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With absence of lawyers, Iran prisoner families forced to handle complicated bureaucracy

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BEIRUT - The middle-aged woman demanded to know the fate of her daughter, Fariba Pajooch, who had been picked up by three Intelligence Ministry agents a few days earlier.

"She will be with us for a few days," the prosecutor told her calmly. "Don't worry, she's in a good place."

"What's the charge against her?" the mother wanted to know.

"It's said she had some foreign connection," the prosecutor replied vaguely.

More than a month later, 29-year-old reformist journalist Pajooch is still in jail, along with thousands of others in Iran, and her mother still doesn't know why. Her mother spoke to The Associated Press in a telephone interview from Tehran on condition that she be referred to as Mrs. Pajooch to protect herself.

Mrs. Pajooch, her husband, her brother and the prisoner's husband take turns every day to visit the General Prosecutor's Office, or Dadsara, in the hope of finding some clue as to why their loved one was arrested Aug. 28 and whether she would be released anytime soon. Their ordeal offers a glimpse into the attempts of thousands of families to find loved ones who were detained in the crackdown following the disputed June 12 presidential election.

Often without lawyers, an accountable system or rule of law, families are forced to handle the nightmare of a complicated legal bureaucracy on their own. They very rarely have any information about the whereabouts, health or conditions of their loved ones. And the prisoners themselves are denied medical care and legal representation and do not even know on what charges they have been arrested.

Fariba Pajooch's lawyer Nemat Ahmadi has not yet seen his client. Ahmadi was out of town when Fariba was arrested. When he returned a week later, there was not much he could do.

"If there was at least a trusted intermediary, such as a lawyer, who would assure us that Fariba is okay, would tell us not to worry and that her case is taking its legal course, then we'd be fine. We wouldn't be in the dark," said Mrs. Pajooch, 45.

On Aug. 28 at 7:30 p.m., three officials from the Ministry of Intelligence came to Pajooch's home. They searched the house and half an hour later left with Fariba.

As soon as they left, Mrs. Pajooch, whose husband was out of town, ran to call Fariba's husband from a public phone lest her home phone was bugged. Then the four of them — her son-in-law, younger daughter and son - cried until 1 in the morning.

Friends advised her to keep calm, and to get word out to channels that were holding Fariba to show she had family looking for her. Fariba's husband went to see a conservative member of parliament for advice. The family got in touch with other friends and acquaintances, anyone they thought might have some influence.

Two days after the arrest, the family received first word from their daughter. Three women had seen Fariba brought to the Dadsara that morning. Fariba had told them she was in solitary confinement in Section 209 of the Evin Prison, controlled by the Intelligence Ministry.

She also allegedly said she was being pressured to confess to espionage and immoral behavior and that she had been threatened with execution if she refused. But her lawyer Ahmadi said there was no way to substantiate such a claim, and no charges had yet been leveled against Fariba.

Fariba, who wrote for reformist publications, including the newspaper of presidential reformist candidate Mahdi Karroubi, and translated for Western reporters, had traveled a few times abroad with government permission.

"They usually tag an immorality label on women as evidence of extramarital relationship," said Hamid Reza, a close relative of Fariba's.

"Things that are normally considered positive - being sociable and making friends easily — are used as negative traits against prisoners. Fariba is an extremely kind and friendly person. They claim to have listened on to her phone conversations as proof of her promiscuity. Maybe they want to frame someone else and destroy him and are using Fariba as a scapegoat," said the relative.

Lawyers advised Mrs. Pajooch to go to the Dadsara, where files of all political prisoners are kept, to pursue her daughter's case. She didn't go until four days after the arrest because she didn't know who to see.

Now when she enters the building, she shows her ID, is given a piece of paper and heads to the Security Office on the third floor.

"When you get there, the prosecutor that you have to see may not be there or might be in a meeting or very busy," said Mrs. Pajooch. "So you sit and wait."

"You're not treated bad, they only stall you," Mrs. Pajooch said. "They keep up appearances, so I can't say they're rude or insulted me or have thrown me out of the room. No. They speak to me with respect. They say hello and ask how I am, and even welcome me to the room. But in practice, it's futile going there; you don't get a clear answer."

Reza, Fariba's relative, said the officials at the Dadsara give false hope to families by telling them there's no need to follow up on the cases of their loved ones, and not to say anything to anyone.

Despite its futility, Mrs. Pajooch keeps going there.

"We have a system in Iran that whenever they tell you 'no', it actually means 'yes.' So you

have to go. Usually if you pursue something, persist in it and keep going — as long as you don't provoke him — it's effective," she explained. "Maybe if he sees I'm not giving up, he might look into her case... or at least he may not extend her detention."

Besides, when she goes to Dadsara she sees numerous other families who are going through the same ordeal. "We comfort each other," she said.

It wasn't until Sept. 7, 10 days after her arrest, that Fariba was allowed to call her family.

"I am good; don't worry about me,' was all she could say," said Mrs. Pajooch. When her sister told her that her mother had been crying nonstop since her arrest, Fariba burst into tears.

"I grabbed the phone and tried to calm her down. I told her not to dwell much on what's happening, that it'll pass and only the memory of it will stay," Mrs. Pajooch said.

Fariba asked her family to get word out to the world about her arrest.

She called again Sept. 13. She was crying again because she was missing her family. She told them she was still in solitary confinement.

Mrs. Pajooch tried to visit her daughter at Evin Prison, but was told those in solitary are not allowed to receive visitors.

"It's more than a month that our lives have turned upside down," said Mrs. Pajooch. "I can't do my work. The most I can do is sit in front of the computer and check the Web sites. Fariba's face comes in front of my eyes. Nothing is important to me anymore.

"When I look at the walls and the hills of Evin, I can't help but wonder that my child is behind those walls and under those hills," said Mrs. Pajooch. "We as parents are also captives."

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