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Iranian-American Faces New Spying Charge

By NAZILA FATHI
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An Iranian-American scholar, Kian Tajbakhsh, already serving a 15-year prison sentence for spying, is facing a new charge of spying, a family member said Wednesday.

Mr. Tajbakhsh told his wife during a visit at Evin prison in Tehran that he was taken before the Revolutionary Court on Monday, where a judge read new charges against him of “spying for the George Soros foundation,” a reference to the Open Society Institute, a pro-democracy group founded by Mr. Soros, a prominent financier and philanthropist. The accusation was brought by the intelligence section of the Revolutionary Guards, said the family member, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of complicating the case.

Mr. Tajbakhsh, an urban planner with a doctorate from Columbia University, was arrested in June after protests broke out over that month’s disputed presidential election, which the opposition says was fraudulent.

He was sentenced in October to 15 years for working as a consultant for the Open Society Institute, which the indictment identified as an adjunct of the C.I.A. He was also charged with

belonging to the Gulf/2000 Project, an e-mail list of scholars, journalists, diplomats and businessmen with interests in the Persian Gulf region. Tehran has accused the Open Society Institute of trying to stage a “velvet revolution” in Iran along the lines of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia.

Mr. Tajbakhsh, who immediately appealed the sentence, was transferred to solitary confinement and remains there, losing weight and suffering under “huge psychological and physical pressure,” according to the family member.

He told the court on Monday that he had already denied the spying charge in the previous court, which nevertheless imposed the 15-year sentence. Mr. Tajbakhsh’s wife, Bahar Malek, was alarmed to hear in court that the judge in the new case said he had inquired about Mr. Tajbakhsh’s defense in the previous court and would rule based on that, the family member said.

Adding to the family’s concerns about the new spying charge is the recent case of a Kurdish activist, Ehsan Fattahian. He had been serving a 10-year sentence for “armed struggle” against the government but was executed on Nov. 12 after a prosecutor went back to the court and demanded a tougher penalty.

Human rights groups have said that Iran, among the world’s leaders in capital punishment, has stepped up the pace of executions since the protests last summer, part of what critics call an effort to intimidate the opposition. Planning is now under way for major demonstrations on Dec. 7, the national Student Day, and opposition members fear the government may want to make an example of Mr. Tajbakhsh or perhaps others among the more than dozen student leaders arrested in past weeks.

“Bringing new charges against Tajbakhsh is quite worrisome and could signal a harsher sentence by the appeals court,” said Hadi Ghaemi, the director for International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. “An increase in punishment at the appeals stage is patently against Iranian law, but what we are witnessing are political trials without any semblance of justice or due process.”