

JUNE 26

**ANAHITA  
RAHMANI**

CCVT Client.

## **Justice in the Context of imprisonment and Resistance**

By Anahita Rahmani

I was around 18 when I grasped the idea of justice. The prevalence of inequality, lawlessness, and tyranny in my country of origin, Iran, provided me with incentive to think about what a just society should be. I developed the vision of a social order in which there would be equal opportunity for all and people could enjoy the fruit of their labour. I was particularly keen about women's rights. I was annoyed when I observed gross injustices against women at the family level as well. I could see how my brother, as a man, received more respect despite working less work for the family.

In an attempt to continue with my education, I travelled to the United States of America in 1977. I learned a lot by seeing a new society and an entirely different culture. I joined a radical movement of Iranian students working against injustice in Iran. I was fascinated by the movement due to its just and humanitarian approach to women. I was respected as a woman and no man looked at me as a sex object. I was given heavy responsibilities with rights equal to those of men. At this time, I made a connection between gender equality and justice. I realized that the implementation of justice would be impossible without the implementation of gender justice. I became an advocate of democracy and women's rights. In those days, I was acquainted with a gentleman called Behrooz. Our relationship turned into a loving attachment and we decided to marry in the future.

Upon my return to Iran in 1979, I found a society ruled by a highly unjust, fanatical and repressive government. Women had a crucial role in terminating the monarchist rule. They were, unfortunately, the first group to be brutally suppressed by the new clerical regime. The regime forced women, even little 4-year-old girls, to wear veils and scarves. Polygamy was allowed; divorce was declared men's right; women were prohibited from travelling alone; children's custody was given to fathers. A myriad of medieval discriminative laws and practices were imposed on women. Women's subordinative condition was a microcosm of the overall situation in Iran. Government's oppression extended to workers, intellectuals, students, religious minorities and ethnic groups. A gross injustice was going on against everybody. I decided to raise my voice.

I joined a leftist group and started organizing workers, women and intellectuals against the regime. Fighting against a tyrannical government that had the support of fanatical people was extremely risky. I was ready to accept the risk, but I was not ready to accept discrimination within our small group. We had all come from a patriarchal and highly traditional society. Men occupied leadership roles in our small group. Also, they used to undermine women's role and therefore gave us less responsibilities. The main challenge was not only to struggle against a

tyrannical regime, but also against male domination among our progressive comrades.

In the year 1982, I married a comrade named Behrooz Fathi. He was a mechanical engineer who graduated in the USA. He had a heavy responsibility in the group and was beloved by workers with whom he worked in different factories. He was a very thoughtful and humble person. We maintained a highly passionate and loving relationship during a very short period of our life together.

On a hot summer day in September 1983, we traveled together to rent a house outside Tehran, as the regime had found out about our whereabouts in Tehran. After we passed the checkpoint on the highway heading from Tehran to Karaj, two army cars began to chase us. One of the cars turned in front of our car and forced Behrooz to stop the car suddenly. Many armed men wearing dark green military style uniforms surrounded our car, pointing their guns at us. One of them shouted at us to get out of the car. I felt as if I was watching the whole thing happen to someone else. It felt like it was an action film at a theatre. I couldn't believe that it was happening to us. We stepped out of the car and put our hands on our heads. They demanded our ID. We gave them our fraudulent ID and then they separated us. Behrooz was in one car and I was in another. The guard came back to me. "You foolish," he said, "cannot fool me. You are Anahita." I denied, but it was of no use. They had already identified us. It was September 11, 1983 at 11:00 am. I was 25 years old and Behrooz was 30.

As we stood there waiting, many people stared at us from their cars. I could see a trace of sympathy in some of their eyes, but most people passed by without even looking up.

I wanted to cry out to them, "Hey people, I have been arrested and will probably be executed. Please don't look back." But, I stood there quietly.

