Witness to massacre

Mehdi Kia talks to former Iranian political prisoner Monireh Baradaran

Mehdi Kia: This September is the tenth anniversary of an enormous crime. The Islamic regime ordered the execution of its political prisoners. This crime has never been openly acknowledged. We do not know how many were executed, nor even where the majority were buried. But it is not just the Islamic regime that denies this hideous crime. A virtual blanket of silence by the foreign press and even human rights tribunals, threatens to bury this crime, like so many others, in the dust of history. Yet the regime that murdered those thousands is still there, unrepentant, and perhaps planning something similar in the face of growing internal opposition.

Now that for the first time the demands that, among others, Iran bulletin made for the regime to be put on trial for this and other crimes is being heard [1], I wanted to ask you, as one of the few living witnesses, to recall your own experiences of this crime as you saw it. How did it take shape? How did it hit you? What happened?...

Monireh Baradaran: Torture and execution are not new to Iran, especially during the life of the Islamic Republic. But what happened in the summer of 1988, was without doubt the darkest and most horrific chapter in the history of political prisons of Iran. Country-wide in under two months thousands of opponents were murdered, silently and in secret.

A decade later, many aspects of this huge massacre remain in the dark. How many died? Why? And how? The regime of the Islamic Republic has avoided these questions. The only definite thing, which the rulers themselves have used to justify their actions, is that the order came directly from Khomeini.

Reyshahri, who heads the Islamic Revolutionary Courts said “the venerable Imam [Khomeini] made a decisive and revolutionary decision, and by choosing a three-man committee (prosecutor, security officer, and prison governor) ordered that a serious decision be made regarding the hypocrites (a pejorative term refer-
ring to the Mujahedin) inside the prison. Such that if this committee finds any prisoners who are still adamant in their counter-revolutionary position, and after being released will re-join the hypocrite organisation, they should be executed immediately”.

Summer of death

I will recall some of my experience in that summer of death. That summer I was in Teheran’s Evin prison. All women political prisoners from Gohardasht and Ghezel Hessar had been transferred there.

One August day we heard on the 2 o’clock radio news bulletin that the Islamic Republic had finally accepted UN resolution 598 and agreed to a cease fire in the Iran-Iraq war. Did this mean an end to the war? For the next few days the papers continued to carry reports of war and “martyrdom”. In one corner we read that the hypocrites had appeared on the western frontiers [2].

Then newspapers stopped coming and the television was taken away. The weekly visits were suspended “until further notice”. Letters from outside also ceased. There was total news blackout. Here and there we heard rumours that some of the male prisoners who had been taken to solitary confinement some months ago were executed.

We were stunned. We did not believe anything - neither the peace, nor the war, nor the horrendous happening which we were beginning to smell around us. We sat waiting. We waited for something horrible, but we had no idea what and how.

Some days later, they took away some Mujahedin in the night. We stood there, in the corridor, silent and dazed as they took them away. They said goodbye. Why? We did not know, and did not want to believe that that horrible thing was about to happen: In an hour, in the middle of the night or the following dawn.

A few days later they took some more prisoners. One of them returned that afternoon, pale and frightened. We were walking fast in the prison courtyard. She still wore the chador [3]. She walked over to her friends and whispered something quickly. We saw the fear in that corner of the yard, and we still could not bring ourselves to believe in the catastrophe. They took her away after a few minutes, this time for ever. A few days later all the Mujahedin in our block were called. We said our goodbyes. They
tried to keep calm and we stood there in the corridor, dazed, gazing at their departure.

That night we heard shots from the Evin and Pasdars [revolutionary guards] marching outside the prison block. Their voice was terrifying when they shouted “death to the hypocrites, death to the non-believer.” We knew something was happening this side of the prison walls, something very frightening, that those on the other side of the prison walls did not know. But what was that thing?

They stopped taking anyone to the central clinic. There we were and the four walls, and a courtyard whose sky had changed. We looked up at it and asked ourselves: what is happening.

Then one day they broadcast the Friday prayers over the loudspeakers. The hezbollah were shouting “Death to hypocrites! Death to communists!” with all their might and then they screamed “kill the hypocrite prisoner!” Why the prisoner? After all our hands were tied. We could not go to war. One day we got hold of a piece of newspaper which contained an interview with a high ranking official in the judiciary. He had said “it is now the turn of these brazen communists who should be wiped out”.

Every word of that interview held a terror that sent shivers down your spine.

