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The Doctor Who Defied Tehran

By FARNAZ FASSIHI

At the height of Iran's bloody civil unrest this year, a young doctor named Ramin Pourandarjani defied his superiors. He refused to sign death certificates at a Tehran prison that he said were falsified to cover up murder.

He testified to a parliamentary committee that jailers were torturing and raping protesters, his family says. He told friends and family he feared for his life.

And on Nov. 10, the 26-year-old doctor was found dead in the military clinic where he lived and worked.

The family of Dr. Pourandarjani, who occasionally treated prisoners in fulfillment of Iran's obligatory military service, says he was killed for his refusal to participate in a coverup at the notorious Kahrizak detention center, widely criticized for its unsanitary conditions.

In a series of interviews over three weeks, Dr. Pourandarjani's family spoke in detail for the first time about their son's mysterious death.

Iranian officials first blamed the doctor's death on a car accident, then a heart attack, then suicide and then poisoning, according to family members and government statements.

The controversy over his fate is transforming the doctor into a martyr for the opposition movement challenging the legitimacy of Iran's rulers. In a sign of his mounting symbolic importance, on Dec. 8 Iran's national prosecutor, Gholam Hossein Mohseni-Ejei, was pressed by local reporters at a news conference for answers. He said the case remains under investigation.

Mr. Mohseni-Ejei couldn't be reached for comment. A spokesman for the Iranian Mission to the United Nations said the case is being probed and declined to answer questions.

"I sent off my young, healthy and beautiful son to military service, and I got his dead body back," says his mother, Ruhangiz Pourandarjani, who lives in the northwest city of Tabriz. "Anyone who says he committed suicide is lying and should be afraid of God."

In Iran, protestors now carry the doctor's picture in street marches and chant his name along with that of Neda Agha Soltan, the young woman whose shooting death in June was captured on video and broadcast world-wide. A popular new slogan at some marches: "Our Neda is not dead, Our Ramin is not dead, it's the Supreme Leader who is dead," a reference to Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Mothers of individuals killed in Iran's antigovernment protests this year have formed a support group, Grieving Mothers, who march silently Sunday afternoons at Laleh Park in Tehran holding

pictures of their dead children. This month, security officials arrested 15 members. They were freed a few days later when crowds gathered near the jail, demanding their release.

The opposition says more than 70 Iranians have been killed since June in a crackdown on the protests that erupted after the nation's disputed presidential election. The government says 17 people have died, including a dozen of its own security forces.

Iran denies allegations that jailed protesters were tortured or raped and blames the deaths in Kahrizak on a meningitis outbreak. The prison has been closed in the wake of torture allegations there.

An influential Iranian parliamentarian and former health minister, Masoud Pezeshkian, is pressing for a full investigation of Dr. Pourandarjani's death. The claim of a suicide by "someone who was a witness in Kahrizak, and has no background for mental illness, is suspicious," he told local news agencies. Mr. Pezeshkian couldn't be reached for comment.

This past Wednesday, the head of a parliamentary committee investigating the broader allegations of torture at Kahrizak prison said Dr. Pourandarjani's death didn't warrant examination. "As far as we are concerned, the death of the Kahrizak doctor is clear and doesn't need investigation," said the lawmaker, Farhad Tajari, according to the main parliamentary news service. Mr. Tajari couldn't be reached for comment.

Dr. Pourandarjani was born into a middle-class family in the ancient city of Tabriz, near a place that some researchers claim is a possible geographical location of the Garden of Eden. His mother is a retired elementary school teacher. His father, Ali-Qoli Pourandarjani, works in the city's traditional bazaar.

Ramin, the future doctor, was their first child.

They took his name from an epic poem, "Vis and Ramin," one of many legends of heroic battles against unjust rulers that help define Iranian culture and provide popular names for boys. "Vis and Ramin," the story of a prince who fights the king to free his lover, may also have inspired the story of Tristan and Isolde, some scholars say.

