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Literature of captivity: The Book of Prison

Interview with Nasser Mohajer

Ardeshir Mehrdad: What was your motive for compiling the anthology entitled *The Book of Prison* [1].

Nasser Mohajer: First and foremost, to record what we have lived through. I think as Iranian intellectuals that we have to record all corners of this experience whenever we can, and to record what happened to us over the last two decades as a people. This in itself is an important task. When it comes to prisons, well it is such a crucial experience. So little has been written on this important experience. A vital task for those who challenge despotism is to fight against forgetfulness. Despotism feeds on forgetfulness. A cornerstone of resistance is to resist forgetting which motivated us to record the defiance of the tens of thousands, nay hundreds of thousands who stood face to face with the Islamic Republic and resisted. The prison books are a contribution to the struggle against collective amnesia.

Ardeshir Mehrdad: It seems that increasing attention is being paid over the last few years to what took place inside the prisons of the Islamic Republic. A number of ex-prisoners have written and published their memoirs. A new branch of literature is apparently taking its place alongside the other branches of the literature of our country. What do you think?

Nasser Mohajer: I agree. We now have a prison literature which has appeared in the last ten to twelve years. Incidentally, it is not the first time we, as a people, have faced despotism. The struggle against tyranny for freedom, for progress, for social justice, for modernism has been a constant feature of contemporary Iranian history.

In the previous periods, both under Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, of the numerous political prisoners, only a handful published their memoirs or reflected on the experience. Under the present system many political prisoners once released have written about it. Of course it will take time. It is not easy to forego such a trauma and immediately live through it all over again by recounting it. It took more than ten years before we could compile the first collection of prison memoirs. But, as a few stepped forwards and broke the taboo, the door opened to others. It was not an easy escapade. You have yourself been a political prisoner. This is especially true under this regime. Its penitentiary system follows a different logic from other despotic prison systems.

Had this path not been paved, we could not have embarked on this anthology. Those early works allowed us to talk to others, whom we knew, had painful memories weighing heavily on their chests. But for a variety of reasons it was hard for them to articulate these pains. We owe this to Osias, Fazels, P. Alizadeh, M Rahas and all others who pioneered this path.

Mirror of society

Ardeshir Mehrdad: I know you have studied the literature of prison in detail. We will get back to the anthology you yourself edited later, but considering the whole opus of prison literature how do you evaluate them? Where is their primary focus and which areas they generally neglect?

Nasser Mohajer: It has been produced, mostly by women political prisoners. In content they differ

from the few works we have from the previous era. The symbolic title of one such work written in Shah's days, *Epic of Resistance* [2], shows the tenor of writings on prison life at the time. We now rarely write on the "epic of resistance". Not that there was no resistance. Despite all efforts of the Islamic Republic to breed a being known as *tavvab* (penitent) within its prisons, a resistance fit for any epic, has indeed taken place by prisoners.

I need to digress a moment, to embark on an important issue which effected all persons who have experienced prison life in the Islamic Republic. A *tavvab* is not someone who regrets his mistakes. This has always existed in prison life everywhere. It is an entirely different phenomenon. In the previous period there were persons who regretted what they had done and the road they had taken. This is was a personal choice. However, when you are a *tavvab*, you are not merely sorry for what you have done. You are a collaborator! You are someone who runs the prison alongside the wardens, and much more besides [3]!

Because of the propaganda and the silence surrounding the issue of political prisoners, the epic of resistance of those incarcerated by this regime has been overlooked. It is widely believed that those who were released were the very ones who appeared before the television cameras and the like. The price of resistance was heavy: the massacres of 1981-2 destroyed many – thousands – we have no real figures. Another massacre took place in 1988, many of whom are still unknown. This regime todate has not been prepared to announce how many it has executed.

In the past few years some people have spoken of some kind of *glasnost* in Iran. At least in Gorbachev's *glasnost*, they confessed to some empty spots in their history. We only hear hints of Khomeini's *fatwa* leading to a "huge massacre" of political prisoners in Montazeri's memoirs [4]. Anyway, the terms massacre or bloodbaths are incorrect descriptions. These took place in Mohammad Reza Shah's prisons.

