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Iranian Targeted by Onetime Associates

Former Revolutionary Becomes Symbol

By Tara Bahrapour
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In the early days of the [Islamic Republic of Iran](#), Saeed Hajjarian advised the hostage-takers at the U.S. Embassy. During the Iran-[Iraq](#) war, he helped establish the much-feared Ministry of Intelligence. Then he turned in a democratic direction, running reformist newspapers and serving as a political adviser to President Mohammad Khatami. In 2000 a gunman aligned with a hard-line government faction shot him in the face, leaving him partially paralyzed and dependent on medication.

And for the past six weeks, Hajjarian, 55, has languished in prison, a key target of the apparatus he helped create.

"He is a great symbol of what the Islamic republic does to its own," said Farideh Farhi, an Iran specialist at the University of Hawaii who first met Hajjarian in the 1990s. "Obviously, today, some in the Intelligence Ministry think he was the brain behind [opposition presidential candidate Mir Hossein] Mousavi's campaign." Hajjarian's arrest, she added, "suggests his continued significance as a reflection of what the hard-liners most fear."

Hajjarian was arrested three days after the disputed June 12 presidential election, along with thousands of other people. Family members said his medications for problems such as seizures and motor control have been administered erratically, which could lead to brain damage or death. After a visit last week, his wife, a doctor, described him as depressed and tearful, and said he has been interrogated in direct sunlight in temperatures of more than 100 degrees and doused with ice water, affecting his heart rate dangerously.

On Thursday, two days after a Human Rights Watch report described his "deteriorating" condition, officials said Hajjarian had been moved to a "state-owned house" with "suitable" medical facilities. His wife, in an interview, said she had not seen the house or been told anything about it.

Iran on Saturday put 100 political activists and others on trial for conspiring to topple the government, and added 10 defendants on Sunday. The opposition's Mousavi alleged that the government had used "medieval torture" to force confessions from the accused.

Hajjarian, who has not yet been tried, had not been particularly active in the lead-up to the election, though he supported Mousavi. But recent articles in the press aligned with the government have listed him as leading a push for democratic reform.

"In the viewpoint of the Iranian government, transition to democracy is a crime, and democracy is equal to evil, and it is a Western term," said Mohsen Kadivar, a reformist cleric who worked with Hajjarian in Iran and is now a visiting professor at Duke University. "So all those figures that try to democratize their country, they have committed a big crime."

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Hajjarian, who grew up in a poor section of Tehran, is described by friends as having a dour face but a sharp sense of humor. Like the revolution itself, he seemed to mature from strident youthful ideology into a middle-aged complexity and thoughtfulness. His transformation echoes that of many revolutionaries who coalesced around Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the 1980s but later moved toward reform.

The end of the 1980s Iran-Iraq war came as a shock to many who had believed in Khomeini's vows to bring down Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein at any cost, said Ahmad Sadri, chair of Islamic world studies at Lake Forest College, who first met Hajjarian in 1992.

"The mentality of the revolutionaries was that this was the dawn of a new age, that this revolution . . . is steadfast, it is non-compromising," he said. When the war ended with no clear victory for either side, "a light went off in their minds and they realized they had been wrong all along about a lot of things, including mixing religion and politics, and that the world of politics is a world of compromise."

After Khomeini's death, when Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ascended to power as Iran's supreme leader, leftists such as Hajjarian and Mohammad Khatami were sidelined. That, analysts said, gave them time to lick their wounds and turn to studying, many moving in more secular directions.

They formed intellectual circles. They started journals. Hajjarian, working on a PhD in political science at Tehran University, pursued the idea of a transition to democracy and advocated pressuring the government from below while striking bargains at the top.

"He's a thinker," said Bill Berkeley, a former New York Times editorial writer who has interviewed Hajjarian for an upcoming book about the hostage-takers. "He had the feeling the revolution had lost its way and gone off the track. He told me war was a bad way to build democratic institutions; he attributes the authoritarian direction that the revolution ended up taking to the Iran-Iraq war."

Hajjarian espoused a democratic interpretation of Islam, said Kadivar, who during Khatami's tenure was Islamic deputy of the Center for Strategic Studies, an Iranian think tank, while Hajjarian was its political deputy. "I remember he said the leader and president is like the employee of the citizen, and the citizen is like the owner of the land. And they rent out to the president or the supreme leader as their workers, so the workers should do as they tell them."

Such ideas, in a system where the word of the supreme leader is considered divine, can be deadly. Analysts say Hajjarian may have been targeted for assassination because he used his insider knowledge to accuse the Intelligence Ministry of a string of killings of intellectuals in the late 1990s.

After recovering from a coma, Hajjarian was physically disabled, but his mental capacities were unharmed. Analysts said the government has targeted him now not for any particular activity but because of his symbolic importance. They said some in the government hope to force a confession of conspiring against the state, an accusation also leveled against other arrested reformists.

"I think it's kind of a terror tactic, to scare people, by showing that even a guy like Hajjarian could be forced to confess," Berkeley said. "If he died [in prison], it would be a debacle for the regime. But if he survives and confesses, that might be something that would be considered an asset."

It could also backfire.

"They have overused this tactic," Farhi said. "Now people will just say that he was forced to do it and further turn their anger against the government."

Special correspondent Kay Armin Serjoie contributed to this report.