

Iran: “How to lose friends and alienate your own people”

Written by Bernd Kaussler

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BERND KAUSSLER, JUL 10 2009

On 12 June, the Islamic Republic of Iran officially died. Even if hardliners in and outside the government thought that they could get away with the usurpation of the election without causing a major popular upheaval, it was evident that governance after “election-day” will largely have to rest on authoritarian rule. In fact, for those who have always advocated an almost totalitarian interpretation of the *velayat-e faqih*, this was the very motivation of rigging the election in the first place.

As far as government propaganda was concerned, the nomenclature has always done a great job in showing the world Iran’s veneer of democracy, by highlighting the dynamics of partisan politics, numerous constitutional tenets of popular sovereignty and civil rights and most importantly, regular elections with at least more choices than elsewhere in the Middle East. Since 12 June and the brutal crackdown that followed, this masquerade will no longer work. The Republic is dead! Long live the Islamic State of Iran!

In Western capitals, the tealeaves are being read. Those who have always advocated regime change and rejected engagement with Iran seem vindicated and charges of “appeasement” gain momentum in Washington and elsewhere. Israel’s call for arms is the crudest manifestation of this mindset.

Given the level of state-sponsored violence and waves of arrests, Iran’s long quest for democracy for now has been strangled by a hardliner elite. Many stakeholders of democracy and human rights have been killed, arrested or intimidated.

Is this it for Iran?

How does the Ahmadinejad-Khamenei alliance intend to rule Iran like this? Judging by its paranoid rhetoric about “foreign plots”, which in itself adds insult to injury to millions of Iranians, a siege mentality has already developed at the top – and siege they may well face.

What the regime is doing to its own people, the “children of the revolution”, is essentially political and economic suicide in the long term. According to the International Monetary Fund, over 150,000 qualified Iranians emigrate from Iran each year, the highest brain in the world. The commitment of ordinary Iranians in science, art, business and academia has been a pillar of the Islamic Republic. For years, scientists, economists and intellectuals have worked endlessly within a restrictive framework beset with crony capitalism and carefully guarded political constraints. Stoicism and an element of fear kept them going. But in the light of recent events, one wonders if this endurance on the part of Iranians can continue?

According to the “International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran“, over 2000 persons have been detained, including political personalities, journalists, professors, and students. In past cases, following their arrests by government agents or paramilitaries, political prisoners are refused legal representation, held in solitary confinement and intimidated or tortured. Should charges be brought forward against them, detainees are usually been tried by a revolutionary court, which is closed to the public. During the trial the prosecution will not release any evidence

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substantiating the accusations – overall a truly textbook case in how to violate human rights. By and large, *themodus operandi* of Iran’s judiciary and security machinery is intimidation and violence.

So, who are those detained?

There is, for example, Bijan Khajehpour, a renowned economist and successful business consultant who was arrested on 27 June and detained in Tehran’s infamous Evin prison. Khajehpour’s services to Iran’s economy have been invaluable, co-founding, Atieh Bahar, the country’s first and now most successful strategic consultancy, helping domestic and international investors understand Iran’s business environment for years. Khajehpour has also been instrumental in creating a large number of jobs throughout his two decades of work in Iran, and has been highly active in the professional development of promising young Iranians.

The decision to imprison him on whatever absurd charges the Iranian authorities have come up with, is as economically expedient as if the US were rounding up CEOs of Boston Consulting Group or McKenzie & Co. Mr Khajehpour’s story is like that of many other highly educated Iranians who obtained advanced degrees and professional experience abroad, yet came back to Iran, demonstrating hard work and diligence whilst putting up with nepotism and political restrictions.

There are Dr. Kamiar Alaei and his brother Dr. Arash Alaei, two high profile physicians who have been spearheading Iran’s campaign against HIV/AIDS for years. Together they set up HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention clinics and initiated a scheme to distribute free needles and condoms in prisons and elsewhere. (Over 42 per cent of prisoners are drug convicts according to the judiciary) Their professional contributions and voluntary commitment to public health in Iran are second to none. In June 2008, both have been arrested on unknown charges. Internationally recognized for their medical services to their country, the Iranian government has long tried to somehow link them to the US government and eventually indicted them for “communicating with an enemy government sentenced to three and six years, respectively, in Evin Prison in Tehran.

In Iran, the estimated number of HIV-positive cases could be up to 100,000 according to the WHO with AIDS deaths as high as 6000 in 2007. Intravenous drug use and needle sharing amongst drug addicts account for 62 per cent of transmissions. Getting rid of those who are dedicated to combat this disease beggars belief.

And then there is Dr. Ardeshir Amirarjomand, chair of UNESCO’s Democracy and Human Rights Program at Shahid Beheshti University and legal adviser to Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who has been arrested almost immediately after the election. Amirarjomand’s academic credentials certainly speak for themselves. His legal hermeneutics centered on his demand for the “potential of the Constitution to be released in order safe-guard the rule of law and protect basic human rights” whilst highlighting the Supreme Leader’s transgressions with regards to legislation. Practicing what he preaches, Amirarjomand, like many other likeminded academics, helped to foster both a human rights culture and a framework in which the rule of law is increasingly challenging authoritarian tenets.

Amongst those journalists and intellectuals detained, there is Mohammad Ghoochani – the editor-in-chief of *E’temad-e Melli* Newspaper (the party newspaper of Mehdi Karrubi) and formerly editor-in-chief of *Shargh* Newspaper as well as the popular weekly magazine *Shahrvand-e Emrooz* (Iran’s version of Time Magazine). Both of the latter publications have been shut down now. With journalists, like him, the press in Iran, despite self-censorship and violent crackdowns, unlike anywhere else in the Middle East became a source of ideas, critique and genuine political discourse. Ghoochani was arrested in his home a few days after the elections.

They will never forget

Prosecutor General Dorri-Najafabadi promised to teach the demonstrators in detention “a lesson they will never forget.” He is right, Iranians will never forget. Just as the British-American instigated coup d’état against Iran’s Prime Minister in 1953 and the West’s support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war has marked an entire generation’s collective memory, so will 12 June be a watershed event to Iran’s youth. Time will tell how the country moves on from here. But there is little doubt that there are few regimes that are as good as losing friends at home

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and abroad and at alienating their own people as Iran’s nomenclature.

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