

Doc_Number: GDE00180

Iran's Interrupted Lives

October 1, 2010

Human rights advocate Shiva Nazar Ahari, 26, was sentenced to a six-year prison term in Tehran on September 18, 2010

In late September, as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was in New York asserting his government's respect for human rights, several young students in Iran were receiving [lengthy prison sentences](#) for their efforts to speak out in defense of those rights. Indeed—as a small photography exhibition about student repression in Iran at Georgetown Law School this month powerfully reminded us—hundreds of Iranian students, journalists, and bloggers have been jailed, many of them in deplorable conditions, since the disputed elections of June 2009. And though the matter has received little attention in the press, many more continue to be arrested and sentenced.

I was struck by the setting of [the exhibition](#). In Georgetown's McDonough Hall, where it was held, law students hurry to and from classes. They walk past or stop to look at the photographs—photographs of men and women, also students, the same age as themselves. But these men and women are Iranian. The Georgetown students are free to come and go, to speak their minds, to argue with their professors; the Iranians in these photos have experienced life differently.

A slide show from "Interrupted Lives: Portraits of Student Repression in Iran"

Ashkan Sohrabi died from bullet wounds during the mass protests that followed last year's contested presidential elections. Shiva Nazar Ahari, 26, an [advocate for women's equality](#) and for children and political prisoners, was being sentenced in Iran this month to a six-year prison term for her peaceful activities, even as the exhibition was ending. Manijeh Hoda'i, a Tehran university student, one of the many pictured here, was executed along with her brother in 1982 for opposition to the Islamic Republic. Ahmad Batebi was sentenced to death when *The Economist* pictured him on its front cover holding aloft the bloody T-shirt of a fellow student during student protests in 1999. His sentence was reduced to ten years under international pressure, but he did not escape mistreatment and solitary confinement. He crossed the

Other recent newsletters

[Iran: In Support of the International Campaign Against the Death Penalty](#)
February 22, 2011

[Iran Uses the Holidays to Announce the Imminent Execution of a Student](#)
December 24, 2010

[Iran Cannot Hide the Truth Behind Sakineh](#)
December 10, 2010

[Iran: A Reflection on the Death Penalty and a Failed Anti-Narcotic Campaign](#)
October 31, 2010

[Iran's leadership guilty of crimes against humanity](#)
June 8, 2010

[Three Iranian human rights activists receive the Lech Walesa Prize](#)
September 29, 2009

[Terror in Buenos Aires : The Islamic Republic's Forgotten Crime Against Humanity](#)
July 18, 2009

[Authorization Denied: The high cost of the public expression of dissent in Iran](#)
July 9, 2009

[Neither Free Nor Fair, Elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran](#)
June 12, 2009

[Thirty Years Ago in Iran](#)
February 11, 2009

» [And more...](#)

Visit the Human Rights and Democracy Library

[International Human Rights Organizations' Reports on Human Rights Abuses in Iran](#)

[Testimonies of Victims and Perpetrators](#)

border into Iraq in late 2007 and is now living in the United States.

The record on display of students arrested, jailed, tortured and executed makes for grim viewing, all the more striking for its spareness and understatement. Beside each photograph is a brief description, powerful in its simplicity, providing name, age, university affiliation, circumstances and dates of arrests, sentencing, eventual fate. At the bottom of each panel, in tiny print, are the names of the thousands of students caught in the web of Iran's intelligence apparatus, its secret police, and its judicial and prison system. There are echoes here of the Vietnam War Memorial's wall of names, except that those commemorated in this exhibition had their lives destroyed by their own countrymen, not by an enemy army.

Sponsored by the [Abdorrhaman Boroumand Foundation](#) and the Georgetown chapter of Amnesty International, the exhibition was organized by two sisters, Ladan and Roya Boroumand. Their father, after whom the foundation was named, was an Iranian lawyer and democracy activist who was assassinated in Paris in 1991, almost certainly by Iranian agents. Among other valuable work, the Boroumands have created [a database](#) of some 12,000 executions carried out in Iran since the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

The display at Georgetown included three small school desks, the kind in which political detainees in Iran are required to sit to write responses during interrogations and, once they are broken, to put on paper their "confessions." Roya Boroumand, who takes me through the exhibition, asks if I want my picture taken sitting behind one of these desks. I shudder and refuse. I have no desire to relive the [long hours, days and months I spent](#) under interrogation and writing answers to questions at Evin Prison.

