

Siamak Pourzand

Iranian writer and intellectual persecuted by the state for his criticism of the country's brutal leadership

Siamak Pourzand was an Iranian journalist and political activist who championed freedom of expression in his native country and was imprisoned and tortured for his beliefs. He was the first Iranian journalist to work in the United States and was widely regarded as one of the fathers of the modern media in Iran.

In the mid-1990s a number of prominent Iranian intellectuals and artists were murdered in what were widely believed to be government-sponsored killings; Pourzand's name, along with that of his wife Mehrangiz Kar, a human rights lawyer, appeared regularly on lists of those who would be next, published by an unofficial security agency associated with the regime.

Pourzand, in particular, became a target after broadcasting live for a Los Angeles radio station on the funeral of his friends Daryoush and Parvaneh Forouhar, a husband and wife who were murdered in their home in 1998. Daryoush was a politician who founded an opposition party to the Shah, and, after the revolution, was openly critical of the Islamic fundamentalist state. His wife supported him and was an outspoken activist, condemning the state particularly over its human rights abuses.

Pourzand and his family, including his daughters Azadeh, then 13 and Lily, 22, were told that the government could no longer protect them and that it would be best to go into hiding. They remained for several months in the basement of a friend's house where

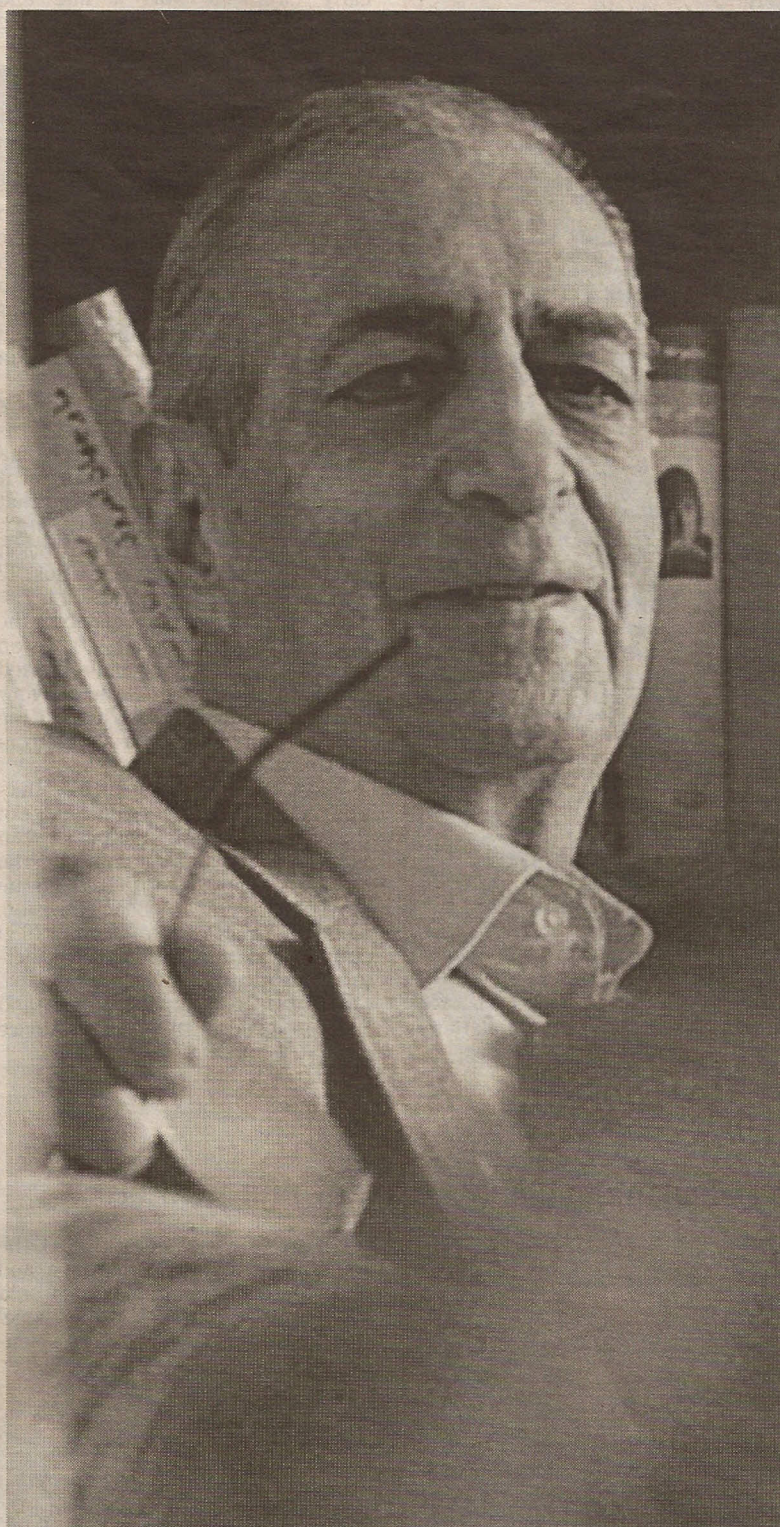
He was critical of the Shah, who encouraged his talent for writing

Pourzand entertained his daughters with stories of his youth in Tehran before the revolution in 1979 — in which the Shah was overthrown in favour of a theocracy — and the celebrities he had interviewed, including Alfred Hitchcock, Julie Andrews, Kim Novak and Natalie Wood.

