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Newsha Tavakolian *And They Laughed at Me*

Texts by Newsha Tavakolian

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Iranian Magnum photographer revisits her archive: memory, politics, hope and trauma

Newsha Tavakolian's newest publication brings together works made between 1995–2001 and 2017–2019, spanning more than two decades of photographic practice. Turning inward, Tavakolian revisits her archive to recover what she calls her »eyesore« photographs—early, imperfect works made when she began her career as a photojournalist in Tehran at the age of sixteen. Through this deliberate excavation of failure, Tavakolian reflects on the relationship between memory, politics, and personal growth. Revisiting contact sheets, broken negatives, and overlooked snapshots, she confronts not only her artistic beginnings but the emotional landscape of a generation shaped by reformist hope, political restriction, and repeated disappointment.

»Following the early death of my father I was unable to take pictures for almost two years. I was angry. I went back to my archive, to my negatives. In fact, I went back to a time that also continued to make me angry, a time of hope shattered, teenage dreams destroyed by reality. Instead of searching for the 'perfect' images among my negatives, I looked for my failed work, crooked, out of focus snapshots that I had long ago mentally thrown away—perhaps because I had come to understand that truths are always made up of perceptions, and we tend to pick the most extreme ones.

One image I found, from 2001, made me particularly mad. An iconic image of a girl smelling a rose during a political rally, it had turned into a symbol of hope and innocence. I wanted to kill that image. I wanted to kill it because we had been lied to in such a blatant manner, and I was upset over just how naive my generation had been. (...)« —Newsha Tavakolian

The book moves between early journalistic work and Tavakolian's later, more refined conceptual portraits, creating a visual rite of passage from youthful idealism to disillusionment and beyond. The material details embedded in the images—cars in the streets, hijab styles of the 1990s, protest gestures, theatre performances—form a dense historical record of post-revolutionary Iran and the generations that followed.

The project resonates powerfully in light of more recent events, including the deadly protests of January 2026, when thousands of Iranians were killed seeking change.

»What started like drops hollowing out a stone, went from waves into a tsunami. Like the girl smelling a rose, we want to live.«

—Newsha Tavakolian

And They Laughed At Me is not simply a survey of a photographic career. It is a testament to endurance and a portrait of a generation that continues, despite everything, to choose hope.

Newsha Tavakolian (b. 1981, Tehran) is a Magnum Photos member, Iranian photographer, visual artist, and educator. Blending documentary and artistry, she explores the human condition, the challenges faced by women in Iran and globally, and the aftermath of conflict. A recipient of major international awards, her work is held in leading museum collections worldwide, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Tavakolian is currently a jury member for the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize 2026.

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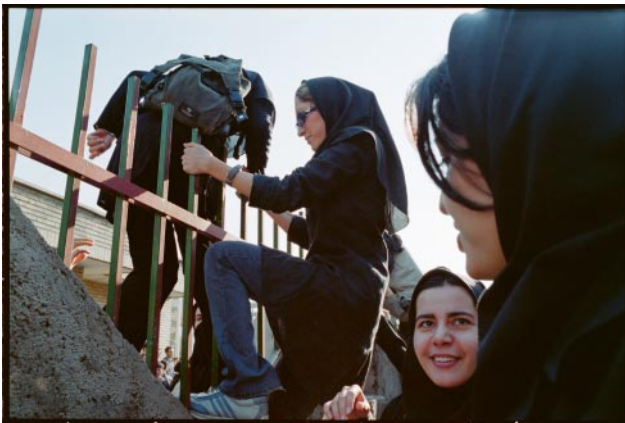
Press Images



01_Girl smelling a rose, during an election rally for politicians promising more freedom for young people. Torn print, taped back together. (Tehran, 2020) © Newsha Tavakolian



02_Dancing with friends and their parents in the mountains outside Tehran. (Shemshak, 1998) © Newsha Tavakolian



03_This is the first time I saw other girls climbing a fence to join a student protest. (Tehran, 1999) © Newsha Tavakolian



04_A girl hiding her face, in a special shelter for vulnerable women. (Tehran, 1998) © Newsha Tavakolian



05_After riot police used tear gas, protesters burnt cardboard to use the smoke to drive the tear gas away. (Tehran, 1999) © Newsha Tavakolian



06_Students asking for reforms during a protest in Tehran. (Tehran, 1999) © Newsha Tavakolian



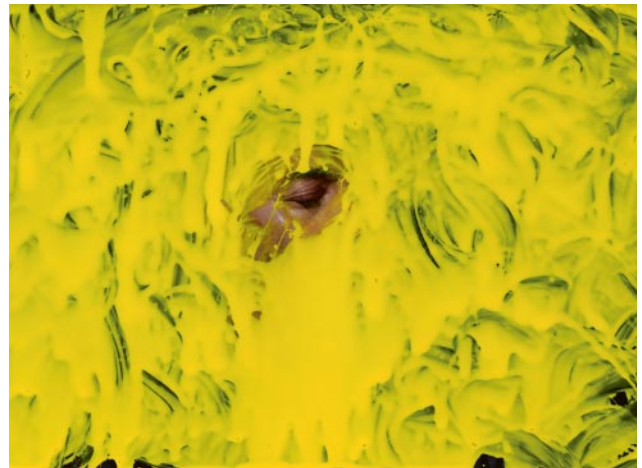
07_The election campaign. (Tehran, 2000) © Newsha Tavakolian



08_Uremia, 2017 © Newsha Tavakolian



09_Tehran, 2017 © Newsha Tavakolian



10_Tehran 2019 © Newsha Tavakolian



11_Uremia, 2017 © Newsha Tavakolian



12_Behesht Zahra cemetery, 2019 © Newsha Tavakolian