



 [Email this article to a friend](#)

Iran: Journalist's Trial Indicates Hard-Line Crackdown

By Charles Recknagel/Azam Gorgin

In recent months, Iranian hard-liners have stepped up their efforts to intimidate liberal intellectuals by arresting a 73-year-old former journalist, Siamak Pourzand, and pressing him to confess to charges of spying. As RFE/RL correspondents Charles Recknagel and Azam Gorgin report, the case is focusing new attention on the hard-liners' ability to arrest reformists arbitrarily and prosecute them in closed-door trials that inspire widespread fear and uncertainty.

Prague, 1 April 2002 (RFE/RL) -- The terror that a closed-door trial in Iran inspires can be felt by anyone listening to the message Siamak Pourzand left recently on his wife's answering machine.

Pourzand, a former journalist and head of the Artistic and Cultural Complex in Tehran, was abducted in November by unknown men who forced him into a car as he left his sister's home one night. After weeks of searching the capital, friends and relatives found he was being held by a branch of Iran's morality police -- the Public Places Supervision Office -- whose job is supposed to be enforcing proper behavior in public places. After Pourzand's relatives discovered and visited him there, he was again spirited away, this time to a new and still unknown place of detention.

Then in March, Pourzand's jailers allowed him to make a few desperate-sounding phone calls to close family members, including his wife, Mehrangiz Kar, who is one of Iran's most prominent dissident lawyers.

Kar found these words from her husband on her answering machine in Washington, D.C., where she is currently undergoing medical treatment for cancer.

2 "Mehrangiz, I have declined the lawyer you suggested for me. I have an attorney introduced to me by the court. Please tell the kids, and yourself too, please do not speak to anyone [about my case]. Please, I beg you."

As the message ends, Pourzand can be heard speaking to people around him, presumably his jailers. He tells them: "I called [my wife] and my sister; neither of them was at home."

Pourzand's call to his wife came just days before the state-run newspaper "Iran" announced he was being tried in a closed courtroom on charges of "espionage" and "working to undermine state security." The newspaper later reported that Pourzand confessed to being in contact with people close to Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late shah who was deposed in Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Since receiving her husband's message, Kar has rejected what she believes was his forced request to stay silent and is gathering support for Pourzand in and outside Iran. Pourzand's supporters say such publicity now may be the only way to rescue the elderly journalist from an almost certain prison sentence --

SP00054

<http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2002/04/01042002060230.asp>

4/2/2002

which, due to his frail health, he might not survive.

Kar's decision to speak out for her husband is grounded in bitter experience. Despite having cancer, Kar herself was jailed in the summer of 2000 for attending a reformist conference in Berlin. She was released after 52 days following an international outcry demanding she be freed to seek life-saving medical treatment abroad.

Kar recently told RFE/RL correspondent Azam Gorgin that she sees her husband's detention as illegal and as part of a campaign to intimidate him and other intellectuals. That campaign has included not only court charges but also a string of lurid allegations in conservative papers accusing him of everything from subversion to immorality.

"I basically think that this case from the very beginning was illegal, disregarding human rights law. It doesn't even fit in with the Islamic Republic's Constitution. [My husband] was abducted from in front of his sister's house at 9 o'clock at night. Then there were articles in all the national papers and the conservative papers saying he had received millions of dollars from the Americans and distributed it among reformist journalists," Kar said. "There were [also] reports that he had an extramarital relationship, and he is accused of adultery. [Plus] the rumor that he has been given \$4 billion. So you see, this case did not begin legitimately, nor do I think it will end legitimately."

The charges of an extramarital affair appear intended to smear Pourzand -- and, by extension, other Iranian intellectuals -- with a reputation for immorality in order to turn public opinion against them.

Kar also said that the way her husband was abducted and held in secret locations has made him feel powerless to the point of confessing to the serious charges against him.

"I think he has arrived at the conclusion that he is in the hands of people who are above the law and have no compassion, either for his old age or my illness," Kar said. "We don't know where he is. We just assume he is in some hellish detention, and in this hellhole he has done whatever they asked him to do."

Pourzand's treatment has drawn a wave of criticism from international human rights groups, who say he is being denied his right to a fair trial.

Human Rights Watch said in a statement in March that "the judicial authorities are making a mockery of rule of law in Iran." The statement added, "The Iranian authorities have given no reason to hold Mr. Pourzand and by law they should release him immediately."

The press freedom group Reporters Without Borders said it feels "serious concern about the suspected ill-treatment of [the] elderly Iranian journalist." The organization also said it is "worried about possible psychological pressure on Pourzand to confess, as has happened in cases involving government opponents [in Iran]."

Pourzand's nighttime arrest by unknown agents, and now his closed-door trial, come as the latest escalation in a continuing hard-line crackdown against the country's intellectuals. The crackdown comes in response to reformist gains in the February 2000 parliamentary elections. Led by the hard-line-dominated judiciary, the backlash has seen almost all the countries' reformist newspapers shut down and the jailing of scores of editors, journalists, and thinkers.

Recently, the crackdown has shown increasing signs of being conducted outside of normal judicial structures to deliberately create a stronger atmosphere of menace and intimidation. Recently, some 20

writers, authors, and lawyers in addition to Pourzand were called into the basement of Tehran's Public Places Supervision Office to face interrogations by anonymous agents. During the sessions, the intellectuals were accused of subversive activities and threatened with physical violence. They were also forced to promise never to reveal the contents of their interrogations.

[Search](#) | [Newsline](#) | [Magazine](#) | [Reports](#) | [Services](#) | [Realaudio](#)

© 1995-2001 Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, Inc., All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.rferl.org>