

# Interview with Babak Payami, director of *Silence Between Two Thoughts*

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*The WSWS spoke to Babak Payami, director of Silence Between Two Thoughts, at the Toronto film festival.*

David Walsh: Why did you decide to make this particular film?

Babak Payami: There are three important elements to this answer from my side, personally. I grew up in Afghanistan, I lived in Afghanistan for all my childhood and early teenage years. In fact, I haven't lived in Iran as long as I've lived in Afghanistan. So I have a special attachment to that country. I also have many Afghan friends. I always follow what's going on there.

Just a few weeks before I premiered *Secret Ballot* in Venice, I had this idea of making a film and my intention was to do a film similar in structure to *Heart of Darkness*, about the hunt for Osama bin Laden. I met some Afghan people, who showed me some material, documents and videotape that were very troubling. Executions, stonings, harassment. And interviews with fundamentalists who were saying things that had nothing to do with Islam or that part of the world, or that people, but claiming that they spoke for that part of the world.

To make a long story short, I was sitting on a sleepless night in my hotel room, making a few phone calls and getting prepared for the next day, and I had a notebook in front of me and I jotted down by impulse: "If you execute a virgin she will go to heaven, a convict must go to hell. Where is that written?"—with several question marks. I put that note in my pocket and I left the hotel room a few hours later, sat and had coffee with [fellow filmmaker] Jafar Panahi. I said, "Jafar, something is bothering me, and I think these three lines are a film." I couldn't stop myself from making that film after that, although I had no idea what the story was going to be.

The film was shot about five kilometers from the border with Afghanistan, in eastern Iran. It's one of the most ancient historic sites in the world. We were 50 kilometers away from a city that is 10,000 years old, the oldest human civilization. The locations were so beautiful, at the same time so devastated by the drought and the limitations there.

There's a lot of influence—as a result of the choices I made, with the actors and their costumes—from Afghanistan and the Taliban. I always had the Taliban in mind. In fact, I modeled Haji after Mullah Omar.

DW: A terrible economic situation, terrible sadness and isolation.

BP: And a drought, that's not only in the landscape, but in people's minds. I think any kind of fanaticism that arises from a radical fundamentalist point of view is in effect the result of a drought that takes place in people's minds and their culture and leads to very abhorrent and very ugly things.

DW: Bush says this is the result of abstract evil. What is the driving force behind this fundamentalism, in your opinion?

BP: I think the two kinds of mentality—Bush's and the Islamic fundamentalists'—is one and the same, this mentality of "You're either with us or against us." The invention of this enemy.

However, to give a more direct response ... what has happened in these regions is the result of exploitation and marginalization over decades by more powerful Western countries for short-term economic gains. They

have directly or indirectly supported abhorrent dictatorships that have uprooted any kind of potential for a political alternative, or any potential for any kind of democratic movement.

DW: I assumed that the film was referring somewhat more directly to Afghanistan because of the presence of the local warlord or religious leader, who is able to take control of a region. I assume that is not precisely the situation in Iran at the moment, or is it?

BP: Not like in Afghanistan. But let me give you an example. In the same location, inside Iran, where we were shooting, we received a warning from the local spiritual leader, the local imam, that the female members of my crew should not be feeding male dogs.

DW: The film's attitude toward the "executioner" is contradictory. He seems inhuman, human and, finally, tragic. He's a victim as well as a victimizer.

BP: It's in the dialogue of the film. "You're just as much a prisoner of the Haji as I am," the girl tells him. To a great extent these people, including the leaders, are victims of their own mentalities and their own blind convictions. I have no sympathy for that character. He deserves his fate. But I try to look at them as human beings and I try to analyze that process of doubt, that process of questioning they go through. I also try to portray their surroundings—it's not as one-sided as we think. Even in that tiny village, he has four authoritative figures around him, all of whom are somehow father figures. Then there is the matriarch behind him, who has immense power over all these things, although it's not overt and open.

Even the townspeople, I didn't portray them as the masses righteously revolting. They were doing the wrong thing. The Haji is eventually scot-free, he is living with Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar and Saddam Hussein. The people are killing the wrong guy.

DW: And the girl? What is her progress?

BP: You see, the fact that she is against the same wall at the end, it's not a big progress, but she's still alive and the shot that's heard is not at her. The fact that we saw her struggle, without picking up a gun, she put up this barrier that even this dog of war could not cross. I tried a lot, without using dialogue, to show how she's resisting, but I resonated that with the movement of the women and what the aunt was doing, so you would see the whole picture.

DW: Tell me what happened once you made the film, and some of your difficulties.

BP: You see, I'd like to make this comment. You can imagine the pain and agony having to show the film the way it is, but it's a matter of principle to do it. All of this aggravation, all of these scary moments, were in order for the film to see the light of day.

I'm an independent filmmaker, with no affiliation inside or outside Iran. I didn't even give a damn about the system, I've simply done my own work. Obviously, if you reach a certain level of effectiveness in what you're saying, you will be seen and subject to scrutiny. In this case what happened is that I made the film and I was in the process of post-production, the final stages where I have everything prepared for the

sound and editing

Before I even submitted anything to the Ministry of Culture, I was arrested on the street, taken in, interrogated, during which I refused to respond to any questions. Then my office was raided in my presence without any legal justification; there wasn't a single charge laid, a single warrant issued, nothing. A bunch of people in plain clothes, with some kind of *carte blanche*, because they could walk in anywhere. They simply walked into the lab and locked everything up. They walked into the Ministry of Culture and confiscated everything. Even the Ministry people would say, 'We don't know who they are.'

