



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2024 OFFICIAL SELECTION
COMPETITION



THE
SEED
OF THE
SACRED
FIG

A FILM BY
MOHAMMAD RASOULOF

FILMS *Boutique*



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Iran, Germany, France, 2024
Duration: 168 mins

CAST

Iman	Misagh Zare
Najmeh	Soheila Golestani
Rezvan	Mahsa Rostami
Sana	Setareh Maleki
Sadaf	Niousha Akhshi
Ghaderi	Reza Akhlaghi
Fatemeh	Shiva Ordooei
Woman in the Car	Amineh Arani

CREW

Director of Photography	Pooyan Aghababaei
Editing	Andrew Bird
Music	Karzan Mahmood
Sound Design	Philipp Kemptner
Sound Recordist	Hassan Shabankareh
Set Design	Amir Panahifar
Make-up	Mahmoud Dehghani
Producers	Mohammad Rasoulof, Amin Sadraei, Jean-Christophe Simon, Mani Tilgner, Rozita Hendijanian

RUN WAY PICTURES PRESENTS IN COPRODUCTION WITH **PARALLEL45**
IN COPRODUCTION WITH **ARTE FRANCE CINEMA** WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF **ARTE FRANCE**
IN ASSOCIATION WITH **FILMS BOUTIQUE** WITH THE SUPPORT OF **L'AIDE AUX CINÉMAS DU**
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INSTITUT FRANÇAIS - MOIN FILM FUND HAMBURG SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN

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LOGLINE

In Tehran, the exemplary family of an investigating judge is tested by the dramatic events following a young woman's death in police custody.

SYNOPSIS

The celebration of Iman's latest promotion as investigating judge in the Revolutionary Guard Court coincide with widespread public protests after the death of a young woman in the streets of Teheran. The demonstrations and the heavy-handed government response upset the dynamics within his family. While Iman is struggling with the psychological burden of his new job, his daughters, Rezvan and Sana, are shocked and electrified by the events, while his wife Najmeh is trying to hold the family together. When Iman discovers that his service weapon has gone missing, he suspects his family. Frightened to lose his reputation and his job, he becomes more and more paranoid, starting an investigation in his own home in which all borders are crossed one by one...

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

After my last film (*There Is No Evil*, 2020), it took me four years to start a new project. During these years, I wrote several screenplays, but what finally led to the making of *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* was my experience of being re-arrested in the summer of 2022. This time my experience in prison was unique since it coincided with the beginning of the Jina (Woman, Life, Freedom) uprising in Iran. Other political prisoners and I were following the social changes inside the prison. While the protests were going in an unexpected direction and had a significant extent, we were amazed by the protests' scope and the women's bravery.

When I was released from prison, the important question was: What should I make a film about now? It preoccupied my thoughts. I think it all began with what I was told by a senior staff member of Evin Prison, and it stayed with me. One day, in the middle of the widespread repression during the Jina movement, while this person was visiting the cells of political prisoners, he pulled me aside and said he wanted to hang himself in front of the prison entrance. He suffered from an intense pang of conscience, but he did not have the courage to free himself from the hatred he had for his job. Stories like these convince me that eventually, the women's movement in Iran will succeed and achieve its goals. Repressions may temporarily keep the situation under the government's control, but eventually, like in many instances we've seen before, the government will surrender to the movement's demands.

As soon as I was released, I wanted to make a new film to help with this effort. But it's not easy to bring together people who can accept the risks of such a daring task. It took several months to gather the actors and the technical staff. During the filming, sometimes the fear of being arrested overshadowed the group, but in the end, their courage was the driving force for us to continue working.

While filming a project like this, nothing makes the work as difficult as maintaining the crew's safety. The fear of being identified and arrested casts a shadow over everything. But beneath this shadow, there are always solutions to be found. For example, we tried to keep the group small. We also had very minimal technical equipment, but the skill of the cameraman and his assistants were able to compensate for the limitations of the equipment. I can't explain how we bypassed the government censorship system, but it can be done. The government cannot control everything. By intimidating and scaring people, they try to induce the feeling that they have everything under their control, but this method is like a stun grenade whose sound can intimidate you. They cannot monitor everything.

