

## Revolutionary Ayatollah:

# How My Father Went from the Prison of the Shah to the Prison of Khamenei

Jan 20, 2010



Articles & Testimony

In the very cold winter of 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, returned to Qom, the spiritual capital of the Shiite world, for the first time after his long exile. A huge crowd came out that day. As he made his way to the stage, passing through those who pressed together to see him, the ayatollah's mantle fell off. Once he had settled in his chair, he noticed how chilly he was. "I'm cold," he said. Within seconds, another mantle fell over his shoulders and wrapped him warm.

This mantle belonged to my father, Mohammad Taghi Khalaji. After my father draped his mantle over Ayatollah Khomeini's shoulders, he went to the podium and gave the introductory speech on behalf of the clerical establishment, as well as the people of Qom. I never saw my father with that mantle again.

Right now, my father is in solitary confinement in Evin prison in Tehran. He was arrested in his home in Qom on Jan. 12. On that day, he joined hundreds of Iranian citizens who have been arrested by the Iranian regime after the rigged election in June 2009. My family has been given no information -- either by the Special Court of Clerics or by the Ministry of Intelligence -- about any charges against my father. Furthermore, my father has not been allowed to contact us or hire a lawyer. The government's denial of his basic legal rights is not unusual; it is the typical treatment of political prisoners.

The son of a farmer, my father was born in June 1948 in the province of Isfahan. When he was 5 years old, he moved to Tehran, where his three brothers lived. In 1968, after graduating from high school and then Shokooh English Language Institute, he started to work as a bank accountant. Although he came from a conservative religious background, he was the first in his family to become a cleric. Under the influence of the rising religious fervor in Iran, and despite his family's discontent, he left his job in the bank and its good salary. In 1969, he moved to Qom with his fiancée -- my mother, Mohtaram -- and began to study in its seminary.

A revolutionary-minded young cleric, my father soon joined Qom's pro-Khomeini clique and proved himself to be an excellent orator with an innate talent for scholarship. As he was making stunning progress in his theological studies, he employed his rhetorical skills in the service of the revolutionary cause. He was a disciple of Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari and close to other founding fathers of the Islamic Republic.

For delivering speeches critical of the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, he was arrested three times. The last time he was released, three months later in February 1979, the revolution had toppled the shah and established the foundations of a new government.

On Feb. 1, 1979, following the revolution's success, Khomeini returned to Iran from exile in Paris. When he returned to his hometown Qom a month later, the conventional wisdom, shared by my father, was that Khomeini would leave politics to the politicians and return to teaching theology. But the course of history proved everyone wrong.

Khomeini was looking to realize his dream of an Islamic government that applied his authority as the "ruling

jurisprudent," or wilayet-e-faqih. Khomeini stayed in Qom for only a few months and, after suffering a heart attack, moved to Tehran. He governed the Islamic Republic from Iran's political capital for the rest of his life.

During Khomeini's time in Qom, my father became very close to this charismatic leader. Every day, he went to the home of Mohammad Yazdi, where Ayatollah Khomeini resided. Yazdi, now an ayatollah himself, served as the head of Iran's judicial system for ten years under its current leader, Ali Khamenei. Parts of our families have remained in touch to this day: My younger brother is married to one of Yazdi's close relatives.

But some of Khomeini's tactics eventually alienated my father. To consolidate power in the clergy, Khomeini convinced Iran's power-hungry clerics that they were the legitimate heirs of the Islamic Republic and deserved their own portion of the spoils of war against the shah's regime -- in other words, political power. Despite my father's loyalty to Khomeini and his ideals, he became disgusted by these clerics and kept his distance from them. He decided to return to the seminary, and limited his social activities.

Nonetheless, my father's views of the Islamic Republic remained naive and optimistic. He was hugely resistant to the criticism of government behavior from both the secular and religious strata of society. Unconsciously, he resisted the belief that the revolution for which he sacrificed his youth could possibly lead to human rights abuses, executions without trial, the imprisonment of the innocent, and the suppression of freedom of speech.

After 30 years of study under some of the most prominent clerics in the Shiite world, in subjects ranging from fiqh (jurisprudence) to Islamic philosophy, my father became a mujtahid -- an ayatollah who is forbidden from following another's religious authority and must fulfill his own religious duties based on his own personal understanding. He also taught Islamic philosophy and Shiite jurisprudence and educated hundreds of seminary students, several of whom later became prominent political figures.

