

Ali al-Dumaini: *Time for Prison, Times for Freedom*

Arabic, fiction

Synopsis

Ali al-Dumaini, Saudi journalist and poet was one of 12 people arrested in March 2004 for organising a petition in December 2003 calling on the Saudi government to institute constitutional and political reforms which would include the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and more public participation in the political process. Al-Dumaini subsequently refused to sign a pledge promising not to engage in further political activity on the grounds that pro-reform lobbying was in the interests of his country. He was sentenced to nine years imprisonment in May 2005. He had his appeal denied a couple of months later, but was released in August 2005 after receiving a royal pardon on the accession to the throne of King Abdullah. While in prison, he wrote the first part of his memoirs – *Time for Prison, Times for Freedom*, which was published on 30 November 2004 in Beirut.

The book is divided into three sections. The first part (The Narrative) follows his first twenty six days in prison, from the period leading up to his arrest and initial interrogation, to his meeting with the public prosecutor and his decision not to sign the pledge. It ends with his transfer to Ulaysha prison in Riyadh where he was to spend the rest of his sentence.

Interwoven with his discussions with Abu Mohammed, the interrogator are meditations on his own political development from his student days at the College of Petroleum to his involvement in the movement for reform today. As he agonises over whether to sign the pledge or not he remembers the 18 months he spent in gaol in 1982 for being a member of the communist party, which were to have a formative influence on him. He reflects on the opposition movement in Saudi Arabia from the fifties to the present and the developments leading up to the Petition for Reform which was signed by a cross section of Saudi society that included liberal reformers and Islamists. He spells out his belief that unless radical constitutional, political and social reforms are undertaken within the Kingdom, the country faces an uncertain future.

The second section of the book, (Articles and Documents) looks at events leading up to and surrounding the signing of the Petition for National Reform in December 2003. He analyses the impact of 9/11 on Saudi Arabia and the urgent need for change. He looks at the changing political climate since 2001 leading up to the 'Saudi Spring' and gives details of the major petitions and protests on external and internal issues which culminated in demands for major constitutional and political reform. Finally, he outlines the main clauses of the Petition for National Reform. This section also includes the statement by the general prosecutor Aoudh bin Ali al- Ahmari outlining the case against him and statements he presented in his defence. In the first he outlines the need for reform to counteract the terrorist threat in Saudi Arabia. In the second he presents a rebuttal of the charges brought against him by the general prosecutor.

The third section of the book contains poems written in prison in 1982/3 and in 2004.

Sample translation – pages 32-38

(Ali al-Dumaini was first arrested in 1982 on suspicion of being a member of the Communist Party. He was initially taken to a prison in Dammam and later transferred to Riyadh)

I remained in the reception area for two hours since they had nowhere else to put me as the cells were full of people they had arrested the day before. When they were at their wits end over what to do with me, they took me to a storeroom that was used for broken furniture and left a guard to sit with me.

"What are you charged with, boy?" asked the guard.

"I don't know. Perhaps they'll arrange something for me."

"No, they don't bring anyone in without reason but you'd better prepare yourself to be tortured. God, I've just come back from seeing prisoners hanging from a fan, who were being whipped and tortured with electricity."

I tried to remain calm and yawned so that he would not see how frightened I was. I had heard about vile practices such as these which are carried out by secret police the world over. Other political prisoners had spoken about them. The late Sayyid Ali al-'Awami, for example described a journey in open trucks from Dhahran to al-Ahsa prison during which the soldiers took turns in beating the prisoners until most of them lost consciousness; Abd al-Rahman al-Baheijan described how the soldiers used to spit on him and abuse him foully every time they passed his cell. It was only later when a guard explained that the interrogators wanted to spread the word that 'you fuck your sister,' that he found out the reason for such gross behaviour.

"If you are accused of something, it's better to confess," said the guard loudly.

"No, I've got no problem with the government. I'm just a writer and a poet."

"A poet, are you? What do you say to letting me hear one of your poems now?"

"My poems are in classical Arabic and not easy to appreciate."

"God help you, you're going to see things tonight you and your poems have never seen before."

I didn't say anything and the guard moved outside, but when it was nearly nine o'clock in the evening, he took me out to a car and we went to another building where I was photographed in my head scarf and had my finger prints taken. After that I was taken to a modern building which housed the administration of the secret police of the Itisalat district. Today it's behind the al-Muajil apartment block, which wasn't built then.

Inside the building I found a large group of secret police going through my books, papers and other belongings. My heart contracted at the sight of the library which I had so painstakingly assembled in al-Baha, Jeddah, the College of Petroleum, Aramco and al-Doha district in Dhahran and during my travels to Kuwait, Baghdad, Amman, Damascus and Cairo.

I was devoted to my books; they were my life-long companions. I'd scribbled comments in their margins or summarised them on bits of paper which were now scattered and tossed about the hall. Who would ensure they were returned to me later?...

I was taken down to the basement, past posters on the walls which declaimed, "Confess and you will save yourself", or "Tell the truth and you will be saved". The basement smelt of damp and heat although autumn had started. Water seeped out of the ground; the guards were taking it away in buckets to prevent us from drowning in it.

At one in the morning the guard took me to the interrogator's room. Ahmed Naher was a quiet man. He would throw out one question then surprise you with another which he had carefully prepared, when you were in the middle of answering the first.

Although he gained from the element of surprise, I was pleased at these supplementary questions because they got me out of details that I didn't want to go into....

At about three o'clock in the morning, he asked me about the leaflets which they had found in my office.

"Can I look at them so I can answer your question?" I asked.

