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The Meaning of Coerced Confessions in the Tehran Show Trials

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Ladan Boroumand on the Tehran Show Trials

[Ladan Boroumand](#) ■ August 18, 2009

FOR THOSE of us who are familiar with the thirty-year pattern of human rights violations and assaults upon due process in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), the recent travesty on display in Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary Court came as no surprise. Tortured defendants falsely confessing to treasonous congress with hostile Western governments have been trotted out by IRI legal and intelligence authorities before.* No matter what administration rules in the United States or in any other Western democracy, no matter what policy options are on the table with regard to Iran, we've seen this movie before. In a clumsy remake of an old-time Stalinist show trial, a pale and underfed individual with a distraught gaze recites more or less convincingly a story whose plot is ever the same: A self-told tale of (highly improbable) contacts with American or Israeli agents is put forward as "evidence" of the hapless defendant's nefarious desire to topple the Islamic Republic.

This treatment is not reserved for oppositionists alone. On the contrary, prosecutors have administered it liberally over the years to former mid- or even high-ranking regime cadres who made the mistake of daring to question some higher-up's wisdom or claim to command. On April 23, 1982, for instance, the confession of former IRI foreign minister and broadcasting chief Sadeq Ghotbzadeh aired on Iranian state television. He accused himself of plotting a military coup against Ayatollah Khomeini, an alleged crime for which he would be shot that September. A few days later, the highest-ranking Shi'a ayatollah, Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari, was given a text to read on television "proving" his connivance with Ghotbzadeh. Shariatmadari's real "crime" was his disapproval of political rule by the clergy, but the trumped-up confession gave the IRI the legal fig leaf that it needed to silence the ayatollah and keep him under house arrest until his death in 1986.

The manner in which Ghotbzadeh was railroaded to the firing squad was not a one-off, but part of a trend that had started in the summer of 1981. The eighties would see coerced confessions by opponents become such a customary practice that in Mehdi Bazargan's last speech as an MP, the former premier (and the elder statesman whom Khomeini had named to head the first post-revolutionary provisional government) warned that with his parliamentary immunity gone, he might be arrested and appear on TV screens saying things that were the opposite of his own well-known and long-held views. "If you hear this person repeating things like a parrot," he plaintively begged his fellow citizens, "know that such a person is not Mehdi Bazargan."

When communism fell and Eastern Europe democratized two decades ago, Tehran turned its paranoid gaze on the prospect of ideological subversion that will lead to peaceful transition. The tools for bringing such transitions about are not guns and ammunition or clandestine political cells, but nongovernmental organizations, civil society groups, and global solidarity networks. Writers daring to demand freedom of expression, dissidents bold enough to criticize official repression, clerics promoting the separation of mosque and state, or student leaders calling for the rule of law and freedom of association—all figured among the scores of victims who in the nineties and the decade now ending were forced to publicly confess their pro-Western leanings and dealings with international NGOs.

When 2009 presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mussavi, who had been premier for most of the eighties, recently deplored how the "crushed people" (his followers) in that Tehran courtroom "would have confessed to anything that they were coerced to say," the conservative Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani could not resist asking Mussavi to recount "how the situation was when he was in government." Larijani went on to suggest that Mussavi "should tell us how many confessions were televised during his premiership," and "on what occasions he protested against them."

Coercing dissidents to confess complicity in imaginary Western plots is not some accidental abuse. Instead, it flows directly from the very nature of the Islamic regime and its inherent hostility to liberal-democratic nations. Belligerent or friendly, critical or cynical of human rights, focused on doing business or pressing economic sanctions—whatever stance toward Iran the liberal democracies have adopted—the IRI's rulers have for three decades seen these countries as unrelenting nests of conspiracy dedicated to destroying the Islamic regime.

Why do the authorities in Tehran take this view? We may find an answer in the recent confession of Kian Tajbakhsh, an Iranian-American scholar and civil-society activist who was first arrested in 2007 and then rearrested during this summer's postelection unrest. Tajbakhsh, who worked as a consultant for the Open Society Institute, was forced to confess for the second time and to repent his supposed complicity in efforts to organize a velvet revolution in Iran. In his latest confession, Tajbakhsh tried to explain why the reformists who supported Mussavi became mixed up with Western outfits such as OSI, and in doing so touched on a profound insight. The entanglement, he said, "is rooted in [Reformists'] lack of understanding of the antinomy between liberal democracy and religious democracy." The torturers who put these words in Tajbakhsh's mouth have an acute understanding of the situation, for they know exactly what "religious" democracy means and why it is and must always be essentially at odds with liberal democracy.

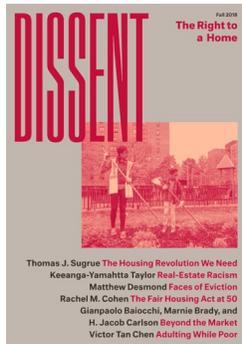
In both species of regime, the people have a role to play. In a liberal democracy, government institutions spring from the popular will, and all individuals are equal when it comes to dignity and rights. In a religious democracy, by contrast, the state putatively embodies an objective truth that emanates not from the general will of the people, but rather from God's command. The people are not sovereign; only God, represented on earth by the supreme leader, is sovereign. The act of voting therefore does not have the same meaning as in liberal democracy. When people vote in a religious democracy, they don't exert their will but rather acknowledge the absolute truth embodied by their government. And if they go astray in their acknowledgment, the government makes sure that such election results are reported in harmony with the ideological tenets of the regime. That is exactly what happened in Iran this past June. During the campaign, Mussavi deviated from orthodoxy (despite having been vetted and allowed to run by the ruling elite), and the electorate made the

wrong choice by going with him over incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

With this in mind, we can understand why the very existence of liberal democracies (meaning above all the wealthy and influential democracies of the West) makes for a kind of standing conspiracy against a religious democracy such as the IRI. For if religious democracy is founded on truth absolute and exclusive, then any other form of government must by definition rest on lies and corruption. Not primarily by their policies, but rather by their very existence do liberal democracies belie the founding principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran. And if Iranian citizens begin to petition their government to respect their universal human rights, then those citizens become *ipso facto* ideological agents and accomplices of Western democracies. They are carriers of cultural corruption and puppets or knowing helpers of the West. Their exposure and exclusion are exactly what the Tehran show trials of August 2009 are trying to enact. That Stalin and not God is the author of the script seems not to bother the prosecutors. But we should be clear about whose signature lies at the bottom of the page.

*See "Coerced Confessions in the Islamic Republic of Iran," 15 August 2007; available at www.iranrights.org/english/newsletter-1.php.

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