iranian criminal justice system, drawing on these developments, has endeavored—on the basis of paragraph 1 of Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child—to incorporate this principle into its processes (33).

In all legal systems worldwide, protecting adolescents, whether as offenders or as victims, is regarded as one of the core priorities. The legislator, in the Law on Reducing Imprisonment Sentences, has paid special attention to this issue and has expanded the scope of compoundable crimes by taking the age of offenders into account. In this respect, Article 11 of the Law on Reduction stipulates that all ta'zir crimes of degree five and lower committed by persons under eighteen years of age, where a victim is present, fall under Note 1 of Article 100 of this law and Article 12 of the Code of Criminal Procedure adopted in 2014, and are considered compoundable. The legislator's aim in this provision is to reduce juveniles' contact with the judicial process and to prevent them from becoming accustomed to criminal behavior. For this reason, the scope of compoundable crimes has been broadened in this article. According to this rule, all offenses of ta'zir degrees five through eight committed by minors, where a victim exists and regardless of the nature of the offense or other conditions, are treated as compoundable. Such a criminal policy toward juvenile offenders, aimed at breaking the cycle of recidivism and redirecting them toward reform, is one of the principal achievements of the Law on Reduction (6).

In explaining the compoundability of crimes with regard to the offender's age, it may be said that the legislator, in the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences, inspired by an educational approach to juvenile justice, has attempted to shape criminal responses to persons under eighteen in a reform- and rehabilitation-oriented direction. Since juveniles, compared with adults, do not possess stable personalities and fully mature reasoning, the legislator—by expanding the scope of compoundable crimes for this group—has created a framework in which the response to victimization is realized through forgiveness and reconciliation between the parties rather than through liberty-depriving punishments. This policy reflects a more humane vision of criminal justice whose objective is not merely punishment but the juvenile's reintegration into society and the prevention of the consolidation of a criminal identity—an approach that fully aligns with international principles on child protection and the “best interests of the child.”

Reduction of Imprisonment Sentences in Compoundable Crimes

Delinquency is rooted in structural and social factors that imprisonment alone cannot remedy. As long as the causes and conditions of offending persist in society, prisons will continue to face the problem of overcrowded inmate populations (34). Although imprisonment produces substantial negative consequences for individuals, society, and the state, it still constitutes a considerable share of the sentences handed down by the courts. Nevertheless, this punishment has limited effectiveness in preventing recidivism (12).

In recent years, the country's judicial policies have heavily focused on criminalization and severity in dealing with offenders. This approach has led to a sharp increase in the number of prisoners, and prisons now hold far more inmates than their actual capacity. This situation has created serious challenges both for prisoners and for the justice system (35). Imprisonment has been criticized for reasons such as its harmful effects on the offender, on his or her family, and on society; its insufficient deterrent impact; the high costs of maintaining inmates; and prisons' tendency to become environments for professionalizing criminals through interaction with other offenders. In this context, various proposals have been advanced to reduce reliance on this form of punishment. One manifestation of such criticisms was the enactment of the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences in 2020, which represents an effort to reform the prevailing trend (14).

One of the most important achievements of the Law on Reduction is not only the expansion of the scope of compoundable crimes but also the reduction of imprisonment terms for such offenses. In this respect, a note has been added to Article 11 of the law, providing that the minimum and maximum ta'zir imprisonment terms of degrees four through eight for compoundable crimes are reduced by half. Thus, by adopting this rule, the legislator has significantly lowered the statutory length of imprisonment. Furthermore, additional provisions have been established under which reduced imprisonment of up to three months is converted into alternative sanctions. In this regard, Article 2 of the Law on Reduction stipulates that a new note is added to Article 18 of the Islamic Penal Code (adopted in 2013, as amended), requiring the court, whenever it imposes a term of imprisonment exceeding the statutory minimum, to specify the reasons and legal grounds for doing so under the paragraphs of that article or other legal bases (15).