At that, he closed his interrogation book and ordered the guard to take me back to the cell. After I'd escaped Ahmed Naher's net, I fell into such a sweet sleep, as I've never experienced since,

and didn't wake up till I heard Mohammed al-Ali and Mubarek al-Hamoud grunting in the neighbouring cells around noon.

(In subsequent interrogations in Dammam and Riyadh, Ahmed Naher's place was usually taken by his deputy, a man known as Abu MansurI found out Abu Mansur's (real) name by chance, when a guard chucked cold water over me early one morning, while I was still a sleep.

"Wake up, you're wanted by Sirah al-Ruwaili".

When I sat down in front of his desk I knew from the angry expression on his face that he was determined to break me. He grasped his heavy stick and began to beat me. Pain flooded through my body. I got to my feet and he hit me in the stomach with the head of his stick so hard that I thought it had gone through to the other side. I didn't change my position.

He sat down on his chair and started speaking in a soft changed voice, opening his book so that we could finish the interrogation. At about five o'clock in the morning, when I had finished answering his questions, he ordered the guard to take me back to my cell.

"Tomorrow you'll be meeting the lieutenant so prepare yourself."

I was completely exhausted but I was unable to eat or sleep throughout the day. I sympathised with those other prisoners who had undergone interrogation or torture during the night and were now forced to shuffle about in chains for up to five days at a time. At seven o'clock in the evening, the guard knocked on my door and dragged me off to Abu Mansur.

Abnormally for him, Abu Mansur bid me welcome. He told me we were going to see the lieutenant, and that I should confess everything.

We went down the stairs to the third floor and into an office. Abd al-Aziz bin Masoud was an imposing man. He had an enormous moustache which was shot through with grey, a broad face and keen hawk like eyes which had a cruel glint in them. He told me to sit down by his desk. He placed a copy of the Qu'ran on it and beside it a revolver.

"We know that confessing the truth is difficult, but by the Great God of this book (and he placed his hand upon it) I swear that if you don't confess the truth then we will extract it from you with this (and he placed his hand on the revolver).

My head spun. I almost put my hands up to it but tried to remain calm.

"Everything to do with me is written down in the interrogation book," I said. "I have nothing to add."

He stared into my eyes. I somehow found the courage to return his gaze. He turned to Abu Mansur who was skulking in a corner of the room, as if he was as frightened as I was, and ordered him to give me an exercise book and pen to take back to my cell, in which to write down all the details I could remember. Then he ordered me to leave. I followed Abu Mansur out into the long corridor. I told him I was not concealing anything and didn't need a notebook; if he wanted to continue his investigation then it should be in his office.

He agreed and ordered the guard to take me back to my cell. I felt revitalised like someone who has just that moment escaped from the grave. That night at least, the lieutenant's threats had not materialised and I was happy. I was also pleased that I'd refused to take the interrogation booklet with me. In the past I'd felt frightened when I'd glanced through the hole in the door and seen comrades returning with those tattered notebooks.

Back in my cell I played with the ant I'd been feeding, which I'd named Wirda, and which had relieved my loneliness during the months of solitary confinement. I no longer needed to worry about being seen with a notebook, fearful that someone might think I was going to pass on information against them.

When you are alone in a cell you are subject to fancies and strange explanations. In reality, if someone wants to confess or is forced to confess then he will do so in front of the interrogator.

This incident affected me and I recorded the memory in a short poem which I learnt by heart and wrote down after I left prison.

You will climb up the ladder, Sir
Whenever
Your hands have restrained me
Your chests will be weighed down with medals
Whenever
Your steps have brought pain to me
But you will never forget, Sir,
That it is
I who have lifted you out of starvation,
And placed you in your position.
And after this, I won't forget you
Or your frowning face
When it is time for the accounts to be settled.

(1982 – Prison of the Ministry of Interior - Riyadh)

Two months went by during which I only slept once morning had arrived, fearful that Sirah al-Ruwaili would send for me while I was still asleep. I made myself remain awake until morning prayers then slept until it was time for midday prayers. The interrogators were busy with other people. They summoned me from time to time though they didn't get anything from me. I was a member of a background cell and was determined not to confess till the end. But once I was surprised by a question, which had been written down in the interrogation book and which I can still remember word for word.

"Tell us everything you know about Khaled al-Nuzha and which organisation he belongs to. Give us the details."

I told the interrogator that Khaled al-Nuzha was a close friend and that we had studied together but I didn't know which organisation he belonged to.

He stared at my answer for a long time, his face clearly troubled then ordered the guard to take me back to my cell.

(I thought, though I wasn't sure that Khaled belonged to the Communist Party...but I don't have the right or the proof to confirm that)

After that I noticed that the number of guards had doubled; every half an hour, they peered at us through the small opening in the cell door usually used for passing food.

"Do you think we are going to escape through the ceiling?" I shouted at one of them.

"No we're concerned about you. Do you want water or cigarettes?"

"No, thanks," I said and closed the opening.

How could I have imagined that my friend was dead? He had died while being interrogated. I only found out later, after we had been delivered from the hands of Sirah and his fellow interrogators, and been set free.

Two facts lie before me. First, Khaled al-Nuzha did not confess to being a member of a party and because of that he was severely tortured; secondly, he died during the period of interrogation and was perhaps found dead in his cell.

He died an innocent man as did many others before him such as Sa'ud al Muammar, Wasfi al-Madah and Abd al-Rahman al-Shamrani yet they remain symbols of steadfastness and

witnesses to the sacrifices made by patriots who are seeking to establish justice, freedom and democracy.

(Ali al-Dumaini was released by royal pardon in 1983 after spending 18 months in prison.)

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