

Reflections of an Iranian Political Prisoner

Minoo Homily

It is said that childhood is the most pleasant stage of human life. As a child, you play and enjoy your life without bothering about society and family responsibilities. This is true for those who live in peace and are free from poverty and discrimination. The bitter realities of life forced me to experience adulthood as a little girl. I have come from a middle class family in the city of Sanadaj located in the Iranian section of Kurdistan. We have been discriminated against in Iran due to our Kurdish ethnicity and due to our religion as Sunni Moslems. Kurdish people have always been suppressed at the hands of various dictatorial regimes.

I felt gross injustice at a very tender age when I saw extremely rich persons in my neighbourhood living side by side with the majority of people who lived under abject poverty. I never forgot when the mother of my playmate committed suicide by burning herself for no other reason than the poverty she experienced. She could not tolerate humiliation and starvation anymore. I instinctually sought justice by crying for this poor mother and extending my helping hands to her daughter. I pleaded with my mother to adopt her.

Simultaneously, I felt injustice at the family level. As a girl, I was expected to observe certain behavioural rules. I was not allowed to laugh loudly. While I was allowed to play with boys as a little girl, I was prohibited from continuing playing with boys at the age of twelve. There was an over-obsession about protecting the virginity of girls by each and every family. A girl who used to go to her husband's house without virginity was at risk of being killed by her male family members. I could not jump or eat pickles because these could presumably affect my virginity. I was constantly blamed for anything that went wrong because I was a girl. Brothers used any excuse to beat sisters. Violence was accepted as a corrective measure. Female genital mutilation was rampant in my region. I was lucky to have a liberal mother who prevented my grand mom to use this infamous atrocity against me. I could, however, see dozens of girls who experienced this practice and developed severe complications. Justice for me, at this time, was an immediate end to all sorts of violence and discriminations against women.

In early 1978, in an attempt to enjoy freedom and social justice, I revolted against the unjust and dictatorial regime of the Shah of Iran. A massive countrywide movement resulted in the downfall of the monarchist regime and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the first few months of the new government, there was a bloody conflict between armed forces of the Islamic regime and civilians in many parts of

the country, especially in Kurdistan. I was a teenager during this chaotic period. This tragic event had a great impact on my perceptions of justice.

When I go back to those days, I feel proud that I did not endorse the massive executions of those who were close to the previous regime including the Shah's Prime Minister, Mr. Hoveida. When I saw their mutilated corpses in newspapers, I was shocked and told friends that justice had nothing to do with execution. I had a strong feeling against the death penalty and retributive justice without naming them as such.

As an adolescent, I combined justice with the highest level of emotion for sick and vulnerable people. My compassion did not accept any boundary. When the new fundamentalist regime began bombarding Kurdistan and killing people, I chose to work as a paramedic in a hospital, trying to help injured civilians and to gather dead bodies from streets. I felt outright injustice from every cell of my body. A mighty army was bombarding the helpless civilian population with seven helicopters from the air and scores of ground rockets. Among dead bodies, I could identify close relatives, teachers and classmates. I tried my best to remain calm and continue with my services. I strongly believe that those who work for justice and freedom should continue their work with braveness and fortitude. I was assigned to carry life-saving medications for a secret hospital. My inexhaustible energy and the lightness of my body helped me to run fast. Bullets used to come from all sides, but somehow they never hit me.

How I could manage to survive these dangerous missions is a long story. But, after the city of Sanandaj was occupied by governmental forces, many doctors and nurses were arrested – some of them were executed. The new leader and the founder of Islamic Republic of Iran, Khomeini, sent the hanging judge Ayatollah Khalkhali to Sanandaj. In a dark bloody night of August 1979, he executed nine Kurdish youth from Sanandaj in a summary trial without providing them the opportunity to have a counsel. Among them were students, teachers, workers and a Sufi master. Two of them were youth living in my neighbourhood. The wave of executions continued and did not spare even medical care-givers including my relative Shahin Bavafa, supervisor of the "Shohada" hospital in Sanandaj. This reconfirmed my commitment against the death penalty as a gross and irreparable breach of the most fundamental principle of justice. Execution is a deliberate murder committed by the state in the name of justice. It takes the right of life away from a human person and is irreversible. It leads to revenge and violence. It has no impact on the prevention of crime. It is an instrument of power.

