

Why Human Rights Abuses in Iran Should Concern People Everywhere by John Weston MP

Abstract

Canadian politician John Weston MP gives his case for the international community's engagement with human rights in Iran. He gives four reasons based on fundamental values; shared roots of human rights and security problems; threats to human rights activists and their families both abroad and in Iran; and the damage to the vitality of the Iranian diaspora. He supports both the current stance of the Canadian Government and the case for sanctions on the regime.

Biography

John Weston is the Member of Parliament for West Vancouver – Sunshine Coast – Sea to Sky Country, where most of the February 2010 Winter Olympics were held. An international lawyer by training, he earned his Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws from Harvard University and Osgoode Hall Law School respectively. He spent over ten years practicing law in Asia. He is a member of Canada's governing Conservative Party, led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Why Human Rights Abuses in Iran Should Concern People Everywhere

Background

Iran is a long way from Canada and the plight of Iranians who suffer under the Government of Iran may seem a remote problem for people from other countries. However, human rights abuses in Iran threaten the peace and security of people elsewhere, presenting a problem that must be tackled, not just for the sake of justice, but also for the peace, order, and good government of Western democracies.

Canada's responses to the Iranian Government, including the recent round of sanctions imposed by Canada and other countries, relate to Iran's nuclear, missile, chemical, and biological weapons programs. As discussed below, it is not a coincidence that the Iranian Government sanctioned by the UN, is a government guilty of a pattern of committing human rights abuses against its own people, an issue on which Canada has consistently focused the world's attention.

I was elected in Canada's most recent federal elections, in October 2008, in the riding called "West Vancouver – Sunshine Coast – Sea to Sky Country". Along with the fame associated with hosting most of the February 2010 Winter Olympics competitions, our area is home to one of the largest numbers of persons in Canada who claim Iranian background. Official estimates range up to 300,000, in terms of the number of residents who claim such background; the numbers range between 2,500 and 5,000 in the riding I represent. In the course of my parliamentary duties, I often advocate for persons of Iranian background inside and outside the House of Commons.

Four Reasons to Take Iran's Human Rights Abuses Seriously:

1. It's the Right Thing to Do

Some people argue people around the world must stand up for the rights of oppressed Iranian people simply because it is the right thing to do. German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and Nazi resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer, paraphrasing fellow Nazi resister Martin Niemöller, put this argument with his ringing indictment of passivity:

First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they

came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me.

Bonhoeffer believed that we have a duty to stand up for our “neighbour”, whoever and wherever that person may be. Oppression knows no boundaries. As Edmund Burke wrote, evil abounds when good people do nothing.

2. Human Rights Abuses and Illegal Weapon Warfare Programs Hatched from the Same Government

People like Bonhoeffer and Burke might say that we have a duty to help people in Iran simply because “it’s the right thing to do”. Reasonable people might disagree, concluding that such matters are an internal affair, the business of the people of Iran. But even those who would adopt a more isolationist policy have other reasons to oppose the policies of the Iranian Government. Iran is a threat to international and regional peace and security. The combination of Iran’s human rights practices, its weapons programs, its democratic deficit and its support for listed terrorist entities make it a special and dangerous case. Promoting human rights is the only way to encourage internally generated and responsible changes in governance which in the long run offer the only real chance of changing Iran’s domestic, foreign and security policies.

As elaborated below, the most recent sanctions flow from Iran’s failure to comply with UN Resolution 1929, passed by the UN Security Council in June 2010, which deals with Iran’s nuclear proliferation programmes. Human rights are not referred to in the Resolution. Some critics of these sanctions wrongly suggest that, by failing to cite human rights abuses, the countries imposing the sanctions have ignored the human rights abuses. However, imposing sanctions relating only to the four indicated programmes of the Iranian government is a step consistent with the condemnation of Iran in other forums for its human rights violations. Governments which imposed sanctions pursuant to Resolution 1929 undoubtedly found it easier to focus on those four programs in order to coordinate their actions rather than try to reach agreement on a broadened array of issues.

3. The Iranian Government is Intimidating People Outside Iran and Threatening Their Families Back Home.

The award-winning autobiographical book and later film *Persepolis* depicts the tragic story of a young Iranian woman whose uncle is executed by Iranian authorities in contemporary times. She is an only child, beloved by her parents, who help her go to Europe to study and work, as many Iranian parents do. The young woman suffers through unrequited love affairs, develops a drug dependence; and ends up on the streets, estranged from her family. The moving story shows how human rights abuses affect a broader circle of persons beyond those imprisoned or executed. The implication of *Persepolis* is that a whole society is tainted.

Those touched by the executions, the torture, and the imprisoning of Iranian people for political reasons, comprise a broad and widening circle. Certainly, family members and friends in Iran fall under this group. But, as surprising as it may be to most Canadians, people of Iranian background in Canada often express a fear that the Iranian government will punish dissidents of Iranian background, regardless of where they are.

When I organised a Canadian National Tour for the 2003 Nobel Peace Laureate Dr. Shirin Ebadi, formerly one of Iran’s first female judges, many people of Iranian background expressed their desire to hear Dr. Ebadi’s address – but feared to be seen publicly to associate with an acknowledged dissident. You might have expected such fear in Tehran – but in Vancouver, Toronto, and Ottawa?