Selecting the actors was a complicated process. We had to guess who, in addition to their artistic abilities, had the will and courage to appear in such a film. It's not very difficult to find people like that in Iranian cinema. But you cannot cast widely, since a larger group beyond those involved in the film would know about it, and news would slowly leak to the outside world. It becomes sensitive who you can approach, and it requires a lot of trust on all sides.



In the case of the two adult protagonists, all of this was relatively straightforward: Besides being a great actress, Soheila Golestani (Najmeh) took a clear political and social stance in support of people during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. She was imprisoned, but that didn't stop her from supporting people. And I had worked with Missagh Zareh (who plays Iman, the father) in my movie *A Man of Integrity*, and ever since we have been waiting for an opportunity to work together again. I knew he refused to work in official Iranian cinema for a long time in protest of social conditions and severe censorship.

However, when it came to daughters, it was more challenging. I didn't want a teenage girl to play the role of Sana. I wanted someone to accept this role who was intellectually mature, aware of the consequences, and familiar with the pressure of the intelligence forces to some extent. Setareh Maleki is far from the role she plays in terms of age, but her ability to get into the character of a teenager is amazing. It was the same with the role of her sister Rezvan. I didn't want anybody to be expelled from university like a student of the same age for acting in this movie. Mahsa Rostami stunningly created the character of Rezvan.

Of course, difficulties like these are by no means unique to my work. My colleagues are facing the same tough circumstances in Iran. The heavy pressure from the intelligence forces has placed them in a difficult situation. They have been banned from leaving the country and threatened with prison, simply for collaborating on artistic creation. In a medieval manner, the revolutionary courts have opened cases against them. The scope of repression and censorship in Iran has expanded so much that the government allows itself to consider brutal punishments for works of art, not just in the medium of cinema. The rapper, Toomaj Salehi, is in prison and has been sentenced to death. This, too, is a form of government violence. The international organizations that monitor the human rights situation in Iran should not remain silent about this.

The current regime in Iran can only stay in power through violence against its own people. In this sense, the gun in my story is a metaphor for power in a wider sense. But it also creates an opportunity for the story's main characters to reveal their secrets. These secrets gradually emerge, with tragic results. There are many historical accounts of powerful people killing those closest to them to ensure their own safety. However, in Iran after the 1979 revolution, there are strange accounts of fanaticism and insistence on ideology that perverts infanticide, fratricide, seeking martyrdom, etc. into quasi-religious values. Over the past forty years, unquestioning submission to the ruling religious and political institutions has created deep divisions within families. But when I look at the recent protests spearheaded by the younger generation, it seems to me that they have chosen a different, more open path to face their oppressors.

For a long time, I lived on one of the southern islands of Iran. On this island, there are a few old sacred fig trees. The life cycle of this tree caught my attention. Its seeds fall onto the branches of other trees through bird droppings. The seeds then germinate, and their roots move towards the ground. When the roots reach the ground, the sacred fig tree stands on its own feet and its branches strangle the host tree.



STATEMENT BY
MOHAMMAD RASOULOF (dated May 12, 2024)

"I arrived in Europe a few days ago after a long and complicated journey.

About a month ago, my lawyers informed me that my eight-year prison sentence was confirmed in the court of appeal and would be implemented on short notice. Knowing that the news of my new film would be revealed very soon, I knew that without a doubt, a new sentence would be added to these eight years. I didn't have much time to make a decision. I had to choose between prison and leaving Iran. With a heavy heart, I chose exile. The Islamic Republic confiscated my passport in September 2017. Therefore, I had to leave Iran secretly.

Of course, I strongly object to the unjust recent ruling against me that forces me into exile. However, the judicial system of the Islamic Republic has issued so many cruel and strange decisions that I do not feel it is my place to complain about my sentence. Death sentences are being executed as the Islamic Republic has targeted the lives of protesters and civil rights activists. It's hard to believe, but right now as I'm writing this, the young rapper, Toomaj Salehi is held in prison and has been sentenced to death. The scope and intensity of repression has reached a point of brutality where people expect news of another heinous government crime every day. The criminal machine of the Islamic Republic is continuously and systematically violating human rights.

