

Report to the Nation

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It was late Sunday afternoon, 22 November 1998, that I was told, by a reporter of a Persian language radio, of the assault on my parents. The horrible news arrived when a few minutes later, a sobbing friend of theirs informed me that they had been brutally murdered in their own home. The palpably daring violence had so shaken everyone that a torrent of descriptions of the scene of the heart-wrenching crime not only flooded the media but spread everywhere, by word of mouth.

The evening sunset witnessed my children crying uncontrollably and my brother banging the wall with his head and fists. Everyone's voice laced with curse words and sobbing fits of sorrow and anger. Our shoulders were buckling under the weight of this human and personal calamity.

Two days later, on Tuesday evening, I arrived [from Germany] at Tehran's Mehrabad airport. Waiting in line to have my passport checked, a stranger with tearful eyes hesitantly approached me and in a barely audible voice murmured: "Surely, 'they' did it."

We began our search for the truth by following the usual routine. In the police bureau of criminal investigations, we kept repeating that Daryush and Parvaneh Forouhar did not have any personal enemies; that they did not own much to arouse anybody's greed; that Kurds were not their enemies but dearest of their friends; and that no one in the circle of their old friends in "the Party of the Iranian Nation," could have murdered them out of political envy. We kept stressing the fact that their private lives and public activities had been under constant surveillance by the agents of intelligence agencies and that the plot to commit such crimes were hatched in the inner halls of centers of power.

On Wednesday, we went to the office of Tehran's coroner to see the lifeless bodies of our parents. None of their friends, who had accompanied us in this sad journey, were allowed in.

The coroner's aids ushered me to a corridor that led to the outer yard of the building. An ambulance with open doors was waiting. Wrapped in blankets and placed on two adjoining gurneys the bodies of my mother and father were brought out. They lifted the blankets from the side of their faces so that I could confirm their identities and sign the appropriate form. I insisted that I would not sign it until I was allowed to look and see the mortal wounds on their bodies too. After some arguments, they finally pushed the blankets aside allowing a daughter to see the mutilated bodies of her mother and father. I never was granted a chance, however, to shed a few tears over my parents' bodies, or plant a kiss on their mortal wounds.

They pulled away the gurneys from under my trembling fingers, hurriedly pushed them into the ambulance and almost shoved me out of the court yard. Only the gentle hands of my parents' friends could have prevented me from falling down on the pavement.

It was written in the coroner's report that the murderers had stabbed my father's chest at least 11 times and my mother's at least 24 times. My father's friends, who were allowed to witness the obligatory rite of rinsing his lifeless body, told me afterwards that his right hand had been broken and his side was also stabbed and torn by a sharp object and that there were black and blue bruises on his body that had not been described in the coroner's written report.

A week later, they let us enter my parents' home that had been occupied by the government agents

ostensibly in search of figure prints and material evidence that would help them identify the murderers. Odorous traces of hatred had tainted the whole house as if everything had been uprooted and devoured in a wild torrent of savagery. Confronted by our questions as to why our home had been so thoroughly smashed and plundered, the police offered no answers. They ruefully kept repeating the mantra that they had only been instructed to hand over the house to us. The judge assigned to the case also simply acknowledged the receipt of our formal complaint about the sorry state of the house without uttering another word.

Such was the image etched in our memory of the end of Daryush and Parvaneh's lives, with their bodies mutilated and their legacy and identity mercilessly assaulted and defiled. But what they couldn't touch was the echo of my parents' powerful call for freedom which shook their beloved homeland. Their spilt blood had forever marked the agents of death with eternal shame. In the forty days that I remained in Iran, I rearranged whatever had been left after the plunder of my parents' house in the shelves and every day I welcomed friends and strangers who wanted to shed some tears on my parents' slaughterhouse. In the soothing embrace of the visitors I felt less pain as if it was being shared by us all.

In the same period, more evil strikes shortened the life of two more victims. The lifeless bodies of Mohamad Mokhtari and, a bit later, Mohamad Ja'far Pouyandeh were discovered in little travelled streets of Tehran. Their children, too, were asked to take the bodies of their fathers out of the coroner's office.

While I was in Iran, the judge in charge of my parent's murder case would periodically visit us and question our neighbors in search of evidence. In one of his last visits, he told me in a calm tone that he was certain the murder of my parents had political roots. The following day he informed us that the case would be transferred to another judge.