In early August, a new inmate was brought in. She recounted that while in solitary she heard that every day a number of women were taken out to be lashed at each prayer time. A few days later some of our group were taken away. They returned and in the few moments we had together told us that in their retrial they were given the choice of death by lashing or accepting Islam and prayer. Before the noon muezzin they were taken away again. They told us they would go on hunger strike.

Thereafter every day, with every call to prayer, we would be nailed to the spot, as if life momentarily departed our bodies. As if the whips were burning into our own flesh. The morning call to prayer would wake us, the imagined scene haunted us: cell doors opened one by one. The prisoner is taken out and laid on the bed in the middle of the corridor. And the lash. And the wait for the next whipping. Five times a day. Was this wait not more terrifying than lashing itself? Especially as there was to be no end. You see, punishment for non-believers was to believe, or be whipped to death.

Some people who had cracked under the lash and agreed to prayer were brought back to the cell block. We saw them through the windows, desolate and broken. Dawn, the muezzins call was mixed with the wailing cries of a woman. This was another pain which burned to the heart. Later I learnt that it belonged to Mahnaz, who had bowed in to prayer after days of whipping.

**The trial**

About thirty girls, in three separate bunches, were taken from our cell-block for trial and lashings. They were asked: “do you pray?” and “are you a Muslim?” If the replies were negative or ambiguous such as “I am thinking about it” or “I am a Muslim but do not pray” the punishment was the lash. The court’s decision was given there and then. And the whipping was also immediate. Some agree to pray after days of lashings. About fifteen, resisted and were lashed day in and day out until the programme came to an abrupt stop. We now knew which days were set aside for the trials. We waited our own turn.

Then abruptly, in early October, things changed as if by a miracle. A new prison governor was appointed. The lashings ceased. Papers began to arrive and the TV was re-installed.

Yet neither our family, nor we were told what had happened in those three months in the prison. The visitors found out of the tragedy when on coming to visit their prisoner, their belongings were handed over. They understood then that they had been executed.

We get the news from the families. We did not cry. We were in a state of shock. Perhaps we still could not grasp the fact that what had happened was something more than a nightmare. Everyone who came back form the visits added a new name to those who had been vanished. We found out that all the Mujahedin from our block, some 40 women, had been executed. The men suffered. Almost everyone among us who had a husband, brother, or relative in prison, discovered they had been killed.

They said they had been hanged. Someone had seen a furgani filled with prisoners’ slippers. A prisoner on the noose has no need for a slipper. We heard that Gowhardasht cell-blocks were almost emptied and the remainder have been gathered in one block. We heard all these but we were too numb and unbelieving to cry.

They hauled us up day and night. Question after question: “are you a Muslim?”, “do you pray?”, “do you accept the velayat faqih?” [4]. Then one night they told us to pack our things. We neatly folded them up inside our sacks and sewed our names clearly on the outside. It was important that after us our things should get to our family neatly. We did not believe the loss of those who had gone. Now we even doubted that we had remained.

**MK:** Did they try you? Was everyone tried? How did they choose who to take? Could you describe the atmosphere in your room when you heard news of the killings?

**Monireh Baradaran:** I don’t know how they chose. I was not taken to trial.

About 30 women of the 120 in our block were taken out, tried and lashed. As to the other questions, can I refer you to my book [see page ]. It is not easy for me to recreate that hell yet again, and even more to do it in just a few words. You can imagine how painful every reminder is to me. Please forgive me, but I hope you will understand why these questions upset me. It was bad enough to relive that experience once before.

**MK:** What were conditions like in the prisons before the massacre? Had it changed after the dark years of 1981-84? Was there any preparations for this massacre? Were there any signs that such a mass killing was in the offing? For example, had they moved any of the so-called “unrepentants”?

**Monireh Baradaran:** After 1984 conditions did improve. This coincided with the removal of Lajevardi as the head of prisons, and Haj Davud Rahmani as governor of Ghezel-Hissar prison. The improvement was especially noticeable in Gowhardasht and Ghezel-Hissar. I have had the experience of both my transfer to Evin. I also had a spell in the Eshrat-Abad Komite after my arrest. I have also tasted the Shah’s infamous Combined Committee.

The prisoners used this new climate to step up their protests. Moreover, the release after 1985 of many prisoners who had been repenent [known as tavvab], and who had acted as the eyes and ears of the prison authorities (and even in torture and executions), a certain degree of freedom of action was possible. Prisoners no longer need to submit to any made-up regulation by the tavvabs or Pasdars.
such as the ban on talking, or laughing etc. There were even some group protests and hunger strikes in the years 1986-87 by prisoners of both sexes.