Failure to comply with this note results in the imposition of a fourth-degree disciplinary sanction on the judge. Under this rule, imposing the minimum statutory term of imprisonment is the default and a legal obligation, whereas imposing a sentence above the minimum requires the explicit mention of one of the reasons listed in Article 18 of the 2013 Islamic Penal Code. In addition, the note to Article 6 of the Law on Reduction states that where, in applying this article or other provisions that lead to sentence mitigation, the court imposes a custodial sentence of less than ninety-one days, such punishment must be converted into an alternative sanction. In other words, this note has been drafted with the aim of eliminating short-term imprisonment below ninety-one days and preventing offenders from entering prison in such cases. This measure constitutes one of the most important achievements of the Law on Reduction (20).

In analyzing the effects of the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences on compoundable crimes, it can be said that this statute marks a turning point in the shift from a punitive, severity-based criminal policy toward a restorative and individualized model of justice. Given that compoundable crimes are more private in nature and reconciliation plays a fundamental role in their resolution, reducing imprisonment and replacing it with non-custodial sanctions appears to be a rational approach consistent with the philosophy of gradual de-penalization.

Nonetheless, implementing this policy may encounter challenges in judicial practice—for instance, inconsistent interpretations of the range of offenses covered or uncertainty about how to apply mitigation where the victim's forgiveness is partial. Overall, reducing imprisonment in compoundable crimes, while lowering the human and economic costs of the criminal justice system, requires consistent case law and close judicial supervision to ensure that the legislator's true goals of reform and rehabilitation are fully realized.

Challenges of Compoundable Crimes in the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences

The Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences, through the expansion of the scope of compoundable crimes and due to the wording and structural choices it employs, has given rise to a number of challenges, discussed below.

Ambiguity in the Scope of Enumerated Instances of Compoundable Crimes

One of the challenges related to the implementation of the Law on Reduction concerns ambiguity in identifying the instances of compoundable crimes. For example, the offense of fraud and its related forms are among the crimes for which the possibility of forgiveness (compoundability) has been recognized. In this regard, the amended Article 104 provides that: "The offenses of transfer of property belonging to others and fraud under Article 1 of the Law on Intensifying the Punishment of Perpetrators of Bribery, Embezzlement, and Fraud, adopted on 6 December 1988 by the Expediency Discernment Council, provided that the amount does not exceed the threshold stipulated in Article 36 of this Code, as well as all offenses deemed fraud-like and offenses for which the punishment of fraud has been prescribed, or which are classified as fraud under the law, shall, in the presence of a victim, be considered compoundable." Under this portion of the provision, the offense of fraud and its related instances are recognized as compoundable crimes under the conditions specified.

Given that Article 741 of the Islamic Penal Code criminalizes "computer-related fraud," this offense is considered a form of fraud in the eyes of the legislator. Therefore, the rules set out in the added note to Article 47 and in Article 104 of the amended Islamic Penal Code of 2020 (as incorporated in the 2020 Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences) are applicable to this offense as well (34).

Analyzing the scope of the enumerated instances of compoundable crimes shows that one of the unclear aspects of these provisions is the lack of a clear distinction between offenses "deemed to be fraud" and those that "carry the punishment of fraud." This ambiguity has led to divergent interpretations in judicial practice when determining which crimes fall within the range of offenses subject to victim forgiveness. In particular, in cases such as computer fraud or transfer of property belonging to others, it is not entirely clear whether all forms of such offenses, regardless of the circumstances of commission and the amount involved, are automatically treated as compoundable. This lack of clarity regarding the conceptual and practical boundaries of this group of offenses, in addition to generating inconsistency in the application of the law, reduces legal certainty and weakens the principle of equality in the application of victim forgiveness.

Ambiguity Arising from the Requirement of a Victim in Property Offenses

The primary rationale for criminalizing property offenses is the protection of individuals' proprietary rights. In other words, this category of offenses is fundamentally designed to safeguard the property and financial interests of natural and legal persons, whether private or public. From this perspective, conceptualizing a property offense that

lacks an identifiable owner or beneficiary appears impossible and contrary to the legal logic of this field (36). Any infringement upon property inherently presupposes the existence of a victim or dispossessed owner whose proprietary rights have been violated.

Nevertheless, Article 11 of the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences imposes the condition of the “existence of a victim” for deeming property offenses (including fraud and theft) compoundable. This approach, given the inherent nature of these offenses—which already presuppose the existence of an owner or injured party—can be open to criticism. Since a property offense cannot logically occur without an owner or dispossessed party, making the existence of a victim a condition for compoundability appears self-evident and redundant, and may not resolve the core challenges in this area; rather, it may create new ambiguities (8).