Before the Islamic Republic's intelligence services were informed about my film's production, a number of the actors managed to leave Iran. However, many of the actors and agents of the film are still in Iran and the intelligence system is pressuring them. They have been put through lengthy interrogations. The families of some of them were summoned and threatened. Due to their appearance in this movie, court cases were filed against them, and they were banned from leaving the country. They raided the office of the cinematographer, and all his work equipment was taken away. They also prevented the film's sound engineer from traveling to Canada. During the interrogations of the film crew, the intelligence forces asked them to pressure me to withdraw the film from the Cannes Festival. They were trying to convince the film crew that they were not aware of the film's story and that they had been manipulated into participating in the project.

Despite the vast limitations I and my colleagues and friends faced while making the film, I tried to achieve a cinematic narrative that is far from the narrative dominated by the censorship in the Islamic Republic, and closer to its reality. I have no doubt that restricting and suppressing freedom of expression cannot be justified even if it becomes a spur for creativity, but when there is no way, a way must be made.

The world's cinema community must ensure effective support for the makers of such films. Freedom of speech should be defended, loudly and clearly. People who courageously and selflessly confront censorship instead of supporting it are reassured of the importance of their actions by the support of international film organizations. As I know from personal experience, it can be an invaluable help for them to continue their vital work.

Many people helped to make this film. My thoughts are with all of them, and I fear for their safety and well-being."



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Iranian independent director, writer and producer Mohammad Rasoulof was born in Shiraz, Iran in 1972. While studying sociology at university, Rasoulof started his filmmaking career with documentaries and short films. His first film *Gagooman* (The Twilight, 2002) won Best Film at the Fajr Film Festival in Iran. Following the making of his second film, *Jazireh Ahani* (Iron Island, 2005), he faced some issues with censorship laws in Iran and as a result his opportunities to further produce and screen films were largely limited and banned. To this date, Mohammad Rasoulof has produced eight feature films none of which have been screened in Iran due to censorship, even though his films enjoy a wide audience abroad.

Rasoulof's cinema had mostly relied on allegorical narratives as a mean for expression, until 2010 when he decidedly opted for a more direct form of engagement. In March 2010, Rasoulof was arrested on set while directing a project together with Jafar Panahi. In the first trial following the arrest, he was sentenced to six years in prison, a sentence that was later reduced to one year. He was then released on bail.

Mohammad Rasoulof has been awarded many accolades for his films. In 2011, he won Best Director in Un Certain Regard for his film *Bé Omid é Didar* (Goodbye, 2011) at the Cannes

Film Festival. In 2013, he earned the FIPRESCI Prize from the International Federation of Film Critics at Un Certain Regard for *Dast Neveshteha Nemisoozand* (Manuscripts Don't Burn, 2013). In 2017, he won the main prize in the Un Certain Regard section for *Lerd* (A Man of Integrity, 2017) at the Cannes Film Festival. Upon returning to Iran in September 2017, he was officially barred from leaving the country, a verdict which is still in effect. He was accused of 'endangering national security' and 'spreading propaganda against the Islamic government.'

All these limitations did not stop Rasoulof from working. In the past years, he has worked as a producer and scriptwriter on the features *the Hatchback Ghermez* (The Red Hatchback) and *Pesar-Madar* (Son-Mother). In the beginning of 2020, Rasoulof also completed his work as a scriptwriter, director and producer on his second last feature *Sheytan Vojud Nadar* (There is No Evil) which won the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival.

On July 8, 2022, Mohammad Rasoulof was arrested after signing a petition criticising the government crackdown after protests over the deadly collapse of sub-standard buildings in the southwestern Iranian city of Abadan. On the basis of a prior prison sentence, he was imprisoned and released from the Evin prison in Teheran after seven months in February 2023. Shortly after his release, new investigation proceedings were opened because of the petition as well as several of his films.

Barred from travel, Rasoulof participated remotely as a member of the Berlinale Jury 2021. In 2023, Rasoulof was invited to take part in the Cannes Film Festival as a jury member of the Un Certain Regard section but could not attend the festival due to his travel ban by Iranian Authorities. After his release from prison, he worked on his new film "The Seed of the Sacred Fig".

In April 2024, the director was sentenced to eight years in prison as well as flogging, a fine and confiscation of his property.

Following the announcement of the selection of his film *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* for the main competition at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival, cast and crew were interrogated by Iranian authorities, banned from leaving the country, and pressured to convince Rasoulof to withdraw the film from the festival line-up.

Shortly after, Rasoulof and some crew members managed to escape Iran to Europe, some of them after long and strenuous journeys in order to avoid prosecution by Iranian authorities.



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