What we have here is genocide. Between 5 and 10 thousand prisoners aged 17 to 75 who had already been sentenced and had even served many years of that sentence, were murdered only after two questions: "are you a Muslim or not?" "Do you believe in the Islamic Republic or not?" In some occasions "do you pray or not?" Thousands were hanged after just these two questions! We do not know how many. They are no longer amongst us to recount. In spite of the official propaganda, here too there were epics of resistance. The best evidence is the massacre itself.

Prison literature portrays some of the unknown and how they lived through their ordeal. In their important task, the survivors echoed the poet Forough Farrokhzad's call: "when you reach the moon, write the history of the massacre of the flowers". This is just what they did, even before reaching the moon, or even before there was a glimpse of the moon.

Another aspect, alongside the epics of resistance, is the countless tragic tale of shattered individuals. Such are the two faces of prison life in the Islamic Republic. When our prisoner comes to write his or her tale, having lived through the immensely moving and mostly unspoken human tragedy that, and having survived the fire, he or she no longer thinks of tales of heroic resistance but of the reality of existence in these jails.

They want to retell how the prison – what Osia called the *towhidi* [5] prison – was run. It can be otherwise described, but the issue is that of a special penitentiary. It is the *shari'a* prison, the prison of Khomeini's Islam. A miniaturised mirror of the social and political order which governs outside. Only more effective, since within those walls, the rulers have absolute control. If you want to know the Islamic regime, study its prisons.

Another reason for compiling the anthology was to see the laboratory at work and to observe how they treat the human person. Their mode of treatment of human beings makes their prison system different from the political prisons in monarchic times. Thus one of the typical features of memoirs of prison life in the present regime is to explain, describe and bear (unexaggerated) witness to reality within those walls. This was less visible in the memoirs and the books describing the prison conditions in the previous period. You may recall Bozorg-e Alavi's work '53 persons' on Reza

Shah's prison [7] which focused on the relationship of the 53 political prisoners in prison, and painted only indirectly an image of that prison.

My second point is therefore that most of the writings now, usually by women, are simple, honest and truthful. There are no attempts to create heroes. They portray the reality of prison and its functions, and how the prisoners lived through this **experience**. And pose important questions which mostly remain unanswered to this day.

The third feature of the writings of this period is closely related to the second point. The works are, with two exceptions, not efforts to prove a political viewpoint, or justify the policies of a particular organisation.

Then and now

Ardishir Mehrdad. Can you expand on the difference between the political prison under the Shah and the Islamic Republic? You mentioned that prison was a miniaturised model of the political order in society in general. This is more or less what various researches report. The broad differences between the two regimes are essentially clear. But how did these translate to the language of prison and the way the prisoner experiences them day and night? And what effects did they have on the prisoner as a human being and its consequences in the form of resistance etc – what can we highlight as a difference?

Nasser Mohajer: I will mention a few points on prisons under the Shah. You can fill in the gaps from your personal experience. The Shah's was the classical form of political prison in modern times: a prison in which according to Foucault in his important work on prison and punishment – the prisoner is there to be punished. And, this punishment will bring him or her to his or her sense so that he or she conforms and complies with the norms and regulations of the society. Beating or torturing, firstly, took place in a defined period in the course of interrogation to empty any information you may have, to discover where you are in the organisational hierarchy and what you know. Once the trial is over and the verdict announced they have little more to do with you. You are meant to be secluded from the society. Such are prisons in regimes intolerant of any serious opposition. In the modern sense of the word despotism in the framework of autocracy. It was a modern autocracy, and its prisons modelled on the autocratic system in Iran.

They were not interested in how you dressed and what you ate or did not eat in prison. You could think what you liked provided it did not oppose the monarch. E. Abrahamian in his book "Confession" says that the most they wanted from political prisoners, especially if they were important or a well known figures, was to appear on television and admit that they were wrong and the Shah's land reform was wonderful and that they had made a mistake because of foreign propaganda, Soviet propaganda etc.

