Content:

- Showing the real face of the regime

My name is Soheil Arabi. I was born in Tehran in 1985. I was arrested because of my activities as a photographer and my posts on social media. I have always loved photography because it tells us the truth better than any other art or science. I started a battle against theocracy and clerical capitalism, the capitalism of the mullahs in Iran. I believe that my best weapon in this fight will always be enlightenment based on facts to overcome ignorance and superstition, the main instruments of theocracy. I have always strived to show the real face of the Islamic regime and its representatives, in a language that the general public, especially the working class, can understand. I often use dark humour and sarcasm to do so.

My life has been marked by deprivation of liberty. I was sentenced and imprisoned for almost eight years in three prisons: Evin prisons in Tehran, the Penitentiary Complex in Tehran and Gohardasht prison (Rajai Shahr). I was then detained once again for a year and a half. During all this time, I was often transferred to be interrogated in high-security detention centres, armed forces detention centres and in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) safe houses.
I was sentenced to death twice by the Sar Allah headquarters of Sepah.

I was eighteen when I was arrested for the first time, while photographing and preparing a report on child labor. I was locked up for a year and six months in a solitary cell of one of those high-security detention centres known as the “safe houses”. I was interrogated every day, several times. The interrogators were mostly focused on finding the branches of political groups they thought I was linked to. I had to prove that I was not connected to any political mouvement.

After my release, I was kept under surveillance for a long time and summoned several times. My most significant arrest after that took place in November 2013. It was related to the activities on Facebook and other social networks that I had developed over several years. I had come to the conclusion that to win the fight against the regime, I had to do more than just photograph.

- Solitary confinement

I was arrested at 6 am at my home, in Tehran, by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Ten armed officers raided our house, eight men with untrimmed beards and guns, and two women. The women searched our bedroom, including our underwear. The men went through the rest of the house. They kept calling their commanding officer to ask if they should take everything they found. I was incarcerated in Evin prison. I was given nothing but three rough blankets. I had no pens, no books. Nothing.

In high-security detention centres, the accused is locked up in solitary confinement and subjected to frequent interrogations. There are several types of solitary confinement cells: those without neither toilet nor bathroom, those with just a toilet, those with both. The authorities use this to move people from one cell to another, so as to intensify or reduce the harshness of material conditions.

I was first detained in a cell with no toilet or bathroom, as is usually the case. Every time I wanted to use the toilet, I had to put a piece of paper through a slot. I would wait, hoping that the prison guards would pass my cell, see the paper, and let me out. It was prohibited to shout that you needed the toilet. If we did so, the guards would deny us access to the bathroom. They have now installed interphones, but at the time, there was nothing.

Interrogations always followed the same protocol. After being locked in the cell for hours, the guard would open the door and warn me: *"Head down, blindfold tight! You can just look at your slippers. You must not talk on the way. If you raise your head, I will break your neck."* We would pass through an open space to arrive in front of another building. Through a video intercom, the prison guard would call out: *"I brought the 58."*
I was beaten and cursed on the first day of interrogation. They were angry with me, both for criticising Islam and for posting calls and reposts about social issues online. Above all, they blamed me for criticising the prophet of Islam and imams. I was beaten so badly that I passed out. I woke up in my cell. The first days passed like this: only beatings, insults, threats. After a few days, the 'real' interrogation started. They printed out some of my social media posts and asked me to justify them and explain why I had posted them. My posts were criticising the situation in Iran in order to find solutions. But they wanted me to confess that I had received money from Israel and the USA. To achieve this, they beat me severely, threatened me, and inflicted other forms of torture. I felt that the interrogators wanted to make it look as if I would have overthrown the government if they had not arrested me, in order to get a bigger reward. I resisted no matter how hard it was, although I was deprived from visits and phone call. This deprivation lasted three years. Resisting was worthwhile, and helped my lawyer to defend my case.

— Another form of torture

I was transferred later to a public cell: the section 350 of Evin prison. It had two halls and 12 rooms. This section held political activists and people charged for security reasons. They had built for themselves, with difficulty, a library and a gym. People in prison were separated into different rooms depending on the charges against them and/or their political or religious affiliation. For example, in room n.1, we were 24, mostly politically active: members or supporters of the Mujahedins, liberal reformists, affiliated to the Kurdistan Democratic Party, religious reformers, or people accused of spying for the USA. Room n.2 was known as the room of religious spies, and in room n.3, most of the people were marxists, communists, socialists, atheists, and anarchists. Room n.6 was a place for exercise during the day and for smoking and playing chess at night, and room n.11 was a classroom built by the prisoners themselves. Each person with a special skill would teach the others. Incarcerated people shared their knowledge in foreign languages, philosophy, political science, economics...

