

WW Interviews Safiya Bukhari

State Repression and the Black Struggle

By Imani Henry

In 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale created the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in their hometown of Oakland, Calif., to wage a struggle against police brutality in their community. By 1968, the Panthers had chapters in more than 20 cities, about 5,000 members on the books and thousands of sympathizers.

In 1969 the U.S. government opened a full-scale assault against the Black Panthers through the Counter Intelligence Program--COINTELPRO. By 1971, due to infiltration, frame-ups, dissemination of false information, and outright violence against the BPP, the organization had begun to dissolve.

To this day, former members of the Black Panther Party, including Mumia Abu-Jamal, remain in U.S. jails for their political activism.

I had the honor of interviewing Safiya Bukhari, a former Black Panther and Black Liberation Army leader who spent close to nine years in prison. Now the co-chair of the New York City Free Mumia Coalition and an international organizer of the Jericho Movement, she continues to struggle to free hundreds of political prisoners of war and to fight for the liberation of her people. The following excerpts are the first installment of the interview with this courageous freedom fighter.

IH: I wanted to ask you about your childhood and what influenced you and brought you into the political struggle.

SB: I was born in 1950 in Harlem Hospital. When I was 9 months old my grandfather took me to South Carolina. So I had a lot of experience in the South on the farm, but we moved back and forth from the South to New York several times. And the whole community where I grew up in the South

and even in the North were relatives, so I never had the experience of racism, because I never came in contact with people of other races until I went to college.

I left home the summer of '67 and went to college. And it was the second year of college, in 1968, that the Black Power Movement was really going strong and everybody was changing their names and getting involved. But I was very one-track and I was going to be a doctor. So I never had time for the clubs at school.

But on a dare, I pledged a sorority and it was then that I learned about racism--because it was the first year that Black people were even allowed in that sorority and so we elected a Black president.

One of the things we were talking about at a sorority meeting was about foster care and sending monies to foreign countries to feed hungry children. And the president that year (her name was Beatrice) said at the meeting, "Why should be sending money somewhere else to feed hungry children when there are hungry children right here to be fed in New York?"

And nobody believed her. This was the "land of plenty." Because there was no such thing as starving children in the United States, right?

So we were sent out, myself and two other women, on a fact-finding mission in New York to determine whether there were hungry children that needed to be fed.

So we got on the train and went to Harlem. The first people we met coming off the train were some Panthers.

We told them what we were there for and they took us around and showed us the breakfast program, and things like that.

The rhetoric they were talking about and everything else that at the time, I didn't believe it, I didn't adhere to that, but I did get up in the morning and go to the breakfast program and cook and feed the kids. And then we noticed that the children weren't coming to the breakfast program, even

though we were doing everything we were supposed to do. We found that the police were lying and telling the kids and parents that we were feeding the kids "poison food." Now, we were eating the same food right along side the kids, but the parents believed this--that is, the idea that the police wouldn't help but they would try to keep kids from getting fed.

That to me ... you know, why would you do this? It was inconceivable. That was the first thing that got me thinking.

The second thing was, my sorority sister Wanda and myself were downtown on 42nd Street, and we noticed that there was a Panther selling papers and the police were harassing him.

So we asked what was going on and the police said to me that my asking the question was obstructing a governmental process and then I said that he had a constitutional right to disseminate political literature.

The cop said I was inciting a riot and said that if I didn't shut up that he was going to arrest the both of us. So quite naturally I didn't shut up because we had rights. So he ended up arresting me, Wanda, and the Panther, putting us in handcuffs and throwing us in the back of the car.

By this time, I've shut up because I am still thinking, this is totally not right, and then Wanda was mouthing off, selling wool tickets and everything.

This was the very first arrest and I am being arrested for following the Constitution. And they told Wanda if she didn't shut up they were gonna ram a nightstick up her _____.

And she quite naturally didn't stop. Once we got to the 14th Precinct, they put us in cell and called for a matron to strip-search us. Because according to them we could be carrying anything. When the matron came, the cops told her that she should put on some gloves because there is no telling what we might have. Then they strip us. We went through that whole process and then they gave us that one phone call.

When I called home I told my mother that I had made a decision about what I wanted to do and I decided that was to join the Black Panther Party.

This part of the interview focuses on the FBI's brutal attack on the Panthers under Cointelpro.

On April 2, 1969, 21 members of the Black Panthers in New York were indicted on charges of conspiring to blow up five department stores, a police station, railroad tracks and the Bronx Botanical Gardens. Those arrested were held on \$100,000 bail each. Many Panther followers and supporters considered this a form of "ransom bail" used by the district attorney and the court system to keep freedom fighters in jail throughout the protracted trial process. On May 13, 1971, after mass protests, they were acquitted of all the trumped-up charges. The Panther 21 defendants included Afeni Shakur, mother of the late rap artist Tupac Shakur.