I was lucky enough to have been a jury member at the Moscow film festival, and the fact that the Iranian authorities are very keen on not letting things hit the fan in the international community ... so they let me go. I had to sign an undertaking that I would come back and surrender myself to the authorities. That's basically it in a nutshell.

After that, I had several discussions with people in the Ministry of Culture over the phone, from Italy. They insisted that the film should not be shown and could not be shown at the Venice film festival. And that if I didn't show it, they would take that as a sign of good faith and when I went back to the country they would see what they would do about it. I didn't believe them.

DW: You showed it there and you showed it here.

BP: Yes, as is.

DW: Had you had contact with the authorities before?

BP: The interesting thing about what happened to me, usually this happens after the film is submitted, this time it wasn't even completely put together. And they haven't seen anything about it. I had such a tight operation going, that no one except my own crew and except some information that might have been leaked ... no one would have known what the story was about. They were more interested in trying to stop me and the likes of me because they were presuming that the work we were doing was not acceptable.

One of the first questions they asked me, or the verbal accusation they made against me, was "You have made a film and you have exported it from Iran without permission." And I said, "My material is here." I never intended to do that. The interesting thing is that I wanted to make a dozen more films in Iran and I wouldn't have jeopardized that with one film. I would have shown the film and defended it, and gone through hell to make sure that this film saw the light of day, through legal channels.

The system in Iran is so insecure and so wobbly, you can see major signs. They are so insecure that anyone who sneezes, they consider it a conspiracy. And also one part of the government doesn't know what the other is doing. I got clearance from the Ministry of Culture and these guys who took me in to leave Iran, and the Interior Ministry arrested me at the airport when I was leaving. Again.

They called the judge, and I have no idea who the judge was, but they said they were calling "Haji." Ironically, this word "Haji" came up. They said, "We have to call Haji," to get permission. I said, "How come you guys don't know...?"

The embassy in Rome later told a journalist that nothing had happened, that I hadn't been arrested, that I was crazy, that I was only doing this to get publicity for my film. And the journalist said, "I've got a dozen newspapers from inside Iran who have reported on his arrest."

DW: Are you going back?

BP: I have a birthright to Iran. I'm also a Canadian citizen by choice. I've never given up my Iranian citizenship or birthright. I'm proud of it. I belong to Iran as much as Iran belongs to me. And I definitely do intend to go back, and I will make sure that when I do go back, I won't be confronting a 25-year-old with a Colt in his hand who thinks that he can interrogate and persecute me.

DW: How would you describe the mood in the country?

BP: I'm not a politician, I'm not ideologically oriented. I can make a

citizen's response. Iran is a very diverse country. From any point if you travel 200 kilometers in any direction, people speak a completely different language and come from different cultural backgrounds. Almost 50 percent of the Iranian population is under 25 years old. The critical problem in Iran, contrary to common belief in the international community and possibly in the domestic community, is not a political one—politics don't exist in Iran any more because the establishment doesn't have a political leg to stand on.

The real situation is socioeconomic. You've got close to 30 million people under the age of 25 who need jobs, who need some kind of financial security, who need access to good education, who need access to information and exchange with the rest of the world. They need an outlet for a progressive and productive future. And they're going to get it, no matter what. It's not a political issue. This 50 percent under the age of 25 don't give a damn what flag you and I are upholding in the government, what they care about is knowing they can pay their rent, they can continue with their education, they can progress in life. Nothing is going to stop them. This is the most sincere response I can give.

DW: Let me express a concern. I've seen a number of films at the festival bearing on the situation in Afghanistan, and I think they are truthful and valuable films. For Western audiences, particularly North American audiences, however, some of these films about the Taliban, which have limited or no historical context, may produce this reaction: "Thank God for US intervention, because anything is going to be better than this!"

This is false on many grounds. First, the Iranian, Afghan, Iraqi peoples have the right to make their own future whatever the US government thinks. Moreover, it leaves out a critical question you touched upon earlier. Not only has the US supported dictatorships, it has for decades deliberately incited and financed fundamentalism, not simply in Afghanistan, it goes back decades—in Egypt and elsewhere. To combat secular, nationalist, leftist movements (and to destabilize the USSR). In my view, there is a joint operation—even though they obviously have conflicts—between the Western powers and the fundamentalist movements to oppress the peoples of the Middle East.

BP: I couldn't agree with you more, I couldn't agree with you more. I can defend my film in the following manner. I have the same worry. As a matter of fact, maybe my situation is a little bit unique because I have lived outside of Iran for a good portion of my life. I am very familiar with the Western attitude and culture. I have attempted to act as a bridge of understanding and communication. In that sense, I am very sensitive about this issue.

However, my film is perhaps not so direct in referring to Afghanistan. I think if you look at my film closely and you forget about the fact that these are strangers speaking in a different language, you will find a "Haji" in your own backyard. The human tragedy is not necessarily limited to Afghanistan and Iran. As a matter of fact, one of the first criteria by which I choose a film project is that it be universal, I don't want to be an exhibitionist about Iranian history or culture.

Therefore, if you think about this film closely, you will think about the same kind of issues, the same kind of mentality that exists in your own country. The same mentality exists in the United States right now. You can't be any more undemocratic than saying "You're either with us or against us," and then waving the flag of international "democracy" and "freedom," etc. So I agree with your worry completely, I share the same worry, and I hope that this film contributes to an understanding of the phenomenon in a wider sense.



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