None of these was to the liking of the Islamic Republic who had hoped to have silenced all potential protest and opposition by its mass arrest and execution of a large number of opponents in the early 1980's. It was undoubtedly waiting for an opportunity to purge the prisons. This excuse was given to them when the Mujahedin attacked the western front. Also, the regime after the Mujahedin attacked the western front the regime accepted UN Resolution 598 for a cease-fire. Yet this was only an excuse to set into motion its "final solution" to the problem of political prisoners. The regime had planned its wicked aims from months before:

They had re-interrogated every single prisoner. This time round questions were over the prisoners' beliefs and position: their views on the Islamic Republic, on theelayate faqih, on political organisations... the interrogations were conducted by the ministry of security. At the same time the prison authorities, under supervision of the ministry of information, were moving prisoners around in Gowhardashi and Evin. For some time they had separated the "unrepentant" [sare-noxe'h] prisoners, the rest. They had taken some, who had served their prison terms, to closed rooms. Some, who had a death sentence but had not been executed for various bureaucratic reasons or even perhaps differences of opinion between the prosecutors office and the Supreme Judicial Council (which had to ratify all death sentences) were sent to solitary cells.

The executions of 1988 were totally unrelated to the original "crime" or action of the prisoner, but solely on their views and position. They killed any Mujahed who they believed was still attached to his or her group, and leftist prisoners who they thought still believed in Marxism.

MK: how did the executions take place. Were the trials single or in groups? Do you have any estimate of the number killed, or is there a list compiled anywhere? How many were men and how many were women?

Monireh Baradaran: They were hanged. One tavvab woman was taken from the block below us to witness the execution of her husband. She had seen the rope on her husband's neck and another woman who had her chador tied round her neck. She herself was due to be executed but had escaped that fate by being tavvab and surrendering to any co-operation. Afterwards she became psychologically unbalanced and had nightmares every night.

Trials were individual. Prisoners were hauled in front of the religious judge - Nayeri - and a representative of the Ministry of Information. As I mentioned, questions were all about views and political positions. Mujahedin prisoners, even if they rejected their group, were required to co-operate with information, such as names of unrepentant fellow-prisoners, or to spy on them.

I do not know how many died. I estimate that in Evin 250 Mujahedin prisoners were sent to the gallows that August. Communist women were whipped for being a non-believer. They have told us that in Islam the punishment of non-believing women is whipping till they die. Either they die under the lash or repent. In fact a few women took the blows out till a hair's breadth of death. In early October they abruptly stopped the lashings. You see how living was also by pure chance. It took longer to die under the lash than with the rope round your neck.

I have heard that 4,000 to 5,000 died in two months that bloody summer. A list is being compiled in Sweden and Paris and the Society for the Defence of Political Prisoners is calling for information.

MK: In view of the fact that many of those who died had spent seven or eight years in prison and even finished their sentence what was the regime afraid of?

Monireh Baradaran: As I said it wanted to rid itself once and for all of political prisoners. It also feared the protest of prisoners, especially if after the cease-fire international human right organisations were allowed into the country. Finally it wanted to make the acceptance of a degrading cease-fire agreement more palatable in society by creating an atmosphere of fear.

MK: How did you get new from other cell-blocks or other prisons? Indeed was there an avenue of information between different blocks and between the men and women sections? Also did those who go on trial after the first wave have any idea what awaited them and could therefore adjust their responses accordingly?

Monireh Baradaran: We were totally ignorant of what went on in the male blocks that summer. However, women politicals were housed in a three-storey prison - one on top of the other. We could communicate through the windows.

We had no newspapers or television for the three months. Later on the Islamic Republic paper was delivered to Block 2 which housed tavvab or inactive prisoners. One of our friends sent us a cutting which included the interview with Moghaddam, head of the Supreme Judicial Council who, as I mentioned above threatened "that now after the hypocrites it is the turn of the discredited communists to be destroyed".

As to whether the men had taken the danger of execution seriously I can only refer to what survivors have written. In this regard the writings of Sima Parvash is particularly illuminating. As to the women, except for one or two of the first series who were taken unawares, everyone knew what awaited them - whether Mujahedin most of whom were executed, or the leftist women who knew that death with lashes awaits them if they refuse to accept Islam and prayer.

MK: Why was the massacre halted? How did you hear of it?

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Then Khomeini announced his amnesty in February 1989 and conditions for freedom was eased. They no longer insisted on a video interview, but were content with a simple note rejecting past activity. A few of the women and the majority of the remaining men took this up. Gradually the numbers increased. Two years later they allowed people to go home on "vacation". I have written on this in the last book of my memoirs.

MK: In your view what caused the executions to stop?