From a legal perspective, it may be argued that the “existence of a victim” in property offenses, although seemingly introduced to safeguard the rights of injured parties, has in practice generated conceptual and operational ambiguity in interpreting the statute. In offenses that inherently involve an infringement of property rights, the existence of a victim is an intrinsic and undeniable element of the offense, not an independent condition for compoundability. Accordingly, the insertion of such a condition in Article 11 of the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences does not add any genuine functional value to the criminal justice system and may, when applied to specific instances such as public or state property, create uncertainty in identifying the victim and determining the legal effects of forgiveness. This ambiguity blurs the boundary between compoundable and non-compoundable crimes and thereby challenges the principles of clarity and foreseeability in criminal policy.

Ambiguity Regarding the Various Forms of Criminal Liability and the Conditions Set Out in Article 11 of the Law on Reduction

Article 11 of the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences, adopted in 2020, was enacted to reduce the prison population by creating mechanisms and conditions for substituting imprisonment with other types of punishment. However, this very flexibility can itself become a source of ambiguity in determining and applying criminal liability. For example, in identifying a “judge” who independently decides on the implementation of alternative sanctions, or in assessing the “mental and psychological state of the accused” and its relationship to the commission of the offense, different judges may apply different standards. This can lead to uncertainty in cases and inconsistent outcomes for defendants.

Furthermore, ambiguity concerning the “capacity and effectiveness” of alternative sanctions in terms of deterrence and offender rehabilitation may influence the way different forms of criminal liability (such as complicity versus direct commission) are treated. Greater clarification of the criteria for identifying and applying these alternatives could help reduce ambiguities and increase certainty in the judicial system (20).

One of the major challenges in interpreting criminal statutes lies in the ambiguity surrounding the definition and explanation of the conditions and forms of criminal liability, particularly in relation to compoundability. This issue is evident in Article 104 of the Islamic Penal Code, as amended in 2020. Under this provision, ta’zir offenses whose punishments are capable of mitigation, suspension, or conversion into non-custodial sanctions, and for which the term of imprisonment does not exceed ninety-one days, or where the public aspect of the offense does not outweigh its private aspect, are subject to special consideration regarding compoundability.

The Legal Affairs Department of the Judiciary, in Advisory Opinion No. 7/99/649 dated 19 August 2020, has addressed this provision and stated that the conditions set by the legislator provide a framework for identifying

compoundable crimes and applying the corresponding legal effects. Nevertheless, ambiguities remain concerning how to determine when “the public aspect outweighs the private aspect” of an offense and how precisely to interpret the “less than ninety-one days” threshold for imprisonment. These issues may continue to cause difficulties in judicial practice and influence the handling of cases and the execution of criminal judgments (15).

An analysis of Article 11 of the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences shows that, despite the legislator’s intention to moderate and humanize criminal responses, ambiguity in aligning the various forms of criminal liability with the conditions stipulated in this article constitutes one of the fundamental challenges facing the criminal justice system. From a legal standpoint, the lack of precise criteria for delineating the scope of criminal liability in compoundable offenses—particularly in differentiating between direct commission, complicity, and participation—has led to inconsistent judicial decisions regarding the application of alternative sanctions, mitigation, or suspension of execution. In addition, determining such matters as “the predominance of the public aspect over the private aspect” or “the extent to which alternative sanctions contribute to the offender’s rehabilitation,” in the absence of a unified practice, has produced discrepancies in judicial rulings.

Victim Forgiveness and Challenges in Cases of Multiple Similar Material Offenses

One of the important innovations of the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences is its new approach to determining punishment for multiple similar offenses committed by a single defendant. Under Article 134 of the Islamic Penal Code of 2013, in cases of multiple offenses—whether similar or dissimilar—a separate punishment was determined for each offense. This could lead to the accumulation of penalties and consequently to increased imprisonment for the defendant, even where the offenses were of the same or very similar nature.

In contrast, the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences has introduced a fundamental change by adopting a regime under which the commission of multiple similar offenses by a single defendant requires the imposition of only one unified punishment. This innovation is a step toward moderating the punitive approach and reducing imprisonment, especially in cases where the offenses are highly similar in nature and legal characterization. The aim of this change is to prevent excessive multiplication of punishments and to achieve greater proportionality between crime and punishment, with emphasis on the similar nature of the offenses committed (8).

