On Campus

Iran Jails Columbia Urban Planning Scholar Kian Tajbakhsh

Winter 2009-10

Iran has imprisoned urban planning scholar Kian Tajbakhsh as an enemy of the state.

Tajbakhsh ’93GSAPP, who was scheduled to begin teaching at Columbia’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) this past semester, was arrested in Tehran on July 9, in the wake of that country’s election protests. He was among several Western-educated scholars then indicted in a mass trial of more than 110 defendants. Iranian authorities found Tajbakhsh guilty of numerous security offenses, including espionage, and on October 20 they sentenced him to 15 years in prison. In early December, as *Columbia* was going to press, news reports indicated that Iran would level more spying charges against Tajbakhsh, who has denied all of the charges.

Cited as evidence against Tajbakhsh in his trial was his involvement in George Soros’s Open Society Institute and his subscribing to a mailing list of Gary Sick, a Columbia professor of international relations who studies U.S.-Iranian relations. Iranian officials claim that Sick is a CIA operative. Sick, who says he never worked for the CIA, has written that the charges against Tajbakhsh are “political fabrications devoid of even the flimsiest effort to verify the truth.”

The Scholars at Risk Network, which includes academics at 220 universities, has released a statement saying that Tajbakhsh’s arrest “suggests a wider attempt to intimidate intellectuals and to limit academic freedom in Iran.”

Tajbakhsh, who has dual Iranian-U.S. citizenship, is an expert on the evolution of cities. He taught at the New School for Social Research from 1994 to 2001 and wrote two books, *The Promise of the City: Space, Identity, and Politics in Contemporary Social Thought* and *Social Capital: Trust, Democracy and Development*.

U.S. State Department spokesman Ian Kelly ’86GSAS has urged Tehran to release Tajbakhsh. Several letter-writing campaigns are under way and a Web site, FreeKian09.org, has been created, featuring statements from the rock icon Sting, Gary Sick, and Mark Wigley, dean of GSAPP, and others.

Wigley recently hired Tajbakhsh as an associate professor at GSAPP. “He’s right in the middle of an international debate among scholars about the history, present, and future of our cities,” says Wigley in a video post on FreeKian09.org. “His specialty area is the way that civic leaders can best provide services for the local residents. . . . I was thrilled that over the course of the last year I was able to successfully recruit him back to Columbia University to be a member of our faculty. It is extremely painful to see him arrested and imprisoned.”



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