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Wife: Iran reform politician's confession forced



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BEIRUT – The wife of a prominent pro-reform Iranian politician said Monday her husband was forced into confessing he helped fuel post-election riots as part of a plot to topple the government and said he appeared drugged days before the trial.

The contention by Fahimeh Mousavinejad came as opposition groups claimed the government's prosecution of about 100 activists for leading protests of the disputed election results was a propaganda show.

Mousavinejad's husband, former Vice President Mohammad Abtahi, looked gaunt and disheveled when he confessed in a televised broadcast during the opening session of the mass trial on Saturday.

Mousavinejad said she was under pressure from authorities not to talk about her husband's trial — or, if she spoke, only to support his confessions. Still, she denounced his testimony as coerced and said he appeared drugged when she saw him two days before the trial.

"No one anywhere in the world would believe the confessions of someone whose lawyer hasn't seen him even for one moment, or someone who has been in solitary confinement for 45 days," Mousavinejad, told The Associated Press in a telephone interview.

The broadcast confessions, plus a warning Sunday that opposition figures who criticize the trial will be prosecuted, were seen as an effort to intimidate the reformist movement led by Mir Hossein Mousavi, who claims to be the rightful winner of the election. The claim that the confessions were staged also undermined the credibility of the trials.

Iran's largest pro-reform clerical group, the Association of Combatant Clerics, condemned the trial as a "ridiculous show," saying the confessions were of no value.

"The show was aimed at demoralizing political activists who are protesting election results and divert the public opinion from the crimes committed against detainees," the group said in a statement on its Web site. "But millions of Iranians won't be deceived by such tactics."

The Association of Teachers and Researchers, an influential pro-reform clerical group at Qom Seminary, also denounced the trial, saying the indictment "is based on confessions made under duress."

"This court lacks legal legitimacy and is not valid," it said.

Abtahi, a cleric who was vice president from 2001 to 2004 under then-President Mohammad Khatami, has been one of the main leaders of the reform movement since the 1990s.

He was arrested soon after the disputed June 12 vote, which sparked mass protests when the incumbent, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was declared the winner despite opposition claims of fraud. For weeks, Abtahi was held in secret locations and banned from contact with family or lawyers.

Mousavinejad said some 40 friends and family members gathered Saturday at her Tehran home to watch the trial broadcast. Abtahi appeared thin in a pajama-like gray prison uniform and sandals, his wrists in handcuffs.

State TV aired footage of Abtahi and another top reformer, Mohammad Atrianfar, confessing to fueling the post-election protests as part of a foreign plot to topple the government. He said opposition claims that the election was rigged were lies, and that he and other reform leaders had plotted even before the vote to stir up the unrest.

Mousavinejad said she was certain her husband did not make the confession in exchange for his freedom and that it must have been "under other pressures."

"I personally believe what he has gone through has made him speak the way he has," she said.

Even though it was hard to see her husband so frail and forced to confess, Mousavinejad said, "I did not cry."

Nor did her children, she said, adding that one of her daughters only once shed a tear when she saw "how his chin trembled as he spoke, or when she saw her father's physical weakness... The muscles in his face were not normal, his mouth was loose."

One of two foreigners among the defendants, Newsweek reporter Maziar Bahari, who holds dual Canadian and Iranian citizenship, told the court that Western media had attempted to guide events in Iran following the election. Iranian-American scholar Kian Tajbakhsh is also among those on trial.

Newsweek

issued a statement that Bahari's work has "always been balanced and objective" with "fairness evident throughout his decade-long career."

"We are extremely dismayed at this turn of events," the statement said.

Mousavinejad said such forced confessions reflect the weakness of Iran's clerical rulers.

"They are completely disarmed" and have no other weapon to fight with, she said, adding: "Confessions in Iran are nothing new. It shows their weakness and their desperation."

The pro-government media has played up the confessions as "earthshaking" blows to the opposition.

Iran has been accused of pressuring suspects into confessions before. Most recently,

American-Iranian journalist Roxana Saberi, jailed earlier this year, said she falsely confessed to espionage after being held incommunicado for days and being told it was the only way to win her release.

Mousavinejad said she and her children visited Abtahi last Thursday and were shocked to find him looking disoriented and haggard.

"He didn't look normal. He wasn't anything like our Mr. Abtahi," Mousavinejad said. "He couldn't focus. When he asked a question and I began to reply, he asked another question. He was completely unstable. He had some sort of extraordinary excitement. He couldn't finish his sentences. He mentioned nothing about his intention to confess."

Asked if he was drugged, she said jailers had warned them not to paint a negative picture of their meeting, but added: "I'm certain. I have no doubt."

She said she possessed documents and evidence that could disprove his confessions.

Authorities have responded to allegations Abtahi was drugged, putting him on television again Sunday to deny the reports. "Look how the issue of the pill has disarmed them," Mousavinejad said.

She said she has been called several times by his jailers and they demanded she stay silent or speak only in support of the confessions.