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'Bad Veils' and Arrested Scholars: Iran's Fear of a Velvet Revolution

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Despite the public bluster of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the regime's behavior shows that it suffers from deep self-doubt. The arrests of visiting Iranian-born U.S. scholars Haleh Esfandiari (director of the Middle East program at the Woodrow Wilson Center) and Kian Tajbakhsh (a consultant for philanthropist George Soros's Open Society Institute programs) reflect Tehran's fear that political change could be easily sparked. A May 22 ABC News report that President Bush has authorized a covert CIA program against the regime will only add to Iran's suspicions.

Fear of Cultural Invasion

After assuming the office of Supreme Leader in 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei spent the next decade worrying about what he called "cultural invasion" by the West. In his view, the Islamic Revolution's "enemies," having failed to change the regime through military invasion (his interpretation of the Iran-Iraq War), invented a more sophisticated and invisible invasion -- a cultural one. The Islamic Republic allocated a hefty annual budget to resisting this invasion by jamming Western radio transmissions, supporting religious establishments, encouraging "committed revolutionary art and literature," and providing state radio and television resources sufficient for relatively sophisticated programming.

One consequence of the government's fear of cultural invasion was the Ministry of Intelligence's mid-1990s assassination of more than eighty writers, translators, and university professors. The regime viewed intellectuals as potential opposition leaders -- Iranian versions of Czech dissident Vaclav Havel, a seemingly harmless intellectual who was quickly propelled to power in 1989 by the Czech people's "velvet" revolution.

In his second decade of leadership, Khamenei is living in fear of just such a velvet revolution. Whereas his cultural invasion fears envisioned liberal, democratic values potentially subverting the cultural foundations of the Islamic Revolution, his current worries center on the notion that the revolution's enemies could recruit people through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to humanitarian, child welfare, trade union, environmental, and antidrug issues. Accordingly, any social or cultural activity outside the regime's supervision is subject to suspicion, especially in the wake of the "color" revolutions that led to the replacement of leaders in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan -- countries close to Iran's borders.

Western Support for Iranian Civil Society

In an increasingly globalized world, it is no surprise that many Western governments fund broadcasting to Iran and support local civil society groups, much as they do in other countries around the world. In the past two years, Britain, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and several other countries have substantially increased budgets for Persian-language broadcasting. For instance, the BBC is set to launch satellite television broadcasting to Iran soon. Many Western governments support workshops and conferences that invite Iranian NGOs and journalists to participate, providing them with education and training. These governments also tend to support limited funding to NGOs in Iran through channels such as the UN.

For its part, the United States has allocated tens of millions of dollars for broadcasting to Iran and for educational and cultural exchanges -- most famously in a 2005 request for a $75 million supplemental appropriation. A small portion of these funds was earmarked for the same sort of education, training, and limited NGO support carried out by European governments. It is this effort that is widely characterized as a U.S. "regime change" policy -- a charge made not only by the Iranian government but by some Western analysts who should know better, given how often U.S. government officials at every level repeat that Washington promotes "change in regime behavior" rather than "regime change."

In a recent open letter, Emad Baghi, a local Iranian civil rights activist, asked the U.S. government to specify the institutions or individuals to which it sends money, arguing that Washington's silence regarding Iranian reformists who receive such support has put the work of all such people in the country in danger. Indeed, the regime does use Western financial support of Iranian civil society to justify pressure against activists. Yet, even if Western governments ceased such support, the regime would still not tolerate local NGOs and civil movements.

The regime's attitude toward Soros's Open Society Institute is symptomatic of its approach. The Ministry of Intelligence -- which is under the full control of the Supreme Leader -- seems to believe that there is something suspicious in any connection between an Iranian and a foreigner outside of the government's control. In a communique released on May 22, the ministry stated that, according to confessions by Haleh Esfandiari, some American institutes "send invitations to Iranian thinkers to give lectures, participate at seminars, or to present research projects, allocating budgets to such activities . . . trying to choose active partners in our country and link them to the decisionmaker circles and organizations in the United States." The tone of this statement suggests that the ministry regards relationships between foreign institutes and Iranian individuals and organizations as inherently intent on a "soft overthrow" of the regime.

Politics of Intimidation

Fearing a velvet revolution, Khamenei's response has been to institute "politics of intimidation." One of the first victims was the press, which has been largely muzzled after a wave of newspaper closures that began in 1999. Since 2004, the Islamic Republic has also targeted online journalists and bloggers, whose popularity rose in reaction to the newspaper closures. In April 2006, journalist and intellectual Ramin Jahanbeglo was arrested, presumably in response to his criticism of President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's Holocaust denial. Minister of Intelligence Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei accused Jahanbeglo of "taking part in a U.S. attempt to carry out a velvet revolution in Iran."

The politics of intimidation have extended far beyond the press. In recent months, demonstrations by bus drivers, schoolteachers, women's rights activists, and students have been suppressed, and dozens of demonstrators have been arrested. The regime's claim that this civil society unrest is all due to U.S. funding of a velvet revolution is quite remarkable -- the hardliners seem to think Iranians are so ready to rebel that even a tiny U.S. effort is sufficient to get them out on the street.

The Iranian regime arose from a mass revolution and has always claimed that it represents the Iranian people. But its actions show how afraid it is of the people. In the regime's view, most Iranians could potentially act against it, whether by going unveiled, watching foreign satellite television stations, or following Western dress fashions. Consequently, control over every aspect of personal life -- the hallmark of totalitarianism -- becomes necessary to preserve the legitimacy and authority of the Shiite jurists. According to Iranian police officials, more than 150,000 women were arrested in Tehran just last month for "bad veils." Many photos and films showing police beating women have been published on websites. Young men are also being targeted; last month, the regime sent instructions to barbershops regarding banned hairstyles.

The international community has limited leverage with which to respond to the Islamic Republic's violation of human rights accords that Iran has signed in the past. More can be done, however, to broaden and extend international condemnation of Iran's human rights record. It was discouraging that, in March, the UN Human

Rights Council decided to drop its examination of violations in Iran.

Now that at least two American citizens are sitting in the Evin prison in Tehran, along with many other political prisoners, the U.S. government is in a good position to raise the issue of the regime's human rights violations for international scrutiny. The many statements by U.S. officials, Congress, leading academic organizations, and human rights groups condemning Esfandiari's arrest should be given maximum publicity. The effect may appear small, but failure to act would only reinforce worries among Iranian civil society activists that the West cares only about Iran's nuclear program, not about the Iranian people. Advocates for deeper engagement of Iran -- an idea that received a sharp blow upon Esfandiari's arrest -- would do well to argue that face-to-face dialogue offers the opportunity for direct protest to Tehran about its abysmal human rights record.

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