Under the Islamic regime we are faced with a theocratic prison system, not a modern autocratic system. It has its roots in pre-modern thinking. In this prison torture and torment is not all about getting a confession. From the first day to the last you are exposed to a system which does not only aim just to punish you; just to extract confessions; just to make you betray your party network and your comrades; or just to get you in front of cameras to admit you were wrong as a propaganda scoop.

What it seeks is to break you, or as they put it to "extinct" you, to make you nothing. It is only through falling into nothingness [*nisti*] that you can be transformed into something. Here repentance is a positive and important act. Before you can be led up the straight path you must pass the bend of repentance. When Lajvardi [7] spoke of the "bend of repentance" he was not just using a random term, a rhetoric – he was using an important concept in Shi'ite thought. You are a renegade, a person who has deserted religion, a heathen, and a heretic. These have no place in the Islamic society, where a renegade or heretic must be tortured so that he or she can be converted into a

believer. It is within this concept that Lajevardi claimed “our prison is a university”.

In the previous regime it was we, the opposition, who said the prison is a university. In those days it was the university of the revolution. Many in the generation of the revolutionaries who stood up to the Shah, our generation passed through the Shah’s prisons.

The prison that superseded is the one through which flowed all the rules of a religious government, a religious order. The guards are interested in the smallest detail of your private life. A female prisoner would have to wear a chador at all times even though everyone present is female. A women prisoner is not allowed to smoke. A total sexual apartheid operates throughout the prison. The same applies to a male prisoner who is not allowed to read certain books, his food, drink, clothing and everything else is governed by the same laws that they impose on society. And at the end you have to come out as a repentant person (*tavvab*).

Friends and foes

Ardeshir Mehrdad. Let us return to the works themselves. You mentioned that the relationship between the prisoner and the guard is what they mainly focused on, while, for example Boziorg Alavi’s account of prison life before the revolution, concentrated on relations between prisoners. In the prison literature of the last decade is there anything on the relationship between prisoners. Remember that the opposition outside the prison was fragmented and each fragment was hostile to the views of the others. Indeed it has been claimed, true or false, that inter-group hostility was such that some groups indeed co-operated with the police against rival groups. If this was so, and one section saw the other as deserving punishment, and co-operated with the political police in case the foe escaped punishment, then when they all find themselves in the same prison, all chained by the same prison guard, what was their relationship?

The *tavvab*

Nasser Mohajer: Do you mean between those who broke and those who did not?

Ardeshir Mehrdad: That was one aspect. The other are people belonging to various political groups who were are loggerheads with one another But there are also people belonging to various political groups who were are loggerheads with one another - say Peikar or Ranjbaran at one end and Tudeh Party at another. These may have been side by side inside the prison without being broken or repentant.

Nasser Mohajer: Let us examine each group in turn. The issue of *tavvabs* is a peculiarity of prison life under the Islamic regime. They have a strange part in the structure of prisons. It may be unbelievable for a non-Iranian to hear that the prison system of the Islamic Republic was partly run by the *tavvabs* [see footnote 3]. They acted as guards, as spies, as interrogator, as executioner. The *tavvabs* would be taken out in the streets for “opposition hunting” helping the guards to turn in anyone they know. Informers were to be found in Pahlavi prisons too. The authorities knew what was going on. But in the Islamic Republic they use *tavvabs* not merely as informers, but as models. This phenomenon continuously reads religious works and is favoured by those who run the place.

From the very first inmates had to confront the *tavvabs*. The same fight as the one conducted in the outside society. A skirmish between civil society and political society in its Hegelian sense, which Marx uses [this is to be differentiated with the issue of civil society as it is fashionably being bandied about these days]. The same skirmish took place between political prisoners and *tavvabs*. When they could get their way – the prisoners insisted that the *tavvabs* should be housed in separate cells. In turn the authorities imposed the *tavvab* wherever they could. Certainly the *tavvab* issue, has been one of the dilemmas faced by political prisoners in the Islamic Republic.

