

I Was Born in the Shah's Prison. Now I Support His Son

By Babak Seradjeh

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I spent the first four months of life in prison with my mother. For the next 11 months, a teenage aunt and other family members cared for me while my mom remained behind bars. She has told me that when she was released, a few weeks before the shah's overthrow, I didn't recognize her. Soon to be a single mother, she protected me from the upheavals of revolution, the devastation of a prolonged war, and potentially life-ending encounters with the new regime's Revolutionary Guards, morality police, vigilante thugs and other enforcers of theocratic repression. Her energetic hope and vision for a better future helped me get to college and graduate at the top of my class nationwide, a path that led me to the free world and a fulfilling career in theoretical physics.

Growing up, I was surrounded by revolutionary ideas, banned books and family and friends who professed socialist, nationalist and religious beliefs, or even a mix of these seemingly contradictory ideologies. Supporters of the old monarchy were rare. Everyone opposed capitalism, imperialism and Zionism, in keeping with the regime's propaganda. No space in private or public life offered a different worldview. Only when I arrived in the free world at the turn of the century did I learn why Western countries remained vital and dynamic by providing economic, social, political and cultural freedoms to their citizens while Iran had either stagnated or moved backward.

Twenty-five years later, the situation is far worse. The regime's proxy wars, ruinous nuclear and missile programs, mismanagement and rampant corruption have sent the economy into free fall. Little hope remained when crowds took to the streets again at the end of 2025. Within days, they were demanding an end to the regime itself, chanting slogans that called directly for Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's removal—and, remarkably, for the return of Reza Pahlavi, crown prince, who lives in exile in the U.S.

Mr. Pahlavi called on Iranians to turn out, and they responded en masse. My family in Tehran described a stream of people suddenly pouring into the streets on Jan. 8 at 8 p.m., the exact time of Mr. Pahlavi's call. The arteries of the capital and other major cities pulsed with people. The regime cut off the internet and responded with unprecedented violence.

Many in my and my parents' generations are wary of anointed leaders. Some envision a leaderless grassroots movement—a fantasy. Then there is Mr. Pahlavi, who some say lacks popular support. But the evidence says otherwise. The courageous people who answered his call at great personal risk aren't mindless followers of a royal exile. They are showing a new understanding of what it will take for Iran to be free: personal agency embodied in leaders who speak for the people.

Over the years, I've had doubts about Mr. Pahlavi. So I read his books and listened to his interviews. He acknowledges his father's shortcomings in promoting democratic institutions while defending his father's intentions and achievements in modernizing Iran. In this, Mr. Pahlavi aligns with millions of Iranians who recall life under the shah with nostalgia and remember the shah himself as a patriot.

I also talked to my mom. "He is the most innocent of them all," she said, reminding me that Mr. Pahlavi was only 18 when he went into exile and is one of the few opposition figures with no ties to the present regime.

Neither the failures of his father nor the sacrifices of my mother should define where we stand in the transition to a free Iran. Through our own choices and actions, each of us must earn our place in Iran's unstoppable freedom movement. In his support for human rights and with his blueprint for a path to democracy, Mr. Pahlavi speaks for me. His leadership, focused on dignity and freedom for Iran, has earned the trust and respect of millions of Iranians. It's time the world showed him the same.

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