My father was quiet and pious then and has remained so. He followed the example of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, who was designated as Khomeini's successor in 1985. After Khomeini ordered the execution without trial of approximately 4,000 political prisoners in 1988, Montazeri criticized him for issuing an order he considered contrary to Islam. For speaking out, Ayatollah Montazeri was stripped of his government position, and his family members and disciples were pressured by the regime to remain silent.

This moment was a turning point for revolutionary clerics like my father who were not contaminated by political and economic corruption. In one of his public speeches Montazeri, who was Khamenei's teacher before the revolution, stated that Khamenei lacks sufficient theological training to issue fatwas and that his government is therefore illegitimate according to both the Iranian Constitution and Shiite law. Following this speech, the regime raided Montazeri's house, confiscated his property, and exercised a tremendous pressure over his family and clerical circle, including my father. Nevertheless, my father remained quiet and continued to write religious commentaries on the Fourth Shiite Imam's prayer book (Sahifeh-ye Sajjadih) and the speech of Fatima, the prophet Muhammad's daughter (Khotbeh-ye Zahra). He published several religious books and, when he was allowed, he delivered speeches in different cities in Iran without ever publicly criticizing the government.

My father was mostly isolated from politics and gradually became disappointed with them. However, the televised presidential debate between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi agitated him and motivated him to throw his support behind Mousavi.

During the unrest that followed last June's election, when government forces arrested and killed peaceful demonstrators, my father began to speak out. He watched the footage of the death of Neda Agha-Soltan, after she was shot by a Basij militiaman during a June 20 protest, replayed on television. After that event, he began calling me at midnight in Tehran for several nights, telling me that he could no longer sleep. He did not revolt against the shah in order to establish a regime that beat up peaceful demonstrators and shot innocent people.

One of his first speeches was in the Dar-Alzahra mosque in north Tehran, where reformists, including former President Mohammad Khatami, were gathering. In his speech, my father reiterated that he would like the Islamic Republic to survive. However, if Iranian leaders claim that they are following the example of Islam, its prophet, and its imams, then according to Islam, he argued, they must have the people's consent to rule. He also criticized the Iranian regime for taking political prisoners, saying that the governments of the Prophet Muhammad and his son-in-law Ali insisted on the freedom of pacifist opposition. Therefore, they maintained neither an Evin prison, the famous prison in Tehran where the government still holds political detainees, nor a Kahrizak, the detention center where the government tortured and raped men and women for supporting Moussavi after the election.

We spoke after this speech. He was happy for the message that he had delivered and felt that he had done his religious duty. He considered that he and his compatriots were responsible before God for the revolution and therefore could not keep silent when human rights abuses were committed in the name of Islam. Despite receiving several warnings from the Intelligence Ministry, he continued to seize opportunities to speak out.

In his last speech, on the eve of Ashura in the residence of Ayatollah Yousef Sanei in Qom, my father asked that Iran's leaders repent to God for what they have done to the demonstrators and for suppressing the clerics who support the Islamic Republic but were merely constructively criticizing the current leaders' behavior. This speech came a few days after the death of Ayatollah Montazeri. While Tehran and Iran's other major cities were on fire after the rigged election, Qom was quiet until the passing of the dissident ayatollah. After hundreds of thousands of people gathered at Montazeri's funeral and used the opportunity to demonstrate against Khamenei and the regime, all the ceremonies around the country for Montazeri were banned by the government. In an attempt to prevent more damage to the government's legitimacy, the government waged a campaign against Ayatollah Sanei by shutting down his offices in different cities. My father was arrested a few days later.

By initiating a crackdown on peaceful protesters and suppressing the first generation of the Islamic Republic, the government has simultaneously discredited its Islamic legitimacy and undermined its revolutionary credentials. This regime has transformed my father from a man concerned with keeping Ayatollah Khomeini's shoulders warm into an enemy of the state. This is a revolution that eats its own children. It places its survival at risk.

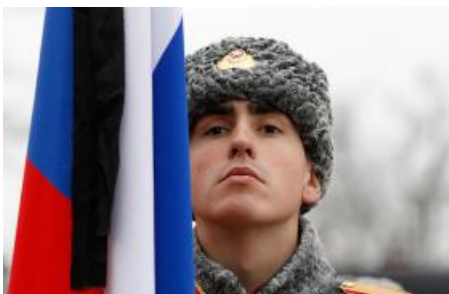
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