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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1305)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Order, please.

Welcome to the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is Wednesday, May 6, 2014, and this is our 25th meeting.

[English]

We are televised, colleagues, and we have two witnesses today as part of our Iran accountability week. This is a series of hearings that have been occurring for several years now at the behest of our colleague, Professor Cotler, but with the full support of all committee members.

We have two witnesses with us today. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo is the chief executive officer of the Nonviolent Initiative for Democracy, and Shari Bryan is the vice-president of the National Democratic Institute.

My clerk advises me, Madam Haghighatjoo, you'll begin first and that Ms. Bryan, you have somewhat more concise or fewer remarks. I'll just mention as you're tracking your remarks, if they're not fully prepared, that the more time that is taken up in the opening remarks, the less time we have for you to respond to questions.

From my own experience, and I think committee members will agree with me, often the questioning and answers are the parts that are best able to allow you to bring out the facts that you think should be before the subcommittee.

Yes, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Chair, because of the nature of the testimony today and the fact that I know some of our members usually have to leave at the end to go into the House, I wonder if we could get a quick agreement.

We have witnesses coming on the Eritrean study. I don't know when they're rescheduled, but I've just been privy, as you are aware, Chair, of a human rights impact assessment that was done by an international human rights lawyer on the specific mine, the Bisha mine in Eritrea.

I've already chatted with most colleagues to have this gentleman who did this study come here and testify before us. I'm wondering if we could just get agreement, and schedule that in.

The Chair: Is there any comment on that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: There's agreement. Okay. Well, perhaps we can leave it up to the clerk to determine the most suitable time.

Let's turn back to our witnesses. I invite you, Ms. Haghighatjoo, to please begin your testimony.

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo (Chief Executive Officer, Non-violent Initiative for Democracy, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and honourable members. It is a privilege to be here.

As you may know from my background, I was an elected member of the Iranian Parliament from 2000 until 2004, and I was the youngest woman in the Parliament.

Today I would like to discuss Iran's election processes, which, as I will demonstrate, violate principles of free and fair elections. As elected members, you all know that conducting free, fair, and transparent elections is essential for true representation of a country's population to govern themselves and translate their will into action. Lack of free, fair, and transparent elections is the root cause of all other problems with which this committee is concerned, since it systematically denies office to all Iranians, who cannot impact policies properly.

Iran is a signatory to many international documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections. However, elections have systematically been manipulated by the state agencies. These include the Supreme Leader and his office; the 12-member Guardian Council, which functions as the only election oversight body; the election administration, run by the interior ministry; the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC; and the intelligence ministry, to name a few.

The manipulation of electoral processes can be divided into three main types, which I will briefly describe: first, the legalization of discrimination against certain groups and individuals to prevent them from standing for any election sanctioned by the Iranian election laws; second, barring a majority of candidates, including opposition members, from contesting; and third, committing systematic electoral fraud whenever needed.

The law pertaining to the Assembly of Experts bars individuals who have not completed seminary school and gained permission to issue fatwas, or religious edicts, known as mujtahid. This means that the general population and majority of elites are barred from participating in this key institution that selects the Supreme Leader. The presidential election law discriminates against non-Shia Muslims, non-Muslims, and women.

Parliamentary election laws and city and village council election laws discriminate against many categories of individuals, including those who are non-practising Muslims and not loyal to the Supreme Leader of Iran, those who worked with the previous regime, and those convicted of religious crimes.

The second category, barring candidates, has been systematically exercised in Iran through the approbatory supervision of the Guardian Council, called *nezarate esteswabi*, which includes three important stages. The GC is the ultimate decision-making body regarding the credentials of candidates to stand for office.

In December 2003, by order of the Supreme Leader, the GC decided to base approval of candidates for any election on the proven qualification of candidates, called *ehraz salahiyat*, which is contrary to the constitution and the concept of free and fair elections, and deprives citizens of the right to compete in elections. Just as an example, for the parliamentary election, the GC disqualified 49% of candidates, 3,379 out of 6,000, in 2004.

● (1310)

I have many examples, but I will just skip this part.

In recent years, the GC has expanded its control over county executive boards by disqualifying nominated trustees until a desired board is formed.