I could not be excluded from the flood of arrests, but fortunately they could not identify me as a paramedic who had been opposing the regime. I was released after two days. Months later, however, I was arrested again.

This time it was very serious because I was carrying a leaflet from an oppositionist group.

I was imprisoned for the first time when I was fifteen and the second time when I was sixteen. Altogether, I spent four years in jail. Going back to those horrible times is excruciatingly painful for me. My jail was more like Auschwitz. I actually spent a long time in solitary confinement and also in shared cells in the same prison. Different sorts of physical and mental tortures were and are the routine in prisons of Iran. We were whipped, we were deprived from visiting our families, we were kept in solitary for long periods, but that was not all.

In the course of transferring me from Esfahan jail to Sanandaj prison, the guard who was supervising my transfer sexually harassed me. He planned to rape me but was never able to carry it out. He used all sorts of threats and verbal abuses against me. Upon the transfer, I was incarcerated in the women's wards. We were deprived of the minimum standard of hygiene, health, medical treatment and nutrition. We did not have enough space to sleep. We felt suffocated due to the lack of air in our cells. For a year and a half, they threw me in a jail that was designated for dangerous criminals. They occasionally used this type of punishment against political prisoners. Some of these women suffered from venereal diseases. I had to share the bathroom and buckets with them. There was a strict discipline. Prison authorities decided about the time to sleep and to wake up. The regime's fanaticism did not allow women to run and do exercise. Guards had been recruited from declassed hoodlums, religious hooligans, vagabonds, and loafers. Most of them, in my view, suffered from multiple psychological problems. They underwent ongoing brainwashing. If they showed any mercy, they would be replaced immediately. Among us there was a group of prisoners who had been brainwashed to act as "repentants". They collaborated with torturers and some of them participated in the execution of their jail-mates. This was based on the Islamic idea of repentance: to be penitent and compensate for sins presumably committed in the past.

Describing the horror of the situation is not easy. I witnessed many of my cellmates being taken for execution. The executioners would sometimes force us to witness the massacre of political prisoners in the courtyard of the prison and I will never forget their devilish laughter while they washed the blood from the ground. When they took my friends for execution, I felt that they were killing a part of me. I had a feeling as if my heart was being taken out of my chest. It is difficult to lose somebody who has lived with you in the same cell under horrible conditions for lengthy periods of time. Victims normally held the highest standards of morality. Most of them were adolescents. They were killed due to their political opinions.

Let me briefly discuss the life of Fazilat Darayi, who is known to be one of the greatest soldiers of freedom. She was only eighteen when they

executed her. She was totally innocent and was not engaged in any sort of armed activity against the government. They killed her just for her beliefs. She could have saved her life if she had abided by the will of the Islamic regime and rejected her beliefs. But she resisted up to the very last moment, never letting go of her loving ideals and proclaiming this love. She was a heroine, yet she was only one of the thousands of women who fought for freedom and gave their lives for a better tomorrow.

For those who survive, the problems of political prisoners do not stop after their release. A shadow always follows you and at any time you may be arrested again. They exclude you from nourishment of the community because the government deprives you from taking part in social life and this may force you to experience abusive relationships.

In my situation, after years in prison, I became stuck in an abusive marriage. My adolescence had been spent with the smell of blood, prison and torture, execution and gunpowder, which transformed me into a rough personality. Consequently, after the prison, I was somewhat immature in my natural instincts and regarding the relationship between man and woman.

This inexperience put me in another prison named marriage, for my marriage was the fruit of a hasty decision without adequate knowledge about my husband or about any man at all. A chauvinist traditional man was now my new warden and he wasted additional years of my life by beating, harassing and humiliating me. More painfully, the rules and laws of the society supported this man and not me. Therefore I had no choice but to take my little child and escape from the country. Any time I complained to the family court, the judge did not provide me with any kind of legal protection due to being a woman, a Kurd, a person coming from a family belonging to a religious minority and being an ex-political prisoner. I was neither given the right to divorce nor the right to have the custody of my child. The judge even advised my husband to beat me or convert me to the Shia sect of Islam by force. "Beat her", he said, "in a way that it does not leave any scar". This led me to connect the idea of justice to the fundamental rights of humankind including women's rights, children's rights, as well as the rights of national and religious minorities.

