

POURAN NAJAFI

Heroes and Heroines

Memories of fallen friends



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Foreword

Pouran Najafi was born in the north-Iranian city of Rasht in 1960. She was a young student during the throes of the anti-monarchical revolution, in 1979, and decided to engage in the political activities of that time. Soon Pouran found like-minded in the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK). She participated by distributing the organization's publications to raise awareness in Iran about the new threat of Islamic fundamentalism.

Pouran was arrested for her activities and imprisoned at the notorious Evin prison. For five years, the mediaeval torturers of the prison tried to break her spirit. But it was them who would eventually tire and accept defeat in the face of this freedom fighter's resolve and relentless quest for liberty. The end of her prison term and the return to her family tested her resolve once again. Instead of continuing her studies and living a normal life, Pouran aspired for freedom in Iran and therefore chose to dedicate her life to this cause. She believed in the path laid down by the PMOI, and so sought to once again join the organization after her release from prison.

In 1987, she fled to Iraq to join her compatriots in Camp Ashraf. With Maryam Rajavi as her role model, Pouran vowed to continue fighting the misogynist mullahs' regime until their inevitable downfall. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq by U.S.-led forces, Pouran's decision was further tested. Over a decade of perseverance, particularly after 2009 which protection of Camp

Ashraf was transferred to the Government of Iraq, under the toughest of restrictions and an inhumane siege, compounded by frequent terrorist attacks by the Iranian regime and its proxies in Iraq, Pouran stayed true to her promise to the Iranian people. After relocating to Camp Liberty, she made the ultimate sacrifice during a missile attack against the camp.

Pouran was slain on February 9, 2013, along with seven other heroic colleagues, when the Iranian regime's agents and their allies in Iraqi government fired missiles on Camp Liberty.



The Spring of Liberty!

I was a student in one of Rasht's high schools when the Shah's regime was overthrown in 1979. Rasht is located in the northern province of Gilan with coastlines meeting the Caspian Sea.

The Iranian people and especially the youth considered the initial months after the overthrow of the Shah as the "spring of liberty." It was the advent of a political season that should have fulfilled the most significant aspirations of the oppressed people of Iran. During the Shah's reign, merely meeting or having contacts with a single member of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) would have counted as a watershed moment in the life of any young person in Iran.

Ever since the PMOI opened official offices in Iranian cities and provinces like Gilan (where Rasht is located) after the 1979 revolution, a dramatic page turned in the lives of many young students, girls and boys alike. Now after a quarter century since the revolution, I can't help but look back on those days. There wasn't even an hour for rest and quiet. This was symptomatic of a fervent national desire that will never subside until the establishment of freedom in Iran.

In the weeks following the revolution, I became active in the social and political arena by becoming a supporter of the PMOI in Rasht's technical college. I don't remember a single day in which we were immune from the constant harassment of the new regime's agents and club-wielding hooligans.

In the initial phases after the Shah's overthrow and the establishment of the Khomeini regime, even though the regime did not have the possibility or the ripe conditions for the creation of a complete atmosphere of suppression, supporting the PMOI or promoting their views and objectives at the time were still unbearable for the mullahs. The activities and involvement of women and especially young female students who routinely distributed PMOI publications, pictures, newspapers, and books were particularly hard to absorb for the reactionary rulers and their forces.

"Double oppression" is a term usually used to express the persecution of women and gender inequalities imposed throughout history. It has a clear meaning in the context of the social sciences. But I have yet to come across a clear enough expression to convey the oppression and policies that the ruling mullahs have imposed against Iranian women supporting the objectives and ideals of the PMOI.

Every time I appeared in a social setting to sell a newspaper or distribute statements by the PMOI or to raise awareness about the regime's suppressive policies, club-wielding thugs known as "Hezbollahis" (party of God) would attack and beat me senselessly with clubs and sticks. When I fought back, they would forcefully take off my scarf. They would approach me and shamelessly hurl derogatory and sexist insults simply because I was distributing pamphlets and newspapers in public. These were the kinds of insults and harassment that would force a normal girl or woman to become depressed and decide to stay at home forever. But thanks to my passion and love for freedom and justice, which the PMOI championed, I could muster enough energy to ward off these attacks.