In these forty days, thousands of Iranians took part in each of the wakes devoted to the memory of the victims in order to pay their respects and loudly express their anger and frustration over the shocking events. In the day of internment of my parents, their flag-draped coffins were laid on the grounds adjacent to the parliament's building. When Dr. Sahabi began praying over the coffins, the teeming and restless crowd of mourners behind him looked like an angry sea. It was in the same day that, once again Tehran, roared the mantra of "Down with dictatorship."

One could undoubtedly call the month of November 1998 a turning point in the spreading solidarity of the Iranian people with those political leaders and activists who had adamantly insisted on their right to freedom of thought and expression. It was during this month that, despite continuous application of state violence all across Iran, the bruised conscience of an aroused nation cried out for liberty.

The tragedy of November 1998 led to a wave of protests both outside and inside Iran. Indeed, almost immediately after Foruhars' murder, a wave of anger and protest rose not only among the Iranians in diaspora and the citizens of other countries but also across Iran.

Finally, widespread waves of protests compelled the Iranian regime to acknowledge publicly, and for the first time, that the employees of the Ministry of Security and Information of the Islamic Republic had been complicit in the commission of the willful murders. This was, indeed, an official confirmation of the accuracy of the judgment of the Iranian public that had, from the very beginning, believed that without the approval and involvement of the regime's centers of power such dastardly crimes could not have been committed. Indeed, it was in the requiem for the fortieth day of the murder of Daryoush and Parvaneh Forouhar, that a member of the Party of the Iranian Nation explicitly pointed to this commonly accepted belief. The statement was followed by the approving roar of thousands of mourners present in the mosque.

The official confession, nearly a month and a half after the murders, led to a flicker of hope and optimism among Iranians, and particularly in international human rights movements. It was the hope that the full exposure of the truth about these murders would break the nexus of violence that had been woven into the fabric of many of Iran's political institutions.

It was, at the same time, quite clear that the regime was determined to place the onus of responsibility for these crimes solely on those who were supposedly a few rogue government agents motivated by their religious zeal. But the people of Iran were not distracted by these self-serving explanations and continued to demand the exposure of the true identity of the key planners of these crimes. The Iranian press, that had at the time gained a measure of freedom, also continued its efforts to discover the organizational and

ideological wellsprings of the crimes and compel responsible government authorities to answer the pent up questions that lingered in the minds of the Iranian people.

However, the judges who had been assigned to the case of these political murders, tried to hide the process of investigation and discovery from the public and even from the families of the victims and their attorneys. They attributed this penchant for secrecy to their concern for Iran's national security. Their true objective, however, was to distract and mislead the public that was insistent on being told the truth and seeing justice prevail.

Our complaints about the transfer of the case to the military prosecutor's office received no satisfactory response. Officials of the justice department claimed that the transfer was necessitated by the discovery of certain facts, without offering any further explanation. In fact, our pleas and those of our attorneys for access to the facts and evidence discovered by the investigators met with stony silence.

In the summer of 1999, following the death of one of the suspects- Sa'id Emami [high ranking security agent, former Deputy Minister of Intelligence who, according to the state's report, committed suicide in prison before the beginning of the trial]- I went back to Iran hoping to elicit some answers to our unanswered questions from the officials in charge of the case. But despite our repeated contacts with the office of the military prosecution, the only explanation I received was that investigations were still going on and judicial authorities were earnestly striving to discover the truth about all aspects of the case. In a long and vague statement, the military prosecutor claimed that the case involved elements of national interest, the possibility of involvement of foreign agents in the murders and a possible conspiracy against the leaders of the Islamic republic. The statement, however, failed to answer our simple questions about the factual circumstances surrounding the commission of the crimes.

In her meeting with the military prosecutors a few days after the publication of the statement, Shireen Ebadi, the attorney for our family [and Nobel laureate], expressed her uncertainties about the circumstances surrounding the death of Sa'id Emami. In response, the military prosecutor claimed that the file on his death contained extensive written confessions by Emami and nearly 40 pages of medical report describing the circumstances of his demise. He also claimed that Emami's death had not hindered ongoing investigations about the murders. The prosecutor, however, did not allow our attorneys to see and review the purported documents until the conclusion of the investigations [in the Iranian judicial system, as in the French judicial system, the plaintive or their lawyers have the right access the investigation's dossiers before the trial and while the investigation is ongoing]; a promise which was never kept. In their following meeting, the prosecutor promised to make parts of the collected evidence available to our attorneys. This promise was not kept either. When I asked the prosecutor whether his office had discovered any concrete evidence pointing to connections between foreign agents and the perpetrators of the crimes, the prosecutor informed me, without further elaboration, that this was only a credible assumption.

