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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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•(1255)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): This is the 24th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. We are meeting today to hear from Roya Boroumand, executive director of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation.

At the conclusion of Ms. Boroumand's presentation, we will set aside a little time for future committee business, in particular our discussion as to whether there will be future witnesses on Iran.

Without further ado, allow me to turn the floor over to Ms. Boroumand.

Dr. Roya Boroumand (Executive Director, Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation): Thank you for inviting me.

I will do a little presentation and leave time for questions and answers, if there are any.

Thirty years ago a regime based on the negation of human rights was established in Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran consolidated itself at the cost of thousands of lives. The long list of tens of thousands of known victims attests to the systematic violence that spared no social, political, ethnic, or religious group—high school and university students, teachers, housewives, generals, clerics, ordinary cops, Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Muslims who had converted to other religions, Bahá'ís, Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews, Kurds, Turkmans, Azerbaijanis, French citizens, Argentine citizens, and the list goes on. Even Salman Rushdie's Japanese translator, who was stabbed in his university in Japan, was not immune from the terror that aimed to silence dissent inside and outside the country and preserve the image of rulers in perfect harmony with those they rule.

Iran also has been an important regional actor in the past three decades. More recently, it has preoccupied the international community with its nuclear ambitions. The record of its human rights violations, however, rarely makes the headlines. The Iranian leadership has successfully deterred the international community from consistently supporting human rights defenders and pro-democracy movements and distracted governments from focusing on human rights issues. Through threats, violence, prosecution, and prison, it has also deterred many Iranians from seeking support from the international community. It has done so confident that there would be little consequence and that these actions would at best get short-lived attention.

In a context of steady deterioration and increasing violence, this seems to be a pretty grim picture. In fact, during the past few years the number of executions has been at a record high. Our organization has documented reports of 468 executions in 2007, 381 executions in 2008, and 195 executions so far in 2009. To this you can add close to 400 deaths in shootings, in clashes with the security forces, and in very suspicious circumstances in 2007, 300 in 2008, and 101 so far in 2009.

The situation of students hasn't been any better. In 2007 there were more than 600 summons either to courts or to the university disciplinary committees for students who have used their right to freedom of expression, have written, have protested, or have presented grievances. So far this year there have been 155 arrests, 26 summons to courts, and 17 cases of imprisonment. In universities, there were 164 cases of summons, 76 expulsions, and 70 suspensions.

This is a pretty grim picture, but there are also many positive indicators. There is a vibrant civil society, which over the past decades has shown increasing interest in human rights. Civil society outside Iran, governments that include human rights as a component of their foreign policies, and the media can help make the change durable.

The Islamic republic leaders, with a successful long strategy, have exported their ideas and built a constituency outside Iran where the lack of legitimacy is less obvious. Positive as well as negative developments in Iran have an impact beyond its borders. Therefore, the international community should not exclude human rights promotion in Iran from its agenda. On the contrary, it should focus its attention on details that allow a better understanding of the patterns of human rights violations and a more accurate analysis.

•(1300)

For example, many among you heard about the arrest and release of the Iranian-American journalist Roxanna Saberi. Most of you have probably not heard of the Kurdish women's rights activist Dana Boyasi, who was arrested in Kurdistan, or Mohammad Pourabdullah, a young student who was arrested after protesting about the burial of war martyrs in the university courtyard along with 70 others in March and who is still in solitary confinement and has been reportedly beaten and is in poor health. Behrouz Javid Tehrani, another student who was arrested during the rioting in the student protest of 1999, is in very poor health also and has been long forgotten.

You may also have heard about the closure of the office of the Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, but what you may not know is that Ebadi and lawyers in her NGO were part of a committee for healthy, free, and fair elections who had called in November 2008 for electoral reforms underlining the incompatibility of Iranian laws and practices with international standards. The government's particular sensitivity regarding those who criticize the electoral laws or promote the boycott of the elections doesn't always get the attention it deserves. That is why very few knew that the young Kurd, Shivan Qaderi, who was killed by the security forces, had actively promoted the boycott of the 2005 presidential elections. Similarly, scores of students punished for criticizing electoral laws and calling for boycotts or a referendum on the constitution are rarely mentioned, let alone supported.