At my school, which was one of the few mixed education centers, only the supporters of the PMOI organized prayers. When I stood in the rows behind other supporters of the PMOI for daily prayers, agents of the regime attacked me from behind to disrupt my prayer. Although there were various political tendencies represented in the school, when the regime's forces attacked me, all of the girls united to come to my defense.

We had set up a library in one of the city's districts. The regime's forces attacked it. We tried to stop them to prevent looting and arson. They beat us

for hours. When these unofficial hooligans and agents failed in their mission, the regime's official forces entered the scene. After hours of resistance against them, they wounded or arrested many of us. The rest sought to avoid being arrested by dispersing into nearby streets. But the regime's "Pasdars" (members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or IRGC) pursued them and beat whoever they could catch. A few Pasdars, armed with pistols, were running after me in the streets around the library and fired at me hoping to arrest me at any cost. One of the local residents saved me by opening their house door and offering me refuge. After the situation returned to normal, the owners gave me a ride to my own house.

On that same day, my friend Zahra Ayyaz, whose head was broken after being hit by a club, had gone to the house of a local resident and changed her blood-stained scarf so that her brother, who was a member of the IRGC, would not notice. If he had noticed, he would have harassed and beat her at home.

On the second anniversary of the revolution, we set up a photo gallery on Bisotoun Street. When a group of the regime's club wielding agents attacked the female supporters of the PMOI, a young man by the name of Hamid Ashrafi tried to save us. But the regime's forces brutally attacked him and stabbed him in his shoulder from behind. A year later, he was executed in prison by a firing squad.

The regime's thugs, armed with stones and clubs, also attacked the funeral of Bahram Farahnak, who the regime had murdered for supporting the PMOI. On that day, they swung long clubs (almost a meter long) embedded with nails especially aimed at women and girls in order to injure as many people as possible. Even the elderly were not spared.

At the Ashura religious ceremony that year, when one of the PMOI officials was speaking at Samad Behrangi mosque, we once again witnessed the onslaught of the regime's club wielding agents and Pasdars. They used the stock of their guns to beat myself and dozens of other women which resulted in injuries. Several mullahs were directly involved in the attack and threw stones at female sympathizers of the PMOI.

My initial question was why are all the officials of this regime, which had

usurped political power by riding a wave of national uprisings against the Shah's dictatorship, so sensitive to the PMOI? Why do they so ruthlessly try to combat it? Why is mere support for the PMOI so unbearable in their eyes?

The answer soon became evident to me in the course of two years of political activism among a large number of social classes and sectors in my city. I spent a long time in the "districts department" of the PMOI, and without exaggeration traveled to every single region and district of the city of Rasht (except Baqerabadeh, which was a gathering spot for the mullahs, the IRGC, and their thugs). I knocked on every door to hand out PMOI newspapers, statements and books to the residents. Almost all of them had something to say in opposition to the regime and the policies of the mullahs in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution. There were only a handful who did not explicitly and openly take a stand against the regime and its policies.

When the Iranian Resistance's Leader, Massoud Rajavi, planned to give a speech at the city's main stadium, we distributed leaflets all over Rasht inviting people to attend the event. When people, especially women, noticed IRGC agents around us they tried to irritate them by saying things like: "There's no need to distribute leaflets announcing speeches by Massoud Rajavi. We all know when he is speaking and, of course, we will all attend the event." Similarly, when we promoted the event at the city's large intersections, passing cars would honk their horns and flash their lights as a sign of encouragement and support.

On the day of Massoud's speech, over 300,000 people congregated at Takhti stadium in Rasht city. When he talked about the legacy of Gilan province during the 1906 Constitutional Revolution and the movement's leader Mirza Kuchak Khan, there was a huge roar of excitement from the crowd, with mothers performing traditional cheers.

