

GLOBAL

Iran Has Become a Prison

What I learned about the challenge of resisting a regime that locks up thousands of political prisoners

By Kian Tajbakhsh



Wana News Agency / Reuters

NOVEMBER 1, 2022

SHARE ▾

SAVED STORIES ↗

SAVE 📌

AMID THE NATIONWIDE PROTESTS that have rocked Iran since the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini, who had been arrested for allegedly wearing her hijab improperly, a riot and a fire broke out at Tehran's Evin Prison on October 15. Iran's security services reportedly responded with extreme severity, threatening to shoot prisoners unless they retreated to their cells. According to the authorities, eight prisoners died.

Evin Prison occupies a special place both within the regime's security apparatus and in the political imagination of many Iranians, which is why this disturbance caught people's attention. Although the prison opened a few years before the 1979 revolution that deposed the shah and brought the clerics to power, it has become a symbol of the Islamic Republic's absolutist rule and intolerance of any dissent: Evin is Iran's Bastille.

Whether the fighting and the fire were directly related to the protests is hard to know. On October 23, the Iranian government released footage purporting to show that the fire had been part of an escape attempt in the low-security sections that house the general prison population. Without an independent investigation, this account is impossible to verify. At any rate, to many Iranians, the mere possibility that resistance to the regime had penetrated the prison's walls meant something.

Today, Evin holds an estimated one-quarter of Iran's political prisoners. Thirteen years ago, I was one of them. I was detained in Evin first in 2007, because of my work supporting democratic groups in Iran for George Soros's Open Society Institute, and then again in 2009, because of my participation in the Green Movement protests. In all, I spent more than a year in solitary confinement at Evin.

Media reports rightly call Evin "notorious" or "fearsome." The revolutionary dreams of those who ousted the shah died at Evin after 1979, when the oppressed became the oppressors, and the new regime used the prison as a stage for its sham tribunals and thousands of summary executions. In the decades that followed, the overcrowding was so bad that prisoners had to take turns lying down to sleep. Beatings and intimidation were commonplace. In 1988, toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War, several thousand political prisoners, primarily supporters of the radical-left People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, also known as MEK, were killed in mass executions. Iran has never signed the United Nations Convention Against Torture.

Regime loyalists have always claimed that they eliminated the most gruesome abuses that took place under the shah. Although Evin has remained open, the authorities closed the shah's older jail in central Tehran and turned it into the Ebrat Museum to showcase the shah's brutality, complete with waxwork figures of torture victims. The regime seemed oblivious to the irony that its own prisons were every bit as cruel.

As a prisoner at Evin, I was forced to participate in televised public recantations. I slept on the bare floor of my tiny cell and was threatened with execution. In 2013, Iran's supreme leader acknowledged that solitary confinement amounted to psychological torture. My experience of confinement, with no legal counsel and limited contact with my wife and baby daughter, was certainly that.

Evin today may not be the nightmarish hellhole it was during the revolution's brutal early years. But its outsize presence in Iran's revolutionary history makes it a reminder of the ways in which Iranian society itself has become a prison that tolerates no dissent from the country's 85 million people. The floggings depicted by the Ebrat Museum's grisly effigies have not been banned—they occur *outside* the prison, in public punishments for such infringements as improperly wearing a hijab, mixed-gender socializing, and drinking alcohol.

I AM NOT SURE what prompted a joke I made to reporters during my first confinement at Evin. I had been en route to an interrogation session when I was diverted and told to take off my blindfold. The prison warden introduced himself and asked how I was, as if we had met in a park and were exchanging pleasantries. "Okay," I said warily, noticing the contrast between my prison clothes and his formal suit. Then he said, "It so happens that a group of international reporters are visiting Evin just now, and they would like to ask some questions about the conditions here." Obviously, this was a setup; I had no choice but to play along in the charade.

I heard the warden proudly claim, falsely, that Evin met international standards for prisons. He then turned to me as though he were a solicitous hotel manager and asked, "How are the facilities in your suite? Are you satisfied with your cell?"

