

Four Steps to Ensuring Human Rights Prevail in Iran

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Nasrin Sotoudeh may not yet be an international household name -- but she deserves to be. An Iranian political prisoner now in her third year of imprisonment (much of which has been spent in solitary confinement in the notorious Evin prison), she is the embodiment of the struggle for human rights in Iran and the symbol of the Iranian regime's massive domestic repression -- a widespread and systematic assault on the rights of its own people, arguably constitutive of crimes against humanity.

Indeed, if Neda became an iconic symbol of the murderous Iranian suppression of the Green movement in the aftermath of the fraudulent elections of June 2009, Nasrin Sotoudeh emerged for Iranians as the iconic lawyer defending the hundreds of Iranian citizens arrested, detained, tortured, imprisoned and executed for nothing other than exercising their rights to peaceful expression -- until she too became a political prisoner in September 2010.

Nasrin's courageous human rights advocacy has highlighted and exposed the brutality of Ahmadinejad's Iran. Indeed, even among the remarkable individuals who have dared to confront the Iranian regime, Nasrin Sotoudeh stands out for her courage and determination. In the words of Sharin Ebadi, the Iranian Nobel Peace Prize laureate and one of Ms. Sotoudeh's former clients, "Nasrin is fearless in taking on tough cases that other lawyers would carefully avoid."

Her advocacy has included being a leader in the struggle for women's rights amidst the persistent and pervasive assault against women; a leader in the struggle against child executions, while Iran has executed more minors per capita than any other country in the world; a valued defender of journalists and bloggers at a time when Iran has jailed more journalists and bloggers than any other country in the world; and a lawyer to other Iranian lawyers who themselves became political prisoners. Indeed, Iran has jailed more than fifty of its lawyers and Nasrin was a courageous lawyer for political prisoners until becoming one herself.

Recently, the European Parliament awarded her and acclaimed Iranian film director Jaffar Panahi its most prestigious human rights recognition, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. In the words of Martin Schulz, the President of the European Parliament at the time: "The award is a message of solidarity and recognition to a woman and a man who have not been bowed by fear and intimidation and who have decided to put the fate of their country before their own."

Nasrin Sotoudeh's arrest and conviction -- on vague and trumped up charges of "propaganda against the regime" and "acting against national security" -- are reflective of the criminalization of innocence in Iran in proceedings devoid of any due process or semblance of legality. This is yet another case-study of the assault on the rule of law in Iran.

And so, the question becomes what can be done on her behalf and on behalf of other prisoners of conscience, let alone the victims of the massive Iranian assault on human rights.

First, it is the duty of parliamentarians and others to expose, unmask, and condemn Iran's massive domestic repression -- what the great Soviet dissident Andre Sakharov called "the mobilization of shame against the human rights violator." The international preoccupation with the Iranian nuclear threat -- while understandable -- has had the effect of marginalizing, ignoring, or otherwise sanitizing the horrific human rights situation.

Second, we must call for the unconditional and immediate release of all political prisoners, support the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, and continue to hold Iran accountable for its breach of international resolutions and Iran's own laws.

Accordingly, I have organized with U.S. Senator Mark Kirk the Inter-Parliamentary Group for Human Rights in Iran to support the courageous men and women on the front lines of the struggle for human rights in Iran. In that regard, we have initiated the Global Iranian Political Prisoner Advocacy Program, whereby parliamentarians "adopt" individual prisoners and internationalize advocacy on their behalf.

Third, we must call upon Iran to cease and desist from its persecution and prosecution of women and religious minorities -- such as the Baha'i -- and to end its barbaric practice of executing minors.

Fourth, we must call for enhanced and enforced sanctions against the major Iranian human rights violators and to hold Iran accountable for its breach of international human rights treaties as well as its own laws in the persecution and prosecution of its citizens.

When confronted with a regime as violent and despotic as the one currently in place in Iran, simply speaking out about abuses may seem like too feeble a response. However, there is clear evidence that denunciation and international pressure can have a positive effect. Nasrin Sotoudeh's sentence, for example, was commuted from eleven to six years as a result of international protest. We must therefore continue to advocate on her behalf until she is safe and free.

It is our responsibility to stand with the people of Iran, to champion their case and cause, to let them know that the world is watching -- that they are not alone -- and that their just struggle for human rights and human dignity will prevail.