

## **Destruction of a Hero**

Show Trials against Dissidents in Iran.  
The case of Said Hajjarian

*Die Zeit, 03.09.09*

The image of his lopsided smile is hard to forget; perhaps because immediately afterwards, Said Hajjarian, who was left partially paralyzed by an assassination attempt nine years ago, made a disturbingly cheerful comment on his condition: "Someone should take another shot at me from the other side so that I can smile straight again."

That was eight months ago during a conversation that took place in Iran – a different Iran. It seemed at the time that Hajjarian had put the dark days behind him; he had no idea of what was yet to come.

When we visited the 54-year-old, it was to talk to him about his life. His biography is one of the most dramatic in the Islamic Republic. At the age of 18, he threw himself into the battle against the Shah; well-read, brilliant and left-leaning in his politics, the young engineer was a revolutionary from the very beginning.

Right from the word go, his chief concern was the security of the young nation; he founded an anti-espionage committee and helped set up the country's intelligence service. But at the end of the 1980s, his attitudes changed: he now believed that the Islamic Republic had to change in order to survive.

He became an influential reformist intellectual, uncovered the misdeeds of his former intelligence colleagues, and was punished for it by a bullet that came from deep within the state apparatus and lodged in his brain.

During our conversation, Hajjarian, who was left partially paralyzed by the attack, found it difficult to speak without stammering; conversation was halting, but he nevertheless spoke with obvious pleasure – the intellectual's pleasure at talking and thinking – about his fondness for Anglo-Saxon philosophy and his theory that a politicized religion invariably tends towards secular thought.

In August 2009, about half a year after our conversation, Hajjarian was carried into the Tehran courtroom where the show trial is being held. His pale grey prison clothes were freshly ironed and looked like a pair of pyjamas. In an orange-coloured plastic folder, as though it needed to be protected from defilement, was an absurd confession in which Hajjarian revoked his beliefs of the last one-and-a-half decades.

The six-page document of self-abasement was read out by a fellow defendant, an ally who otherwise acts as his spokesman at political meetings.

In it, Hajjarian apologized to the people and the students for his political theories, for his recommendations of western literature and for the application of the theories of Max Weber to an analysis of Iranian power structures. Finally he declared, together with his ally, that he was standing down from Mosharekat, the most important reformist party in Iran.

What happened to this man during his two months in captivity? Internet accounts from released Iranian prisoners tell of being brainwashed in several stages. When rumours circulated at the end of June that Hajjarian had died in prison, his wife, a doctor, was allowed to visit him briefly.

She told Human Rights Watch that her husband was under huge pressure and that he had wept continually. Most of those accused in the show trial – and there are some 140 of them – are

completely isolated from the outside world.

On one occasion, several of the wives managed to call out something to the figures in the grey pyjamas as they were led from the Revolutionary Court building back to the prison vehicles. The women called out the names of their husbands and shouted "My darling, you are a hero. Many people support you."

State television news shows excerpts from the morning's closed-door trial at 8.30pm. Initially, many Iranians tuned in; the first confession – by the former vice president and theologian Mohammad-Ali Abtahi – was both spectacular and shocking.

Since then, many have stopped watching. State television complains of falling ratings across the board; artists and intellectuals are boycotting its talk shows, and the angry old Grand Ayatollah Montazeri again raised his dissident voice to say that the wages paid at state television are 'haram', or sinful, because they are wages for aiding and abetting oppression.

Supporters of Ahmadinejad may view the self-humiliation of the show trials as an affirmation. Non-political Iranians, on the other hand, feel a sense of disgust. Commenting on the appearance of the accused in pyjamas and flip-flops, a Tehran grocer, aged around 30, said:

"I would die of shame if I was put on public show in this way and my wife saw it." He went on to say that it makes him sad to see people who once held high office humiliated in this way.

Older Iranians recall the phenomenon of false television confessions from the early years of the Revolution. Some historic examples can now be viewed on YouTube, as though in consolation.

