

NEW REPUBLIC

The Indictment

by Abbas Milani, Abbas Milani | August 10, 2009

A joke has been circulating widely in Iran these past few years:

One day, a fox sees a friend running fast through the forest. "Why are you running?" asks the fox. "They are killing foxes who have three testicles," the friend replies. "So, why are you running?" the bewildered friend asks again. "After all," he adds, "all the males in our skulk have only two testicles." As he quickens his pace, the fleeing fox says, "Yes, but they kill you first, and then count your balls."

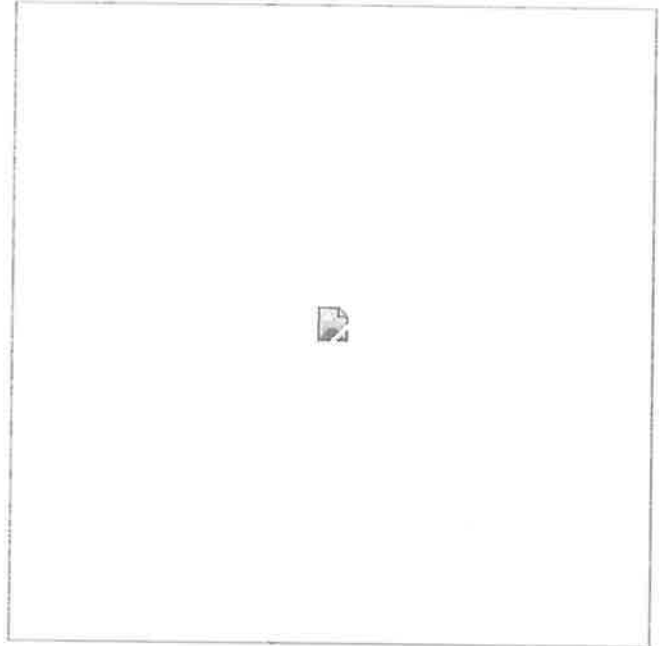


photo credit:

When a regime is paranoid and when it tries to interfere in every aspect of private and public life, its citizens will run like the fox. In Iran, every unexpected ring of the phone, every unexpected nocturnal knock on the door produces a racing heart and a sense of imminent danger. The scars of living under a paranoid regime last a lifetime. Today, even after I have resided in California for almost a quarter of century, a ring of the phone can still provoke fear and trembling.

Earlier this month, I received a phone call. One hundred leaders of the Iranian opposition had been placed on trial and this was the first night of the grotesque spectacle. "You are mentioned in the indictment," the caller told me. Even though it was a good friend relaying this information, I felt a familiar rush of foreboding.

In style and substance, the trial of the hundred emulates the infamous Soviet show trials of the 1930s. Like their Bolshevik mentors, the mullahs are at least as keen in destroying those who share their ideology as those who oppose it altogether. Stalin, for his part, killed far more leftist writers than those of a tsarist persuasion. Pasternak was always safer than Babel or Bulgakov. In the Tehran trial, we witness leaders (former government ministers, a vice president even) who served the Islamic republic for 30 years paraded in front of the cameras, broken in spirit, wan in countenance, and wearing, for maximum humiliation, pajamas. For them, the indictment is the ultimate betrayal by a regime they had long served, and by an ideology they had long shared.

The first warning that I would be assigned some role in the regime's paranoid scenario came a few months ago. An editorial in Keyhan--Ayatollah Khamenei's mouthpiece--described the lawyer Shirin Ebadi, the scholar Abdol-Karim Soroush and myself as partners in an "American plan" to overthrow the regime. At about the same time, a number of so-called intellectuals and journalists began to accuse the three of us of the same alleged crime. Sometimes the language shifted: In the sterile jargon of the left, we were described as "comprador intellectuals" who pave the way for "imperialism."

But these were fulminations. And the indictment is meant to provide the definitive portrait of the "outside" influences that have incited demonstrations in the streets. "The velvet revolution has three arms, intellectual, media, and executive, and each of these have relations to a number of American foundations." Of these foundations, "the most important is an institution called Hooffer, at Stanford, created during the Cold War. In this institute, there is a project called Iran Democracy project, and three intelligence officers direct it: Abbas Milani, Larry Diamond, and Mike McFour." Despite the chills the indictment sends down my spine, I chuckled when reading this. Hooffer is, of course, the Hoover Institution, not Stanford's school of tap dance. Mike McFour is the esteemed academic Michael McFaul.

The indictment goes on to describe my past by declaring that "Abbas Milani was imprisoned under Mohammed Reza period for working with a leftist group. He later became a fervent royalist, so much so that after the revolution, he lived in Iran for a couple of years, and then left for America, where he published a number of books praising the accomplishments of the Pahlavi regime." In actuality, I lived in Iran for the seven years following the revolution, as well as the four preceding it. During much of my time in prison, I was in the company of future Islamic luminaries--men like Montazeri, Taleghani, Rafsanjani, and Mahdavi-Kani. I suspect in the soon-to-be-prepared indictment against Rafsanjani, this coincidence of life will absurdly date the beginning of our "conspiracy."

Surely my friends at Hooffer will be jealous that I'm assigned such an outsized role in the indictment: "[G]radually he became one of the most important leaders of the opposition, and his one big difference with other leaders is that he has close relations with reformists inside Iran." The indictment ends by suggesting that, "For the CIA, Abbas Milani is even more important than [the deposed Shah's son] Reza Pahlavi, because he is in close contact with the reformists, and has defrayed the entire cost of [the reformist cleric Akbar] Ganji's stay abroad." For the record, I have had no contacts with the CIA. I do know that Ganji survives in the United States only by hard work--not by hand-outs and certainly none that I have given him. If the authors of this baseless indictment lived in the America, one could easily fight them in the court of law. Sadly they live in a country where they govern absolutely and with violence.

Indeed, it is only a matter of time before they apply their most ruthless methods to the likes of Moussavi, Khatami, Karubi and even Rafsanjani. These barbaric trials, these shameless and cruel spectacles, are merely a prologue.

I know I am reasonably safe here in California, but I also know that the regime has assassinated more than a hundred of its opponents--from activists and journalists to scholars and artists--in Europe. Mostly I feel a pang of shame--the shame common to the survivor spared the consequences of a great calamity, the fate of those hundred brave but shackled, dignified but tortured prisoners.

Abbas Milani is the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford, where he is the co-director of the Iran Democracy Project. His latest book is *Eminent Persian: The Men and Women who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979* (Syracuse University Press).