

Iranian Prisoner's Faith Outlasts Persecution

It was early in the morning the day after Christmas. It was cold. Mehdi Forootan sat in the back seat of an undercover police car in front of his house in Tehran, Iran. He was barely awake. An officer pointed a camcorder at him.

The officer had recorded the entire police raid on his house, where he and three other officers claiming to be from the anti-narcotics squad confiscated Forootan's books, computers and other important documents.

Forootan, 33, wasn't afraid; he was not guilty of anything. He had heard of Christian friends being arrested and released, and he thought he could manage being in prison as they had. The officers said they wanted to ask him some questions and that they would return him home in a few hours. Forootan thought he might make it back in time for the Christmas sermon he had prepared for a group of Iranian believers who were going to meet in a home that evening. The camera was still on him.

"Do you know why you were arrested?" the officer behind the camcorder asked him calmly.

"No," Forootan said dryly.

"I'll ask you a second time," said the officer with the camera. "Do you know why we took you?"

"No!" Forootan replied. "Why don't you tell me why you are taking me?"

The officer turned off the camera and looked Forootan in the eyes.

"I can beat you until blood is coming out of your mouth and

every part of you. The next time I turn on the camera, you tell me why we are taking you," the officer said and turned the camera back on.

"Ok, I guess you arrested me for Christianity and my faith in Jesus Christ," Forootan said.

The officer turned off the camera and asked: "Do you want to come back to Islam?"

"No," Forootan said.

"We want to take you to a bad place," the officer said. "Do you know anything about Evin?"

Forootan's heart sank at the mention of the ill-famed prison, though he tried not to show it. "Yes, I know."

On Dec. 26, authorities arrested Forootan in a wave of persecution against Iran's underground church movement. It is estimated that Iranian authorities arrested over 120 Christians in a two-month period. Most of them were released within days, but Forootan was among a small group who were not. Without explanation, authorities freed him on April 9.

Farshid Fathi was arrested on the same day as Forootan and is still in prison. There has been no news on Noorollah Ghabitizadeh, who was arrested Dec. 24 in Khuzestan. Abraham Firouzi, arrested Jan. 8 in in Robat Karim, and Masoud Delijani, arrested March 17 in Kermanshah, were released in recent months. The condition and whereabouts of Mostafa Zangooyee, a university student who was arrested on June 30, are not known.

Solitary Confinement

Forootan couldn't believe his ears – the car was headed to the harshest prison in Iran. There was no telling what could happen there, or when he could return home.

At Evin Prison, authorities ordered him to change into a blue

uniform and took pictures of him from the front, left and right. Forootan felt like a murderer, he told Compass. Authorities took him down a long corridor of single occupancy cells and showed him his: two meters wide, three meters long.

There was no bed, no chair, no table – only a thin blanket, a small toilet and a metallic washing basin. There was a Quran and a Muslim prayer book on the windowsill.

“Settle in and relax,” the prison guard told him. “You’ll be here a long time.”

Forootan spent the first of many nights sleeping on the bare, cold floor. In the morning a prison guard took him out of his cell and left him in the corridor for a few minutes.

“Pst, pst, Mehdi!” Forootan heard familiar voices behind him. Farshid Fathi, Rasool Abdolahi, Mohammad Zardouz and other Christian friends were in cells along his corridor. They had all been arrested the same morning as he was.

“Farshid, why are you here?” Forootan asked.

“In the early morning they arrested us,” said Fathi. “Don’t worry, in a week we’ll be free!”

Of those arrested last Christmas, Fathi and one other are the only Christians still in prison. With the benefit of hindsight, Forootan chuckled ironically to think of how long he and his friends spent in one of Iran’s most notorious prisons for the crime of being a Christian. There were dark circles under his eyes, and though being in prison with friends was a consolation, his time there made his voice break as he spoke.

He sat on a simple Turkish carpet in his rented house in southeastern Turkey where, like so many Iranian Christians, he had fled in hopes for a better future.

