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Iran's Election Promises: Slaughter, Imprisonment, Torture, and Oppression

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While the world is understandably preoccupied with the slaughter of innocents in Syria -- and when addressing Iran is concerned primarily with its nuclear threat -- a massive domestic repression has been passing quietly under the international radar screen, and will have a prejudicial impact upon the Iranian parliamentary elections today.

Simply put, we have been witnessing a state-sanctioned assault on the human rights of the Iranian people -- the imprisonment and silencing of all opposition in the run-up to the Iranian election today that are constitutive of crimes against humanity. There have been arrests, beatings, torture, detentions, kidnappings, disappearances, and executions -- indeed, an execution binge even by Iran's wanton standards: A place with already with the highest rate of executions in the world has executed more than 60 people in January 2012 alone.

And more: We have been witness to the imprisonment of the entire Baha'i leadership, as well as the exclusion of, and discrimination against, religious and ethnic minorities generally; the imprisonment and silencing of more journalists, bloggers, and filmmakers than any other country; the persistent and pervasive assaults on the women's rights movement and the imprisonment of its leaders; the criminalization of fundamental freedoms of speech, association, and assembly; assaults on filmmakers, artists, and culture generally; and the shutting down of all independent civic organizations.

In particular, in the last several months -- and in the run-up to today's Parliamentary elections -- we have seen the quarantine of opposition leaders, human rights defenders, journalists and bloggers, civil society leadership, as well as the lawyers who would defend them.

The criminalization of any opposition or dissent has made a mockery of any notion of free and democratic elections. In effect, the Iranian Parliamentary election is one in which the opposition speaks and acts at its peril.

Moreover, the massive repression has had a distinct Canadian connection, often targeting leading Canadian/Iranian cyber dissidents. For example, Saeed Malekpour, a 36-year-old web designer, was [arrested](#) on trumped-up charges related to the posting of pornographic material on the Internet, was tortured in detention, and was forced to make a televised "confession," sentenced to death, and is now under imminent threat of execution. According to Malekpour's family, the death sentence was at the urging of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which the Iranian Human Rights Documentation Center at Yale University has noted is responsible for the murder of Iranian dissidents both inside and outside of Iran.

Similarly, Vahid Asghari, a blogger who hosted websites critical of the government, was [sentenced to death](#) on January 6, 2012 after conviction for "corruption on earth" for allegedly organizing a "pornographic" network against Islam and the state. In October 2009, he said in a letter to a judge that he had been subjected to torture, also forced to make a televised "confession," and forced to make spying allegations against another high-profile blogger and Canadian citizen who is currently serving a sentence of 19.5 years for his role in helping Iranian dissidents create blogs.

Hamid Ghassemi-Shall, an Iranian and Canadian citizen, [was arrested](#) on trumped-up charges of espionage, spent 18 months in solitary confinement, and is now under a death sentence.

There are other cases with a connection to Canada that deserve attention as well. Indeed, in the latest of a long series of crimes perpetrated against the Iranian Baha'i community by the Iranian

regime -- and which has resulted in the imprisonment of the entire Baha'i leadership -- several graduates of Canadian universities have been detained and imprisoned for their involvement with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education.

[Nooshim Khadem](#) -- who holds a Masters in Business from Carleton University -- was sentenced to four years in prison, while [Kamran Rahimian and Faran Hesami](#) -- who both received a Masters in Educational Counseling from the University of Ottawa -- has been detained without charge since September 13th. Indeed, the arrest of these educators underscores the arbitrary persecution and prejudicial treatment inflicted upon the Baha'i in Iran.

There has been a wave of repression in the run-up to the election. Iran, which had already imprisoned more journalists than any other country in the world, recently arrested reformist journalists Parastoo Dokouhaki, Marzieh Rassouli, and Sahamoddin Bouraghani, following similar arrests of journalists Fatemeh Kheradmand and Ehsan Houshmandzadeh, who were detained in January of this year -- the whole designed to quarantine any freedom of information leading up to today's elections.

The past two months have also witnessed a massive assault on filmmakers, artists, and the leadership of major independent Iranian organizations. This has included the shutting down of the Iranian House of Cinema, the country's leading independent film association, with over 5,000 members, the body also behind this year's Oscar winning foreign film: *A Separation*. The arrests have also included: celebrated filmmaker Jafar Panahati and BBC filmmakers, and the house arrest of opposition leaders Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hussein Mousavi.