RECOMMENDED READING



A Gentler, Better Way to Change Minds 🔖
ARTHUR C. BROOKS



Something We Can All Agree On? Corporate Buzzwords Are the Worst. 🔖
KATE CRAY



How Your Laptop Ruined Your Life 🔖
AMANDA MULL

I had been instructed to speak in Persian, so I did. I said that the conditions were all right, that I was in a solitary cell with a toilet, and I acknowledged that my wife visits every week. But the warden's questions struck me as so absurd that I said, deadpan, "The only thing missing is a swimming pool." At that, I was whisked away, so I lost the chance to add that, as an American Iranian dual national whose case had attracted the attention of the U.S. government, I suspected my treatment was better than that of other political prisoners.

My joke fell flat, of course, with regime officials. The BBC's report omitted it, I assume because it was not translated. Iranian state media quoted it as if I had said it straight. Weeks later, the judge who reviewed my case noted that I seemed to consider myself "very witty."

Why did I risk it? Maybe I was feeling mischievous after reading a humorous account of the exploits of Alexandros Panagoulis, a poet and democratic activist imprisoned under Greece's military junta in 1969. (The book was Oriana Fallaci's *Interview With History*, which my wife had brought from my home library.) I was amazed to read how he had almost succeeded in escaping from his solitary cell by boring a hole through the wall with a spoon. I laughed out loud in my cell as I read how he'd bantered with the warden, who thought he deserved to be handcuffed because of the spoon caper, saying: "You're not really going to believe those imbeciles? You're not really going to take the story about the spoon seriously? After all, a wall isn't a custard pudding!"

As the Czech writer Milan Kundera, the author of *The Joke*, once observed, the problem with totalitarian ideologies is the way they "represent the world from a single point of view," one that blinds their adherents to their own conceits. Perched on the lower slopes of the mountains on the north side of Tehran, Evin's solidity and efficiency loom over the city below—emblematic of an ideology without irony. The religious ideologue lacks all humor, lacks any awareness of the distance between his theocratic dreams and the real world around him. He doesn't understand that there cannot be a heaven on Earth.

The disturbance at Evin has not destroyed what the prison represents: the humorlessness of the religious ideology driving the regime and the harms it does. Perhaps the only way to overthrow an oppressor that refuses to budge or compromise might in the end come down to fire and fists. But sometimes the oppressed can try to take back a little power simply by making the tyrant look ridiculous.

SOMEHOW, my joke seemed to get around—even prompting a poem by Iran's leading satirist, Ebrahim Nabavi, who argued that no conditions can be humane when nonviolent dissidents are imprisoned simply for their ideas. The poem is right, but today, I worry about my successors at Evin who may experience a

return to the bad old days. The regime is on edge from what I have described as Iran's First Feminist Uprising. The demonstrators chanting "Death to the dictator" are calling for nothing less than the end of clerical rule.

I heard the same slogan through the open windows of my interrogation room during my second confinement, in 2009. As my interrogator stood by the window, he mockingly asked, "What do they think they will achieve by saying that?" Today, those shouts have only become louder and more widespread, and the regime's response more intransigent.

Whatever immediate outcome the protests may have, we can hope that they will bring a permanent change in gender relations in Iranian society. In four decades of struggling for equality against what the exiled Iranian legal scholar Mehrangiz Kar and others have identified as a system of gender apartheid, the protests mark the first open mass defiance of a central tenet of the Islamic Republic.

Even as this new wave of dissenters faces detention in prisons like Evin, it has achieved something of lasting value: a new language of civic courage and individual dignity. Many protesters today put themselves at physical risk from the regime's reprisals in ways far beyond anything I experienced. I do not know if the society that they and I dream of can come into being. But I do know that only with this language of liberty can the democratic citizenship on which a better society depends be built.

Kian Tajbakhsh, a senior adviser at Global Centers Columbia University, is the author of *Creating Local Democracy in Iran: State Building and the Politics of Decentralization*.

MOST POPULAR

Should We All Be Eating Like The Rock?

KATHERINE J. WU



What Your Insurer Is Trying to Tell You About Climate Change

