

## Women's Activism for Freedom in Iran, Ladan Pardeshenas

Before the Islamic revolution in Iran, although I was still a schoolgirl, I was very interested in politics. I read voraciously-books on sociology, social evolution, and by the progressive author Samad Behrangji. My cousin, who was a college student, was a political prisoner under the Shah. He had been arrested for his ties with the Mojahedin. In 1978, as the revolution began to sweep the country, he was released from prison. It was through him that I became acquainted with the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, which is a democratic, Muslim, progressive, independent political organization. For more than thirty years, the Mojahedin has been fighting for democracy and human rights in Iran, first against the dictatorship of the Shah and then the fundamentalist ayatollahs.

I was attracted to women's activism the first time I saw Mojahedin leader Ashraf Rajavi. She was speaking at a meeting about women's liberation. I met with her. She had a lot of permanent injuries from her torture in the Shah's prisons, and was deaf in one ear. She spoke in a very calm, dignified manner. This experience was very exciting to me. A woman who had resisted so adamantly; this was a whole new concept for me. Two years later, when I saw her bloodied body at Evin Prison, I swore that I would follow in her footsteps to my last breath. Ever since that day, I have been in love with women's activism. To me, whatever step a woman takes against dictatorship has tremendous value.



*Ashraf Rajavi*

In his first speech, after the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, Mojahedin leader Massoud Rajavi identified freedom, democracy and equality as the crucial issues and warned that religious fundamentalism was the primary obstacle to democracy. The Mojahedin always stood for freedom and equality, whether the issue was women or religious minorities. When the fundamentalist regime began talking about enforcing an "Islamic" dress code, it was the Muslim Mojahedin who came out into the streets to protect the women protesters from attacks by the regime's mobs. On the day of that speech, I realized I did not want to lead a comfortable life, while the underprivileged women of my country were crushed under the dictatorship of the mullahs. During those days, most of the Mojahedin's supporters and activists were young and educated, which also drew me to them. Women became more and more active in the movement, and now women have an unprecedented role in the leadership. This is especially remarkable for the Middle East and Iran.



*Massoud Rajavi*

I was arrested in August 1980 for being a supporter of the People's Mojahedin Organization. I was 22 at the time, and had completed my college education and begun teaching at Majlessi High School in Tehran. I was taken to Evin Prison, where I was held for four years, until September 1984, in cellblocks 246-upper and 1-upper. I also spent 6 months at Gezel Hesar Prison, where I was in punishment cellblock 8 and cellblock 3. I was also held for a time in a cellblock known as "the apartment" in Evin Prison. At that time the building had six floors, with two large cells on each floor. The overcrowding in these cells was extreme. One hundred women crammed into cells designed for twenty. Most of the prisoners were subjected to psychological torture. For example, for long periods they were forced to face the wall and stand on one leg. Such tortures put us under physical and mental pressure. I was transferred from cellblock to cellblock because my jailers were very worried about the prisoners organizing themselves. As soon as two or three prisoners would become close friends, they would separate them, sending them not just to other cells, but to different cellblocks.

I endured many different tortures while in prison. The first day I was tortured, I still remember the day, August 25, 1980-it was a Monday. I was tied to a very short bench and blindfolded with a filthy rag. Then I was flogged on my back and on the soles of my feet with a cable. Threats of rape were also used as a form of torture, not just against me, but all the women prisoners. The interrogator who threatened to rape me was the chief interrogator for section seven of Evin Prison, named Rahmani. After he had flogged me with a cable for a week and gotten nowhere, he began threatening me with rape. He kept it up for 3 months. Another form of torture I endured was known as "the scale"-my arms were twisted-one up over the shoulder and the other from underneath then bound behind my back. Then I was suspended from the ceiling and left like that for 12 hours. I still bear scars from the torture. I lost the hearing in my right ear under torture. I have also lost much of the sight in my left eye. I suffer a great deal of pain in my arms and legs. Because of the blows to my head, I suffer long periods of headaches and dizziness.