Similarly, there is rare mention of the laws on political parties voted in 1981, which eliminated from the country's political life an overwhelming majority of Iranian citizens. Abas Khorsandi, a political activist, is serving a nine-year sentence for creating the Iran Democratic Party, a party whose constitution is fully compatible with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. His crime is having created an illegal political party.

There are many other significant examples that could help understand the pattern of repression in Iran. The execution last summer of Yaqoub Mehr-Nahad, a young activist who had created an association in Baluchistan with a focus on discrimination and accountability, is a sad example, as is that of his 15-year-old brother Ibrahim, who is now serving a five-year sentence for having tried to give visibility to his brother's case.

The Islamic republic authorities act with impunity and do not tolerate any attempt to hold them accountable. The activities in the area of women's rights, which were once tolerated and hence better known outside Iran, are now leading to prosecutions and prison sentences. These episodes of repression are too often attributed to Ahmadinejad's presidency rather than to the nature of civil society's demands, which the government tries to dissimulate by criminalizing the activities of rights defenders, journalists, and academics.

Criminalizing dissent and coercing confessions are not new in the Islamic republic. Early on the new revolutionary leadership eliminated dissidents, accusing them of spying or being agents of foreign powers. It pushed the absurdity to the point of calling Iranian Marxist Leninists American grouplets. Today rights advocates are accused of acts against national security and charged with publicity against the Islamic republic if they dare share information with the outside world. This attitude is symptomatic of the government's apprehension of attempts by Iranians outside the ruling elite to organize and promote ideas and legal changes that question the legitimacy of the Islamic republic's main tenets.

To prevent the flow of information the authorities isolate human rights defenders, journalists, and dissidents or pressure them into leaving the country. In exile these advocates often lack financial resources and the necessary language skills to effectively continue their activities. The government can easily accuse them of working with foreign powers and make it costly for their allies in Iran to work and communicate with them. The international community, if interested at all, rapidly loses interest in these activists. Most of them, that is most of us, become irrelevant to those interested in Iran.

● (1305)

The government has also successfully used the nuclear issue to distract the international community. Last September, for example, Ahmadinejad was given remarkable visibility in New York and no alternative views were presented to the American public. Ahmadinejad went back home boasting about the fact that the media was begging for interviews and that Iran's government was praised for its inclusion of the Iranian people in the scene.

Over the past years, the international community has not been consistent enough in its interest; it has been narrow in its focus and sometimes lax on definitions and principles. Details, laws, and discourses inside Iran have been neglected, except for sporadic human rights reports. Supporters of reform outside Iran paid little attention to President Khatami's government's inconsistencies, and hence did not foresee the failure of the reform movement.

In a context of increased violence and militarization, this state of affairs seems hopeless. Experts often talk about Iranians' apathy, but general apathy can hardly justify the increasing number of arrests and prosecutions, which in fact indicate a positive trend. So there are many positive indicators. Human rights defenders refer to human rights and universal values more often and more systematically than they used to in the 1960s or 1970s. In fact, human rights defenders were rare in the 1960s and 1970s.

Young Iranians are not drawn to radical ideologies or armed resistance in the face of government repression. They reject violence, for the most part, and look for alternative ways to bring about change. The One Million Signatures campaign is a very good example of this effort, as are various student movements. Mehr-Nahad, and his organization's non-violent effort to call for the end of discrimination and accountability in a region plagued by violence, like Baluchistan, is another example.

The other positive indicator relates to ordinary Iranians, who are more accessible and more receptive to the language of human rights. The massive participation in the 1997 elections, or the attention given today to reformist candidates, was a response to the language used by Khatami in his campaign. Today, again, candidates who include human rights in their discourse and campaign get good public attention.

The existence of modern technology is another good indicator that allows access to the Iranian people and gives the Iranian people the means to access the outside world. The Iranian government cannot afford to shut off completely the Internet and isolate businesses and universities. Young Iranians are technologically savvy and manage to overturn the obstacles created by the government and the filtering created by the government.