They covered our eyes with blindfolds and Behrooz's wrists were handcuffed. They forced us to sit in the car and to bend at the waist so that our heads were pointed towards the floor. We knew that we were headed towards the notorious Iranian jail Evin, one of the biggest prisons in the world. Evin was built in partnership with Israel and the CIA during the Shah regime. Khomeini's regime had expanded it. No one spoke a word for the whole journey. A deep silence ensued. I could hear only the noise of the traffic. When we entered Evin, I was brought to the female section. A female Pasdar searched me, took my bag and gave me a dark blue chador (veil). When we passed the main door we were put in the car again. It stopped in less than 2 minutes. Somebody guided me into a place that later I found out was called Ward 209 – a ward for newly arrested prisoners.

I was dragged into the torture room, downstairs of the 209 ward. If I looked out the bottom of the blindfold, I could see three pairs of legs. I could imagine the

faces of these men - their bearded, angry faces. I saw many different sizes of cables, from thick to thin, on the ground. There were bloody footprints everywhere. The room was dimly lit by a small lamp. I felt paralyzed by fear. The strong odour/stench of blood made me dizzy.

In the middle of the room, there was a bed. A man was being flogged. He was screaming loudly. A voice said to him, "shut up, get up, get out of the room and wait in the hallway." I could see his feet as the prisoner tried to get up. I wondered if he was going to be able to walk. Eventually he was able to move and walked towards the door, dragging his bloody feet on the floor.

One of the men told me: "Take off your socks and lie down on your belly on the bed." I wasn't sure they knew my identity; so for me it was very important to continue to deny that I was Anahita. I tried to play the role of a woman who was very scared and constantly called her mother. I hoped to fool them by acting. One of the men tied my hands to the metal headboard; he tied them so tightly that I could feel the ropes bruising my wrists. After my ankles were tied to the bed, a dirty, grey blanket was thrown over my body and one of the men sat on my head. I heard the sharp whistle of a cable cut the air and it landed on the soles of my feet. Pain. The pain was excruciating. I felt a molten pole was put on my sole. Flashes were running on my brain. I can't compare it with anything or any other kind of pain. All my body was contracted. I was sweating, and also because of the blanket and the heavy body on my head, I couldn't breathe. I tried to push the heavy body off my head but it was impossible. Suddenly everywhere went dark. I began to lose consciousness.

When I opened my eyes, I was alone in the room. The blanket had been removed and my whole body was dripping with water. I laid on the bed waiting. My feet were throbbing with pain. I shivered uncontrollably. After a while, my interrogator returned with another prisoner. It was a man who had been beaten severely. His clothes were torn and there were bloody bandages on his feet. I knew him; he was one of my colleagues. I heard the interrogator asking him, "Is this Anahita?" He refused to look at me but I heard his answer, "Yes, she is."

As I lay there on the bed, I didn't know how to react. I was shocked that he had betrayed me and yet, I had felt the pain of torture myself and so felt compassion for what he had endured. As I lay there, I wasn't sure which pain was more acute, the physical or the emotional pain that I was feeling. They untied my hands and let me get up. When I saw my feet, I couldn't believe my eyes. My feet had swollen to the size of a pillow.

They brought me to a cell that night. The cell didn't have a roof - the ceiling was covered with criss-crossed ropes and I could see the sky. I could hear the sound of the guard's feet when he was walking up and down the roof of the ward. I could also hear the sound of an interrogator's feet who was running happily and saying to others, "at last we arrested Behrooz and Anahita."

I was exhausted but I couldn't sleep. I lay on the concrete floor. My feet were bruised; they throbbed with pain. And, yet I knew that the torture wasn't over. They would try to break me again and tomorrow would be a worse day than today had been. I was also thinking about my husband. I was worried about him. I began to have thoughts of doubt: "Can I resist the torture? Am I strong enough?" I was scared. The thought of betraying my comrades was terrible. I would rather die than betray people whom I loved. I looked for something, anything in the cell that could help me to kill myself - a small piece of glass, a rope; but the cell was completely empty. I knew that I would need to be stronger than I had ever been before.