Fred Hampton, at the age of 20, became leader of the Chicago chapter of the BPP. From his work with the free health care clinic to the free breakfast program to organizing community control of the police, he evolved into a beloved leader of the Black community. On Dec. 4, 1969, Chicago police assassinated Hampton while he was sleeping, along with Mark Clark. Four other Panthers were also shot, beaten and arrested. Hampton had just been appointed to the Party's Central Committee as chief of staff.

Bobby Seale and Erica Huggins were both indicted and later acquitted of murder charges in the death of a police informant.

Safiya Bukhari: I tell people straight up that it was the New York Police Department that made me decide to join the Black Panther Party. In college I supported the war in Vietnam. I was so far to the right it was ridiculous. I was writing essays on "Why we should be in Vietnam." But by the time the summer of 1969 was over, in November, I was in the party.

That's why I got involved. If these police are supposed to be the protectors of the community and they're violating rights, then somebody has to stand up and speak up against it.

We saw several attacks that came down so quickly with the Cointelpro program. Everything was just geared to making sure that we did not get a chance to work step by step through stages of political education, to organize in the community in the method that would have insured that the masses of the people would have been involved in our movement by the time it came to the stage of armed struggle.

Imani Henry: What work did you do with the Panthers?

SB: As part of my work, we did community self-defense, community organizing, the breakfast programs, the liberation schools. I did welfare rights organizing. The welfare rights organization that came into existence came out of a lot of the work we did organizing welfare mothers. I sold papers in my community because papers were very important. That's how you got the information out. I taught political education classes.

And soon I was given a section. My section was 125th to 116th streets from 7th Avenue to 1st Avenue. That's a big section, but we didn't think that it was going to happen overnight. So I would spend a lot of time out in the community organizing. Be aware of what's going on in your community and make your daily reports of what you encountered. That's how you learned about the community that you lived in and the issues that affected your community.

Basically we organized on whatever were the needs of the community. I remember this sister had gotten raped and we went to work with her and the person who attacked said they were coming back, and so we set up this sting to catch the person who had raped this sister.

IH: How did Cointelpro impact the East Coast BPP?

SB: Well, during this time the Panther 21 were on trial. A big part of the organizing was to make sure the courtroom was filled and money was there for their legal defense.

The 21 were basically the leadership of the New York chapter of the party prior to them getting captured. They thought that by taking the leadership away they would destroy the New York chapter of the party.

IH: So was the raid on the office?

SB: No, on their homes. Simultaneously, all these people were arrested almost at the same time, during the early morning that day.

IH: So this is a perfect example of Cointelpro-a systematic raid on everyone's home, 21 people.

SB: Actually, 1969 was a very bad year for the party. 1969 was the year Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were killed in Chicago. Also during this time Panther leaders Bobby Seale and Erica Huggins were arrested in New Haven, Conn. Huey Newton was already in jail and BPP Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver was forced into exile.

There was like a command coming from somewhere in the party on what to do. So even though we were doing the community programs, the government's operation to destroy the party continued. Most of the time I was in the party, the issue of political prisoners was the major thing because we had Panther trials going on all over the country.

So if they weren't already on trial, their offices were being raided and more people were going to jail. The media were televising raids on Panther offices. By 1971, the government's dissemination of false information played upon internal contradictions within the organization that brought a split in the party and basically the disintegration of the party.

Cops waged 'psychological warfare' on Panthers

Imani Henry: There were the four parts of the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program or Cointelpro--infiltration, psychological warfare, dissemination of misinformation and violence. Can you give other examples?

Safiya Bukhari: We didn't know about Cointelpro--and I think people believe that Cointelpro started with the Black Panther Party but it didn't. And people need to understand what Cointelpro is so they can see it when it is happening and prepare themselves to deal with it because it is going on all the time.

In the Harlem chapter, there were undercover agents, and if it wasn't for my sister who worked as a communications person at the police department, I would not have known so many people in the Harlem chapter were police officers. Come to find out that some of them were gold shield-carrying detectives.

Psychological warfare was more insidious than just spreading disinformation. They learned to push peoples' buttons. It went as far as destroying people's ability to trust each other. For example putting hallucinogens in people's food so you would be scared to eat because it could lead to finding out something from someone's past and exposing it to the community.

IH: When did you join the Black Liberation Army and what was that experience like?

SB: In 1970, we were about so much work around political prisoners. We had the Black Panther Party in prison and the BLA in prison and they were being given life sentences. And we knew we needed to start an offshoot to deal with the issue by getting the parents involved and community support around it. So we started the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners.

At the same time, loads of us were being subpoenaed by the grand jury to testify against Panthers. I was given immunity from prosecution so I couldn't

take the Fifth Amendment. So I had to make a decision whether to go to the grand jury and take the fifth and face federal contempt charges or not show up and face regular contempt charges. If I went to court and pleaded the fifth, I could be facing five years in prison for every question I refused to answer. So finally I made the decision not to go to the grand jury and I went underground in the BLA.