I went back to Iran in the fall of 1999 to take part in the gatherings for the first anniversary of my parents' murder. The huge crowds' cries of "Down with dictatorship," and "Let justice prevail," once again filled the air. And once again, neither my pleas nor our attorney's requests for information led anywhere.

In the spring of 2000, I again returned to Iran since the rumors about the disappearance of the court's file on our complaint had spread everywhere, and while our attorneys' attempts to contact the authorities had proved futile. Finally, in a letter to the Head of the Judiciary Power, I described how unfairly we had been treated by various civilian and military members of the judiciary and pleaded with him to let us know who was directly in charge of the case of my parents' murder. I met the designated judge a few days later and once more went through our unanswered complaints and questions. He, too, repeated what the previous judge had told me and claimed that the courts and law enforcement agencies are even more determined than the victims' families to get to the truth. He further added that the investigations were drawing to a close preparing the ground for the opening session of the trial of the accused.

Finally, after nearly two years of behind the scene collusions, and contradictory statements by the governments' spokesmen, they announced the end of the investigation phase of the case and the start of the trial. In the meanwhile, the press freedoms had been further restricted and those who complained about and criticized government's handling of the case were intimidated and harassed by the regime's security agents. Such conditions permitted the prosecutors to distort the facts surrounding the crime and its multiple roots and

thus stage a meaningless show trial.

With the end of the investigations, the judicial authorities permitted our attorneys to review the hitherto unavailable evidence in a period not to exceed ten days. In my first meeting with the trial judge he informed me that in going over the collected evidence he had noted that two religious retribution verdicts had been issued in favor of your family. He further informed me that, in order to execute such a verdict, I must first pay half the value of the blood money of the condemned to his family. This was added insult to my injury [in the Islamic Republic's penal code if a man is sentenced to death for the murder of a woman, the family of the victim must pay half of the blood money of the male murderer to his family, for the life of a woman is considered worth half of the life of a man].

I, along with my attorneys, read the obviously falsified pages of the reports on the gathered evidence and found the following flaws:

- a) Contrary to official claims, the transfer of the case to the office of military prosecution was only based on the written instruction of the head of the Judiciary Power, and not on any provision of pertinent statutes;
- b) Many pages of the interrogation records and other documents had been excised from the file, including the interrogation of Sa'id Emami, who had previously been named as the main culprit in the murders. Furthermore, no first hand report on the nature and circumstances of his death was included in the file.
- c) All the files related to the interrogation of Mostafa Kazemi and Mehrdad Alikhani [security officers attached to the Ministry of Information], named as two of the principal culprits, had also been excised from the file;
- d) Mostafa Kazemi and Mehrdad Alikhani, referring to various documents and witness reports, had claimed that the Minister of Information had instructed them to commit the murders. To prove the involvement of their superiors in the murders, they had named other similar cases in which government officials had been involved, including the case of the so-called "tour bus conspiracy." No serious investigation had been conducted on such cases.
- e) Some of the accused have confessed that, "physical elimination" of the critics of the Islamic republic being part of their official duties; they had previously committed similar crimes. Moreover, they had even produced documents in support of their confessions. The investigators, however, had overlooked such frightening confessions and had posed not a single question about the matter.
- f) It seems that every one of the accused considered the act of murder a legal and legitimate means to silence the political critics of the government. Such an attitude could only be the result of a certain ideological and organizational training. The interrogators, however, have neglected to probe into the roots of this key component of the crime.
- g) The accused have offered false names and personal backgrounds in the interrogation process. Some of them have claimed that they had withheld their real identity with the approval of the investigators themselves, which fact is another indication of premeditated collusion between the interrogators and the accused.
- h) According to the written report of Tehran's military prosecutor, included in the file, he had discussed the murders with the minister of Information, of which the text and audio tape have been annexed to the file. The file, however does not anymore include these important pieces of evidence.
- i) A statement initially issued by the judicial bureau of Iran's armed forces had claimed that connections with foreign intelligence agencies or a desire to conspire against the Islamic government were the motivation of the accused in committing the crimes. However, there is no evidence in the file of the accused admitting such connections or the existence of a conspiracy;
- j) Once our review of the file was concluded, our attorneys filed lengthy protest motions regarding the discovered flaws in the reports on the interrogation of the accused, and called for further investigations in the case. Yet, although the trial judge had confirmed the existence of a number of flaws in the file, no steps were taken to remedy these flaws;
- k) The most significant of the file's flaws, however, is the characterization of the crime as an ordinary criminal act, whereas in fact it should be regarded as a premeditated conspiracy against individual's freedoms, and a collective assault on humanity itself.