They also threatened to rape my younger sister, Nassrin Pardehshenas, who was only 18. Ultimately, they did rape her before she was executed. That was their last try at breaking her, but she was very brave. Nassrin made prayer stones from the mud of Evin Prison, on which she wrote the verses of Kosar (The Fountainhead) from the Quran. Just before her execution, she wrote a letter to her

mother: "In an hour they will execute me, these miserable worshippers of the night. But as Massoud Rajavi says, we are like the fountainhead; the more of us they execute, the more we multiply." She never gave in, and walked proudly to the stake for her execution.

Ayatollah Khomeini issued a special "religious decree" that required that all virgin women prisoners be raped before execution to prevent them from going to heaven. They also threatened Ashraf Jalali, Farah Shirmahale, and Mashid Sheikh with rape. The routine was to rape all of the women, especially the unmarried girls, before they were executed. Ashraf was young, not more than 17-years-old. I got to know her in prison and in the torture chamber. She had attractive dark eyes, and would stare at one point. When asked what she was thinking about, she said she was thinking about freedom for the women of her country. She used to say that the more they flogged us with cables, the more she believed in the path she had chosen. She was only with us a short time; they executed her very quickly.

One prisoner named Farah had a poetic nature. She used her fingernails to carve out a picture on the wall of the cellblock of a group of people who had pulled down Khomeini and set free a group of prisoners. She was summoned the day prior to her execution by Rahmani, the chief interrogator, who told her, "Tomorrow you will be executed, but since our religion tells us that we should not kill a virgin girl, we are going to marry you to one of our Revolutionary Guards." They told her this to try to break her spirit. Farah shouted and slapped him. The next day, Farah was executed. As she was taken away, she said, "I am certain that our blood will set Iran free. I see women who have been freed, singing a song of freedom."

Psychological torture was also used. The worst was being forced to watch another prisoner being tortured. They forced us to be in the same room, to hear the sound the cable made as it bit into the flesh of one of our fellow prisoners. Sometimes the women who had children were tortured in front of their children. This was the ultimate test of their spirit. The worst torture I ever endured was being forced to watch as my sister was flogged with the cable.

Sometimes I was kept in the torture chamber from ten to 18 hours, and forced to watch as the other Mojahedin supporters were being tortured. Those were some of the worst moments I endured. I was forced to watch the torture of Monireh Rajavi, Nassrin Pardehshenass, "Mother" Zakeri, Leila Ardekani, Mashid Sheikh, Homa Radmanesh, Farah Shirmahale, and Ashraf Jalali. All of them were martyred in prison.

"Mother" Zakeri was a woman about 70 years old, who was jailed and tortured for supporting the Mojahedin. They threw two of her granddaughters, aged 12 and 17, and two of her sons into prison at the same time. She refused to break. Every day, they came and took her for torture. Her strength was such that it gave even us, her cellmates, courage. Despite her age, she had a special sort of high-spiritedness. The prison guards did not dare to come close to her, because on more than one occasion she had slapped them hard on the face and boxed their ears. On the day they took her away to be executed, her shouts of "Long live Rajavi" set the whole cellblock trembling. She told the guards with a special smile, "I am happy that I have achieved my goal. You must understand that however many of us women you execute, more of us will arise, roaring like lionesses."

I shared a cell for one year with Monireh Rajavi. She was tortured with a long cable, which shredded her flesh and the soles of her feet. She was tortured with "the scale" for 12 hours. Every two hours, they dropped her on the floor and then started again. For days on end, she was in the torture chamber for 21 hours of the day, either being tortured herself or forced to watch other women being tortured. They always called Monireh and me for interrogation together. We had the same interrogator. One day, I asked her why they always summoned us together. She replied, "Either they will take us together for execution, in which case we will leave here together, or we will be set free by our heroic people. But if either of us ever does reach our people, we must tell them how these criminals did everything imaginable to the Mojahedin prisoners, and how these women stood up to their tormentors." My most lasting and beautiful memory of Monireh is of her face, which had an innocent expression and smile, always. I saw a special dignity in her face. Her eyes spoke to you, like they were telling her story.