I began to walk on my bruised feet. I knew that by walking I could reduce the swelling. If I could do this perhaps the torture would be easier to bear. As I walked, my mind was filled with thoughts: "Are my comrades okay? Have they heard about our arrest? Have they moved their location so that they are safe?" I looked up and thought that I saw something written on the wall of my cell. I looked more closely and read a sentence scratched into the wall: "This moment will pass."

As long as I live, I will never forget that moment and those four small words on that prison cell. Those words gave me a strange sort of power. I knew that this was temporary and that the physical and emotional assaults that I would face would pass. It was like oxygen running into my brain. I felt a sense of hope. Yes, this would pass and the important thing now was to figure out how this situation would pass.

After that, I was able to sleep. I woke up when I heard the small window in my door open. Through my chador (veil) I could see two men. They watched me for a while and then one of them said, "see how relaxed she is now in her sleep. She is relaxed because she doesn't know what we will do to her tomorrow." They laughed and closed the window.

At the time that I was being tortured, I didn't realize what an important experience it was for me. It wasn't the pain itself, but what I learned from the pain that was important. I learned that the inner strength of human beings is tremendous and even under terrible situations, they can resist. As I lay in my cell that first night with my eyes closed, listening to the words of my interrogators, I decided to be just to myself. The only way for me to overcome their denial of justice was to resist. I thought to myself, "you can kill me but you can't break me and I will change your laughter to crying with my resistance."

The next morning I got up very early. While I was walking back and forth across my cell, the door opened. A guard handed me a filthy red plastic cup of tea, a very small and dry piece of cheese and a stale chunk of bread and he said "after breakfast, be ready for interrogation."

I didn't have an appetite. I couldn't eat anything except the tea. Even though I knew it would be very hard, I was surprisingly relaxed. I was ready for anything. I decided to defeat my interrogators. The guard came back sooner than I expected and said, "put on your chador and blindfold; come out and follow me." He led me down a long hallway and told me to sit on the floor.

While I was sitting on the floor, I tilted my head up until I could see underneath my blindfold. I saw a long corridor with many rooms. There were many other prisoners sitting on the floor. I also saw three prisoners whose hands were tied with thick chains and fastened to the wall. One of them was groaning. Later I discovered that this was a kind of torture. The torturer kept the prisoners chained to the wall for many days so that they were unable to sleep. Another prisoner was tied to the radiator and in his hands, he held the Quran. He was reading the Quran loudly and hitting his head against the radiator. I could see that he had lost his mental capacities. I found it to be a sordid injustice to torture a mental health patient. As I was looking at all of these things, I didn't hear my guard coming down behind me. The next thing that I felt was his fist striking my head with huge force. He put his mouth right beside my ear and whispered, "If you raise your head again, I'll shatter it against the wall." A shudder went through my body. I could tell that he meant what he said.

I heard a woman screaming, "Forgive me I didn't know. For God's sake, don't execute me. Have compassion for me, for my children." A harsh voice answered her "If you really loved your children, you wouldn't be a political activist, and instead you would be a simple housewife. Islam is very compassionate with believers, but not with unbelievers who fight against Allah and Islam." This seemed to me a medieval type of religious injustice. As I listened to her pleas, I wished I could talk to her to say "don't cry and don't beg for your life. There is no justice; there is no compassion. He can kill you and your children in this moment, without compunction." I heard a voice calling out my name very softly, telling me to follow him. I got up and followed his voice.

We went to a room down the hall and when I entered, he said "Sit down on the chair." I sat down on the chair. It was a chair with arms and a small table attached to it. He started to pace the floor behind my chair and began to speak to me. He said, "You are a poor, uneducated person who had to escape from war and support your family economically." When he said this, I knew that he had talked to the manager at the factory where I had worked. In order to get a job as a worker, to be involved in the worker's movement, I had told the manager of the factory this story. Then my interrogator put paper and a pen on the table and said "You see that we know everything about you. Now write all the names and addresses of your colleagues. Don't mess with us, when I come back I will expect to see that you have written everything." I heard him leave the room.