Many civil society organizations have been shut down, including the Defending Human Rights Centre, which had been lead by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi; the Association of Iranian Journalists; Daftar-e Tahkim, a leading pro-democracy student union; the Association for the Rights of Prisoners; Human Rights in Iran (HRA); and the Committee for Human Rights Reporters (CHRR). Independent trade unions are still banned, and leading trade unionists are still in prison.

Numerous leaders of the women's movement -- and women journalists -- have been deliberately targeted, arrested, persecuted, and even executed, while still others continue to disappear or be threatened with execution, with no official record of their arrest or whereabouts even provided. For example, the prominent Iranian filmmaker and women's rights activist -- who directed the acclaimed documentary *Women Without Shadows* -- [has been arrested](#) by the intelligence services of the IRGC for "unknown reasons."

[Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani](#), who was to be stoned in 2006, had her sentence suspended last year after an international outcry. A senior judiciary official very recently announced that the punishment of stoning could be changed to hanging. She remains under threat of execution. [Maryam Majd](#), another women's rights leader and photojournalist, has been arrested and is being held in Tehran's notorious Evin prison.

[Nasrin Sotoudeh](#), a celebrated defence attorney for activists and political detainees, was charged with "acting against national security" and "propaganda against the regime," and sentenced to 11 years in prison, later reduced to six years after multiple hunger strikes and an international outcry.

Sotoudeh is a case study of the assaults on lawyers who would have represented prisoners of

conscience -- or who have publicly critiqued torture and detention or the absence of the rule of law - and have themselves become political prisoners for their outspoken advocacy of human rights and the rule of law in Iran, and which has now resulted in over 50 of such lawyers being targeted, arrested, and imprisoned.

Moreover, Iran has sought to limit internet access and restrict the content that can be posted online. A new Iranian "cyber army" is said to be forming, and as the latest Amnesty International report explains, this force has blocked websites while initiating attacks on servers including those of Twitter and the Voice of America.

And so the question: What can, and must, we do?

Simply put, we must expose, unmask, and hold accountable the massive domestic repression in Iran, which has prompted the establishment of the Inter-Parliamentary Group for Human Rights in Iran, an international consortium of parliamentarians from all over the world that I co-chair with U.S. Senator Mark Kirk.

The state-sanctioned assault on human rights in Iran must become a priority for Canadian foreign policy whereby all relationships with Iran are conditioned on its compliance with international human rights standards. Travel bans and asset seizures must be placed on senior Iranian officials and their family members, while sanctions should be placed directly on Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad.

Moreover, Canada should redouble our efforts to support dissidents directly by funding programs to help activists mobilize and circumvent electronic barriers. Further, the Iranian Dissident Awareness Program -- an initiative of US Sen. Mark Kirk and the Inter-Parliamentary Group for Human Rights in Iran -- is calling on parliamentarians internationally to "adopt" a political prisoner and create a critical mass of advocacy on behalf of these prisoners of conscience.

Indeed, we must call for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience -- those detained for doing nothing other than exercising their internationally recognized rights under law, and even under Iranian law. Equally, we should call upon Iran to establish an immediate moratorium on executions, while working towards the complete abolition of the death penalty.

Also, we should call on the Iranian authorities to grant the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran access to the country and to implement their undertakings to receive visits by UN human rights bodies to ensure Iranian compliance with international human rights treaties to which it is a State Party.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is at the epicenter of the Iranian critical mass of threat, should be placed on the list of terrorist entities under the Criminal Code.

In addition, we must put pressure on satellite companies that carry Iranian state television, as the Iranian authorities use their airways not only for the spreading of propaganda, but the televising of coerced confessions and show trials. We must ensure that communications technology and service providers are not used for the advancement of the regime's goals to the detriment of the Iranian people.

While the world is focusing on the threat posed by the Iranian nuclear weaponization program, we

cannot abandon the people of Iran who are themselves the targets and victims of the Iranian regime's massive assault on human rights. We must champion their case and cause, let them know that the world is watching, that they are not alone, and that we stand in solidarity with them.

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