Some time later, I escaped my new prison via human smugglers. Having a little daughter, being chased by a lunatic and violent husband, having no passport and being a former political prisoner made my escape a dangerous, breath-taking venture. I was facing the immediate danger of being caught by border police either in Iran or in Turkey. But I made it and once I arrived in Turkey I went to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that is mandated to protect asylum-seekers. I applied for refugee status.

Unfortunately, with great disappointment my first application with the

UNHCR was unsuccessful. I then decided to get support from opposition political parties and human rights organizations. They supported me by holding international campaigns over my refugee status and it worked! The UNHCR was finally forced to re-open my case and to give me my very basic right of being accepted as a refugee. This episode introduced another concept of justice to me: the fundamental right of each and every human person on this planet to seek asylum in other countries when persecuted at home.

In fact, the hardships I went through during that difficult and disastrous time in Turkey instilled within me a commitment that compelled me to engage in activities to support all Iranian asylum seekers. I volunteered to advise them about asylum claims, write letters of support and escort them to relevant offices. I specifically focused on refugee women. There are many asylum seekers now in Turkey in exactly the same situation in which I was trapped or even worse. There are journalists, authors and writers, students, and activists not being heard by the UNHCR. They are in a very fragile situation and could face the danger of deportation at any moment. Moreover, some refugees, despite being accepted by the UNHCR, cannot leave Turkey because of the government. This specific group of Iranian refugees including women and children, entered Turkey from northern Iraq, and they have been in this hard situation for years and years with no end. I am presently working towards their protection.

When I go back to the root causes of my imprisonment and torture, I state with no hesitation that the Iranian regime is genocidal. As a Kurdish woman, I have witnessed the systemic attempt of the regime to wipe out the entire Kurdish population. The same policy is followed against other ethnic and religious minorities of Iran. Everyone is aware that the Islamic regime of Iran has committed mass murder. The Islamic regime committed group-executions, and it has been executing thousands of political prisoners who had actually been sentenced to prison and not to death. Many of these victims have been buried in mass graves.

It should not be forgotten that at the very foundation of the religious tyranny in Iran is the hatred of women, and the yearning to humiliate and abuse them. To understand the misogyny of the regime we need to go back to 1979 when the people of Iran revolted against the Shah. They revolted because they were discounted and dissatisfied. Under the Shah's regime, women had only a small part of their rights, like freedom to wear what they wished. People revolted in order to improve the unjust economic, political and social conditions of the country. Revenues coming from oil were appropriated by a few aristocratic families at the cost of mass poverty. In slums and shanty towns, hundreds of people suffered from homelessness and malnutrition. People knew about Europe and felt they deserved a free life. Once powerful countries decided to strengthen the

opposition against the Islamic regime, women were the pioneers of this opposition. In the modern history of Iran, women's movements for their rights have always contributed to general political movements against tyranny. Women started to defy the new regime in Iran from the first days after the revolution, and they stated that "We didn't make this revolution to go backwards".

This objection of women in addition to the ideological mindset of the present theocratic regime caused the attack on women and all the defenders of liberty in Iran. Although the ideology of the Islamic regime is anti-feminine, this is not the only reason causing the suppression of women. The ruling clerics do this also for the sake of their political benefits. They can maintain their political power by sticking to an outmoded culture of Islamic patriarchy. Women's movements will bring modernity and pluralism that are in conflict with the very foundation of the regime. There are many Moslem governments in the world. However, they do not all violate women's rights to this extent because their political situation is different.

Given the present situation, it is difficult to forecast what the future of Iran holds. There is surely growing sentiment toward freedom and people are fighting for it. The experience of Iraq, however, shows that people should achieve liberty on their own. Any sort of help from people of other countries should be aimed at strengthening opposition to the medieval regime. A military attack by an outside superpower could result in fortifying the basis of the Islamic regime because it provides the government with an excuse to suppress the opposition and deceive people in the name of fighting foreign enemies.

There is definitely a path toward freedom. The present outmoded regime of Iran should be taken over by the decisive political action of the Iranian people, and its constitution and rules should be destroyed to the last particle. In its ruins a democratic system should be established. People will not be content with less than this and they are fighting for their salvation. Our people need to be helped.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Minoo Homily was born in the Kurdistan region of Iran. She is a university graduate in Natural Geography. She spent four years in prison in Iran due to her political and humanitarian activities. At present, she works as a refugee and community activist in Toronto. She is also a writer and a women's advocate, writing in both Farsi and English.