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Canada should stand up for Iranian heroes

It is time to be clear: further atrocities will be met with legal action

By Payam Akhavan, McGill University June 26, 2009

June 15, 2009, marks a turning point in the history of Iran.

That was the day fraudulent elections propelled millions of outraged citizens on to the streets of Tehran and other cities in an unprecedented display of people power that has been an inspiration to the world.

Against this democratic tidal wave, there will ultimately be no going back to the authoritarian past. In a final attempt to hold on to power at all costs however, Iran's hardline leaders have unleashed horrific violence on protesters. The authorities increasingly have been faced with the stark choice: either agree to the protesters' demands for genuine democracy, or eliminate them through large-scale savage beatings, killings, arrests, torture, and disappearances.

There is increasing fear that this campaign of repression will escalate into mass executions and torture of the reformist leaders.

To prevent this outcome, the international community - Canada included - must stand in solidarity with the Iranian people by clearly signaling that those responsible for human-rights abuses will be brought to justice.

At the outset, the protests in Iran were remarkably peaceful. Millions walked silently through the streets in an exemplary demonstration of non-violent resistance. They included in their ranks not only supporters of presidential candidate Mir-Hussein Mousavi, but also a broad cross-section of civil society including students, women and labour movements, as well as ordinary men and women hoping for a better future. The violent repression of this grassroots democratic movement has not been about restoring law and order against "hooligans" and "terrorists" as the hardliners claim. It has been and continues to be above all an act of self-preservation by those who have no compunction about murdering and torturing thousands in order to maintain their grip on power.

With most journalists now banned from Iran, it is difficult to gauge the extent of the atrocities being committed. Internet-savvy youth at the forefront of the demonstrations have been the primary source of information as they bypass media restrictions by relaying information through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other social media sites.

These sources point to a disturbing pattern of systematic state-imposed terror through beatings, murders, torture, imprisonment, and disappearances of thousands of protesters. The snipers of the notorious Basij militia have killed scores of innocent civilians and the violent repression of protests this Wednesday was further evidence that the regime will use all means to crush dissent. One YouTube posting captures the shooting of a girl named Neda whose weeping father is forced to see her bleed to death before his eyes. This is but one snapshot of the outrages unfolding throughout Iran. Thousands are being arrested and taken to undisclosed locations or simply disappeared. Many of the reformist leaders are apparently being tortured to confess on state-run television that the protests are part of a supposed “American-British-Zionist” conspiracy consistent with Iranian government propaganda. These interrogations are taking place under the notorious Prosecutor-General of Tehran, Saeed Mortazavi, who is also implicated in the torture and murder of Canadian-Iranian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi. One source indicates that the Basij coerced doctors at a hospital to sign the death certificates of injured demonstrators. Many have been taken away to unknown locations.

Even if the Iranian authorities manage to terrorize the population into stopping the street protests through massive and brutal violence, there should be no illusion that the movement for democracy and justice can be stopped. Through their exemplary heroism, the Iranian youth have sacrificed their lives for freedom and given their people a glimpse of a better future. They have redeemed their nation's honour and rebuked the myth that fundamentalist hate-mongers speak on their behalf. Remarkably, several Revolutionary Guards have been arrested for refusing to obey orders to shoot demonstrators. Against this onslaught of violence, a new Iran is being born.

The least the world community can do is to express its solidarity by making it unequivocal to Iran's leadership that those responsible for this month's mass atrocities will one day be brought to justice.

In international law, large-scale atrocities committed as part of state policy constitute crimes against humanity. Iranian leaders ordering, instigating, or acquiescing in such acts are individually responsible. As with President Solobodan Milosevic in Yugoslavia or President Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, the United Nations must send the message that crimes against humanity will not go unpunished.

The Canadian government has always been at the forefront of General Assembly resolutions condemning Iran's human-rights record. At this critical juncture, in order to prevent the further escalation of atrocities into mass-killings and systematic torture, Canada, acting in concert with like-minded nations, should deliver a clear message to Iran: any continued escalation of violence may result in a referral of Iranian leaders to the International Criminal Court by the United Nations Security Council. This warning should at least serve as a limited measure of deterrence should some hardliners be tempted to pursue a “final solution” through extreme violence against protesters and dissidents.

The world has been watching during these remarkable few days. It must not avert its gaze just as the worst crimes may be about to transpire.

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