Another positive indicator is the Islamic republic itself. The Islamic republic has never totally dismissed human rights. Though the leaders rejected these rights as a western plot, they did not withdraw from the conventions ratified by the Iranian Parliament before the revolution. They have often denied access to human rights monitors, but have adopted the language, created an Islamic Human Rights Commission and a human rights headquarters in the judiciary, for example. The Iranian leaders refer to rights and freedoms when they travel outside Iran and try to project the image of rulers in harmony with their people; hence their dislike of reporting human rights violations.

Human rights monitoring does act as a deterrent, so it is not surprising to hear statements such as "We don't cut thieves' hands in Iran because when we do so we become the subject of human rights discussions outside Iran". This is the representative of the spiritual leader in Shiraz, who also expressed a hope that some day we will cut hands everywhere in the world.

• (1310)

The ambiguity that characterizes Iran's attitude towards human rights opens a space, albeit small, for progress. But all the above are not enough in the face of the government criminalizing efforts aimed at acts organizing and promoting human rights. Denying freedom of expression and most importantly campaigning against universalism are also serious obstacles that Iranians cannot overcome without the support of the international community.

Since I have your attention, I would like to perhaps make a few recommendations on how you can help and the international community can help the human rights situation in Iran. Of course, as a historian, I always yearn for consistency and follow-up. There should be long-term programs to support the work of human rights defenders, and these programs should be inclusive. These programs should focus on lesser-known activists who work in more isolated and difficult regions and whose work of promoting human rights is the most challenging. Give visibility to crackdowns and publicize what exactly triggered them. Follow up as long as activists are in prison. Investigate laws and practices that exclude the majority of Iranians and focus on impunity of the security forces.

Of course, if you know us better, your work of promoting human rights will also improve. If you train translators who can read Farsi and who can read our newspapers and reports from Iran and who can allow you not to depend on us as your only source of information, your work will improve.

Be true to your values. Iranians who promote universal values rely on your support. Their advocacy is undermined and their morale affected if they feel that the human rights community and democratic governments do not uphold international standards. We do have the same rights and the same needs. Insist on freedom of association and expression, for example. Most importantly, fight back the government's propaganda and take possession of the agenda. The Islamic republic does not often play by the rules. Human rights defenders do need full moral and financial backing, so there is a need to fight back the government's propaganda regarding foreign supports to human rights activists. Rather than defending against the accusation of velvet revolutions and regime change, move the debate to Iran's reason for arresting activists. Focus on laws related to the right to

create association and promote ideas and laws on political parties and elections. Focus on excluded Iranians, including practising Muslims. Remind the Islamic republic that the reason for arresting a human rights defender is not due to criminal activities, but it is an effort to hide their despicable record and the Iranian people's view. Don't let the Islamic republic call the shots on what the international community can support and what it cannot.

Finally, keep us relevant. The international community should discourage the government from pushing human rights defenders and journalists into exile by keeping those who leave relevant. To do so, you can provide them with the necessary means to continue their work effectively outside the country and make the government policy too costly. By keeping us relevant, you will also help us be more effective.

I am going to end here. I hope this will be an introduction to questions, if you have any.

• (1315)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to the questions, starting with the Liberals and going around. I'm going to give one round only of questions, given the unfortunate time constraints, and I should take a moment to apologize to our witness. This occurred because we had an unanticipated vote in the House of Commons that delayed us.

At any rate, one round of questions, seven minutes each.

Professor Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank the witness, Ms. Boroumand, for being with us today and sharing with us an important narrative of the critical mass of human rights violations in Iran, the increase in arrests, prosecutions, and executions. I think something that we sometimes ignore is the criminalization of dissent and the criminalization of innocence and the impunity that attends it. You've also described another matter, which I think is often ignored, and that is the manipulative character of the Iranian leadership that would teach to marginalize, exclude, and even push into exile those who had hopes and will no longer be relevant.

As well, I think it was important for you to describe some of the important positive indicators, the voices that are emerging, the technology of communication, and the fact that Iran is a state party to international human rights conventions that use the language of human rights, and we should, in fact, use that narrative in turn to hold them to account.

Some of those voices have been heard, in particular in what some have called an unprecedented way, in the last week in the run-up to the election in Iran. Do you foresee any change, given the limited number of candidates that were allowed to run, and do those candidates themselves share a basic ideology? In a word, does it make a difference if Ahmadinejad is defeated and someone else, like Mousavi, takes his place?