Assume, for example, that an individual commits ten counts of breach of trust. Pursuant to Article 11 of the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences, breach of trust under Article 674 of the Islamic Penal Code (Ta’zirat, 1996) is considered a compoundable offense. Furthermore, under Article 100 of the Islamic Penal Code of 2013: “Compoundable crimes are offenses for which the initiation and continuation of prosecution and adjudication, as well as the execution of the sentence, depend upon the complaint of the private complainant and the absence of forgiveness by such complainant.”

In light of the above, if some of the complainants grant complete forgiveness before the issuance of a final judgment, the judicial authority will issue an order for discontinuance of prosecution in respect of those counts. However, if, after the issuance of a final judgment and during the execution stage, some complainants grant forgiveness while others insist on execution of the punishment, difficulties arise: given that a single punishment has been imposed for multiple offenses committed by the defendant, the enforcement authorities face a challenge.

Under the previous law, this difficulty did not exist: because a separate punishment was imposed for each offense, the execution authorities, upon forgiveness by some complainants, could issue an order for discontinuance

of execution with respect to those specific counts, and no practical challenge comparable to that which now exists under the new law arose (15).

Under the new Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences, the imposition of a single punishment for multiple similar material offenses creates, at the enforcement stage, a challenge related to differentiating the effects of partial forgiveness. The difficulty arises from the fact that, when some of the complainants grant forgiveness after the final judgment, it is unclear how such partial forgiveness affects the unified punishment. Under the previous practice, a separate punishment existed for each count, and the enforcement authority could discontinue execution solely with respect to the forgiven counts. Now, however, with a single aggregate punishment, the enforcement authority must determine whether the forgiveness of some complainants leads to reduction, modification, or complete suspension of the punishment. Thus, the challenge is both practical and interpretive: determining the extent and limits of the effect of partial forgiveness on the execution of a single unified punishment in cases of multiple similar material offenses has become a contentious and ambiguous issue among judicial authorities.

Conclusion

In line with the objectives of this study and in response to its key research questions, the findings of the analyses and examinations conducted can be summarized as follows:

The scope of compoundable crimes—particularly with regard to the enumerated instances and conditions such as the existence of a victim and the various forms of criminal liability, which at times appear ambiguous and indeterminate—remains a complex subject requiring careful legal scrutiny. Although the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences has expanded the scope of compoundable crimes with the aim of moderating the punitive approach and reducing imprisonment, ambiguities persist concerning the precise criteria for determining compoundability, its effects on different forms of liability (including civil liability alongside criminal liability), and the means of establishing the victim's genuine consent. These complexities highlight the need for clear judicial interpretation and unified judicial practice to prevent fluctuations in the implementation of the law and to safeguard the rights of all parties involved.

The Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences, with its emphasis on the concept of compoundable crimes, has yielded notable achievements. One of the most prominent of these is the enhancement of the victim's active participation in the adjudicatory process, such that the victim's consent or lack thereof plays a decisive role in the outcome of the case. Additionally, the law has contributed to the qualitative calibration of property offenses and, by considering factors such as the offender's age, has enabled the compoundability of certain offenses. This approach reflects an effort to strengthen the restorative and protective dimensions of the criminal justice system, aiming to reduce overreliance on imprisonment and to increase the effectiveness of sanctions by taking into account the specific circumstances of both victims and offenders.

Despite its efforts to moderate the criminal policy approach through expanding the scope of compoundable crimes, the Law on Reducing Discretionary Imprisonment Sentences also faces multiple challenges. Among these are the ambiguity surrounding the scope of the enumerated compoundable crimes, which invites divergent interpretations; the condition of the existence of a victim in property offenses and the ambiguity involved in identifying such a victim; and the uncertainty regarding different forms of criminal liability (including direct commission, complicity, and other forms) within the framework of the conditions set out in Article 11 of the law.

Furthermore, victim forgiveness in cases involving multiple similar material offenses—where punishments differ—may create challenges in determining the legal effects of such forgiveness and the manner in which it should be applied. These ambiguities underscore the need for clearer statutory drafting and more precise judicial guidelines to ensure the fair and efficient implementation of the law.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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