It was on the basis of these major flaws in the manner the investigations were conducted, evidence collected or ignored, that we refused to recognize the legality of the staged trial, rejected the legitimacy of the proceedings and refused to participate in the sessions of the court.

However, despite the intervention of some of the members of the Iranian parliament in our favor, government authorities continued their efforts to close the case before it could arouse further public anger. Thus, in summary proceedings and behind closed doors, the court convicted those who had actually participated in the murders while refusing to pursue the roots of the crime. The inescapable conclusion is that the mere executioners of the crime were sacrificed so that the plotters of the act could escape the hands of justice and hide from the inquisitive eyes of the public.

With its participation in the conspiracy by condemning three of the perpetrators of the crime to retribution by the family of the victims, the court proved that it shirked its primary duty to seek the truth, enforce the law and respect the norms of fair and impartial adjudication. The court's verdict was indeed an unforgivable insult to the victims of the crimes who had given their lives in pursuit of freedom. The sham judicial proceedings have simply created another obstacle to our struggle simply to uncover the truth and not to avenge our parent's murder and mete out punishment to the culprits.

The court and its verdict bespeak of a deliberate decision by the authorities to impose a collective punishment on all those who have simply cried out for truth and justice. Our parents' lives belonged to the people of Iran, to the glorious history of the nation's unceasing struggle for liberty. Their death shall not be used for vengeful bloodshed.

In our letter to the Supreme Court, we stressed the fact that we are not seeking the execution of the two convicted culprits, for, we do not intend to provide an excuse for the authorities to plot another conspiracy and thereby claim that the court-ordered executions were carried out to satisfy our demands for justice. At the same time, our opposition to capital punishment was used as a pretext by another court-of whose existence we were not aware- to free some of the accused by reducing the length of their incarceration.

Moreover, in order to silence the voices of protest against the contrived adjudication of our case, the courts convicted and imprisoned our attorney, Nasser Zarafshan, who had only been guilty of fearless pursuit of justice and rights of the victims' families. The irony is that the punishment imposed on the defender of our rights was heavier than those meted out to the convicted criminals. The publications which had consistently attempted to uncover the extent and roots of the crimes were closed and their reporters were silenced or jailed so that they could no more cause the morphing of public anger and disbelief into cries of protest. But, those who had ordered the murder of their critics were never indicted, let alone punished. Nasser Zarafshan was condemned to imprisonment and flogging and the cabinet minister who had sent his employees on a mission of murder and mayhem was acquitted.

It is, therefore, clear that so long as the plotters of the political assassinations of the fall of 1998 have not been tried in a competent court, the case of these crimes shall remain open. Political assassination is one the most heinous of crimes against humanity. Such assassinations have inflicted deep wounds on the conscience of Iranian citizens. The healing of such wounds is the only way for justice to prevail. But the healing can only result from persistent and uncompromising pursuit of truth which will purge the society of the urge for violence and extremism.

The wounds inflicted on our hearts, however, are destined to be always with us. We will forever carry the burden of our sorrow from one day to the other. We will carry the burden of the injustice suffered by our freedom fighting parents, and yet keep alive our hope for justice deep in our hearts' wounds. Only expressions of support and sympathy for our cause can alleviate our pain. Only a common and collective struggle for the establishment of peaceful co-existence in our homeland, free of bullets, hangmen's noose and the daggers of despotism and intolerance, could lift the pain from our hearts. And only then can we truly be proud of being Iranian.

May the memory of those brave souls who gave their lives for freedom, live forever.

Parastou Forouhar,

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