The next stage, which is very important, is invalidating and halting elections. The Guardian Council has invalidated, partially or totally, outcomes of many districts in previous elections without being accountable before law. There are no independent international or domestic election observers allowed in Iran, and the results from each polling station are not publicly accessible. Even candidates and representatives are not entitled to a copy of polling station minutes, and the compilation of final results takes place behind closed doors, without the presence of independent supervision. As a result, it is not clear whether invalidations happen due to massive fraudulent activities.

Presumably, the GC has nullified outcomes of elections in particular districts to give seats to desired candidates. For instance, in 2000, when I was elected as a member of Parliament, 700,000 votes of Tehran were nullified in order to give a seat to Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, who is the father-in-law of the son of the Supreme Leader and who later became the speaker of the Parliament in the following parliamentary election.

The third category is systematic electoral fraud whenever needed. In the last decade, a political phenomenon has been identified by political activists, called "engineering elections". Even though the Iranian constitution and election laws have forbidden interference of military personnel in politics, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has for a decade played an important role in engineering elections.

Mohammad Baqer Zolqadr, a former deputy of IRGC, revealed that the IRGC had "a complex and multi-layered design to ensure the victory of the conservative forces". Ali Motahari, a current member of Parliament, stated in his parliamentary address that the IRGC has interfered in many districts and supported their desired candidates. Many candidates who won and who lost have affirmed this.

In the absence of independent media and free political parties and assemblies, the state propaganda apparatus, including the national TV and radio as well as the offices of Friday prayer imams and mosques, are used to shape the public opinion in favour of the regime's desired candidates. Last, but not least, is the role of Komite Emdad Imam Khomeini, a state-run organization to support the poor, which has played a role in buying votes by distributing goods to the poor.

What can be done? These systematic interventions demonstrate that elections are not free, fair, and transparent in Iran. This process has a more negative and unbalanced impact on women in particular.

Therefore, the international community should employ nonviolent measures to pressure Iran to meet her international obligations under the UDHR, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other international treaties.

The second cycle of the Human Rights Council universal periodic review for Iran is scheduled for October 2014. Addressing systematic violations of free, fair, and transparent elections in Iran must be part of the second review, and Canada has an important role to play.

● (1315)

Canada has been consistent in its approach to human rights. Thanks to all of you, Canada can engage other countries to create pressure for free and fair elections in Iran, at least competitive ones. I believe free and fair elections will change the leadership of the country in the long run. If this pressure is built now and continues over the next two years, Iran's government may accommodate some of the demands of the international community for free, fair, and transparent elections for the 2016 parliamentary election.

In closing, the international community should ask Iran to: one, respect the rights of all citizens to be elected at periodic, genuinely democratic elections by amending electoral laws to be inclusive, match international standards and base practices, and recognize independent, non-partisan civil society organizations; two, observe the transparency of the whole process of elections including candidate qualifications, the publication of outcomes for each polling station, and the tabulation of votes; three, allow credible and independent international and domestic election observers to monitor elections, especially for the 2016 parliamentary election; four, respect freedom of assembly for political parties and civil society organizations; five, recognize freedom of media without fear of illegal prosecution; six, encourage more women to stand for and gain access to office, given their important role in society, their percentage of population, and their interest in addressing broader issues that are of dire concern in Iran today; and seven, seek UN technical assistance on elections in order to strengthen electoral processes and to enable international observation to validate the integrity of electoral processes and to assure relatively high standards for free and fair elections in Iran.

I look forward to answering questions on the 2016 parliamentary election, women's political participation, or anything with which you are concerned.

Thank you very much for this opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Haghghatjoo.

We will turn now to Ms. Bryan, please.

Ms. Shari Bryan (Vice-President, National Democratic Institute): Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. It's an honour to be here.

I have very brief remarks. I represent the National Democratic Institute for international affairs based in Washington, D.C. We support democracy in governance around the world, and are currently working in over 65 countries with the support of the U. S. government, European governments, and the Canadian government, and for that we have deep appreciation for the Canadian support of democracy in governance around the world.

I would like to underscore Fatemeh's very important remarks today. As she has laid out, the 2016 elections will be far from what could be considered free and fair by any standard. The recommendations that she has just articulated are standards that could easily be met by the Iranian government with support of the international community. They are achievable. They are very basic things like publicizing polling stations and supporting international observation. These are minor activities that the government should consider and the international community should push for.