Thus prison, where *tavvabs* were concerned, was a continuous battle. And like all real life battles it was at times open, at times hidden, sometimes with a political face, sometimes in subterfuge. It ranged from snubbing, to swearing, to occasional physical scuffles, and political protest to the authorities. There were many ways to expel the *tavvabs* from the cellblocks. At the end the political prisoners were victorious. It was the same as any concession the people of the country manage to wrest from the regime – the fruit of a long hard struggle. Like so many other things the regime was defeated in plans to create and use *tavvabs* as showpieces. The entire strategy was turned on its head. Becoming a *tavvab*, was one of the most disgraceful things that could happen to anyone. It was not even a gain for the regime

The relationship of the non-repentant prisoners with each other, passed through various phases. At one stage between the extreme left and those groups such as the Tudeh Party and the Fadai' majority [8], both inside and outside the prison the relationship was bad. The issue was not entirely ideological or political. Each phenomenon has a history. The Tudeh party called groups like Peikar empty radishes (red outside and empty inside) and even counter-revolutionary. The same relationship carried on inside.

For the extreme left, who had been the target of Tudeh Party's attacks outside the prison, it was quite normal that they should not be friendly towards the Tudeh fellow prisoners. Sadly after a time this understandable political distancing went further. Some groups boycotted others. This is a dark spot in any account of history that may be written on life in political prisons. The boycott of Tudeh and Fadai' majority was especially notable in the women's cellblocks. Once such conduct became acceptable, it gradually extended to other groups. Initially by groups of the extreme left and later by others. In women's prisons, at one stage this became the norm. The entire atmosphere was that of boycott. This created for many a prison inside prison, a cell inside a cell. Well aware, the regime has used such disdain to its advantage to this day. Opposing tendencies are placed next to each other. This triples torture. Had the progressive forces, achieved a different culture, they would have created a more humane relationship between prisoners, and also taken the weapon away from the regime.

In their more recent memoirs, former prisoners take a critical view of this. They now speak not just of what the regime did to us, but also of what we did to ourselves. When Ghotbzadeh the post revolutionary foreign minister, just before his execution, was taken to Hosseinieh (prison mosque), he was mocked. It had not been yet understood that the death penalty should be abolished. He was not received as a political prisoner, regardless of any real political differences or even genuine grievances. It was not understood that as a political prisoner, no one had the right to kill him – least of all the enemy. Now, we look back with genuine regret at having taken part in this nauseating charade. Even though some of those present were against the death penalty.

Certain other views were also revised, the progressive opposition of the left, in particular. The left went on to reject the death penalty even for our torturers. This self-criticism is seen in the second volume of the anthology. We address not just the enemy but our own weaknesses and faults. This is a great achievement.

Non-political inmates

Ardeshir Mehrdad: Prisons in the Islamic Republic also house others who do not specifically fit the term opponents of the regime, for example from religious minorities – Bahai's and Jews, to name two. To what extent has our prison literature paid attention to these? And was the relationship of the political prisoners, and in particular the left, with this group in prison?

Nasser Mohajer: this is an important question. In the period of 1979 – 81 political elements and other prisoners from a wide spectrum such as that accused of prostitution or drinking alcohol were kept in the same prisons. In the first volume reports were published of, for example, when political prisoners, especially of the left, came face to face with prostitutes, or a cabaret artist. Not only the

relationship was not bad, but the most beautiful of human relationship found its form. Here we saw two totally differing cultures from two forces emerging from the same society with radically different views on, say, prostitutes— one saw them as evil and the other regarded them as victims.

After 1981, a large number of Bahais were arrested and the relationship carried on in the same fashion. Respect for those who were persecuted for following their conscience. Consistently, we see it in numerous reports. Such relationships, at times, were better than the relationship between the progressive forces. Perhaps in the subconscious of many lies the fact that these people, who never fought the Islamic Republic or declared their opposition against it, had no other defender or shelter. Memoirs of the Bahais reflect this relationship, notwithstanding the fact that born into Muslim families many of the political prisoners had been exposed to intense anti-Bahai propaganda.

