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IRAN: Lawyer spent 10 weeks in prison 'for nothing'

September 1, 2009 | 4:34 am

On the 28th day of his detention inside Iran's Evin Prison, he was granted his first family visit.



It was then that he found out that while he had been locked up, his sister had died in a car accident.

Prison authorities offered to let Abdul-Fatah Soltani attend the mourning ceremony.

There was just one condition.

The famed human-rights lawyer had to promise that he wouldn't speak out to the media about his incarceration.

He rejected the offer, missing the chance to join his family to grieve for his sister.

"I did not believe I had done anything wrong, so accepting their condition was against my belief and my principles," Soltani, now free, told The Times in an interview at his downtown office a few days ago. "Accepting their condition was a rubber stamp on my non-committed crime."

Instead he vowed to prison authorities that once he was out of prison, he would haul all of them into court, suing them for unjustly locking him up.

Soltani is among Iran's [small cadre of human-rights lawyers](#) and is the spokesman for the Center for the Defense of Human Rights, which was co-founded by the Nobel Peace Prize-winner Shirin Ebadi.

For his efforts in defense of political dissidents and religious minorities accused of crimes against the state, he'd [already done time in prison](#). This time, he lost 15 pounds while in jail. "It is nothing," he says cheerfully, as he fasts during the holy month of Ramadan. "Good for my health."

Security forces stormed his offices on June 16, four days after Iran's disputed presidential elections, seizing his computers and arresting him.

About a day after he was locked up, a judge, whom he named as Majid Matin Rasekh, approached him. He accused him of "being skeptical about the results of the election," and issued an order to detain him on "a temporary basis."

In wards 209 and 240 of Evin, he recalled narrow corridors full of detainees, most of them as young as his sons. "Many of them cried and pleaded innocent," he said. "Some of them said that they were crossing the streets, simply at the wrong place at the wrong time."

Many had voted for opposition candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi and participated in post-election demonstrations. "They cried during the hasty interrogations," he said. "I was very touched. They were like my sons. On what basis were they detained and kept in those narrow awful corridors? I could not help weeping as I overheard their lamentation."

From his cell he could overhear some of the interrogators sympathize with the detainees.

"They said, 'You are right. You're innocent. But when there is an unseasonable flash flood many innocents are washed away before they can prove that they are innocent.'"



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At one point he says the interrogators again approached him and made an offer. "They explicitly said, 'If you recant, disconnect yourself from Shirin Ebadi's human rights center ... then you will be freed right now,'" he recalled.



Soltani refused.

He says he believes that the authorities are angry at him for continuing to meet with other human-rights lawyers even after [authorities shut down the small office](#) of the human-rights center for [operating without a permit](#).

"We will hold our session anywhere possible, even if we have to get together in Behesht Zahra cemetery in the south of Tehran or outdoors we will meet," he boasts.

He was questioned as to why he -- a devout Muslim -- agreed to defend the alleged leaders of Iran's Bahai community, who are [to be put on trial next month](#).

"I answered that I am human rights lawyer, we are impartial," he says. "We are like physicians. We do not ask what is the religion or belief of our clients. I have defended the rights of a Basiji, a monarchist, Communist, converts to Christianity and Bahais."

But the worst experience was that of finding out his sister died. He was entitled to a one-week humanitarian leave but couldn't stomach the condition of keeping his mouth shut while outside.

His brother-in-law passed away 15 days later as a result of injuries from the same crash. Again he was offered a one-week leave if he kept quiet. Again he refused.

He wound up spending 72 days in prison "for nothing," he says.

He spent 17 of them in solitary confinement and was not allowed to shower for the first 15 days.

He still doesn't know why he was arrested, and says he is angered that Iran's legal system has gone so far astray from the principles he believed in.

Soltani cites a story regarding the Imam Ali, considered the founder of Iran's Shiite faith.

In the story, Imam Ali claimed before a judge that a Jewish man had stolen his property. But he had no witnesses, and he lost the case.

"There should be concrete rules and laws to arrest and try people," he says. "You cannot do it out of your own judgment."

-- [Ramin Mostaghim](#) in Tehran and [Borzou Daragahi](#) in Beirut

Photo: Abdul-Fatah Soltani; Credit: File photo. Below, a satellite image of the massive Evin Prison compound. Credit: File photo

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I am wonder why Mr. Jimmy Carter has not said one word about all of the Human Rights violations that this regime has done to its own people since the fall of the Shay by the Carter administration. I hope Mr Obama be bright and not follow his foot step. If he does, God bless America. We will be in worst situation ever.

I hope United Nation listen and not just pretend not knowing like the Hitler and the jews masacare.

Posted by: benjamin | September 02, 2009 at 05:13 PM

I have only one thing to say, Mr. Soltani. As an Iranian I'm immensely so proud of you.

Posted by: nxx | September 02, 2009 at 10:28 AM

With heroes like Mr. Soltani living in Iran, there must a truly bright future for all who live there. Mr. Soltani, thank you for your impartial defense of those who are the most vulnerable under Iran's government.

Posted by: sb | September 01, 2009 at 01:50 PM

What a wonderful example of a human being Mr Soltani and Shirin Ebadi are. It is an honour to share this planet with people of great values where Human Rights are concerned. Iran should be proud of such people, not intimidate them. It just tells you more about this regime's wrong priorities with its citizens.

Posted by: ZG | September 01, 2009 at 11:42 AM

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