The regime's thugs did not dare to approach the stadium in the course of the entire speech. Even hours after Massoud's speech had ended, people were still honking their horns and flashing their car headlights to express excitement and joy. It was this incredible atmosphere and the outpour of social support for the PMOI that dramatically drew the ire and hatred of the mullahs and their forces against the PMOI.

The crimes I witnessed in society and in the regime's prisons against the PMOI by the regime were simply and in all their elements indicative of the mullahs' endless panic and fear. They believed that the PMOI has the ability to overthrow them. All their crimes were a tactic of self-preservation and nothing more.

Less than 30 months after the revolution, on June 20, 1981, the regime's first supreme leader Khomeini officially issued an order to fire upon 500,000 peaceful protesters marching in support of the PMOI in the streets of Tehran, resulting in dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries. A new era had emerged, and the mullahs left no option whatsoever for the continuation of peaceful political life for the various socio-political groups and forces. The dark period of largescale executions and barbaric tortures thus began in earnest in Iran.

In particular, anyone who was arrested on charges of supporting the PMOI or distributing leaflets or possessing PMOI-related books or publications was put under the most cruel forms of torture and in the end was sentenced to death in kangaroo courts that lasted no more than a few minutes. They were then quickly executed by a firing squad or hanged.

In the eyes of the clerical regime in Iran, even the name "Mojahed" (PMOI member) was forbidden. Khomeini's fatwa (religious decree) called for the confiscation of PMOI property and killing PMOI members, families or supporters, describing these actions as religiously permissible.

Maintaining any form of contact with the PMOI or conducting activities on their behalf is still punishable by death, and the death penalty usually takes place after the victim is subjected to cruel forms of torture in the regime's detention centers. Therefore, supporters of the PMOI like myself continued our sociopolitical activities in secret.

The Allegation

In the early hours of an August day in 1981, my friend Naima and I were walking on a side street in one of the districts of Rasht city. We were going to meet another friend. Suddenly, a number of Hazbollahi thugs stopped

us. One of them said: “You two have to come with us to the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] office.”

I said: For what reason? Who are you and why are you here?

They responded: You’ll see after we go to the IRGC (detention center) and search your purses.

I said: We don’t have anything in our purses. But if this is all you’re after, then find a lady to search our purses right here on the street.

He said: We can’t do that. You have to come with us.

Being arrested on the street because they want to search your purse is something that no young woman in Iran is prepared to experience. This is because it is clear beforehand that being subjected to the worst kinds of treatment and immoral behavior would be the least of her worries.

For Naima and I, whose backing of the PMOI was well known for many in the regime’s suppressive forces, there was no choice but to try to escape. So amid the verbal bickering, we seized an opportune moment, and ran away into another street. There, too, we saw another similar group of agents. In order to avoid raising suspicion about our dash, I pretended that we were running after someone else and yelled out: Stop them! stop them!

By doing so, I was trying to distract the guards. But the success of this tactic was short lived and one of them who supposedly knew me from the past and had known that I was politically active called out: You are a hypocrite (PMOI) yourself! He tried to approach me to take me into custody. But I swung my purse as hard as I could and struck him in the head.

I then grabbed Naima’s hand and we ran away from the pack. After a little while, my friend couldn’t keep up and when I looked back I could see them arresting her. I yelled out to her: Bite their hand and run away! But it was too late. The second group turned her over to the first team of agents that was running after us. Even though I succeeded in getting into the main street, there were not a lot of cars on the road at that time of the day and even the few that were on the road were driving too fast, which meant I could not find a vehicle to help me leave the area.

The guards were in pursuit but still far away. I finally entered another street, which turned out to be a dead-end. I was detained. They were burly men.

They grabbed my arms, held me up and dragged me away. I did everything to get them to let me go, but to no avail. They kept beating me and dragged me into the main street where they had also brought Naima.

