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# Death of a Showman: Film Reveals New Leads on Fereydoun Farrokhzad's Murder

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Since leaving Iran in 1979 the variety show host had regularly launched stinging attacks on the Islamic regime

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## Death of a Showman: New Film Reveals Fresh Evidence in Fereydoun Farrokhzad's Murder

"We are allowed to kill every Iranian who is our enemy because it's our people. And nobody should care about it. It's our business."

On August 6, 1992, the body of Iranian entertainer, poet and anti-regime firebrand Fereydoun Farrokhzad was found on the floor of his flat in Bonn, stabbed multiple times and half-melted by the heat of the kitchen stove, which had been left burning long after his killers had fled. The irreverent voice of a generation of Iranian emigres had been snuffed out – if not, as he'd anticipated, for good.

The ghastly incident shocked a nation, even coming as it did at the end of the **chain murders**: a string of high-profile assassinations of dissidents at home and abroad by agents of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It was one small part of a decades-long campaign of **transnational repression** waged by the Iranian state on its perceived opponents around the world. The rationale behind this drive was articulated, as above, by intelligence and terrorism expert Wilhelm Dietl in a new film on Farrokhzad's killing, entitled *Who Killed Fereydoun Farrokhzad? The Unsolved Murder Of Iran's Dissident Showman*.

In Farrokhzad's case, many believe the Islamic Republic ultimately succeeded in convincing Europe that it was indeed "their business". And yet, it was Farrokhzad's case among dozens in the late 1980s and 1990s that continued to grip observers: an icon in death as he was in life.

This month the new, three-part documentary on the nature and legacy of Farrokhzad's killing was **published** by Radio Farda: the product of years of investigation by journalists Hooman Askary, Shahriar Siami and Carl Schrek. The three-hour Persian-language film has been condensed into a **half-hour English version** for audiences less familiar with the 30-year cold case. Both bring to light disturbing new details not only on the life of one of Iran's most famous contemporary showmen, but how his murder came about – and who might have had a hand in it.

## Dispelling the Myths

"Fereydoun Farrokhzad always mesmerized me," says Hooman Askary, a former BBC Monitoring, BBC Persian and BBC World correspondent now at RFE/RL. Ten to 11 years ago, Askary was asked to produce a radio package to mark the anniversary of Farrokhzad's death and came into contact with his siblings, Mehrdad and Pooran. "The more I talked to people, the more the story captivated me. I put it aside and didn't focus on it, but every time I found something new, I saved it and took notes."

Pooran passed away in 2016, Mehrdad in December 2018. Fereydoun's other sister **Forough Farrokhzad**, a celebrated feminist poet, had died in a car crash aged 33 in 1967, long before the Islamic Revolution. Though scarcely acknowledged by the regime, Forough has also retained a special place in contemporary Iranian life: her poems are regularly cited by civil and women's rights activists on the frontlines even today. "The same was true of Fereydoun," Askary says. "They were both more glorified and appreciated posthumously because of the impact they left on the Iranian psyche, especially after 1979, as people came to understand the true colors of the regime. The one thing people consistently say is that they were 'ahead of their time'."

Despite this, speculation took hold in Iran in the months after Farrokhzad's death. The Pahlavi-era variety show host had fled after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, going on to become one of its fiercest public detractors on the global stage. Cleaving to long-established rumors about Farrokhzad's sexuality, the regime tried to portray his murder as either "sex-related" or the work of a rival opposition faction.

"It was always a big question among Iranians," says Shahriar Siami, a Prague-based documentary filmmaker, whose previous work has examined the Persian maestro Mohammad Reza Shajarian and the Islamic Revolution. "There was a lot of gossip; people said he was a homosexual and some even supported what the [Iranian] government said. Some older people of his generation still talk about this case as a kind of taboo, as a 'problem'. Most people know the government killed him but don't want to believe it.

"We wanted to resolve this question, and also others. If the government killed him, why him?"