To go underground is very difficult. Whatever made you unique as a person, you have to change all of that and become somebody totally different. You are out of contact with your family.

IH: How long were you underground?

SB: Beginning April 1973 and I was captured on January 17, 1975.

“I was a prisoner of war”

Imani Henry: What were you charged with?

Safiya Bukhari: I had five counts charged against me, including one count of felonious murder where I was facing the electric chair; two counts of attempted murder; two counts of robbery; one charge of possession of a machine gun. The federal charge was knowing and willing possession of an unregistered explosive device. The rest were state charges.

What they had done was stomp Kombosi Amistad to death. [He was only 23 years old.--IH] While they were stomping him, they found a weapon under his coat. It was a Paratrooper M1 with a folding stock that I had a federal firearms license to carry. I bought it over the counter.

They charged me for that weapon. I gave them the license thinking that they would see that it's legal and wasn't a machine gun. [The rifle fires a .30 caliber bullet and is effective at 500 yards. Clearly not a weapon of mass destruction.--IH]

They charged Masai Ehehosi and me with attempting to rob this place. I wasn't charged in the state court with the pipe bomb. I was charged in federal court with that. Anyway they brought in demolition experts who said I could have killed everybody for a block with that. They asked for a 900-year prison sentence for the machine gun possession to show people that "they can't come to their town doing stuff like this."

IH: Where were you captured?

SB: In Norfolk, Va. Out of the five charges, only the felony murder charge was thrown out along with the million-dollar bail. Once they threw out the murder charge, I told the media that I would counter-charge them with murder because of what they had done to Kombosi. And I told them I would expose this on the stand, how they had stomped him to death and what had happened.

Then they cremated him before his family got there so they couldn't do the autopsy and show what they had done. So by the time his mother got there all she got was clothing.

Anyway, they left me with the other four charges. I told them they didn't have the jurisdiction to try me because I was a prisoner of war and I gave them my name, rank and serial number and that was it.

They assigned this former FBI agent to defend me and wouldn't let the attorneys gotten by the PG-RNA defend me. [The Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika (PG-RNA) was formed in 1968 "to free the oppressed Black nation in North America and to win reparations from the United States government."--IH]

There was no way I would let him defend me. I wasn't stupid so I refused. But the only way me and Masai, my co-defendant, would get to see each other is if we went to a legal meeting. So we went to the meeting but when we got there, Masai and me talked in code the whole time. The lawyer was

so upset that he walked out of the room. But we got across what we wanted to and then I told the lawyer that I would not let him represent me in court. During the jury selection, when this potential jurist asked why was I being tried, the dude (the defense lawyer) said, "I was being tried for what I had done."

I objected. And the judge said I couldn't object because he was my lawyer, and I said, "Oh no, he is not."

And I told the judge he was supposed to say, "I was being tried for what I allegedly had done." He's already convicted me in front of the jury and he's supposed to have been my attorney!

Anyway, by the time it was all over they had thrown me out of court. They picked a jury, had the trial, convicted us, sentenced us and sent us off to jail all in one day. They drove me out of there with a helicopter caravan that night to the women's prison.

IH: So the whole court process happened...

SB: ...in one day.

Doing hard time

Imani Henry: Did you have a defense committee?

Safiya Bukhari: There was no defense committee. We're talking about a time when trials were going on all over the place.

A major trial in New York was the New York 3. They didn't get convicted until May 1975. The Panthers had split. The East Coast ones--those who weren't in jail--were busy running for their lives. The West Coast was off in electoral politics. So you had the movement in disarray, but at least in prison we were consolidated, trying to get some kind of organization to all these people in prison, so we could speak with one voice.

In December of 1976, I escaped from prison--in fact it was New Year's Eve. I was recaptured in February of 1977 and taken back to Virginia. And the Coordinating Council of the BLA, the ones that were in jail, asked me not to escape again, but to come home on parole and work on the issue of organizing around political prisoners, because there was no work being organized.

As a matter of fact, Mumia got sentenced to death while I was still in prison. I wrote him because it was really a shock, a Panther on death row. While I was in prison I became aware of how deep the counter-intelligence program was.

IH: How long were you in jail?

SB: Eight years and eight months.

IH: How was it you didn't serve out your full sentence?

SB: In Virginia, if you are convicted for the first time, you only serve a fourth of your sentence. And you earn good time. While I was there they came up with "a day for a day." You earn a day "good time" for a day in jail. It comes off the front end of your sentence. With my escape, I ended up losing all my "good time" and then, because I didn't get involved in anything stupid in prison, I ended up earning all my good time back.