The reformist milieu is trying to respond to the human catastrophes in the courtroom with a healing echo, with an atmosphere of solidarity – at least on the Internet. When Hajjarian and his ally announced at the trial that they were quitting the party, the well-known blogger Hanif Mazrui wrote: "Your resignation has not been accepted. Your empty chairs are waiting for you."

But in spite of this, Hajjarian's case illustrates a defeat that goes far beyond the individual in question. The strategy for change devised by Hajjarian a decade ago foresaw "the application of pressure from above, and negotiation in the upper echelons" – or in other words, the development of civil society by all means while respecting the legal framework of the Islamic Republic in all political dealings. Now, for the second time, he has again come to symbolize the weakness of those reformers who are intrinsic to the system.

The attempt to physically liquidate him occurred in broad daylight in the centre of Tehran in March 2000. President Khatami had been in office for three years, Hajjarian was his closest advisor. He was also a city councillor and an editor-in-chief at the time.

The sentries in Paradise Street didn't move a muscle as the perpetrators roared up on a motorcycle and shot Hajjarian in the face. His newspaper had published revelations about what became known as Iran's serial murders, to which many dissident intellectuals fell victim in the 1990s. It can be assumed that those who tried to kill Hajjarian had some connection with these earlier cases.

Hajjarian lay in a coma for two weeks. Outside the hospital, young Iranians held a round-the-clock vigil. When Hajjarian came around, he could only move his eyes. Iranian surgeons came from abroad and operated on him for no fee. Thereafter, he fought for years to win back his life and speech. Like a martyr, he is loved, respected and glorified.

Like all leading reformers, Hajjarian has never accounted for his past in public, and has never made any admission of personal guilt. In our conversation, he bestowed an artificial simplicity on his biography, saying "I've been a reformer for 33 years." Few people in Iran are bothered by this, and to this day he remains a symbol of the search for identity, of hope: he was paralyzed, but not

broken.

And that is why he was arrested three days after the elections on 14 June. The news left many Iranians speechless; there is something cowardly about laying hands on this man again. But some people still have a score to settle with him.

Besides, most of those at the show trial are not the youngsters driven onto the street by political aversion and a desire for freedom. Those in the dock are the links between them and the system, grey-haired men who, like Hajjarian, are the flesh and blood of the Islamic Republic. Now is the time to deal with them.

The show trial is just a stage where Tehran is playing out its power struggle. The vital front is not between hawks and doves, between reaction and reform. The bitter struggle for the character of the state is actually taking place at the core of the system, both within its central institutions and between them. It is a struggle with chaotic, often apparently indiscriminate traits.

No sooner had the prosecutor at the show trial called for Hajjarian to receive the full punishment – which could potentially mean the death penalty – Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei got involved with an astonishing U-turn:

There was no proof, he said, that "the leaders of the latest unrest" had had contacts with foreign governments. President Ahmadinejad contradicted him immediately – an unprecedented move in the Islamic Republic. No one has ever dared to publicly defy the country's leader in such a manner.

Ahmadinejad is trying to gain autonomy, more than any other president before him. The fact that he is the first leader to allow female ministers is all part of his strategy. But what does he really want? To make the republic, the Iranian semi-democracy, into an Islamic state?

Within days, Khamenei propelled his allies – opponents of the omnipotent plans of Ahmadinejad and the Revolutionary Guards – into key positions within the judicial system.

As the newly appointed head of the judicial system, one of the first things that Sadegh Larijani did was to sack the most terrible lawyer in Iran, Tehran prosecutor Said Mortazavi, who has long been accused of involvement in many cases of torture and murder. Is this the beginning of a period of self-reflection, or simply an arbitrary act?

Three commissions have now been charged with the job of investigating human rights abuses, primarily in penitentiaries. In what is known as the parliamentary truth commission, the advocates of clarification wrestle with the advocates of a cover-up; there are conservatives on both sides, and the subject could hardly be more sensitive.

It is a grave accusation, namely that both women and men have been raped in Iran's jails. A well-known journalist personally delivered a report on his rape to Khamenei.

More than ever before, the Islamic Republic is showing its weaknesses. And in the light of this, it is difficult to predict with any certainty what the future holds for Iran.

*Translated from the German by Nina Coon*