

Academics in jail : Fariba Adelkhah and Roland Marchal and their struggle for freedom in Iran

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Academics in jail : Fariba Adelhah and Roland Marchal and their struggle for freedom in Iran

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- 1 The accusations are far-fetched - no-one in either Paris or Tehran is fooled. Yet Fariba Adelhah and Roland Marchal have been detained in Evin Prison since 5 June 2019. About 15 foreigners and bi-nationals are currently "imprisoned without justification" in Iran.¹ We say there are about 15, but there may be more: the number of cases not publicized being, by definition, unknown. In all these cases, dual nationals and foreigners are imprisoned in order to apply pressure to the countries of which they are nationals.

Academic prisoners

- 2 Fariba Adelhah and Roland Marchal are academic prisoners. Franco-Iranian anthropologist Fariba Adelhah is a Research Professor at CERI Sciences Po. Because the Iranian authorities refuse to recognize her French nationality, they do not allow consular visits. Yet that dual nationality is precisely what makes her a good bargaining chip, in the Iranians' geopolitical calculations.
- 3 Since the publication of her first book, *Revolution under the Veil*, Fariba Adelhah has published other major works on Iranian society.²³ A little over ten years ago (in an open letter addressed to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and in which she defended Clothilde Reiss) she wrote that she was "wounded" as well as afraid that she, too, would find herself in the dock. In the same letter, she reiterated the fact that science has "neither religious nor political aims" and denounced the "fatal blow to the climate of trust and tranquillity that is essential to research".⁴ Despite these fears, she did return to the country of her childhood and her main field of investigation.
- 4 Roland Marchal has never conducted research in Iran. He was there to celebrate Eid with Fariba. His research career has been dedicated to the sociology of armed conflicts

in Somalia, Sudan, Chad and the Central African Republic.⁵ Unlike his colleague and friend, he does get a monthly consular visit. His detention conditions in the Revolutionary Guards' quarters are, however, particularly harsh.

- 5 On 24 December 2019, Fariba Adelkhah and one of her fellow inmates, Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert, managed to smuggle an open letter out of prison.⁶ In it, they announced that they were beginning a hunger strike for their own release as well as that of "all academics and researchers unjustly imprisoned in Iran and the Middle East". Six weeks later, Fariba is still on hunger strike.
- 6 On January 6, 2020, the espionage charge against Fariba was lifted. However, she is still charged with undermining state security and "propaganda against the Islamic Republic". The most serious charge, which carries the death penalty, has been dropped, but the case is far from closed. Roland Marchal is accused of "collusion" for the purpose of undermining state security.

A transnational mobilization

- 7 Fariba Adelkhah and Roland Marchal are not the only detainees being used as bargaining chips by the Iranian authorities. Other detainees whose situation has been made public include Kylie Morre-Gilbert, Anoosheh Ashoori, Aras Amiri, Siamak Namazi, Morad Tahbaz, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, Ahmadreza Djalali, Kamran Ghaderi and Michael White. Most of these women and men hold dual nationality.⁷ All are victims of geopolitical issues that have nothing to do with them. According to the Center for Human Rights in Iran, dual nationals and foreigners are subjected to similar treatment: long stays in solitary confinement, repeated interrogations (aimed at getting them to "confess" to things that did not happen), conviction on the basis of vague, non-specific charges.
- 8 In September 2019, at the margins of the UN General Assembly, relatives of the detainees set up the "Families Alliance Against State Hostage Taking".⁸ Its main objectives are to raise awareness of the fate of detainees (and more broadly to "state hostage-taking") and urge both governments and the UN to take action. In France, the Fariba Adelkhah and Roland Marchal Support Committee⁹ has called for the suspension of institutional scientific cooperation with Iran, out of solidarity with imprisoned colleagues and as a means of exerting pressure on a state accustomed to engaging in such practices.¹⁰
- 9 As this editorial goes to press, no-one can say when our colleagues will be released. It could be a matter of months, or years. Only one thing is certain: there is an urgent need to get them out of there and organize to bring an end to this policy of repression and political instrumentalization of researchers.

NOTES

1. To borrow from the title of the conference organized at CERI Sciences Po on 31 January 2020: “Imprisoned without just cause: contemporary prisoner and hostage figures”
 2. See the scientific portrait written by Jean-François Bayart on the *Fonds d'Analyse des Sociétés Politiques* (FASOPO). <http://www.fasopo.org/>; Marc Semo, *Fariba Adelkhah, une chercheuse emprisonnée en Iran en grève de la faim*, *Le Monde*, 13 January 2020.
 3. *La révolution sous le voile : Femmes islamiques d'Iran*, Paris, Karthala, 1991.
 4. The letter was published by *Courrier International* on September 9, 2019: <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/2009/09/10/contre-le-regime-de-la-peur-en-iran>
 5. See the scientific portrait written by Didier Péclard and Sandrine Perrot on the FASOPO website, as well as the dossier put together by Marielle Debos et al., “The many facets of Roland Marchal at work”, *Sociétés politiques comparées*, 49, September/December 2019, http://www.fasopo.org/sites/default/files/charivaria_n49_2.pdf
 6. It is distributed by the Center for Human Rights in Iran. <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2019/12/imprisoned-french-australian-academics-call-for-christmas-eve-hunger-strike-iran/>
 7. <https://iranhumanrights.org/2018/05/who-are-the-dual-nationals-imprisoned-in-iran/>
 8. <https://iranhumanrights.org/2019/09/relatives-of-jailed-dual-and-foreign-nationals-launch-alliance-against-irans-hostage-taking-amid-unga/>
 9. <https://iranhumanrights.org/2019/09/relatives-of-jailed-dual-and-foreign-nationals-launch-alliance-against-irans-hostage-taking-amid-unga/>
 10. For a reflexive analysis of the ethical, scientific and political dilemmas of the support committee, read Jean-François Bayart, « Iran : la savante, les politiques et nous », *AOC*, 27 janvier 2020.
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