



Iran 'It is not possible to organise in Iran': jailed activist warns of totalitarianism after Mahsa Amini protests

Majid Tavakoli says protesters should have had more help from abroad but the west doesn't understand what Iran has become



Patrick Wintour *Diplomatic editor*

Fri 15 Sep 2023 19.44 CEST

The majority of Iranians wish for a “normal life and for a government similar to the governments based on the liberal democratic system”, one of Iran’s most prominent political activists has said, as he prepares to start a six-year jail sentence, leaving his wife and three-year-old daughter behind.

Majid Tavakoli’s incarceration is part of the extraordinary crackdown that the Iranian regime has imposed on dissent as a result of protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody after she was arrested for wearing the hijab improperly. The first anniversary of Amini’s death falls on Saturday, and the regime is taking every step to prevent protests, including with patrols outside the Amini family home.

Tavakoli is unusual because he is critical of reformists working inside the system and the communist left. He has been in and out of prison since his 20s. Nazanin Boniadi, the British-Iranian actor and human rights campaigner, describes him as “a man of courage and conviction who has become an even more prominent voice inside the country over the past year”.

He is open about the pain of the imminent rupture from his family. “It is very distressing to be away from them. There is a lot of love in our family. We are very dependent and attached to each other. It is painful to remember this distance every moment.”

Asked if writing and speaking as he did was worth it, he says: “Without tangible results it is hard to say it is. Under normal circumstances, the government could only sentence me to one year in prison for my collection of writings and opinions. However, the special circumstances after the 2022 protests created an environment where they added the charge of collusion, which meant organised collective action with others.”

Authorities subsequently charged him, he says, “without considering the documents and evidence”, and the sentence is heavy.

“But my family and I are aware of the difficult choices we have made. We know that in this era sticking to the truth has many consequences,” he says.

“The text of the court order says that because I want to establish a liberal government and system, I will be punished. Liberals have been attacked many times before by the authorities, yet the general desire of Iranian society is for a normal life and for a government similar to the governments based on the liberal democratic system. The government does not want this thinking to have any representatives inside Iran.”

In recent years the Iranian public’s “perception of power and government has changed” he said. “The government’s inability to solve problems, persistent structural discriminations, the intensification of exploitation, the harmfulness of bad laws, has created a more

progressive society.”

Now, the public are disillusioned with elections condemned by international observers as rigged and have “moved towards disobedience and various forms of civil struggle”.

But he admits the protests were flawed, given the difficulty of organising opposition movements in Iran, and suggests there should have been more momentum and help from abroad. “If a specific political change is to bear fruit, there needs to be some kind of organisation and leadership. I think it is not possible to organise inside Iran. Even creating an effective political solidarity is impossible. It is not possible to create such movements and organisations without the government’s knowledge.

“As a result the protests, based on the accumulation of anger and disgust in the society, lacked a political focus for change.

“Inside the country due to repression and censorship it was not possible to form this force, and it should have formed abroad.”

He says he feared that people “outside the country did not have a clear picture of the events inside the country and on the streets”.

“Part of the opposition has reduced the society’s demand to the struggle against the compulsory hijab. They didn’t even recognise the roots of the struggle with hijab and the direction of that struggle.”

No serious attempt was made to create divisions within government, he said. “There were even no resignations of government officials and agents at the provincial and district levels.”

Although technology in the form of satellite TV and social media has broadened access to information, it has also given a tool to the state. “Unfortunately, technology has also contributed to repression ... Monitoring and control has become intense. They have the necessary financial resources and motivation. The government can now do far more with telecommunications monitoring and surveillance cameras. It can impose financial penalties - closing bank accounts and other transactions. The manipulation of truth and consciousness has also changed. In other words, this technology has led us to face more control and propaganda instead of suppression and censorship.”

He insists Iranian people want change “that does not require weapons”. “They expect the political elites and political forces to reduce and even eliminate the possibilities of such a risk,” he says.

Above all, he does not think the west understands what Iran has become. “A totalitarian government is established here. Maybe because this is a modern totalitarianism, it has not come to the attention of the west. That is to say, because the structures of repression and censorship have given way to the structures of control and propaganda, the observers do not notice it. Or maybe they are deceived because of the promotion of a permitted opposition within modern totalitarianism.”

He also questions whether the west has a viable strategy to promote a liberal movement in Iran, saying foreign officials say they are concerned about human rights, but in reality focus on restraining Iran on issues such as nuclear file, missiles and armed regional groups.

So is there any cause for hope a year after the protests? “The discourse of personal responsibility, which is a liberal theory for empowering individuals in an era of totalitarianism, has had an advance in the past years,” he says. This rise in people’s sense of personal duty, he says, has led to more Iranians concluding that they cannot ignore the blatant wrongs inflicted by the regime. “Society in general has become very sensitive to those that belittle, normalise or abet wrong doing. That is an advance.”



Iran's new chastity and hijab bill: what you need to know - video