All the same I was a troublemaker. At a drop of a hat, I'd file a lawsuit against those people. If they did something wrong, I didn't go through the whole "motor mouth" thing. What is that going to do? And I didn't take it out on no regular guards, they were just workers. It was the "white shirts" I took it out on. They were the ones with responsibility for doing the wrong. So in time I created a situation where the guards saw me as a human being and not an inmate.

For example, I went on hunger strike, because they had me in maximum secure segregation for three years and seven months after the escape. They

had never had a woman in segregation that long. The maximum before was six months.

In order to get out I had to go to court. I had to file a lawsuit against them for discrimination. While I was in there for the three years the guards were upset. This one correctional officer, her son was in prison in Alabama. She told me how her stepfather had abused him and she felt responsible and what could she do? Well, I said, give me his address and I'll write him. So I started writing her son. And she would bring me food from the outside because I was writing her son. And when he got out of prison he came to visit me.

When I went on the hunger strike, I knew exactly what I was doing. I went on hunger strike to get attention from the media for the lawsuit I had filed to get out of segregation.

IH: How long were you on hunger strike?

SB: Thirty-three days. This same guard would try to get me to eat, because she was very concerned. She would talk to me about her family and the problems she was having. When they finally took me to trial for the escape, this guard had talked to people in her community. This is a little town in Virginia and these people were on the jury from the community. The judge threatened them because they didn't want to find me guilty and give me time for the escape.

My defense was "not guilty by reason of duress and necessity." I represented myself. I told them one of the reasons for my escape was inadequate medical care. Because I had fibroid tumors. I was down South in the first place to have the surgery in my home [South Carolina].

The doctors in the North had diagnosed that I needed surgery. So I was on my way home, and we stopped in Virginia to take care of some political business, and that's when the arrests went down.

“Everyone has a point where they won't back down”

Imani Henry: I asked about you getting out of prison without doing all of your time.

Safiya Bukhari: I used the courts. And the women in the prison started to watch what I was doing. ...The warden said I was "a threat to the security of the free world." Then she told them that I could organize the women in her prison. And that was the only women's prison in Virginia.

They were concerned about my ability to organize and "recruit" women from the institution. I didn't believe in recruiting because the person has to make up her mind for herself and if you recruit too many, then it puts the responsibility on you. But if they did on their own, that was something different. [The prison officials] didn't understand those concepts at all. Then the warden told me, "I'll approve you for a furlough, but I won't approve you for honor college." Honor college is where you can go in and out of the building anytime you want to. Now I could go off grounds, I could do work release, but I couldn't go to honor college on the grounds. What sense did that make?

I and other women started this group, Mothers Inside Loving Kids (MILK), for the long-termers. And we helped them spend time with their children. Because one of the things they do heavy in the South is that they take away parental rights, especially if a woman goes to jail. Doesn't matter how long she's in prison for or how short she's in prison for, even if her case has nothing to do with child abuse. Virginia took away parental rights.

That prison used to be a plantation. And most of those prisons down there used to be plantations. And they still had the slave housing; some of the same buildings that slaves had slept in.

IH: So when you came up for parole, was that a struggle again, or did you have enough good time?

SB: When my time came up for parole, the debate was what I was going to say to the parole board. Everybody kept saying I should say, "I have remorse."

IH: So what did you decide to do with the parole board?

SB: What they asked me was, "What do you think about violence?" And I told them. I don't believe in violence for the sake of violence. But everyone has a point where you will not back down.

And they asked me about being in contact with any former Black Liberation Army people, Black Panthers and felon. And I told them, "Look, I'm not going to sit here and tell you that I'm not to be in contact with my family. Because these people are not just members of the BLA or BPP; these people are part of my family. So it's up to you. And whatever you do, I will do what I have to do."

Then they asked me, "Do you still believe in what you believe in?" And I said, "No, in all these years, I learned that not everybody is ready for armed struggle. There is a lot of education that needs to be done. There's a lot of organizing that has to be done if you want to support other people. And that's what I do best." They didn't turn me down and they didn't give me parole. They gave me a deferral.

IH: So you did eight years and eight months, and you were released when?

SB: August 22, 1983.

IH: When did the Jericho movement start?

SB: I came to the conclusion there had to be a better way to deal with this issue of political prisoners. I went to Cuba to spend time with Assata Shakur and meet with the Association of Cuban Women and we heard that we had won the stay of execution for Mumia Abu-Jamal [in 1995].

In 1996, we started to build the Jericho march. ...We needed an umbrella organization that represented all political prisoners. The four objectives of the Jericho Movement are:

- 1) Winning amnesty and freedom for all political prisoners currently held;
- 2) Making the U.S. government acknowledge there are political prisoners in U.S. jails;
- 3) Setting up a legal defense fund so their appeal work gets done and there is ongoing work on their cases after their trials; and
- 4) Demanding adequate medical care.

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