Dr. Roya Boroumand: This is a very difficult question. I think that there are always little differences between candidates. I think the differences are, as far as our experience shows, related to the daily life of the Iranian people. The massive support for the 1997 elections for President Khatami ended up with those who had supported him deciding not to vote in the 2005 presidential elections. The reason for that is that the legal system in Iran does not allow a comprehensive reform of legislation, and the constitution itself doesn't allow its own reform, or at least the main tenets of it that are preventing the opening of the Iranian political scene.

All these candidates are first generation revolutionaries. They have a very serious past. In the 1980s, Mr. Mousavi was Prime Minister for seven years. During his tenure, thousands of Iranians were executed for political reasons, among them the range going from 14 and 15 to 26 and 27. One episode at the end of his presidency in 1988 includes a prison massacre, a prison killing of prisoners who had been sentenced to various prison terms. Some had also served their sentences but were kept in prison because they had not repented. A delegation went from prison to prison, and as a result four or five prisoners were hanged in a few weeks.

This is no small event. For that reason, I think none of the candidates are campaigning for a substantial or comprehensive legal change and legal reform. Unless there is a campaign for legal reform that would be taking the vagueness of the constitution and the references to vague Islamic criteria out of the constitution and promoting a separation of religion and state, we will be in a legal impasse.

• (1320)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you.

The Chair: You still have a few minutes, Mr. Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: You've also mentioned some important recommendations to us, particularly a long-term program to assist human rights defenders, the investigation of laws and practices and the impunity of security forces and the like, and insistence on universal values and freedom of expression. Is there anything that a group of parliamentarians can do in particular? Is there any value in seeking to engage counterpart parliamentarians in Iran? Is there any specific way in which our own human rights work can have a greater impact?

Dr. Roya Boroumand: I think any discussion of human rights is positive. Depending on who your counterparts are, it can have a very strong impact.

What has a strong impact is if your counterparts know what you're talking about; that they know you know what you're talking about, that you're not just talking about what you have read in *The New York Times* or from reports from Iran, but you know exactly what the problems are with the laws. So when they say the Iranian president is elected democratically, you can then tell them that is not the case,

and no matter what your relationship is with the Iranian leadership, they know you know the leadership is not elected democratically.

These things are important. That's why I say you have to insist on your values and do not be lax on definitions and principles, because that is when they won't feel motivated for change. If they think you believe they are democratically elected, they have no reason to change the political party laws.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: I just have a quick question.

Would you say, Ms. Boroumand, that characterizing Iran as an authoritarian system, or some have even called it a totalitarian system, would be reflective of reality?

Dr. Roya Boroumand: It's authoritarian, certainly. Totalitarian, in definition, yes, but in the 1980s more so. There is now a different approach, although the ideology is totalitarian and remains totalitarian. That is why the Iranian leadership is sensitive about your getting information about where the society doesn't agree with the leadership.

The effort and the tendency is to give you a monolithic view of what Iranians want, that Iranians want nuclear power, and that Iranians are belligerent and understand their government's foreign policy. The truth is that Iranians have no say in the government's foreign policy and that Iranians have repeatedly expressed concern about the government's use of violence outside Iran.

Even nuclear power or nuclear energy is debated. The Office for Consolidation of Unity, the umbrella group for student associations, put out a statement saying they were very concerned about the nuclear ambitions of the government, which attract too much hostility outside Iran and are not worth it or not good for Iran's national interests. But these statements never get visibility, because the government doesn't want them to get visibility.

So one thing you could do is to give visibility to the voiceless.

• (1325)

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Thi Lac, *s'il vous plaît*.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Good afternoon. Thank you for appearing before the committee today. We have to move through today's agenda a bit quicker than anticipated, so we will keep it short since our time is limited. Unfortunately, I have to leave once my turn is over, as I have to speak in the House at 2 p.m.

You mentioned wrongful detentions, violations of Iranians' civil rights and executions of human rights activists who were declared criminals, which violates the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ratified by the Iranian government.

I was listening to my colleague, Mr. Cotler, speak about the impunity tolerated by the government in these situations. I would say that it goes even further than impunity.