## The BKA, "Mr. X" and a Smear Campaign: New Leads Emerge in Decades-Old Cold Case

Remarkably, a full 30 years later, Farrokhzad's case is still open with German prosecutors. The federal criminal police (BKA) refused to be drawn on what leads – if any – they were still chasing down for the film, as the investigation was still technically "ongoing". "It's an amazingly weird aspect of this case," Siami says. For whatever reason, political or otherwise, he said, "the German authorities seem to have left it."

However, the team was able to obtain excerpts from a since-destroyed BKA report dating back to October 1993, in which Farrokhzad's murder was described as bearing the hallmarks of an Iranian state-led operation. Entitled "Findings on

Iranian State Terrorism", it listed the killing among 21 cases of murder, kidnapping and surveillance of Iranian opposition figures in Europe. "The perpetrators apparently used a confidante in the murder of Farrokhzad," German police noted.

In the months before his death, Farrokhzad had been in contact with the Iranian embassy trying to secure safe passage to see his family in Iran. Whether he intended to go through with it remains up for debate. But shortly before the murder, he met two people at Bonn Hauptbahnhof railway station. Two plates were set on the floor of his flat when police discovered the crime.

For the first time, an Iranian ex-spy named Abolghasem Mesbahi – a key witness in the **Mykonos murders** trial – told the Radio Farda journalists that the man who fatally stabbed Farrokhzad was a friend of his from Los Angeles.

In his interview, Mesbahi could only recall the man's first name. But the team identified a man fitting the description, named only as Mr. X in the film, and was able to corroborate several details the ex-spy provided about him. In the film, Mr. X is described as a "car dealer" in Los Angeles and a supporter of the Shah whose property in Iran had been confiscated after 1979.

According to Mesbahi, the alleged killer was led to understand he could recover his seized assets if he displayed loyalty to the regime. An intermediary with the last name Ghodsi informed Iranian intelligence officials in Germany, who signed off on the plan, then accompanied Mr. X on a flight from Frankfurt to Iran the day after Farrokhzad's murder. Mr. X, Mesbahi said, used a passport supplied by an Iranian intelligence officer named Seyed Reza Saberi.

Other high-profile figures part-corroborated Mesbahi's account. Seyed Hossein Musavian, Tehran's ambassador to Germany at the time of the murder, said a man of about 55 years old named Dr. Javad Ghodsi had worked at the Iranian Embassy in Bonn. For his part, Musavian insisted he was doing all he could to facilitate Farrokhzad's return to Germany at the time: "Just when he was about to start selling his belongings and move back to Iran, they hit him."

These Iranian-born contributors and others spoke to the RFE/RL journalists at enormous personal risk. Members of the team also received threats to themselves and their families in Iran. Convincing people to speak, Hooman Askary told IranWire, was "the most difficult thing" about the project. "For two months, I had to talk to some people almost every day to help them understand the situation."

The man identified as Mr. X died in 2011 and his family did not respond to questions about Ghodsi. Meanwhile, a former associate of Farrokhzad told the journalists that as recently as 2019, German police believed a Tehran-financed smear campaign had been launched against him in LA prior to his death.

In November 1988, Farrokhzad had staged a charity telethon in the city for child victims of the Iran-Iraq war, and was subsequently accused of embezzling \$28,500 from the proceeds. He was released on bail in March 1992 and returned to Bonn, where he was murdered not five months later. "It was a plot," Siami says. "Because of this, Farrokhzad left LA, a safe place, and went back into the lions' den."

### Diaries and VHS Tapes Reveal a Star's Hidden Anguish

The new film also sheds new light on the troubled character of Farrokhzad. Even at the height of his fame, a TV mainstay worth millions of dollars had opted to live alone, in a miniscule, shabby flat without so much as a dining table. On visiting the building, Askary recalls, "It was shocking. I never expected to see that; it was a tiny flat at the top of the stairwell, the kind of place the caretaker would live in." Neighbors, he said, were shocked to learn of Farrokhzad's fame among Iranians, unable to comprehend why anyone so wealthy would have lived so modestly.