Monireh Baradaran: They stopped the killing when the prisons were thoroughly purged. They wanted
most of the prisoners killed, and they were. For those who remained the lesson of that summer of 1988 hung like the sword of Damocles. In fact the shock and blow of the massacre broke the will to protest in the political prisoners. Even though resistance, especially among the leftist women who had escaped the massacre remained, no collective move was made.

The Islamic Republic stopped killing when it attained its goal. I personally doubt if the criticisms of the unbridled executions made by Ayatollah Montazeri - which we later learnt - was influential.

**MK: Do you think the Islamic regime can repeat a similar tragedy today?**

**Monireh Baradaran:** For regimes such as the Islamic Republic who maintain their presence not on the basis of the democratic needs of the people but on repression and a climate of fear, a repeat of such crimes is within its nature.

**MK: Can a repeat massacre be prevented? In your opinion what role is there for us, Iranians, or non-Iranians whose heart beats for freedom and humanity, in this tenth anniversary of that tragedy?**

**Monireh Baradaran:** If a repeat is a possibility, and it is, in order to oppose it we need to act seriously. We need to create institutions, both inside and outside the country, to bring the perpetrators of this crime to justice. One must be aware that no fundamental change can take place towards democracy in Iran without having an answer to the past. In this respect a decade of political experience in Latin America is particularly relevant. We must insist that the trial of the perpetrators of this crime is added to the usual criticisms of human rights abuse and suppression of press freedom that international organisations are making. Without this any change or promise is temporary and superficial. While murderers rule because of the silence of others, freedom is a mere lie.

What took place in that summer in Iran's prisons is only a corner of the criminal dossier of the Islamic regime, and the potential for its repeat is always there. One way of preventing this is to work on an international tribunal of the regime.

The UN Commission on International Law in Geneva on July 26 classified five sets of punishable "crimes against peace and security of humankind". These include massacre, torture, repression for political, ethnic, religious, or racial reasons, institutionalised discrimination, assassination, and causing mutilation. Through its life the hands of the Islamic Republic have been soiled with most of these. There is sufficient evidence to convict the Islamic regime, including the 1988 massacre of political prisoners.

Another task that can be accomplished alongside an international tribunal is to support, or more accurately, invite world public opinion and human rights supporters to support the moves by the mothers of the executed and political prisoners. In the last 18 years, despite pressures and beatings, they have managed to keep together, to observe the anniversary gathering and commemorate their dead in Khavaran cemetery and keep up their mutual support groups. When even mentioning political prisoners had dire consequences, the families of those in prison or executed stood up publicly, and unsupported, for all to see. Many have themselves tasted prison and been beaten up by the Basdaran. Not even the old were spared.

Today many of these feel disillusioned after years of adversity and futile struggle. International support can raise their spirits, and like it did for the Argentinean mothers of the disappeared in Mayo square in the 1980's, make them into an important force for change. The same role that the mothers of Mayo square had in overthrowing the military dictatorship, and the demands that the military murderers be tried, can be taken up by the mothers in my land.

I also feel that another important task is to struggle to set up institutions that reject torture and execution. This slogan should enter the collective consciousness of Iranians, just as exposure of torture and executions in Iran takes root in world public opinion.

It would contend that in Iran today conditions for such protests exist. Whether or not the Khatami regime is capable of changing a regime based on coercion and repression - which in my view in essence it is not - is not under discussion here. Only movements and aspirations for change by the people can cause changes in society and government.

It is interesting that such institutions as "Islamic human rights" which were created as a retort to the International Declaration of Human Rights and the activities of Amnesty International, have had to admit to torture, illegal prisons and disappearances. Or other periodicals published in Iran [Iran Farda no. 46. Special issue on the legal opposition] talk openly of horrific prisons, and torture.

In this climate it is not beyond imagination that efforts to create institutions that defend human rights may yield fruit. I believe that only the institutionalisation of these demands and wishes can work towards vanishing prison and execution from our land. Mere change of governments in themselves do not change anything. Torture and execution reappear in succession. Our own revolution of 1979 gave us the best proof. Not only did they not end, but it gave them horrific dimensions.

Footnotes (by Mehdi Kia)

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Monireh Baradaran was a left activist. She grew up in politically active family and was imprisoned in both the Shah's (1978) and the Islamic regime (1981). In the latter she spent nine years behind bars. She now lives in exile in Germany. Her prison memoirs Hāghihat-e sadēh (simple truth) were first published abroad in three volumes in Farsi. A German translation by Bahram Choubine and Judith West: Erwachen aus dem Alptraum has recently been published by Unionsverlag August 1998.
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