We are currently working with Fatemeh and her colleagues on ideas for supporting more women in political office in Iran, which we think is important. The number of women currently stands between 2% and 3%, which is affecting society at large in the country. We're also working with civil society activists both inside and outside Iran in the lead-up to the 2016 elections.

Again, thank you very much for having us both here. We appreciate your time, and we look forward to your questions.

• (1320)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Given the amount of time we have remaining before we have to end our proceedings, we have time for the rounds to be six minutes long.

Mr. Sweet, would you like to begin?

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much, Chair.

Witnesses, thank you very much for your testimony.

I'll start with you, Ms. Bryan, because you had mentioned civil society in Iran. After the last uprising was put down so violently by the revolutionary guard and the Basij, how intact are they in their communications and organization? Do you feel that they still have the resolve to mount some clear resistance, to send a clear message that they want free and fair elections?

Ms. Shari Bryan: Thank you very much for that question.

I think civil society is prepared and ready to stand up for free and fair elections. As you know, it's very dangerous to be an activist in the country, but I think through the use of technology there are a number of things that can be done, and that are going on, that allow citizens to connect with one another to report on incidents of human rights abuses, electoral law abuses, and so on.

I think a combination of a number of years of resilience since the last uprising, a great number of young people who want to be engaged and who stand ready to be involved, and the advent of technological solutions, for lack of a better term, are allowing citizens and citizen groups to organize.

The risks are high and the challenges are great, but the resolve remains.

Mr. David Sweet: Your point is well taken. In Canada, we can't even imagine with the kind of regime that is in power right now in Iran the kind of risk a person would take to actually go in the streets, make clear statements, and associate themselves with an opposition. We have great respect and pride for those people who would fight for democracy in an environment like that.

Ms. Haghghatjoo, I want to ask you a little bit about your career. When you stepped down in 2004, you made it very clear why you stepped down, because of the disqualification of so many qualified candidates.

Did you receive any threats, any kind of social ostracization, any kind of sanctions against you?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghghatjoo: Well, even when I was a member of Parliament—and according to Iran's constitution, members of Parliament enjoy immunity—I was arrested while I was in my home, I believe it was in 2001. That was absolutely against Iran's constitution.

My arrest was due to my addressing human rights issues, and asking that the Supreme Leader be held accountable, because the judiciary acts under his rule. I had a trial, where I was sentenced to 10 months' imprisonment. I never served it. And there have been several other cases against me.

But in general, the population supports change, so while the government violated my constitutional rights, my colleagues and I who stand for human rights and democracy were very popular and welcomed by people.

We experienced two levels of welcoming by people, and of course the Supreme Leader and his followers didn't like us criticizing them, especially as some of these human rights violations were committed by the corps, the Pasdaran, so one of the files against me was issued by them.

In 2005 I realized that to continue my work at another level, I had to leave the country, and I have resided in the United States since then.

• (1325)

Mr. David Sweet: You mentioned multi-layers of organization to try to get rid of candidates or qualified candidates they don't want. Is it an overstatement to say that really the entire electoral process is manufactured by the Supreme Leader?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: Yes and no, because the concept I just tried to mention here, engineering elections, from time to time this goes differently, because first the regime wants to use the election to show the world that we are a democratic regime. We have elections. We have elected people. On the other hand, it wants to make sure those who are loyal to the regime can go through this election.

Sometimes things don't happen the way they want. For instance, they disqualified Hashemi Rafsanjani, a very powerful man in the country, but they qualified Mr. Rouhani, who seems to carry the same agenda for having a better relation with the international community, and actually having a better domestic policy, and who is concerned about human rights issues, although the judiciary is independent from government.

Sometimes even though an election is manufactured, as you say—I say engineered; it doesn't matter which word is used—you find that people can navigate through the system. That is our hope, and we think if the international community puts pressure on Iran's government and resumes this pressure for the next two years, we may have competitive elections. It's not a free election, but still you can feel that people have representatives inside the government.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): I'm going to attempt the name one time out of respect—Haghighatjoo.

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: Yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: My goodness.

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: Yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: It's a small miracle. I'm going to call you Fatemeh from now on.

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: Yes, Fatemeh is okay.