Forootan said Evin interrogation authorities brought him to a

separate room to ask him endless questions. They blindfolded him. Who did he work for? Why did he visit Afghanistan, Turkey and Armenia? Was he a Christian? They accused him of being a spy, a mason and a friend of Israel.

"They told me that if I told them everything, I could be free in two to three weeks," Forootan said. "When I heard 'two to three weeks,' I understood this was a bad situation and we would be there for a long time."

His interrogators told him he was charged with threatening national security because of his evangelization activities and his work with a Christian ministry.

There were always two officers in his interrogations: One was rough and threatened to kill him or keep him in prison forever. The other was reassuring and promised him help if he told all. The interrogations would sometimes take place every three days. Sometimes they would leave him alone for 10 days without questions.

"They are playing with your mind," Forootan said. "It is a very bad situation when you are alone and you can never do anything. I would start praying, and after some time I would be really sad. 'God, please get me out of this situation, I want to speak to people.'"

In his solitary cell he once heard the sound of a soccer match playing on the guards' television down the hall. The commentator's voice shouted "Goal!" and Forootan got excited.

"I understood there was a football game going and I love football, so I started to listen to the game," he said.

Finally Forootan could no longer contain himself, and he pounded on his door to get the authorities' attention. A gruff prison guard appeared.

"What?" he barked.

“Could you please turn up the volume?” Forootan asked shyly, “because I want to hear the match!”

“Shut up!” the guard said, marched back to the TV and turned it off.

‘We Can Do Anything We Want’

One morning while he was in his cell, he heard someone call him. Forootan looked out the little window on his door and saw Fathi in handcuffs, blindfolded. He was on his way to an interrogation, but the guard had left him for a moment alone in the corridor.

“Mehdi, don’t worry!” Fathi said, “We’ll get out of here soon!”

Forootan responded and the two laughed together, then Forootan saw the guard angrily walking back to Fathi. The guard pushed Fathi and kicked him on the floor, telling him that he would shave his head as punishment.

A few days later, during visitation hours when prisoners can talk to relatives from behind a glass pane, Forootan saw Fathi in passing. Fathi’s head was shaved. He looked tired.

“I think he was tired because he misses his children,” said Forootan, “it’s hard for him.”

He said authorities probably kept Fathi incarcerated to make an example of him.

“They keep Farshid because they want the people to be afraid about this situation,” Forootan said. “And they are really afraid of cell groups in Iran. They say, ‘If you are Christian you can go to a [church] building,’ so they can monitor what churches do.”

Forootan didn’t respond to his interrogators until three weeks into his imprisonment, when a police officer walked into the interrogation room with a stack of documents from a friend’s

laptop.

"If you continue to be silent, we can keep you in prison for two, three, four years," the officer said. "You won't have a lawyer. We can do anything we want."

That day Forootan wrote his first statement, one of many about his life as a Christian leader in Iran—trying to guess what his interrogators already suspected about him and his activities as a cell group leader in Iran.

Every time he wrote statements, he said he made sure to write from one edge of the paper to the next, careful not to leave any blank space. He scribbled in the blank spots of his paper so that authorities could not alter or add to his statement.

During one interrogation, an officer turned on a camcorder and pointed it toward him.

"Tell us about your crime!" he said, ordering Forootan to speak into the camera.

"I started to tell them how, when I was a teenager, I struggled with substance abuse and how when I was in university I found Jesus and He saved me, and I have been free ever since," Forootan said. "But he became angry and turned off the camera. He said: 'I asked you to tell about your crime, not evangelize us.'"

Long Path to Freedom

Forootan was tired of the questions, prison and solitary confinement. He missed his family and his fiancée's voice, he said.

That is when he remembered the biblical character David, and how in the book of Samuel he acted crazy to get out of a precarious situation.

"Because I was alone and I wanted to get out of the situation," said Forootan, "I started to act like a mad

person. I said, 'I'm ill, I want to get out of here.'"

