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Iranian Protester Flees After Telling of Torture

By NAZILA FATHI

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When he eagerly joined the mass street protests that followed [Iran](#)'s tainted June 12 presidential elections, Ibrahim Sharifi, 24, hoped only to add his voice to the hundreds of thousands of demonstrators demanding that the government nullify the results. He never imagined that he would eventually have a far greater impact, as the only person willing to speak publicly about the brutal treatment he was subjected to in prison, including rape and torture.

Mr. Sharifi, who recounted his ordeal to the opposition leader and former presidential candidate [Mehdi Karroubi](#), and then released a [video account](#) last month on opposition Web sites, is now in Turkey. He said he fled Iran after a stranger stopped him on the street to tell him his family would be killed if he testified before a parliamentary committee that was investigating the torture and rape accusations.

"I felt that I was not safe anymore and I could put my family's life in danger, too," he said in a series of telephone interviews, in which he spoke in detail about the protests, his imprisonment and the psychological scars he said the abuse had left.

Since he was dumped by his captors on the side of a Tehran highway, he said, he has been terrified of being alone. First, he had trouble sleeping, fearing that the guard who raped him in prison would attack him again. Now he is convinced he is being followed by someone who means to kill him.

“I was ready to be tortured to death,” he said, his voice trembling. “But not ever to go through what happened to me there.”

Mr. Karroubi and another opposition leader and presidential candidate, [Mir Hussein Moussavi](#), have vigorously condemned the vicious tactics the security authorities used against the demonstrators, 72 of whom they say were killed. Yet, of all the allegations of brutality and abuse that were lodged, none have presented such a threat to the government as those involving rape and sodomy, which are culturally and religiously unacceptable in Iran.

The rape allegations were aired publicly by Mr. Karroubi after the victims began coming to his office to report the abuses. The allegations — which appeared to reinvigorate the battered opposition — were immediately rejected by the government, which then raided the offices of Mr. Karroubi and Mr. Moussavi and seized materials. Subsequently, a [judicial investigating committee](#) ruled that documents presented as evidence of rapes and other abuse were fabricated.

But the government has been unable to silence the opposition and human rights groups who dismiss the government’s claims.

Human rights groups say that Mr. Sharifi’s account conforms closely with those of other abuse victims. Omid Memarian, a researcher with [Human Rights Watch](#), said he had confirmed the credibility of Mr. Sharifi’s story with people close to Mr. Karroubi.

“His narrative is consistent,” Mr. Memarian said. “He has no reason to risk making up a story like that, especially because he also met with judiciary authorities and demanded a thorough investigation.”

Mr. Sharifi was one of five brothers raised in north Tehran in a middle class family that was religious but not fanatically so. His father, a retired military officer, was a supporter of the 1979 revolution and participated in the rallies against the shah. His mother wore the traditional head-to-toe chador.

At Open University in Tehran, Mr. Sharifi studied computer engineering, and Italian at the Italian Consulate, the latter in hopes of studying medicine in Italy.

Not overtly political, he said he wanted more democracy and freedom, but gradually and peacefully. "I always told my father that even the 1979 revolution was a mistake, and that my generation did not want one," he said.

He says everyone in his family favored the reform movement and were shocked when Mr. Ahmadinejad announced that he had won in a landslide victory, an outcome that has been denounced as a fraud.

Mr. Sharifi was outraged, and the only one in his family who began participating in rallies every day. He was on his way back home the afternoon of June 22 when he was grabbed by two men. "I had taken part in every single protest, so I saw this coming," he said.

He said he was handcuffed, blindfolded and, as he later learned, taken to the notorious Kahrizak detention center in southwestern Tehran, where even the government concedes that several detainees were killed.

He said he remained handcuffed and blindfolded for four days in a cramped cell with about 30 other prisoners.

They were beaten senseless the first day, he said, and periodically after that over the next four days. Urine and blood covered the floor.

By the fourth day he was beginning to lose hope of getting out alive. He had trouble closing his mouth and he said he began vomiting blood.

"I told the guard that he should go ahead and just kill me if he wanted to," he said, breaking into tears. "Then he called another guard and said 'Take this bastard and impregnate him.' "

They took him out of the cell to another room where they pushed him against a wall that had handcuffs and two metal hooks to keep his legs open. The guard pulled down his underwear, he said, and began raping him.

"He laughed mockingly as he was doing it and said that I could not even defend myself so how did I think that I could stage a revolution.

"They wanted to horrify and intimidate me," he said, weeping.

At that point, Mr. Sharifi said, he passed out. The next thing he remembered was opening his eyes and realizing he was in a hospital with one hand cuffed to his bed. Another young man was screaming hysterically on a bed next to him.

He said he heard a doctor tell someone, “Dump him or you’ll have the same problem as the other ones,” meaning that he would die in custody. Two days later, he said, they put him in a car, took him to a highway in Tehran and left him there, blindfolded.

He immediately went to a psychiatrist who put him on a heavy dose of anxiety medication. Then he went to a police station to file a complaint, but the officers advised him to be thankful that he was alive and to try to forget about it.

In time, he decided to go see Mr. Karroubi, having heard that other victims of rape and torture were doing so. At first he spoke only about the torture; the rape was too painful and embarrassing to talk about.

But Mr. Karroubi pressed him, suspecting that he had been sexually assaulted because he began weeping and shaking every time he was asked about his last day in prison. Finally, Mr. Sharifi told him.

Even after his shattering ordeal, Mr. Sharifi, who hopes eventually to get to the United States, refuses to be intimidated.

“I think they are following me to kill me,” he said. “But I will not let them force me into silence.”