The exhibition is aptly named "interrupted lives." These young men and women, you think, should be playing soccer and basketball, could have gone to graduate school, might have been lawyers and doctors. Instead, jail and exile, and aborted schooling and careers, have been their fate. Manuchehr Es'haqi was arrested at age 13 and spent ten years in jail for "corruption on earth." He now repairs coffee machines in Sweden. He looks at the camera through haunted eyes. "I am still not really living. Nothing makes me really happy," the small inscription quotes him as saying.

Hamed Ruhinejad, a university student arrested after the 2009 elections, lingers in jail, despite multiple sclerosis and the loss of sight in his right eye. Bahareh Hedayat, the well-known human rights and women's rights activist and a leading member of the Office for Fostering Unity, a student organization, has been in and out of jail since 2006. Only 25, she was sentenced in May to nine-and-a half years for speaking out on rights issues.

iranrights.org/english/newsletter-15.php

[of Human Rights Abuses in Iran](#)

[Iran's Pro-democracy Voices](#)

» [And more...](#)

Thousands of young Iranian exiles, fleeing the unwelcome attention of the secret police, have sought refuge in towns and cities across Turkey, waiting for a government to grant them asylum. The country of my birth, I think to myself, brutalizes its own youth, robs them of their futures because they dared dream of freedom and liberty.

There are now a considerable number of political exiles in the United States as well. I met three of them at the exhibition. Ali Afshari, who is pictured in the exhibition giving a speech during his days as a student leader in the 1990s, was imprisoned three times and tortured. He refers in a matter-of-fact way to "the time when I was broken." He gave his interrogators the "confession" they wanted, recanted once out of prison, and came to the US once he was allowed to leave the country.

In 2009, physics student Ali Reza Firuzi Ali, 19, was sent to Evin Prison for insulting the Islamic Republic on his blog and for "acting against national security, propaganda against the Islamic Republic, and organizing illegal gatherings."

Kian, a photo-journalist, was beaten up and his equipment seized on two occasions during the post-election protests last year. During a desperate search for medical attention after the second beating, he accidentally ended up in a hospital belonging to the Intelligence Ministry. A sympathetic doctor hastily patched him up and sent him away before he caught the attention of security agents. He speaks of a continuing clampdown in Tehran and parents who try to keep their children off the streets.

The other exile I spoke to is a political blogger who recently fled Iran and understandably did not want to give his name. However, he wanted to talk about Hossein Derakhshan, the father of political blogging in Iran. Derakhshan has a controversial history. Once an advocate for democracy, he turned into an unrelenting critic of the reformist Green Movement. Some even suspected him of working for the government. Whatever his loyalties, somewhere along the way, he seems to have fallen foul of Iran's security agencies. He has been held in prison for the past two years. My interlocutor's concern for Derakhshan was not misplaced. A few days after my interview, on September 22, sources close to Derakhshan's family reported there had been a trial and that the prosecutor had asked for the death sentence.

No one knows how many bloggers there are in Iran. John Leyne of the BBC cites a figure of 65,000. My interlocutor

says there are many "social bloggers" but perhaps only 100 serious political bloggers. Still, they play an important part in keeping political networks alive and as sources of information for the international press, whose direct access to Iran is increasingly limited. The intelligence agencies regard them as dangerous. In addition to Derakhshan, several other bloggers have ended up in jail, sometimes for sending out a single message.

There are exhilarating moments in the exhibition. One photo shows a lone, chador-clad woman facing a clutch of soldiers. They point batons and bayonets at her; she points back with a single, angry finger. Another photograph shows a student at Amir Kabir University, as he stands during a speech by President Ahmadinejad. He is holding a hand-made poster high above his head. It reads: "Amir Kabir is no place for you, Fascist President." An amusing montage of headshots shows men wearing women's scarves or in full hijab—a tactic adopted by protesters in 2009 to show support for a student leader whose picture in female dress the security authorities had faked, claiming he fled a demonstration in women's clothing.

I leave the exhibition angry at the thought of so many lives fractured, but also uplifted by the courage of these women and men who return to the battle again and again despite arrests, jail and even the threat of execution. The words of Shiva Nazar Ahari remain with me: "After all, this is our country. If we leave, there will be no one left."

"Interrupted Lives: Portraits of Student Repression in Iran," was shown at Georgetown University Law School from September 13 to September 17, 2010. A film and slide show about the exhibition is available on the web site of the [Boroumand Foundation](#).

September 27, 2010 1:55 p.m.