I was held in section 350 until 2016, until I was then transferred to section 7 for writing and publishing a statement in support of prisoners on hunger strike, as well as publishing reports on detention conditions. In that section, more than 900 prisoners out of 1.000 were financial convicts. About 80 were accused of spying and communicating with other countries, and near 15 were political prisoners.

I was then transferred again to another section of the prison. Again, nearly 800 prisoners were there, most of them for financial charges. There were also sixty political prisoners: a labour activist, one for the right to education in the mother tongue, supporters of different religions, Christian converts.

Being transferred to another cell or prison is one of the worst tortures for any incarcerated person. A prison is not just a set of walls that imprisons people. It is a world with its own complexities and mechanisms, to which it is very difficult to adapt. Each prison, each ward, each cell has its own rules. Although prison law is the same for all facilities, there are unwritten rules that are sometimes enforced more strictly than the official ones. Each prison is different from the others, each cell has its specificities, even each prison bed is different from the others. The smallest transfer changes the whole environment of an incarcerated person. The people you

share your cell with can make life in prison easy or very difficult.

— Living - or surviving - in prison

Detention conditions vary a lot depending on the facility. For example, in Gohardasht and Evin prisons, prisoners are counted in the cells. In Greater Tehran prison, people in prison are counted in the open space, which is more difficult. People are kept waiting for hours, outside in the heat or cold, until the administration comes and counts them. For example, summers in Greater Tehran prison are very hot, and there is not enough shade in the open space. Out of 700 people, only about 20 could be in the shade. It was even possible to buy a little shade from prison guards in exchange for packs of cigarettes.
In Evin prison, many newspapers are provided for free, whereas in Greater Tehran prison, access is only allowed to two newspapers, Iran and Jame-Jam, and people in prison have to buy them. The water in Evin prison comes from wells, but it is drinkable after boiling. In Greater Tehran prison, the water is very salty and full of mud. As for the food provided by the administration, is not edible. People in prison have no other option but to buy food from the prison store, which is rotten and past its expiration date.

People detained for committing common crimes, such as theft or selling alcohol, are transferred to Greater Tehran prison after the authorities have finished interrogating them. The living conditions in this prison are so difficult that people are willing to do anything to be transferred to another facility.

— An almost free workforce

Every week, several members of the Cooperative Foundation[^Cooperativedef] go to Greater Tehran prison and select some people to work in workshops. The Cooperative Foundation supports a business established by Shahram Jazayeri and several Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commanders.
Tasks in such workshops include sewing or food packaging. The foundation buys expired food products in bulk and has them packed by people in prison.
People in prison work almost for free. They are sometimes forced to work without being paid. While the minimum wage was of 5 million tomans per month [in 2022], the foundation pays each incarcerated person less than 200.000 per month, for 12 to 16 hours of work a day, without insurance or safety in the workshops. They suffer many injuries due to their working conditions, and the fact that they have to stand for hours each day. [in 2022], I heard than more than a hundred incarcerated people were killed in a workshop explosion. People in prison work to afford a better place to sleep within the prison, and to increase their chances of being released.
Would these people, who are willing to work so hard in prison, have ended up in prison if if they had been able to have a job outside? I have asked this question many times and have received no answer other than accusations of propaganda activities against the regime, imprisonment sentences, and exile.

People in prison are forced to provide services to the prison guards, such as repairing their cars, cooking, gardening, cleaning the offices of the prison heads and the outside area of the facilities, translating, building new prisons, etc. In Greater Tehran prison, it is common to hear that the walls were built by prisoners, who were paid with cigarettes. They earn very little, as do the service workers who wash the boiler, clean the corridors, wash the toilets, cook for the officers and wash their dishes. Many incarcerated people are also obliged to do the cooking and laundry and receive very little pay for these tasks. The fee received for washing a piece of clothing in Evin prison is 10.000 tomans, and 2.000 tomans in Greater Tehran prison. The room manager, who is

responsible for delivering the food, washing dishes and cleaning the room, is paid 500.000 tomans per week in elite prisons, 200.000 tomans in ordinary prisons in Evin, and 100.000 tomans in Greater Tehran prison. [data from 2022 ]
Incarcerated people also earn money by prostituting themselves and by storing prohibited items, such as drugs or mobile phones, to bring into prison. The storage of goods is mainly carried out by women. They store things in their body, which is a form of prostitution. Other types of prostitution such as becoming a 'chick', which means giving sexual services to others, are also common in Iranian prisons.

[^Cooperativedef]: The Cooperative Foundation of the Revolutionary Guards is under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.