Dr. Pourandarjani's mother recalls that her son showed his intellect early. By the age of 1, she says, he was speaking full sentences in Farsi and Turkish. He could read and write by 3. Before entering first grade, Ramin was reading aloud from a children's newspaper aimed at 10-year-olds.

When he was 11, Ramin entered a school for gifted and talented children. At an age when most teenage boys were interested in playing videogames, his father says, Ramin read and wrote poetry. At 13 he won a national contest for young poets.

Relatives and friends described Dr. Pourandarjani as the family star. "I always told my son he should strive to be like Ramin. What can I say?" says his cousin, Sima, 44, reached by phone in Tabriz. "He was exceptional."

In Iran, students are placed in universities based on their performance on a national entrance exam. In 2001, Ramin Pourandarjani ranked 1,069 out of more than a half-million applicants. He won entrance to Tabriz Medical University, one of the top schools in the nation.

Ramin's younger brother, Amin, described his brother as a bookworm when it came to medical studies, but said he also loved watching French movies to practice his own French.

Last year, Dr. Pourandarjani graduated from medical school at the top of his class. A YouTube video shows him delivering the graduation speech in a new navy blue suit and a pink shirt and necktie. Although wearing neckties at public events and at universities is frowned upon by Iranian authorities as being too Western, Dr. Pourandarjani wanted to mark the occasion with

special attire, his family recalls. Behind him, an Iranian flag fluttered in the breeze.

"Thank you to all our beloved families and distinguished professors for attending the celebration of the day we take flight and open our wings," Dr. Pourandarjani said. "If I could go back in time, I wouldn't change a thing."

Then he quoted some poetry. "The person whose heart is filled with love will never die," he said, citing a well-known Persian verse. "Our perseverance is recorded in the book of time."

Like all Iranian males, Dr. Pourandarjani was required to complete a 19-month military service. Doctors serve at government hospitals and clinics as part of their military obligation.

Luck of the draw placed Dr. Pourandarjani at a clinic in Tehran, a 75-minute flight from home in Tabriz. The clinic is in the district that oversees Kahrizak, a rundown detention center for drug addicts and dealers.

The job mostly amounted to routine medical work, until July 9. That day, some 140 young men and women were arrested at a particularly large protest in Tehran. Some detainees were brought to Kahrizak.

It marked the beginning of a prison scandal that shook Iran. Members of the opposition have made allegations of widespread violence and rape in the prison during this time.

Over a period of nearly three weeks, Dr. Pourandarjani was called to the prison four times to treat the wounds of the detainees, according to his parents and Iranian media reports.

At least three prisoners died during this time.

One of them was Mohsen Ruholamini, the 19-year-old son of a conservative politician, who died in late July.

The government publicly blamed Mr. Ruholamini's death on meningitis. Mr. Ruholamini's family immediately disputed that. In public statements at the time, his father, Abdol-Hossein Ruholamini, said his son suffered a broken jaw and died from torture in prison.

In the medical report, Dr. Pourandarjani described Mr. Ruholamini's cause of death as physical stress, multiple blows to the head and chest, and severe injuries, according to the doctor's family and local press reports.

The news of deaths at the prison sparked an unusual public fury, even among government allies. Particularly shocking to Iranians was the death of Mr. Ruholamini, the son of a conservative politician who openly supported the republic's leadership.

In a televised meeting with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Mr. Ruholamini's father told Mr. Khamenei: "The fact that I support the Islamic regime does not mean that I will give up my rights. I demand justice."

Mr. Ruholamini couldn't be reached for comment.

Two influential conservative lawmakers called for prosecution of individuals responsible for Kahrizak. Parliament named a special committee to investigate. Some of the highest Shiite clergymen in the holy city of Qom issued statements condemning the government for its handling of Kahrizak.

In the face of the allegations, Mr. Khamenei ordered the prison shut in late July.