I wondered what time it was and whether my husband had been tortured like I had been. He was so thin. I wondered if he could have resisted the torture. I felt sleepy. I was happy that I was left by myself so that I could have some silence. I put my head on the table and slept. I woke up when I felt a sharp pain on my head. My interrogator hit my head again with his fist. He was holding a pen in his hand and when his fist hit my head, the sharp tip of the pen tore through my skin. A scream came out of my throat, "I have nothing to write."

"Get up, you need some more *tazir* (religious word for torture). When you receive *tazir*, you will tell us everything." Using a pen so that he didn't have to touch me, he guided me toward the basement. He called somebody and explained my position in the organization and told him that I refused to cooperate. As he spoke, he was mocking the *Shar'ia* court, pretending that he was giving evidence against me so that I could be punished with *tazir*. In this way, he showed that he was not bothering about their own Islamic laws and courts. It was an outright denial of any semblance of justice

While I was sitting on the floor a young man was brought out of the torture room into the hallway. He was short and thin. I saw this from under the blindfold. His feet were bloody. We were alone for a short time. He asked me "Were you arrested recently?" I nodded. He continued, "Don't be afraid of them. They are much weaker than us. I was arrested 2 years ago but my real identity was only released recently. I know I will be executed very soon." Then he lifted one of his feet and asked me, "Should I put my bloody footprint on the wall?" Without waiting to hear my answer he put his foot on the wall. I showed him my praise by smiling. He was taken away very soon after this and I never saw him again.

I was sleepy. I didn't want to lose an opportunity to sleep. I don't know how many minutes or hours passed. I woke up to the words of my torturer, "Ana, have you thought about it?" I responded, "There's nothing to think about."

"Go ahead and lie on the bed," He said. He tied my feet to the metal of the bed and then threw a dirty, grey blanket on me. He said, "Whenever you want to talk, raise your hands." He didn't ask me any more questions and began to beat me. The pain was terrible. My teeth were clenched in pain. Sweat was pouring out of my body as though bucket after bucket of water had been poured on me. I shoved the blanket into my mouth and bit it as hard as I could. While they struck my feet, I saw sparks of lights behind my eyes. It was like electric shocks running through my body. I wanted to frustrate him so I didn't scream. I thought to myself, "How weak he is. He has thrown me here and tied my body and is flogging me. I am not imprisoned by him, he is imprisoned by me. The most he can do to me is to beat me then kill me, but he can't break me. He is thinking he is strong because he was able to arrest us but I know that he is digging his own grave."

He started to become fatigued. He began to beat me on my back. He became like a mad man, crying, talking, and hitting my whole body with his fists. I could tell that I was causing him to lose himself. I was laying there in horrible pain, but I was content. I felt like I had power. Everything went dark as I lost consciousness.

He poured a bucket of water on my head. I didn't have energy to move my body or my head. He left the room and after a short time he came back and began to flog me again. I could see my blood on the floor. He was spreading it around the room as he walked. The floor was covered with bloody footprints. It was afternoon before he untied my feet and said "Get up and run around the room. I could hardly get up. I tried leaning against the wall and began to walk around the room. The pain was terrible. There was dirt on the floor and as I walked on it, it caused me extreme pain. He began to whip my feet and said, "Faster, faster, run, run." I tried to go faster but I couldn't. I fell down and my *chador* fell from my head. As I lay on the ground, he continued to flog me but told me to cover my head. This was a sinister testimony of injustice mixing with hypocritical religious Puritanism.

Their horrible tortures lasted for 3 days. They prevented me from sleeping by chaining my hands to a hook in the wall and forcing me to stand upright for 3 days and nights. Those nights were the longest and hardest of my life. The third morning when the torturer unlocked my hand, I fell down. He shouted, "Get up." I heard him but it sounded to me like his voice was coming from far away and I couldn't respond. He began to kick me but I couldn't even move my body. He kicked me harder but I didn't move. He thought that I was unconscious and left me alone.