Forootan said he did not expect that authorities would prescribe him psychiatric medication for pretending to be ill. They gave him three pills that made him want to sleep, he said, and he told authorities that he was feeling better and didn't want to take the medication anymore. They force-fed the pills to him for the remainder of his detention.

After 38 days of solitary confinement, around the time he was prescribed the psychiatric medication, his prayer was answered to move from solitary confinement to a group cell, he said. Forootan later learned that his friend Fathi spent 50 days in solitary confinement.

For the next two months, Forootan shared a cell with about 30 other inmates. Some of them were Baha'i, some from Al Qaeda and some from political groups like the Green Movement that protested Iran's elections in 2009 and demanded President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad step down.

"When I said I'm a Christian and I came out of Islam, they were really angry," Forootan said of the Al Qaeda members in his prison cell. "A friend in prison told me be careful, 'These people want to kill you!' He was from the Green Movement. After a week I started to speak about the Bible with them. I asked them why they kill people with bombs and guns. Is this really Islam? They started to talk about Quran, and I started to talk about Bible, and we became friends after a week ... Because we all have one enemy in prison: the Islamic Republic of Iran."

On April 9, the heavy door of Evin Prison opened and Forootan stood inside, looking out the entrance. If they were releasing him, he did not know why. He squinted at the sun.

He had been in prison for 105 days. As he stood there, he thought that perhaps he might soon find himself back in his prison cell, as had happened to his friend Fathi. A few weeks

prior, he had heard from a fellow inmate in his group cell that authorities had played a cruel joke on Fathi. As the rumor went, authorities told Fathi he could put his clothes on and took him to the prison door. They told him he was free. Then the guard stopped him and told him he had to take him back to his cell.

"This is a game, and after this Farshid [Fathi] was really crushed," Forootan said, having seen him in passing during the weekly visitations.

At the prison door, Forootan prayed as his head raced. He suspected it was a cruel ruse to break him, too. He waited at the door for three minutes expecting someone to call him back to his cell.

"I thought they were lying to me," he said. "When they pushed me out the door, and I saw the sun and the free space, I started to run."

Forootan ran for 30 minutes – to the nearest soccer stadium, where he bought a ticket for a match. He said the best thing for him was to be in a crowd. When the game was over, he called some friends, who picked him up and brought him home, "because for 105 days I hadn't walked, and my feet were weak," Forootan said.

For the next five days Forootan couldn't sleep. His body had developed a dependence on the medication authorities had given him, he said, and he was overcome by fear and paranoia. He thought authorities were listening to his phone, monitoring him through his computer.

"My eyes were wide open," he said. "I went to a Christian doctor, who told me that whatever they gave me in prison was like a drug, and I needed to be strong because it was a really hard situation."

In a few weeks, he said his body recovered from his experience

in prison and the substances authorities forced him to take.

Forootan said his first month out of prison was one of the worst of his life. He couldn't speak to anyone of his prison experience for fear that authorities were watching and would re-arrest him. His parents had given the deed of their house to authorities as bail.

He and his fiancée decided it was best for him to leave Iran and go to Turkey as a refugee. For Forootan, this meant an illegal escape through the mountains, because authorities had confiscated his passport.

"I came out of Iran with 70 Afghanis," Forootan said. "I went to the mountains and walked in the mountains for eight hours, and after eight hours I came to Turkey...That was really hard, because I really love Iran, and I'm really sad about this land. Maybe I can't see my country again."

When Forootan arrived in Turkey, he and his fiancée, also a convert to Christianity, got married. They found a house and were together for two months before she had to return to Norway, where she had been granted asylum.

In southeast Turkey for three months, Forootan said the only thing more difficult than leaving his parents in Iran was not knowing what his future held. He said he hopes he can join his wife in Norway one day and finally start a Christian family of his own in freedom. For now, as he seeks refugee status in Turkey, he said he feels stateless.

"I miss Iran," Forootan said. "I read in the Bible once about how the Jewish people were banished in Babylon; it says there that when my child is born in the banished land, then I will feel this is my land. When my child is born in Norway, I can say that is my land."