A large group of bystanders gathered around us. In the short time span that we were waiting for the IRGC cars to show up and take us away, while trying to catch our breath, we talked to the curious bystanders about the regime agents' treatment and beatings. Looking at our condition and torn attire, people could see that we were beaten. We had no shoes, having slipped them off in order to gain the ability to maneuver the streets more easily. A number of women among the crowd started weeping. A few of them prayed loudly for us. As we yelled in protest, one of the guards punched me in the eye, ripping the skin. Blood started gushing out, covering half my face.

A number of the people among the crowd that had gathered there began protesting. A few of them came close to secure our release. As the number of people increased and tensions began to escalate, we once again sensed that an opportunity for escape was at hand. But then the cars arrived to take us away. Despite our resistance, within minutes, they forcefully pushed us into the vehicles and took us to a detention center.

In the initial minutes after arriving at the detention center, using our condition as an excuse, we requested to take a shower, but were in reality planning to find an escape route. But in response they told us that we were only there temporarily. A guard stayed behind to watch over us. When I tried to grab my badly bruised and bleeding foot to calm the pain, the guard quickly took out his handgun and said in an intimidating tone: «Sit quietly and don't make any sudden moves.»

Sometime after our interrogation, when it was clear that they had no evidence against us, they threw us into a room that resembled an animal barn. At first there were no guards. So, Naima and I synchronized our stories about every event so that they could find no discrepancies between our separate narratives in the course of subsequent interrogations.

But we did not have a lot of time and once again they had sent someone to watch over us. He started by beating us, later separating us and exclaiming: «You cannot talk to each other.»

After a while, despite the fact that he had beaten us, we started talking to him and gradually opened the conversation about the PMOI. In less than half an hour, he was so touched that tears began running down his cheeks while he said: «You are such pure human beings and I don't know why they're doing this to you.»

A few minutes later, he glanced outside and discreetly opened the door so we could get some fresh air. During the hours that we were there, he told everyone who came to see us: «They are innocent.»

A couple of the guards who were former students at my school and knew about me and my connections with the PMOI noticed me there. But they did not say anything and left. It appeared they were seeking to confirm my identity.

By noon we were taken to the head office. It looked like they were going to free us because they had nothing against us and could not lay any charges except resisting arrest, which we obviously could defend.

The head officer said: «We don't have any evidence or reason to keep you here. But if the IRGC becomes involved then we would have to hand you over to them.»

At the same time, the head of Gilan's IRGC entered the room accompanied with his wife. His wife knew both Naima and I, and was aware of our political tendencies. Immediately after coming into the room, they began to beat us. They left a short while after. Half an hour later, official teams of the IRGC came to pick us up. They took us to the yard while beating us, and then forced us to stand under a tree.

The leader of the pack said: «We have to hang these two right here from this tree so they don't go to the IRGC detention center. Detaining these hypocrites in those places would cause only more aggravation for us.»

For almost half an hour, all kinds of accusations, humiliation and harassment, both physically and psychologically, continued as we stood under that tree. A few other military vehicles arrived and they took us to the IRGC detention center in a convoy of three cars. On the way, one of the female guards suddenly said in a ridiculous manner: «You don't have any grenades that could explode, do you?»

And while pretending to be afraid she began to frisk me.

During the whole time driving, the male guards were pointing their guns at us from all three sides in order to dissuade us from even thinking of escaping. Naima was sitting by the door. I tried to signal to her to open the door so we could jump out. But since a guard was watching her she could not do much. I tried to test the situation myself. I lifted my hand and gradually moved it toward the door. But the female guard noticed and smacked my hand.

As soon as we arrived at the detention center, we were blindfolded and taken to a building. I could hear someone saying “separate these two.” As soon as I heard this, I started yelling out: «Why did you bring us here? What crimes are we accused of?»

I could feel there were more guards congregating, with a few who knew me, because I heard several of them saying in unison and with excitement: “Well, well, they finally got Pouran Najafi and she’s in our hands now.”