It seemed that I was in another state of being, far from this world. I don't know how long I lay like this but eventually somebody came and took me to my cell. I fell on the floor and slept immediately. I didn't see anyone for two days. The guard would bring my meals but I didn't move. On the third day, I opened my eyes and ate my breakfast. Afterwards, I started to walk around my small cell. I was looking for that small phrase of encouragement written on the wall. I read it and repeated it several times to myself: *these moments will pass*. I was worried about Behrooz. I didn't know what he was experiencing and had no idea how to contact him. I wondered if he was alive. When I thought about the way they tortured me, I wondered what they would have done to him because he was one of the leaders of our organization.

While I was walking the door was opened and the guard said, "put on your blindfold and chador and then come out for interrogation." I was brought into the corridor and sat down beside a closed door. Somebody was being tortured in the room. I could hear his screams. Someone opened the door and I could see inside the room. The torturers had surrounded the man and kicked him with their feet. It was like a ball in a small field.

The prisoner had stopped screaming; now he was only grunting with the pain. I caught a glimpse of the face of the man they were torturing. My heart felt like it had been stabbed when I realized that it was Behrooz. His whole body was covered with blood. I watched as his body fell like the trunk of a tree to the ground. I couldn't control myself. In a second I found myself in the middle of the room, trying to hold Behrooz, yelling out "You killed him, you murderers!" They jumped on me, threw me to the ground and began to kick me. They threw me out of the room and dragged me towards the stairs. One of them threw me on the bed and the other one started to whip me. I don't know if my screams and cries were due to my own pain or for Behrooz. When they left the room, tears continued to pour down my face. It was late at night when I was brought back to my cell.

Behrooz was a leader of our group. He was a brilliant organizer with lots of connections and information about many people. For the rest of my life I will continue to be proud of him; he resisted all techniques of intolerable torture and did it heroically. Within a month, they had murdered him. I received news to his resistance from some of my cellmates who had seen him during their torture and interrogation. A pregnant woman who became my cellmate later told me that she had seen Behrooz in the torture chamber. "He gave me," she said, "all his food and empowered me with his courage and promoted my morale by his kind words." I came to know about his execution after one year when my parents were allowed to see me for the first time.

I experienced the worst and most sordid types of injustice in the years that followed. They kept me under torturous interrogations for around 18 months before taking me to an inquisitional court blindfolded. I moved my blindfold and told the judge that I did not like to be tried with close eyes. The judge, a clergyman called Nayeri, gazed at me with outrage. It was a summary trial, and he asked me only two questions:

1. Do you agree with your group's political views?
2. Do you believe in Islam?

He then accused me of being politically active in jail working with other prisoners and that a heavy punishment was awaiting me. I had no lawyer and was not provided with any means to defend myself. The only person present in the court was my torturer who was sitting behind me. I could not see him, because I was not allowed to look back. I could, however, feel his presence due to his shadow and by the way the judge was staring at a specific point behind me. At the end of this sham trial, that took less than ten minutes, I was blindfolded again and was pushed out of the courtroom.

Initially, they sentenced me to execution, commuted later to life imprisonment. Altogether, I spent 8 years in jail. That was the price I paid for justice.

Upon my release, I suffered in a society that had become extremely patriarchal. I was stigmatized as a widow and as a non-believer. And finally I escaped Iran in 2001. In my first country of asylum, Turkey, I had to face the challenge of living as an illegal alien while I applied for refugee status in Canada and immigrated as a government assisted refugee in 2003.

Years of imprisonment and exile have changed my idea of the concept of justice. From a young activist who supported violence against the enemy, I have matured into a woman who works towards the promotion of people's awareness about their rights and the best ways of obtaining them. Back in those days, I supported the death penalty against the enemies of the people. Today, I oppose the death penalty. I strongly believe that a justified goal needs justified means. The ruling class and the government of each country are responsible for the practice of violence and torture in their societies. When people do not enjoy legal tools to express their views under oppressive regimes, how can we expect them to protest and show their objections? It is through fighting or armed uprisings, that opposition groups cry out loud that we are here, and that we must be heard. The only way for abolishing violence and torture is the creation of a just system that respects every human being and listens to each and every voice.