

The West must stand by Iranian protesters

By Payam Akhavan, The Ottawa Citizen June 30, 2009

June 15, 2009, will be remembered as a turning point in the struggle for democracy in Iran, when millions of outraged citizens poured onto the streets of Tehran and other cities to protest fraudulent elections and express frustration at years of repression and national decline.

The ferocity with which the hardliners have crushed this movement shows the struggle for freedom will be long and hard. The prospect of mass executions now looms over these heroic protesters and the world must stand with them to prevent further atrocities.

The unprecedented display of people power has inspired the world and irreparably shattered the myth that Iran's political leadership is somehow divinely ordained and invincible. In the aftermath of this political earthquake, the authoritarian ways of the past cannot continue indefinitely. At the very least, the immediate future will bring factional struggles within what was once the unified inner circle of the Islamic Republic. Ultimately, the prevalence of a democratic culture among the masses will erode the power base that sustained the leadership.

Notwithstanding this cautious optimism, the hardliners' attempt to hold on to power at all costs is a cause for alarm. Authorities have already demonstrated their capacity for repression of peaceful protests through savage beatings, killings, arrests, torture and disappearances. Recent signs suggest the worst is yet to come.

In a sermon on June 26, a senior cleric -- Ayatollah Ahmed Khatami -- called for the thousands of protesters who have been arrested to be punished "without mercy" branding them as "enemies of God." Not mincing words, he stated: "Anyone who takes up arms to fight with the people, they are worthy of execution." That his statements were broadcast on state-controlled television is an ominous sign that the hardliners are preparing the way for mass executions.

According to Amnesty International, Iran executed more people than any other country except China last year, when at least 346 people were put to death. This was at a time when there was no fundamental challenge to the power of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The government has now established special clergy-dominated courts to

prosecute the protest leaders in trials without any due process whatsoever. Given the far-reaching challenge to the hardliners' power, some are tempted to exterminate the opposition leadership once and for all -- reminiscent of the execution of tens of thousands in the early revolutionary years of the 1980s -- to drive home the message to the Iranian people that the cost of dissent will be very high.

The international community must send a similarly clear message to the Islamic Republic: that any executions will have far-reaching consequences for Iran's international standing. Failure to do so would be interpreted as an invitation to slaughter.

At the outset, the protests in Iran were remarkably peaceful. Millions walked silently in an exemplary demonstration of non-violent resistance. They included not only supporters of presidential candidate Mir-Hussein Mousavi, but also a broad cross-section of society including students, women and labour movements, as well as ordinary citizens 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" and "foreign agents" as the hardliners claim. It has been and continues to be an act of self-preservation by those who have no compunction about murdering and torturing thousands to maintain their grip on power.

Since the hardliners cannot openly declare the people of Iran as their enemies, they are desperate to portray calls for democracy as a foreign plot to undermine national sovereignty while simultaneously instilling terror among the public. Through their heroism, however, the Iranian youth who have sacrificed their lives for freedom have 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. Against the onslaught of violence by the old guard, a new Iran is being born.

The least the world can do is to show its solidarity by making it clear to Iran's leadership that those responsible for this month's mass atrocities will pay a price.

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 Slobodan 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, to prevent the further escalation of atrocities, Canada, acting with like-minded nations, should deliver a clear message: continued escalation of violence will result in severing of diplomatic ties and even result in a referral of Iranian leaders to the International Criminal Court by the United Nations Security Council. The time to deliver such a message is now, before mass executions begin, as the hardliners contemplate whether to pursue a "final solution" to their "democratic problem."

In this "Twitter revolution," the world has seen gripping and unforgettable scenes of courage in the face of appalling violence. We must not forget these young heroes now that their torture and possible execution might be hidden from our eyes.

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