

The Seed of the Sacred Fig [15]

2023 Iran/Germany/France

168 mins

UK released **7 February 2025**

Director **Mohammad Rasoulof**

Screenplay **Mohammad Rasoulof**

Cinematography **Pooyan Aghababaei**

Music **Karzan Mahmood**

Cast **Soheila Golestani** (Najmeh); **Missagh Zareh** (Iman);
Mahsa Rostami (Rezvan); **Setareh Maleki** (Sana);
Niousha Akhshi (Sadaf)

Premiering dramatically in Cannes with Rasoulof freshly escaped from his country, *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* wrenchingly pits an investigating judge and his wife against their two dissenting daughters, who are appalled by brutal crackdowns on protesters.

Iman (Misagh Zare), the respectable-looking father, is rising in the ranks of the state judicial department, doing increasingly repressive work that we never see; his wife, Najmeh (Soheila Golestani), dotes upon him, and they savour the prospect of a bigger apartment and other rewards for his loyal service. But their daughters, university-age Rezvan (Mahsa Rostami) and younger Sana (Setareh Maleki), stay glued to social media videos of government attacks on protesters, shown repeatedly in harrowing clips in mobile phone-vertical shots.

They're primed for a generational clash, and the mounting dissonance between the young women's democratic views and the parents' hold-the-line conservatism becomes a microcosm of the archaic authoritarian regime ignoring its citizens' will to be free. Rezvan and Sana are finally drawn directly into the turmoil of the latest protests when Rezvan's friend, Sadaf (Niousha Akhshi), is wounded by a buckshot, and they smuggle her into the apartment for her safety.

Rezvan confronts her father at the dinner table and says, baldly, he's wrong, and too close to the problem to see it; at the film's premiere screening, these exchanges sparked applause. "Normal people who want a normal life and

freedom” is, in Rezvan’s words, at the root of the protests, not some conspiracy of ill-defined “enemies” that her father flimsily maintains. Throughout, Rasoulof is plumbing the individual moral decisions faced by citizens under this regime much as he did in *There Is No Evil* (2020) and its four stories circling capital punishment. But *Sacred Fig* proceeds to bust out of the confines of their domestic drama, with eye-opening developments that express the paranoia engendered by the patriarchal regime and its corrosive effects.

These genre-inflected turns include questioning of the girls by a friend of the family who works as an interrogator. It’s a creepy sequence that shows Rasoulof’s willingness to break out some severe imagery: Rezvan sits blindfolded against a bare wall, in an unsettlingly bare composition that gives the subjugation of citizen to state a pure, unforgiving shape. There follow some wildly unexpected action-drama flourishes. Far from entertainment value, these sequences suggest the violent prerogatives Iman assumes as a father and controlling agent of the state when push comes to shove.

“Over there we will become the family we were,” Iman says at one point when explaining a move to the countryside where he grew up. The tortuous phrasing is a concise statement of conservative purpose: family and state returning to some imagined prior perfect form. It’s no wonder that Rasoulof opted to flee the country upon learning that authorities were onto his film production and would soon carry out his pending sentence of imprisonment and flogging. But his film stands as an eloquent record of and warning to a regime clinging to power at the expense of freedom.

Nicolas Rapold, *Sight and Sound*, 3 June 2024 (abridged)

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