I couldn’t figure out what it was all about. It appeared as though they were building a case. I wanted to be ready for it and decided to cause as much commotion as possible so I could gain the upper hand. I continued to yell hoping to figure out what the impetus for bringing us to the detention center was.

The yelling provoked them to quickly separate me from Naima. They blindfolded me and took me to an area that, judging from what I was walking on, appeared to be a deserted quarter. I had no shoes on, I was blindfolded, and they were making me walk on gravel. They constantly pushed me from behind hoping I would trip. They continued to whisper in my year: «We’re taking you to a firing squad, so say your last prayers.» They obviously wanted to scare me.

After walking a few hundred feet, I adjusted my blindfold in a way that I could see the holes on the ground to avoid tripping. I noticed one of the potholes and could feel that they were deliberately pushing me towards it. I managed to walk around it in order to avoid tripping. The person who appeared to be the ringleader struck a hard blow to the back of my head and said: “Stop acting like a guerilla fighter.”

I gradually began to understand that these maneuvers and actions were not

only to scare me. They wanted to test me and make up charges of participation in military actions so they could dole out any punishment they liked. The walk on the abandoned site took about an hour. In the end, after straightening out my blindfold, they took me to a room within the building where I could hear grueling cries of people who were being tortured.

After spending several minutes sitting in a room, a man entered and said in a gentle tone: «If you tell me the whole story, I will help you.»

I replied: «I have nothing to say. You're the ones who have to tell me why you've arrested me.»

He took a stab at being sympathetic, trying to calm me down in hopes of getting me to talk. I told him: «I have nothing to say and I have done nothing wrong. You can do whatever you want. If you had even one bit of decency you wouldn't have treated me like this.» The interrogator tried hard to stay calm and collected, pretending that he knows nothing. It was as if he was trying to create a scene in which I was talking to a true democrat.

He asked: «Why do you say that? Did they do something to you?»

I pretended I wanted to show the bruises on my face left from that morning when a guard punched me in the eye. But my real goal was to understand what is going on in the room and see if I can recognize the people who were there. On the one hand I felt like this was a ploy to get me to talk. On the other hand I had my doubts about the cries I was hearing; maybe they were part of a tactic to scare me.

I said: «You can remove my blindfold so I can show you what they've done to me.»

The interrogator hesitated for a moment but then said: «On one condition; on the condition that you don't look around and keep your head down.»

But before he could completely remove my blindfold, I quickly looked around and recognized some of the faces of people who were being interrogated. Among them were several students and workers who supported the PMOI. I knew them from my days in the districts division of the organization. They had blindfolds on and were being beaten by their interrogators.

Furious, the interrogator quickly put the blindfold back on. But he managed to control himself and simply complained "no one should have mercy on you

people.”

He then began asking a series of questions: «Where did they arrest you? What were you doing ...»

I did not tell him the whole truth because in light of the events that had unfolded since that morning I couldn't predict what was about to transpire. All indications were that they were trying to fabricate trumped up charges against me.

The interrogator said: «If you don't tell me the truth, I'd be forced to do something that I don't want to do.»

As he was making these types of threats, another guard entered and said: «They have summoned Pouran Najafi to appear in court.»

The interrogator said: «I got nothing from her anyway, so you might as well take her away.»

The “Court”

They then took me to another room where I could immediately see Naima sitting down on a chair. The mullah in the room promptly introduced himself and said: «I am the sharia judge of this court. My name is Ansari. If you tell me the truth I'll be able to help you. You've been arrested for sabotage, which automatically carries the death penalty.»

I asked: «What sabotage?»

He said: «This morning the residence of the IRGC commander was bombed!»

It was at that point that I realized why the IRGC was hanging around the Komiteh. It appeared as though they were trying to associate anyone detained that day to what had happened in the morning. The IRGC was flexing its muscles, and wanted to claim that it had arrested the culprits on the very same day.

My friend and I had agreed previously that we must resist against all plots and allegations. But if they figured out our ties to the PMOI and tried to harass us on that basis, we would not give up defending our ideals until our last breath. So in response to the sharia judge we complained about the