Mr. Wayne Marston: You've spent your time in the U.S. since leaving Iran. Have you gone back at all to Iran during that time?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: No.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Do you feel being before us today will put you at risk if you returned?

• (1330)

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: Yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That matches very closely the years of reports we've heard coming out of Iran, but I thought it was worth putting that on the record.

President Rouhani has completed his first year, pretty well. Listening to you now, you sound more optimistic than anybody I've heard speaking of Iran in the last five years. Do you see him as that dynamic a change from the last president?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: Of course, in no major way can you compare Rouhani to Ahmadinejad. He was a disaster and very unfortunate for the nation.

I am optimistic for several reasons. First of all, if you want to bring change, you have to be hopeful. You have to envision the future and try to reach that future.

Second, we have democratic forces inside the country, even though the oppression is so heavy inside the country. But this is a force inside the country, even though maybe in terms of some human rights standards this situation hasn't changed since Rouhani came to power because the judiciary is independent from the government. In other words, President Rouhani has no power over the judiciary, but he cares about these issues. He wants to open up the political atmosphere. He wants to give more room to democratic forces inside the country, and he has to navigate.

It's a very difficult job. He thinks he has to start with the economy first. If he is successful in addressing and by mutual agreement closing the nuclear file, and having sanctions lifted, people will feel a little bit empowered economically, and then through that, they can move to political reforms. It's very slow.

Mr. Wayne Marston: You're touching on something that's very critical here.

Professor Akhavan was before our committee. He spoke to us about the fact that it was very critical that the synergy happen within the country to move it forward to a more democratic nation. What I'm hearing from you today is for Rouhani to be successful, he has to get the economy moving and be seen by the rest of the international community to be moving things forward so sanctions are lifted, so at some point we have to start backing away from the sanctions and encouraging this by backing away. Am I hearing you correctly?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: I think it does have several components. The social issue is multi-layered and complex. I believe to have people support in general a democratic country, you have to address their everyday life challenges, which is the economy. That is pretty much attached to international sanctions. This doesn't mean we have so much mismanagement in the country. I don't want to say everything is tied to the sanctions, but technically those go together.

Giving more room to Rouhani, I believe, would give him more power to win the majority of seats in the next parliamentary election. Otherwise even this Parliament would stop progress on the nuclear issue.

Mr. Wayne Marston: How is my time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have one minute exactly.

Mr. Wayne Marston: One minute is pretty good, I'll take it.

We've heard reports over the years about the atrocious violation of human rights, of torture, detainment. Has there been a significant change that you're aware of since this new president came in? Has there been any improvement? Has anybody been released?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: No.

Mr. Wayne Marston: So that side is still as dark as it always has been.

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: That's true.

● (1335)

Mr. Wayne Marston: That's sad to hear, because for a few a moments, you had me very excited about the potential. I guess we have a way to go yet.

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: Yes. As I said, on human rights issues, other organizations have been engaged. The only tools Mr. Rouhani has, negotiation, lobbying, going to [*Inaudible—Editor*], releasing a few political prisoners, but this is an authoritarian regime. We know the nature of authoritarian regimes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Grewal, would you like to go next?

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for your time and your presentations.

Dr. Haghighatjoo, as a member of the Iranian Parliament, what reforms do you think are necessary in the governing structure? Do you believe that UN resolutions are an effective means to pressure the Iranian government? What about sanctions? What can Canada do bilaterally to improve the human rights situation in Iran? Multilaterally, do you believe that the report of the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran has significance? Can you also elaborate on the status of Iran's nuclear program? Do you believe there is a link between Iran's nuclear ambitions and human rights violations in that country?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: I will start with the special rapporteur and human rights issues and Canada's role. I believe this has a great impact, even though the authorities in Iran say they don't care, it is biased, and so on. I am telling you, based on my experience, if there were no pressure from the international community, they would do worse.

Even though the situation is not good, even though the record of human rights violations is high in the country, imagine if this pressure wasn't there what the record would be. I would like to use this opportunity to show appreciation to Dr. Ahmed Shaheed for his strong will in continuing his work. This gives voice to the voiceless.