We know that an election will be held on June 12. Do you think that Iranians will turn out to vote willingly? How do you think the vote will work? Might some citizens be pressured?

Dr. Roya Boroumand: No one can predict what the Iranian people will do. They have mastered the art of surprising the analysts. But a major push is underway to lure them to the polls, especially with the prospect that President Ahmadinejad may not be re-elected. Over the past decades, the government has also gone to great lengths to scare those who do not vote. That is why those who promote boycotting the elections are usually thrown in prison for committing a crime against national security.

For instance, every time you vote, the last page of your identification card is stamped. When you apply for a job, when you want a business licence, when you want to work for a government or paragonment agency, you have to show every page of your ID card, including the last one. When you write a university exam, you have to show that page, but when you want to obtain your licence, you are not asked for it. The implication is that people will know if you do not vote.

I do not think that they can really do anything to 50 million Iranians, but there are a lot of people who vote out of fear, to avoid any problems, if you will. Will they leave? I think they are paying more attention to candidates and their campaigns than they were a month ago. So I think more people will vote than in 2005.

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: When you talk about surprises and defying analysts' predictions, how do you think human rights could change the most as a result of this election?

• (1330)

Dr. Roya Boroumand: None of the candidates is seriously campaigning on change or legislative reform. They talk about human rights, prisoners' rights. Candidates mention the fact that people should not be in prison.

I have 30 years' experience. That is not the case with young Iranians, who did not live through the 1960s and so on. Enthusiasm over the possibility of major change does not come easily to me. I think there may be minor changes in terms of freedom of expression and private rights at the street level and in universities, but I do not see any significant changes because that cannot happen without the agreement of the Council of Guardians. And the members of that council are appointed either by the spiritual leader himself or by the head of the judicial system, who is also appointed by the supreme leader. So the system is closed to change. Furthermore, the assistant of the interior minister, who organizes the elections, said in an interview some time ago that it did not matter to them who won the election as the candidates had been hand-picked by government regime insiders, meaning friends of the regime, and so they were not at all worried. The way I see it, as long as there is no open campaign denouncing the spiritual leader's veto power and promoting the separation of religion and state, which is the cause of our problem, nothing will really change.

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: Earlier, you mentioned the detention of Iranian citizens who had started political parties. We know that some of them are currently in prison. Are they being imprisoned until the vote is held, or are they serving actual sentences?

Dr. Roya Boroumand: They are imprisoned for nine years. Mr. Khorsandi's party was recently created and had only an Internet presence. Now, a number of the party's members are in Norway and Sweden. They are political refugees. The sentence is nine years. Another man recently died because he was sick and did not receive the care he needed. He had also been sentenced to four years. Mr. Tabarzadi, an ardent supporter of the regime who eventually switched sides and set up a democratic coalition that included students, merchants and people from all groups, spent many years in prison. Now, he talks the talk but does not walk the walk. Change is impossible because it is illegal to form a political organization or group that does not adhere to the objectives and principles of the Islamic republic. Therefore, by law, it is impossible to form a political party based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Marston, you're next.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have to apologize to our guest as well. I was the last person into the room, because I was delayed coming out of our vote.

I would agree with what I'm hearing from your testimony, when you're saying how Canada must join the international community and be a lead voice in ensuring that Iran's human rights abuses are taken to task on the international stage. You used the work "impunity", and many times before this committee we hear of South American nations, or any nation, that seem to have totalitarian types of government....

I listened to your testimony when you were talking about the election and if Mr. Ahmadinejad loses. I am curious about one thing. You had a candidate before by the name of Khatami, I believe, who stepped aside for the current candidate to run. I'll ask you a couple of questions and then maybe you'll be free to answer. I'm curious as to what the political manoeuvring was that would cause that. Is it symptomatic of a problem?

In the supreme leadership, you said that all three were insiders, I guess. Is that symptomatic of some kind of change happening there? We see media reports. In fact, I just saw one last night, or the night before, about the excitement in Iran over the election and that people were on the streets in a way they haven't been in years. If you take that in sync with the fact that it looks like there could be some shuffling within that leadership group, and given the excitement of the people, is there any chance of this evolving into an electoral victory, and perhaps a significant change in due course?