The chief commander of the Iranian police, Esmail Ahmadi Moghaddam, told state television in August that the detention center was closed "because the conditions inside were not very

desirable. If some guards were a little rough with detainees, it was their bad judgment."

Over the next few months, security authorities called in Dr. Pourandarjani for interrogation, according to family members and reports in the Iranian media. They ordered him to revise the cause of death on medical reports from physical wounds to meningitis, his family members say. He refused.

When the parliamentary committee called him to testify, he told them what he had witnessed, his family says. Dr. Pourandarjani's statements to the committee aren't public record, and the committee has said it won't make its findings public.

In the fall, Dr. Pourandarjani was arrested.

According to his family and official Iranian media reports, he was detained in Tehran for a few days and interrogated by the police and medical officials. Family members say he was warned that if he continued to challenge the authorities, he could face medical malpractice charges and jail, as well as the loss of his medical license.

Iranian officials say in public statements that the doctor was questioned about whether he had given detainees appropriate medical care.

He was released on bail and continued working at the military health clinic, where he also lived in order to save money. He downloaded applications for medical schools in France and Germany and told friends he wanted to study abroad. His military service would end in April 2010. He asked his mother to look out for a nice young woman in Tabriz for him to marry.

In October, a few weeks before he died, both parents say Dr. Pourandarjani confided in them that he feared for his life because he refused to cover up what he had seen at the prison. He described threatening phone calls and said he was being followed.

His mother immediately phoned Abdol-Hossein Ruholamini, the conservative politician whose son had died in Kahrizak. She pleaded with him for help.

"My wife called the Ruholamini family and said, 'My son's life is in danger because he told the truth about the circumstances of your son's death. You must help him,'" Dr. Pourandarjani's father said in a telephone interview.

In early November -- the day before he died -- Dr. Pourandarjani took the unusual step of visiting the offices of Iran's parliament, his mother says, to ask for help because he felt his life was at risk.

That night, Dr. Pourandarjani phoned his parents to say he planned to come home to Tabriz for a family visit. He also emailed several friends that evening, according to an opposition Web site, Norooz, that obtained the email from the friends.

In the email, the doctor described the heavy pressure of the prison scandal but said he was looking forward to his trip home. He signed off by asking if his friends needed him to bring anything back from Tabriz, the friends said.

The next morning, Dr. Pourandarjani's father received a call from Tehran. His son had been in a car accident, he says he was told, and was unconscious with a broken leg. The caller asked him to travel to Tehran immediately.

When Mr. Pourandarjani arrived in Tehran, he was taken to a morgue. He says he was told his son had died from a heart attack.

He flew back to Tabriz with the body. Security authorities prohibited the family from viewing the body or opening the *kafan*, the traditional funeral shroud. The funeral took place under the

supervision of several security agents, the family says.

Initially, authorities refused the family's request for an autopsy. This month, because of the public outcry, the government conducted an autopsy, indicating that his last meal, prepared and delivered by the clinic where Dr. Pourandarjani had lived, contained propranolol, a blood-pressure medication that can cause cardiac arrest at high dosages. The government cites the report as evidence of possible suicide, which the family dismisses.

Dr. Pourandarjani's parents are still in mourning. Mrs. Pourandarjani said she sometimes goes into Ramin's bedroom. "I want to turn on his computer to read his poetry and look at his pictures, but I can't bring myself," she said.

This Thursday, in keeping with Islamic tradition, the family held a memorial service at a local mosque on the 40th day after Dr. Pourandarjani's death. These are usually private affairs. But this ceremony attracted hundreds of strangers who came to pay their respects.

In an unexpected gesture, one of the strangers, a university student from Tabriz, stood up and read from a statement, the doctor's relatives said.

"We are all children of Iran," the student said. "And today we mourn our dear Ramin."

The crowd spilled into the streets. It included a heavy presence of plainclothes government security agents, according to several people in attendance.

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