I appreciate Canada for standing firmly on the issue of human rights. I believe that if these human rights violations, including lack of free and fair competitive elections, are recorded on United Nations human rights documents, that may have an impact in the middle or longer term, if not immediately. Once you do these actions, they have long-term effects. The change doesn't come overnight to the country. So please be supportive. Keep doing what you are doing. I think it is important.

In terms of sanctions, I believe the international community should use smart sanctions. Use more diplomatic sanctions and try to engage Iran on other levels. Give support to civil society inside the country. I believe supporting civil society would definitely help. Once you empathize, you can't believe.... You save the lives of so many Iranians, so many individuals. Yes, systematic violations have been going on, but you have saved the lives of so many people. This is important also.

In terms of the nuclear issue and human rights violations, I think there is a link. A few years ago, almost a decade ago, the authority identified four challenges: the nuclear challenge, human rights issues, Middle East peace talks and, I am sorry I have forgotten the last one.

The leadership decided to take a stand on the nuclear issue because they thought they could mobilize people around the goal. But once it was taken to the second step of human rights issues, they couldn't mobilize people, because people of Iran would not agree on the violation of human rights. So I think nuclear negotiations go well, and I believe President Rouhani is genuine in addressing the issue and will close the file and give access to visits to the sites.

I visited most of the nuclear sites in Iran when I was a member of Parliament, but on the other hand human rights issues are very important. The international community should not forget to address that, because if you have a democratic government inside Iran, you can make sure that a democratic government, while it's accountable to its own people, would respect international standards as well.

● (1340)

Am I missing something?

Mrs. Nina Grewal: No, but I have another question.

Could you please tell us something about the discrimination against women in relation to gender segregation, marriage, divorce, and mandatory dress? Could you also elaborate on Iranian restrictions for women's education? How do women activists fare in trials, prisons, and the media? Do you believe that Mr. Rouhani has kept his promise to improve women's rights in Iran?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: As you know, women outnumber men in university, and the rate of literacy in the country is over 90%. So, compared with other neighbouring countries, the population in general is educated.

In terms of women's issues, we face a patriarchal attitude, which is a global issue—it's not just for Iran—on one side. On the other side, because we have an Islamic government inside the country—and I believe patriarchy is rooted in all institutions, including religion—religion is used as a tool to justify this discrimination against women. We see discrimination at all levels, and it is embedded in our laws.

There has been discrimination against women, but women are not silent. Women have been active agents for change inside Iran. We have powerful women's movements. You've seen so many vocal women inside the country.

Actually, in terms of education, during the time we were in power, we lifted restrictions on women's education, but now the current government wants to say that there are certain majors for women, and certain so-called male majors, such as mining, and so on. They want to actually limit women's access to those so-called male majors.

Also, they are trying to put another quota for men. Usually in the international community we talk about quotas for women, to give more access to women. Because women outnumber men at university—and there is an entrance exam for public colleges—the government actually wants to limit women's access. They have started with medical schools, where the number of women admitted is limited to 50%, not higher. They don't want to admit more than 50% women.

Right now the country is shifting its anti-natalist policy, which was implemented in 1992, to a pro-natalist policy. The Supreme Leader is advocating for that. He is pushing for a pro-natalist policy. That means we will face another layer of discrimination due to a pro-natalist policy.

The deputy president for women's affairs is one of the great women in the country. I would say that women's rights activists really tried hard to convince President Rouhani to appoint this lady. She is a lawyer. I believe that because President Rouhani feels pressure from women, he will be kept accountable by women's rights activists to meet his promises on women's issues.

● (1345)

The Chair: Thank you.

We went significantly over on that particular question. I didn't stop it, because it was the witness answering, not the questioner, that caused that to occur.

Ms. Sgro, you'll have the same amount of time as everybody else did, but the last two members, NDP and Conservative, will have their times reduced accordingly to allow us to conclude on time.

Ms. Sgro, go ahead, please.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and I am filling in today, if that's even possible, for the Hon. Irwin Cotler, who is hoping to get here still, but he's tied up in some other important work.

Welcome to both of you.

I have been involved to some extent on some of the issues with the PMOI and supporting the opposition parties. In particular, I continue to be very concerned about the people in Camp Ashraf and the so-called Camp Liberty, and the desire for them to have some freedom

and to be able to move from there. Clearly, from what I have seen in the work that I have done, it's been the women, led by Mrs. Rajavi, who have always shown the leadership. So if President Rouhani is concerned, he should be. But President Rouhani has still continued to execute in the last while far more people under his jurisdiction than previous people in his position.