Siamak Pourzand was born in 1931. His father was a high-ranking officer in the Shah's military and Pourzand was expected to follow in his footsteps. He attended the military school in Tehran, but in his third year he jumped over the cement wall and escaped, not quite knowing what he wanted to do.

In the early 1950s he supported the politician Mohammad Mossadegh, who wanted to nationalise the oil industry — which had been owned and run by the British since the beginning of the 20th century — and move Iran away from its colonial relationship with Britain. During Mossadegh's tenure as Prime Minister from 1951 to 1953 — in which oil was nationalised — Pourzand became a writer for the newspaper *Bakhtar Emrooz*.

After the British and American-sponsored coup d'état ousting Mossadegh from power in 1953, and restoring the authority of the pro-Western Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Pourzand — who was critical of the Shah's anti-democratic authoritarianism and his close relationship with Britain — went into hiding for the first time. But in an



Pourzand: he spent the last seven years of his life constantly spied upon

unexpected twist, the Shah recognised his talent for writing, even those articles in opposition to the ruler's own policies, and paid for him to take a journalism course in Los Angeles, perhaps to demonstrate that he believed in freedom of expression.

While there, Pourzand started working for the Iranian newspaper *Kayhan*, becoming the first Iranian journalist to work in Hollywood and Washington, a career that spanned 19 years. In his spare time back in Tehran, Pourzand helped to launch a number of organisations to champion freedom of expression, including a union for journalists.

Pourzand met his future wife, Mehrangiz, a law school graduate, in

Tehran in June 1968 when she helped him to write an account of the assassination of Robert Kennedy.

The winds of revolution were blowing through Iran and Pourzand prophesied what was to come, especially after writers associated with his union were ordered to go on strike. Those who refused, including Pourzand and his wife Mehrangiz, were disciplined by the mullahs then gaining increasing power. Pourzand quit the union and, after the 1979 revolution, was forced into premature retirement for the next ten years.

While Mehrangiz became one of Tehran's leading lawyers and human rights defenders, Pourzand gradually

returned to work at the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 when the government relaxed some restrictions on the press. He edited a magazine for kidney patients and another for architecture and later became the senior adviser for the tourist island of Kish, pushing the boundaries ever so gently of the Islamic regime by inviting some of the country's best actors, musicians and artists to perform together.

He was invited to help to relaunch the Tehran Centre for Culture and Art, in which he built a theatre where he encouraged the performance of new plays. During the 1999 student uprisings in Tehran, he broadcast radio updates to dissident stations around the world.

In 2000 Mehrangiz was imprisoned on charges of acting against national security. While in jail she discovered she had breast cancer and, after some international pressure, the following year she was allowed to travel with her daughter Azadeh to Europe for a medical check-up. Her ultimate goal was to get Azadeh to the US or Canada, where her elder daughter Lily was living as a lawyer in Toronto, and then return alone to Tehran.

While mother and daughter were in the US Pourzand was kidnapped by an intelligence agency acting on behalf of hardliners associated with the regime. For 13 months he was kept in underground jails, tortured and then forced to make a confession in which he said he was a spy and the link between the US and the reformists in Iran.

Mehrangiz was not allowed to return to Iran. But international pressure, particularly from the European Union, resulted in Pourzand being granted some freedoms.

In 2002 he was sentenced to 11 years' jail after being found guilty of nine charges, including working for the state security forces of the former Shah and maintaining contact with the Shah's son. He was branded an enemy and sent to Tehran's notorious Evin Prison where, after a year, he was sent to hospital for injuries sustained during interrogation.

After international pressure from organisations including Amnesty International his sentence was commuted to a form of house arrest: he was allowed to come and go but had to report to the police regularly and his telephone was tapped and his conversations recorded. He underwent 13 operations in prison hospital to repair the wounds of the torture that he had endured.

During that time Mehrangiz, who had become a visiting fellow at Harvard University, had tried to get him out of Iran legally and illegally, but he refused to go, intent on living for the day when he could testify at a truth and reconciliation hearing about the nation's history. Last month he threw himself off the balcony of the apartment where he had been living under surveillance for more than seven years.

He is survived by his wife Mehrangiz and their two daughters.

Siamak Pourzand, journalist and political activist, was born on September 17, 1931. He committed suicide on April 29, 2011, aged 79