As befits the “*towhidi*” Islamic or “ideological” prison, both the left and the Bahai shared the distinction of being labelled “unclean” (*najess*). They were not allowed to use the same toilet as the Muslims – the “unclean” had a separate toilet. This too helped bring the “unclean” closer together. Of course despite this communion the Bahais kept their identity, yet in all their works you can see this feeling of solidarity among prisoners.

Even with monarchists, who not only had an ideological difference with the left and most of the other political prisoners, but were on the whole of an older generation and had a different mentality, were more comfort seeking, and had some privileges. Yet, to the surprise of many outside, the left had a more respectful and gentle relationship with them than amongst themselves. From this angle the prison literature gives us a view of remarkable sympathy and flexibility for the religious minorities and the Bahais. Perhaps a little more among the left than the Mujahedin.

Blind spot

Ardeshir Mehrdad: in the early years when the Islamic Republic was being established a number of functionaries in the old regime were summarily tried in Islamic courts and executed. I cannot remember any left groups protesting or opposing these executions, or even the travesties masquerading as trials. How then did that same left behave so entirely differently inside the prison? Is that difference real? And if so, how do we explain it?

Nasser Mohajer: Looking back at its record, one issue the left cannot be proud of, is its attitude towards the trials and the executions of the monarchists. Let us place it in its historical context. A massive revolution had taken place and the repressing forces were what we call monarchists. The new regime did not arrest every monarchist – leaders of SAVAK, army, police, those who ran the country. A revolution is like a war. Some persons on one side, some on the other. Another aspect of the historical context is that opposition to death penalty was not a belief shared by the intellectual and political forces within the society, even by the most open-minded and progressive. Even today the issue of death penalty remains a global struggle.

However, placed in its context the Iranian left cannot be proud of its stance. Once the war was over and the defenders of the old regime lost, they were entitled to their rights. To put certain monarchists on trial was a legitimate demand. Yet the group which took over the task had no legitimacy. It was a vicious circle. But like a real war, the moment one side raises the white flag, they are prisoners of war, and should enjoy all the rights of any citizen. In general, this understanding was missing in our society, in our movement, by our intellectuals, our left, our democrats, and our liberals.

We paid a heavy price to reach this cognizance. Declining to condemn summary trials and executions sooner or later places the noose round your own neck. Moreover we have arrived at a scant understanding that our ideal society is to be humanitarian. This is the achievement since then.

Life inside

Ardeshir Mehrdad: Can we turn to the second book of prison writings. What is the focus there?

Nasser Mohajer: This is the continuation of the first book. As you recall its chapters recount the procedures in prison life – from the moment of arrest and detention to interrogation, the cell, and torture – the book moves step by step with the captive, living his or her experience. You enter life in the cellblock. It ends with the story of children of prison. The reader is confronted with torture, *tavvab*, suicide, and remorse.

The second book begins with life in the cellblock. Which books were available and which were not. How they were read. An important chapter is allotted to psychological distress in prison. It has to be understood that those who stood by their beliefs paid a heavy price for it. To avoid becoming *tavvab* or remorseful, many prisoners of the Islamic Republic became psychologically deranged. Others committed suicide to avoid that fate.

The period of relative relaxation 1985 – 8, was short. This too is described and the theoretical backdrop for the temporary retreat is examined. Why the change of atmosphere in both the male and the female blocks? And then we bear witness to the 1988 massacre. Its theoretical background is touched. Then, life after the massacre for those still alive.

The visiting international groups, what they did and what they did not do. For example in the women's block (this has not been described in detail before) they herded the long standing prisoners who had remained loyal to their beliefs into a quarter separated by a new wall from the rest of the prison. In this quarter, tens of girls, long-term political prisoners who could testify, were separated and kept away from the scene. UN representative Galindo Pohl never saw them – did not know of their existence. None of those interviewed by the Special Representative of the UN Commission for Human Rights, were long standing steadfast prisoners.