Askary also gained access to Farrokhzad's private diaries. In some of the film's most poignant moments, handwritten extracts reveal the singer and poet's acute loneliness in Europe and his longing to see his mother in Iran again. "I expected to see that kind of life," Askary says. "But I never expected to read that much about heartbreak and solitude."

This from a man who exuberantly sang and danced on stages across the continent, joked about Ruhollah Khomeini being illiterate and sex-obsessed, railed against the ayatollahs and even challenged the regime to shoot him where he stood – while laughing and joking with émigré audiences. "I learned that people are shades of gray, not black and white," Siami says. "I saw this in Farrokhzad's life. He was a very energetic person, very funny, but inside he was lonely; he didn't show sorrow he felt. From the very first day he left Iran, he thought he'd be able to go back. It was a dream that never came true. This is the story of many Iranians in exile."

Amid the VHS tapes collected from the crime scene and later handed over to Farrokhzad's family, Askary was also shocked to discover that the entertainer had opened up about his sexuality to a live audience: a massive taboo in Iran, then and now. "This tape was in a horrible condition. It was torn and broken. One night I scotch-taped it and sometime after midnight, I was electrified." The recovered footage features in both versions of the film.

Even as his declared allegiances changed, Farrokhzad had also sought out and contacted all facets of the often fractured Iranian opposition in Europe, seemingly in hopes of creating a broad church united against the Islamic Republic. The results of those efforts show in the film, with figures from Farah and Reza Pahlavi to MEK representatives willing to talk to the camera. "He was the sort of person who wanted to find the reality, so he talked with all political groups," Siami says. "He even talked with the Iranian Embassy, which at the time was the center of Iranian intelligence in Europe. I think it's the first time I've seen monarchists, the MEK, and Iranian government officials all appear in one film. All of them wanted to take part."

## Why Fereydoun Farrokhzad?

The documentary ends with a tape recording of Farrokhzad performing an unpublished song of his, *Sukut-e man* (My Silence), to a live audience. It was remixed for the film by composer Barbad Bayat and performed by the Prague Metropolitan Orchestra. "If my heart breaks, it's not the moment of my death," Farrokhzad sings. "No, my silence is not a sign of my death."

"Even though Farrokhzad had grown withdrawn, he was no-one to be silenced," Askary told IranWire. "Where others needed an entourage to support them, all he needed was a microphone and a stage. He was incredibly charismatic and eloquent, and he had a shockingly good memory. He was a walking encyclopaedia. There was no way to circumvent him."

Farrokhzad's legacy in Iran is such that within a week of the film's release on RFE/RL's platforms, where about 80 percent of the millions-strong audience comes from inside Iran, viewers of all ages were getting in touch – mostly with messages of thanks, many asking for more details. The film is understood to be circulating widely on messaging apps in Iran. "Even today people still keep sending us messages about how they cried while watching it," Askary says, "that they're grateful we did something like this, that he was worthy of a documentary like this."

The documentary is more than a tribute to one of the brightest Iranian stars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Siami notes it has helped expose the "tools and techniques" used by the Iranian regime in the past to snuff out dissident voices thousands of miles from the country's borders. The new information was shared with opposition groups, as well as the perennially tight-lipped German police.

Especially with regard to the English version, Askary says, "I hope that people read between the lines, and understand what led to this horrendous crime taking place and going silent for three decades. And how this came about, and what motivations lay behind it. Even though we don't sympathise with the Islamic Republic, we understand why they would want to kill and silence everything – because they want to stay in power. It's the same technique all authoritarian regimes have pursued about history.

"What's shocking to me is the appeasement approach that European powers have taken to these crimes. I hope those who watch it ask themselves the question: 'Why the appeasement? To what extent are governments allowed to prioritise their economic and political gains over human rights and humanitarian cases? If we've managed to spark this question, we've done a good job."

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