4. The Health, Welfare and Productivity of the Iranian Diaspora are Being Steadily Eroded

In his book, *Trust: The Social Virtues and The Creation of Prosperity*, Francis Fukuyama draws an analogy between the "juice" that makes the commercial world progress, that is, financial capital, and what makes the social world progress, that is, trust. If you take at face value that people of Iranian background in Canada and other countries are divided by fear and anxiety arising from events in Iran and the concern that the Iranian Government may be watching their actions, their community must be paying a price. Fear propagated through a community corrupts trust and undermines progress. The Persian Empire, has a noble history dating back thousands of years. People of Persian background have made great contributions to "humanity and, particularly, Canadian culture". What more could the community accomplish, absent such fear and anxiety?

Response of the Canadian Government

The Government of Canada has acted formally on many fronts to condemn the Government of Iran at the United Nations and elsewhere, all the while expressing its support for the Iranian people and their democratic aspirations.

Canada has adopted a Controlled Engagement Policy, which limits its political and economic relations with Iran. For example, under the Policy, there are no direct air links between the two countries and no new Iranian consulates beyond those already established in Canada.

On May 17, 2005, Canada tightened its Controlled Engagement Policy. Official contacts between Canada and the Islamic Republic of Iran were limited to four subjects:

- the human rights situation in Iran;
- Iran's nuclear program and its lack of respect for its non-proliferation obligations;
- the case of Mrs. Zahra Kazemi, allegedly tortured and killed in an Iranian prison in 2003 and other consular issues; and
- Iran's "role in the region".

Iran's "role in the region" includes its relationship with Israel, with Hamas, and with Hezbollah. For seven consecutive years, and with the support of its like-minded partners, Canada has successfully sponsored a resolution on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran at the UN General Assembly. The adoption of these resolutions send a strong signal to the Islamic Republic of Iran that the international community remains deeply concerned by its deteriorating human rights situation.

During the Fall 2009 session of the United Nations General Assembly, Canada demonstrated its opposition to the policies of Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad by refusing to attend the President's address to the United Nations. Representatives of other countries walked out of the address when President Ahmadinejad began to condemn Israel but Canada had simply refused to have a representative there in the first place.

Canada's condemnation of Iran's human rights record crosses party lines. In a rare show of unity in our minority parliament, I was honoured to muster consent of the House of Commons in June 2009, in favour of a resolution I moved in support of the democratic rights and aspirations of the people of Iran.

I organised the Shirin Ebadi National Tour of April 2010, acting in my role as Member of Parliament. People of Iranian background of various political sympathies assisted me in organising the Tour,

which featured her moving speeches to audiences in Vancouver, Toronto, and Ottawa. In Canada's capital, she made a special appearance before the House of Commons Sub-Committee on Human Rights, met one-on-one with the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Minister of Citizenship & Immigration; and participated in an expert panel discussion on, among other things, human rights in Iran. Dr. Ebadi's National Tour helped to unify all Canadians, especially those of Iranian background, and increased knowledge about human rights abuses in Iran, and their effect on people around the world.

Sanctions

The international community is increasingly unified in condemning the Government of Iran for pursuing reckless, hostile policies. UN Resolution 1929, passed in June 2010, and other UN resolutions have called for Iran's compliance with its international nuclear obligations. Soon after the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1929, with the support of Russia and China, the governments of Canada the EU, US, and Australia followed with robust sanctions, built on sanctions already in place.

The Government of Canada is consistent in promoting human rights around the world, whether by opposing the Iran Government's nuclear and weapons programmes or by opposing individual human rights abuses in Iran. In consultation with like-minded countries, Canada implemented new sanctions against the Government of Iran, operating under its Special Economic Measures Act (SEMA). The new sanctions commenced on July 22, 2010. Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lawrence Cannon both issued statements at the time (<http://www.johnweston.ca/sanctions>).

The Government of Iran is increasingly out of step with basic values that cross countries, governments, and cultures, including its own constitution and Islamic values. Canadians stand together, hoping for a happier day for Iranian people. We do not desire to hurt the average Iranian citizen but acknowledge that the alternatives to sanctions would be much worse for all humankind.

Hope for the Future

Iran has a proud democratic heritage. Observers often refer to the culmination of democracy in Iran under Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, in 1953, when he lost his role. The emphasis in Persian society on education and entrepreneurship has made Iran a country of urbane people, who are naturally open to democratic aspirations, to playing a positive role in building a peaceful, productive world. Iran is in fact a logical centre for the promotion of freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. Current policies of the Government of Iran frustrate those things and foster great ills in Iran and throughout the world. Looking ahead in Iran, it is easy to envision a perilous descent into chaos occasioned by a government that abuses human rights and fosters illegitimate programmes to propagate missiles, nuclear arms, chemical weapons, and biological warfare. But we must never forget an alternative, loftier vision of a Persian people who are an engine of dynamic economic, cultural, social, and scientific growth in Iran, and throughout the world. As Martin Luther King said, "Let freedom reign, and let justice roll down like a river!"