*Monireh Rajavi*

Khomeini issued a religious decree declaring that the Mojahedin women were infidels and hypocrites. Rape and sexual abuse, the worst forms of torture, were practiced in the worst way on these women. The jailers had absolutely free rein, and this religious decree justified their actions. They hated the women of the Mojahedin, because they are very active-they resist, and in particular, they defend the leader of the Resistance movement. One day, Chief Interrogator Rahmani told me, "It is all the fault of you Mojahed women that we are annihilating your generation. No matter how many of you we execute, you spring up again like mushrooms. I am amazed that none of you talks. We torture you to make you talk. From Monireh Rajavi to the likes of you, you are all alike and none of you talks. I can't understand how Massoud Rajavi managed in just one year to teach all these women to fear nothing. Women are made for raising children and keeping house. Shame on you, who now have to be tortured by men and ultimately killed by them."

The women organized among themselves to support one another. We had group activities, focusing on politics and organizational issues. The Khomeini regime prevented family members from bringing any books or articles that might be related to the Mojahedin into the prison. So our political activity was for everyone to gather in a circle, and for anyone who had read a book or article to relate as much as she could remember of it, especially those dealing with ideological questions or political

challenges. This was part of the daily program. Whenever anyone was brought back from the torture chamber, we all gathered around her. Anyone who had anything that could ease the pain offered it to her. The prison guards did not give us any medications, so we tried with things like massage to soothe the suffering. The only way out was execution or escape. The only thing that gave us our spirit was the resistance as a group against the torture and execution. Sometimes, we gathered together secretly to come up with plans of escape. As a result of these plans, we managed to get two people out.

The guards got really upset by the women's activism. The prison guards blindfolded us every day to take us for interrogation. One day, as I was being led to the torture chamber, the guard said to me: "Why would a woman be drawn to the resistance? A woman should get married, and keep house. You are throwing your life away here. You even have an education. You should get married and make the best life for yourself. What have 'the people' got to do with you? What does this sort of thing have to do with women? A woman is a wife and mother." One of the guards told another woman prisoner, "We torture you so much to make you give this up and go back to taking care of your houses and children. It amazes me, all these women in one place and time; we will annihilate you all."

Some of my most cherished images of the prison were those of the Mojahedin women's resistance in the face of mass executions. I remember one day in particular, when 50 were summoned for execution. All the other prisoners of the cellblock lined up in two lines, and embraced the condemned and began singing an anthem. The condemned went to put on the best clothes that they had from their days in the Mojahedin militia, which they felt was their official uniform. They used to talk about how they would say good-bye to this world in these clothes, and enter the next in them. The outfit consisted of a navy blue headscarf and tunic, and an army green overcoat. They donned the coat as they said their farewells. Their faces were shining; they laughed and cried at once. They said, "We smile because we have achieved our objective; we are joining our beloved. But we cry because we are leaving you." The room filled with tears, laughter and singing. The atmosphere was such that the prison guards did not dare to enter the cellblock. Instead, they kept repeating the condemned prisoners' names over the loudspeakers. Pulses were racing. It was an unforgettable moment. They left the cellblock chanting, "Long live Rajavi!" As I write these words, I feel I am reliving it. I can see the shining face of Leila Ardekani. I shall never forget her face. I feel as though she were still in my embrace.

## Author

Ladan Pardeshenas was born in Shiraz, capital of Fars Province (southwestern Iran) in 1960. She finished her grammar school and high school education in Shiraz. She continued her education at Tabriz University, where she earned a degree in biology.

Her political activities began during her college days. In 1982, Ladan was wounded and then arrested during a demonstration. At the hospital, the doctors, who were Mojahedin supporters, helped her to escape. In summer 1983, she was arrested again and sent to prison. For four years, she regularly underwent torture, as a result of which she required brain surgery. She was taken to the hospital for treatment. During her post-op recovery in the hospital, the Mojahedin were able to rescue her.

Once free, Ladan joined the Mojahedin forces on the western border. In 1994, she was assigned to the Mojahedin's office in Italy. Since her escape, the Tehran regime has stopped at nothing to terrorize Ladan and members of her family, in and out of Iran. **During the Gulf War in 1991, she sent her two sons, aged two and four, to Holland for safekeeping. One of the regime's agents kidnapped her eldest son while he was living in The Netherlands. A few days later, they threw her four-year-old son to his death from the fourth floor of a building.**