Is the pressure really getting to him to pay attention to the fact that the world is watching what they're doing?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: Your question is about execution, and not about Camp Ashraf, right?

Hon. Judy Sgro: No, it's about both. You can comment on both of them. I only have so much time, so please....

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: Yes, unfortunately in Iran's Islamic penal code, capital punishment is there and even they use it for drug smugglers, and so many of those executions have been used against drug smugglers and other varieties of things. As I said, this has been handled by the judiciary system. Of course, putting pressure on Rouhani's government, on the government in Iran in general, would to some extent make the government accountable. But I don't believe Rouhani technically can do anything on issues where he does not have power. The situation requires responsibility and power.

On the issue of Camp Ashraf, I think the best way to solve the issue is to first convince the leadership, Maryam Rajavi and others, to either accept them both...because as I've been following this, they want a camp in another country. They don't want people to be divided into different countries.

I think they have to solve that first, and all countries have to give asylum status to those who live in Camp Liberty. I doubt that the Iraq government would accept them there. In terms of humanitarian assistance, I think also Canada can help by lobbying and negotiating with various countries in terms of the situation in Camp Ashraf. If every country accepts—I believe that 3,000 people are still out there and distributing these 3,000 people around the world is an important task that can be done.

● (1350)

Hon. Judy Sgro: The nuclear issue continues, of course, to be something that we are all watching very carefully. Do you believe that President Rouhani and others are actually negotiating in good faith?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo: I believe President Rouhani does stand for it. They want recognition of a right to enrichment. I talked to so many politicians in Washington, D.C. They understand this, and I think that is part of the final deal. You have to meet somewhere in the middle. Of course, no party can get the whole thing from negotiation.

In Iran just last week there was a conference of supporters of Saeed Jalili, the former chief nuclear negotiator, and they raised grave concern that Iran gave out a lot. So we have one force inside the country. They pushed President Rouhani not to give. On the other hand, the international community also has a legitimate concern over the nature of nuclear programs.

I think maybe the real solution really is recognition of nuclear enrichment but under very heavy supervision and inspection by the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency, and also maybe a sort of international consortium to make sure the program is not going to divert to detonation. That is maybe a permanent solution.

If that is still part of the negotiation in a comprehensive agreement, I think, yes, genuinely President Rouhani can continue. Otherwise, unfortunately, this is just an order. At any time the Supreme Leader can stop him or ask him to go in another direction.

The point is, if the international community can close this negotiation within a timeframe of six months, that would be the best option to address the international communities under negotiation. Otherwise there might be a chance of President Rouhani being more under pressure, and then we don't know what will happen next.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Ms. Bryan, did you want to comment?

The Chair: You're over by about two minutes, Madam Sgro. I'm sorry about that.

We do have to cut short the time for the other questioners. I can only give you four minutes each in order to accommodate the time constraints we face.

Mr. Schellenberger.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Ms. Haghghatjoo, is the law of the land in Iran sharia law or some sort of sharia law?

• (1355)

Dr. Fatemeh Haghghatjoo: The Guardian Council has been there to make sure that legislated bills are not a gain in sharia law. Sometimes even if a law becomes a gain in sharia law, there is the expediency council that would arbitrate in favour of public interests. But in general, yes.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: If there are gains to a more democratic and human rights friendly country, what's to say the Supreme Leader may respond with force? An election or so ago, the country seemed to be going a little more in the right direction, and then there was force put on the people.

Dr. Fatemeh Haghghatjoo: I am sorry. Can you rephrase it? I couldn't understand.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: If there were democratic gains made in the country....

Dr. Fatemeh Haghghatjoo: Yes.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: If there were human rights benefits, and the Supreme Leader doesn't think this should happen, does he then put force on the electorate, on the people?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghghatjoo: I think if democratic forces were to be more powerful, they could gain a majority in public and in institutions and the real power of the Supreme Leader would shrink. That is the idea for having a pragmatic way of giving more room to a democratic government. But in general, I believe to have a democratic country we really have to change the constitution.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Ms. Bryan, I have a question.

Do you feel that your organization is making a positive difference in Iran? Can you state how you would measure that success?