Book two has a few important chapters on life after prison. How did the society or indeed their family deal with them, in jobs and employment, in getting out of the country? It is vital to ensure that the issue of political prisons is raised and a political understanding is reached in the society, since political prisons may be with us for a long time. Unlike many in the previous generation, we must create better relationship with our children should they become political prisoners. Often the political prisoner is under pressure from numerous directions. Many imprisoned young mothers were taunted that if they loved their child, they should write a letter to repent and come out. The mother who had her child's face in front of her eyes every minute of the day was seen by those closest to her as a mother who did not care for her child. This is what a nation has experienced.

There is another question. What can those outside the country do to help, keep silent, as some suggest, or raise their voice? Which will be more effective? This too has been looked at. The book ends with reasons why the leaders of the Islamic Republic should be put on trial in an international tribunal as persons who have committed crimes against humanity, and for being involved in acts of genocide. A subject which has also been discussed on its theoretical and practical aspect.

International tribunal

Ardeshir Mehrdad: It is good that you mentioned the need to try the leaders of the regime in an international tribunal. Do you think these two books can provide living witness accounts and documentations for that tribunal?

Nasser Mohajer: The existing memoirs of prison life that we have in our possession form a powerful and moving collection of documents. The *Book of Prison* can be a part of this collection. Eighty percent of those writing in this book have been prisoners in the Islamic Republic. These are first hand eyewitness accounts.

Our belief in the book, shared by everyone who contributed, was that we do not want revenge,

exaggeration and slogans. We wanted to uncover the truth and record what had happened. These pages recount the history of a people. We must not forget, only the truth is unforgettable. If you transgress that line – it becomes pure fiction and will be recorded as fiction. This book, and others, will help create a strong, fully documented, file fit for a court to examine the plea of a people for justice, not for revenge but to shed light on the truth.

The statement that a few weeks ago sons and daughters of Mokhtari, Puyandeh and Foruhar's [9] made reflected from same angle the alertness of our society. They refused to accept the concept of retribution (an eye for an eye). As close relatives of the murdered dissidents the regime asked them to chose between blood and blood money. They refused to point to any of those accused of murdering their parents (we are not even told who they are) as persons who should face retribution or as those who should not. The families echoed what we all believe.

This is one of the most radiant documents of the Iranian opposition. We do not want to kill anyone. We are not killers. We are after the truth. Our protest at the travesty of a trial for the serial murderers is that it was designed to hide the truth. Our issue is the truth, and our book too is one of the endeavours which aims shedding light on the truth. It is only with facts and truth that this regime can be brought to justice.

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Nasser Mohajer co-founded Noghteh Magazine (Persian Quarterly on politics, history and culture) in 1995 and has been its editor-in-chief since. He also edits Noghteh Review an annual on Iranian history and literature. From 1986-94 he was editor of Aghazi-No theoretical journal, a Persian language quarterly.

Footnotes

1. The Book of Prison: An Anthology of Prison Life in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Edited by Nasser Mohajer. Noghteh Books. Paris, France and Berkeley, USA. 1998. See *iran bulletin* no 21-22, Spring-Summer 1999 for a translation of *A Single Window to Life*.
2. By Ashraf Dehghani, from the Fadai' Organisation who made a spectacular escape from prison.
3. The *tavvab* is someone who totally rejects his or her past – in all its facets. In order to prove their penitence they had to co-operate with the prison authorities – to the extent of becoming indistinguishable from them.
4. Ayatollah Hossein Montazeri was heir designate to Khomeini until differences, including his protest against the massacre of political prisoners in 1988 led to his disgrace. His memoirs, were published abroad and is available in Persian on www.montazeri.com
5. Divine unity – one of the central tenets of Islam - hints that only one outcome with one alternative only is acceptable to the authorities of the Islamic Republic in its prisons: total submission or death.
6. The 53 were imprisoned by Reza Shah for their communist beliefs; Some belonged to the disbanded Communist Party of Iran. When released a number of them founded the Tudeh Party.
7. Chief prosecutor and head of the prison service – himself an ex-political prisoner in the former regime.
8. Who had supported the regime.
9. Political dissidents and writers murdered by agents of the intelligence ministry as part of the chain killings of dissident intellectuals. The reformist faction has published a list of over 80 persons.