I'm not talking about the period following the election, but the stage might be set for change. I say this because we know in Canada that the original revolution started by the students in Iran was hijacked by the religious community, and that 70% of the public out there is still more in tune with that original revolution than the current one.

● (1335)

Dr. Roya Boroumand: We have the experience of the Khatami era. President Khatami got many more people out into the streets. The participation was something that had not been seen since 1979. People voted who had not voted since 1979. The result was student repression and closure of newspapers. So a space was opened, which is very important, and allowed the discourse of human rights to actually become a familiar discourse. Then it was closed down, because of course the more room you leave, the more people would want, and then, you know, we have a problem.

The problem is that if people are excited now.... These are very young people who have not lived in the 1980s or don't remember the 1980s. They see Mr. Mousavi as a newcomer. There is a strong emphasis on the fact that Mr. Mousavi was an architect for 20 years and there is talk about what he has built. He was prime minister for seven years. During his tenure, at least 10,000 people were executed. So this is no joke.

My guess is that unless there is an opening, even in the sense of a suspension of some rules and regulations that allow five people into Parliament who are not insiders and who could actually have a frank discussion within the Parliament without fearing for themselves in case of opening.... Because let's be realistic: Mr. Mousavi and Mr. Khatami, ministers of Islamic guidance for twelve years, and there are also Mr. Karroubi and all of these people. Mr. Rezai was the head of the Iranian revolutionary guards at the worst time of the Islamic republic's aggressivity outside of Iran. They are looking at the perspective of opening, thinking that the Iranian people may do to them what they did to the former regime.

Here is our problem. We need new faces. You see within the insiders of the Islamic republic that the younger generation are much more vocal about human rights and more willing to take risks, because they themselves don't feel endangered.

We have an impasse here, I think. This is not my work. My work is human rights, and I'm giving you political analysis. Remember that I am a human rights advocate, so this is what I see.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I have one question more in line with your human rights advocacy. I'm very interested in knowing about Mrs. Ebadi. What is her status today? She appeared before this committee two years ago, and it was a very exciting day for us. She's certainly a person who inspires one. You mentioned her earlier in your testimony. I'm concerned about her well-being, if you can comment on that.

Dr. Roya Boroumand: Well, her office is still closed, but I don't hear about the harassment that she was subjected to right after her office was closed. In the streets, there was a very physical presence of people who did not wish her well. She's still calling for the opening of her office.

I think that what is heartwarming regarding Ms. Ebadi is that now she's known within the international community personally, having been around, seeing you and seeing other people, and it is too costly for the regime to harm her. That opens up a space for her to continue her activity, although probably at a slower rate.

I would be more worried for the safety of the people you don't know than the people you know.

● (1340)

Mr. Wayne Marston: I would agree with that. That's very clear. But she is actually free at this point in time, then? She's not incarcerated?

Dr. Roya Boroumand: Yes, she is free. She is not incarcerated.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now have Mr. Sweet from the Conservatives.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Madam Boroumand, thank you for taking the time to address the committee.

I have a publication in front of me called *An Indictment Against My Own Conscience*. Ladan Boroumand is the author. Ladan is who?

Dr. Roya Boroumand: She is my sister.

Mr. David Sweet: It's a compelling document. One of the things that I think can happen when we operate at committee like this is that we talk so much about human rights, sometimes we lose the face of what we're investigating. I just want to read a paragraph in this small article that captured me. It says:

From among thousands of young men and women who faced firing squads for no crime, my memory rests on the smile of a seventeen-year-old girl by the name of Mona Mahmudnizhad. Her laughing eyes light up her beautiful face and the locks of her hair intensify that light. She was detained for a few months. They wanted her to denounce her Baha'i faith and she refused. They hanged her along with nine other Baha'i women on Saturday morning, June 28, 1984.

Ladan's article really highlights the fact that whether you're Baha'i or whether you're someone who disagrees with the leadership and they want to erroneously charge you with adultery or with being gay or lesbian or whatever does not fit into the small spectrum of what they feel the world should look like and of course does not challenge their authoritarian power, they're prepared to do anything, from torture to execution, to silence the individual.