Ms. Shari Bryan: That's a very difficult question to answer.

I think we are having a positive impact on the margins. We cannot operate inside the country, so we are working with individuals outside the country and using technology to engage citizens over the Internet. Given the security concerns and the risk that citizens are at internally, it's very difficult to have a robust engagement, which we would have in most countries that we work in.

I think the gains that we see, while they are on the margins and they may be small, are very important in the long run. I think that's the message for the international community, that there must be engagement, whether it's on the margins or not.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Benskin, please.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Witnesses, thank you for your testimony.

I'm the newest member to this committee, so it's been quite a learning experience on many levels. I thank you for sharing your thoughts and your insight with us.

You had mentioned a couple of times, in terms of the international community helping to make a difference, that it is important that the international community maintain pressure going towards 2016 in order to help facilitate the changes that need to happen in Iran.

What type of pressure are you envisioning?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghghatjoo: That's a good question.

First of all, practically, there's working to make sure that in the October version of the universal periodical review of human rights, the issue of Iran's human rights will be addressed. For that, I believe that your country should work by July.

Also, your country can ask other countries to put requests for Iran to allow international observers inside the country, even though Iran may not accept. That would have a direct impact on having a sort of competitive election. Still it's far beyond a free election.

Second, Iran could be asked to take a small, but effective measure, such as publicizing the result of each polling station. This is very simple. That would prevent systematic fraud. Also, we should empower citizens to monitor and report fraud.

Technically, it's asking Iran to be transparent, and even if Iran doesn't want to change discriminatory laws, holding transparent elections is important.

This pressure should come through Canada, through the European Union, in any negotiations on human rights issues. This issue should be brought up with Iran's diplomats around the world. In general, there should be political pressure. Use all diplomatic means to address the issue of free elections inside the country.

•(1400)

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Ms. Bryan—and either one of you can answer this—you brought up the fact that the communications you have or the dissemination of information is happening through the use of electronic media. So I guess I would ask both of you, how much access does the general public in Iran have to the Internet, to web-based media, web-based news and information?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghightjoo: Actually, for that, in general there is access, but it's very slow. One solution that Iranian activists who are experts in ICT suggested is giving access to the population to the Internet via satellite. That, if I am correct, needs real funds. If that is a multi-nation project to provide the Internet via satellite, I think that would assure Iranians access to information. The dissemination of information is a basic tool and means for creating a democratic government. I think this is one of the most important projects supporting a democratic Iran inside the country, Internet via satellite.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Do I have time?

The Chair: You are actually over your time, but Ms. Bryan hasn't had a chance to respond yet.

Ms. Shari Bryan: I would just agree with what Fatemeh said.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

You're actually quite a bit over your time, Mr. Benskin. I appreciate your conscientiousness in asking, rather than launching into another question, which is so often what occurs. Not that I'm pointing fingers at anybody whatsoever.

To our guests, I want to thank you very much for attending today. This has been very useful testimony for us. As you may be aware, we've been monitoring in this subcommittee the situation in Iran, with particular reference to the status of women and the ongoing struggles that you have in your country, for a number of years now, and your update is very helpful to us. Thank you very much indeed.

Before you go, Mr. Sweet.

•(1405)

Mr. David Sweet: I think this may be a desire of all my colleagues. I know that we've finished the questioning, but do either of the witnesses know of an update they can give us on Shirin Ebadi?

The Chair: Did you hear that question?

Dr. Fatemeh Haghightjoo: An update on Shirin Ebadi?

Mr. David Sweet: Yes.

Dr. Fatemeh Haghightjoo: The last time I met her was in February to support resuming the mandate of Dr. Shaheed, because it was very important for us. So we went and we met so many delegations in Geneva to make sure that on Iran's statements they are going to address different issues, including execution because the rate has been up.

Shirin Ebadi has been so active and is a great icon for Iranian women, addressing human rights issues. She travels around the world, but mostly she is in Europe.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thanks for the indulgence.

The Chair: It's quite all right.

Thank you, Ms. Bryan. Thank you, Dr. Haghightjoo.

Ms. Shari Bryan: Thank you very much.

Dr. Fatemeh Haghightjoo: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and all members of the committee and of the audience. Thank you for this opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you.

We are adjourned.

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