

Persian Awakening

Testimony of Ali Afshari to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Members of the Commission, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am very glad to be here. First of all I want to express my gratitude from Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for giving me this great opportunity. I want to talk a little and briefly about how the Islamic Republic of Iran and its suppression of the post-election protests. The range of violence used against peaceful demonstrators has been huge and varied. I therefore will just focus on what happened on the streets, the brutal treatment of demonstrators and the serious struggle in the universities, the heart of resistance against the government.

I am sure you all saw the pictures of violence and the bloody oppression of the Green Movement. There were two aspects to this. First was the shocking images of the ways in which a cruel regime uses mass violence and intimidation to stop peaceful protests and to maintain itself in power. What happened in Iran since June 2009 is unprecedented in history of human rights violation records of this regime. Riot police, paramilitary groups and plain clothes forces attacked peaceful demonstrators, using batons, beatings, pepper and tear gas spray, sticks and, in some cases, firearms. They did not care if they injured women, children, or elderly people. The Iranian government has confirmed the deaths of 36 people during the protests, while reports by a special investigation committee set up by Mr. Moussavi allege there were 72 deaths. The use of live gunfire against peaceful civilians in public is a low point for human rights. Because of these tactics, the regime killed Neda Agha Soltan. Neda is now the symbol of Iran's new victims of democracy, freedom and of positive change.

The second aspect of the repression was the arresting, imprisonment, torture and bad treatment of prisoners. This was a key element of the regime's strategy. Since June 2009, over 3,000 people have been detained. The majority of them are new activists, low level activists, people with affiliations to reformists factions, as well as journalists and civil society actors such as students and women's rights activists. Most of them have been tortured and forced to do confess in the manner prescribed by the intelligence agencies. The main forms of torture are long stays in solitary confinement cells, lashings, humiliation (such as being forced to standing in front of a wall for hours on end, depriving them of privacy), rape (of men and women alike), savage beatings assault, stress position, sleep deprivation, stripping prisoners naked and then pouring iced water on them, starving prisoners, withholding water from prisoners and then giving the thirsty prisoners hot water so that they choke, withholding medical care, preventing prisoners from maintaining basic personal hygiene, not allowing prisoners to visit the bathroom (which means that they suffer pain and soil themselves), keeping prisoners in filthy, vermin infested surroundings, blindfolding prisoners to induce fear and disorientation, exposing prisoners to extremes of cold and heat or bright sunlight, insulting or threatening prisoners (in particular about their families and their personal honor), general verbal abuse and psychological torture. The authorities also used misinformation, blackmail and false hopes of release to trick prisoners into confessions. Many of these abuses have occurred in the notorious Kahrizak detention center where prisoners were raped and in some cases beaten to death. Remember, most of these people had simply been arrested. They had yet to be charged or even put on trial.

Some of the political activists and civil society forces were put on trial and then sentenced to severe terms of imprisonment. Around 40 detainees have received prison sentences in the range of 2 years to 10 years. Some were sentenced to death. Two men who had no role at all in the post-election demonstrations and who were in fact arrested even before the election were hanged. Some of prisoners were forced to make false confessions in the court. These were broadcast by the state run TV channel. The regime claims that there was a plot by the Green Movement against the government that involved a "velvet revolution" organized by the west, and in particular the USA, to overthrow the Islamic Republic. The regime also accused Moussavi and Karoobi of misleading the people and wanting to encourage a revolt to destabilize the country and undermine Ahamdinejad's so-called victory.

In all this darkness, there is a brightness that emerges, that of the brave people who want to change how they live. The Green Movement is the most extended and powerful dissident mobilization against the regime since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This movement can perhaps be called a Persian awakening or a rebirth of Persian society. Although this movement is the result of a long struggle, and its fortunes have fluctuated, what it has done in recent months shows that it is not extinguishable.

One of the strengths of the movements is Iranian students. Student movements are an engine of change and the fight for freedom in Iran. Today Iranian students have suffered from the most unprecedented pressure and repression since Cultural Revolution of 1981. More than 250 students are in the prison and many suffered the various physical and psychological abuse mentioned above. Within the universities, around 1,200 students have been summoned to disciplinary committees. These are university bodies that punish students for criticizing the regime or for supporting freedoms and democracy. More than half of these students who have been summoned have been punished, whether through suspension, expulsion, deprivation of facilities and subsidized food, or being placed on parole. The remaining independent student organizations are being shut down by the authorities. Despite these threat and punishments, students have continued with their protests.

The future of Iran depends upon the outcome of the current struggles between the Green Movement on the one hand and the supporters of religious despotism on the other. Over the long-term the regime cannot survive. The regime survives only because it has a monopoly on the key parts of the economy, because of the atmosphere of intimidation, and its used of weapons and its security forces against innocent people. However, many factors means that this is only a short-term strategy for the regime. The regime is undermined by the huge gap between the people and the government, the vast discontent within society against the regime, the internal disagreements and struggle within the regime itself, the population's discontent at Iran's low standard of living, the regime's aggressive foreign policy, and the tensions with the international community. he regime cannot handle all these problems, especially when society is being reborn and seeking its freedom.

Thank you.