

Brutality Still Reigns in Iran

By Ladan Boroumand

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When a doctor examined Zahra Kazemi, he found, according to his medical report, "Bruises from forehead to ear," "Skull fracture," "Two broken ingers," "Broken and missing fingernails," "Severe abdominal bruising" and "Evidence of very brutal rape." Iranian security agents had arrested Kazemi in June 2003. Her crime: photographing a demonstration outside Tehran's Evin prison.

One year later, Atefeh Rajabi, 16, was sentenced to death and hanged. Her crime: an "act incompatible with chastity." Last month a cleric in the security forces gunned down a 20-year-old man in a train station because he had verbally teased two young women.

These cases are typical of the Iranian regime's brutality. More than ever, Iran's human rights situation needs the scrutiny of the outside world -- particularly in the context of today's presidential election there. In fact, three of the presidential candidates could be prosecuted for involvement in the assassination of Iranian dissidents inside and outside Iran. While the election has been designed to appeal to the Western media -- even many of the posters have been deliberately printed in English instead of Farsi -- for most Iranians, many of whom have advocated a boycott, they are an occasion for reminding the country's leadership of the disastrous human rights situation.

On Sunday several thousand women gathered in front of Tehran University to ask for an end to gender apartheid. Political prisoners have gone on hunger strikes to protest their illegal detention, and their action is supported by others gathered outside the notorious Evin prison.

Pro-democracy activists take risks while campaigning for a boycott of today's election. Authorities, worried about a low voter turnout, accuse activists of threatening state security, and they continue to harass and prosecute the students who called for a boycott of the last parliamentary elections.

Those rare Iranians who are able to attract outside attention to their cases fare better than others. The government recently dropped its case against an Iranian Christian persecuted for his religion because a worldwide campaign drew attention to his fate. During the man's trial, the judge told him, "I don't know who you are, but apparently the rest of the world does. You must be an important person, because many people from the government have called me, saying to cancel your case."

Despite evidence of increasing human rights abuse, and the fact that the government cares about how such abuse is viewed by the outside world and by Iranians, Western pressure on the Iranian regime has weakened recently. Western representatives in Geneva decided, for example, not to call for a "special rapporteur" on human rights in Iran during the last meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights.

Officially, the reasoning was pragmatic: One U.S. diplomat explained that a rapporteur would get nowhere in Iran, since Iranian authorities would deny him a visa. But human rights activists in Geneva believe that the reluctance to investigate may be motivated by a desire to mute criticism of Iran while nuclear talks continue.

That approach is wrong. Special rapporteurs, even when denied access to the country, are important, probably more so than the human rights commission itself. These jurists spend a year researching and monitoring human rights in their subject countries. Dispassionate and careful, they publicize their findings. And nothing is more embarrassing, or more politically charged in Iran right now, than neutral information about abuse, not least because it forces Iranian officials to respond. Former political prisoners remember the hasty building of a wall within the precinct of the prison just before the first visit of a U.N. special rapporteur: The real prisoners were hidden behind the wall while actors were introduced to the visitor.

Over time, Iranian diplomats, who face international challenges, put pressure on the government to address the issue. Confronted with their own shameful image, reflected in the eyes of the world community, even the worst perpetrators change. More important, by responding to the inquiries of the United Nations and others, they pay implicit homage to human rights values and force Iran's officials to question their own system's ethics.

By failing to take a firm stand in favor of human rights, Europe and the United States are offering a cheap victory to an ideological enemy. Ironically this victory could well keep the Islamic Republic convinced of its moral righteousness and its "democratic" principles – and ultimately help it to pursue its long-established goal of acquiring nuclear weapons.

The writer is a historian and co-founder of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation for the Promotion of Human Rights and Democracy in Iran. She is working on a study of the Iranian revolution.

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