You had mentioned a One Million Signatures campaign. Were there any positive results from that campaign? Did you see any movement in the regime, any pressure that made some difference?

Dr. Roya Boroumand: There are several positive results with the campaign.

Before looking at the regime, we have to look at where we stood and where we stand now. Iranian civil society was not organized. Iranian civil society and political movements have often been based around particular individuals whose existence made the group survive. They are sometimes charismatic and sometimes not. They were easy targets for the regime because all it took was to take the head of an organization and everything would fall apart. Organizations didn't have experience and didn't really work together.

The campaign has taught Iranian civil society that if you put your egos aside and you work together for the same goal, you are much stronger and much less vulnerable to repression. Because one person is arrested but there are 15 others all over the place. There are two people in the Kurdish areas and two others are there. There are no big leaders.

And the campaign is issue-focused. So the campaign has talked to a lot of Iranians. Now a lot of people know about the campaign, and it has tentacles all over Iran. That is why they repressed it. They didn't care much about the campaign before all the women's rights activism, but because it has become organized and because it's effective, they go after them. So once they are effective and they talk and people know about it, the leadership and reformers or other people within the leadership have to listen. Even if nothing happens, they know this is a demand and this demand is serious.

Ahmadinejad's government introduced a draft law that was changing the little gains that Iranian women had made in terms of divorce and child custody, and there was such an uproar from these women's rights activists and from everyone that they took it back. I think this is a first. So there have been successes, although they are small successes. But the success for us, at this point, is that these movements survive. They survive and thrive, and that is the success. That is when you know the government will retreat.

• (1345)

Mr. David Sweet: It teaches us that unrelenting effort and persistence pays off.

You had mentioned right at the end of your address several recommendations. I'm paraphrasing now, but the first one was resources for activists. Could you just give me an idea about what you mean by that?

Dr. Roya Boroumand: I'm not necessarily talking about governments per se, but groups. There is no funding for human rights groups inside Iran. That used to be the case for Morocco and Algeria and other places. Iran is not unique in that sense.

I remember working on women's rights in Morocco, and the woman who was helping me had to go to her law office to earn a living—hardly—and then try to work on the cases of these poor women, victims of domestic violence, on her holidays, at night, and at lunch time. She was very good, but she couldn't be as effective. If she had a salary and could only do her women's rights activism, the issue would have more gains. So I think that's what I mean. One student told me it's the phone, how much her phone bills cost every month when she tries to organize with the students in Zanjan and the students in Tabriz. Her cellphone bill is expensive, and her family cannot afford it.

So I think that when the human rights community can support the human rights community in Iran and elsewhere, governments are a little bit more sensitive. I'm sure there are ways to do that. But the

Iranian government, by criminalizing any contact between the outside world and Iran, has deterred the human rights community from getting money, and that slows them down. I say money, but support, moral support, visibility, all of this is what I say. If you have people who regularly translate what they write there, that's already support, because if their issues get visibility here, the government will be on the retreat.

So I'm talking of all of this together—they need help. If the government tells you that if you help them, they're going to accuse you of spying, you say, "Okay, let's move on." That's what happened, you know. First it was workshops for civil society, then there was a retreat. The workshops were outside Iran on the borders. Then that became dangerous too. So the workshops, instead of being on women's rights, or civil rights, or whatever, became photography and journalism.

In the end, no one is doing anything, because anything that the international community does, and the Iranian people want them to do, becomes a criminal act. So we have to stop this, and I don't know how to stop this. But by retreating we won't stop it; we will encourage it.

Mr. David Sweet: Madam Boroumand, thank you very much. Please thank your sister as well for *An Indictment Against My Own Conscience*. It's very thought-provoking.

Dr. Roya Boroumand: She will be very happy to hear that. I'm glad.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madam Boroumand. We very much appreciate you coming.

We apologize for the fact that our meeting was cut short the way it was. Nevertheless, you have used the time very well. I know that all of us have found it very informative. It will help us in preparing our report. I do appreciate it.

Thank you.

Dr. Roya Boroumand: Thank you for having me. I'm sorry for the flight cancellation.

• (1350)

The Chair: Not at all. We were able to get all the information. It was very useful to us.

Members of the committee, we are going to now go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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