



The world must expose the scandal of Iranian detainees

Alex Chalk

As Iranian diplomats are seen by millions across the world being expelled from London, Nasrin Sotoudeh remains in solitary confinement in the notorious Evin prison in Tehran. The lawyer, and mother of two young children, has been held since September last year having been accused of “propaganda against the State”. Even if she survives prison (she has been on two hunger strikes), she will be barred from leaving Iran.

There can be little doubt that Britain’s expulsion of Iranian diplomats was a justified response to a shocking episode of destruction; but it is striking that one incident of thuggery has aroused far greater outrage than the immediate and appalling suffering of Iranian citizens.

The world must highlight more forcefully the conditions of Iranians in detention. Proposed US restrictions on the Iranian central bank and an EU oil

Expelling diplomats is unlike freeing activists, which inspires millions

embargo need to be aimed not solely at persuading Iran to abandon its suspected nuclear weapons programme, but also to free its growing band of prisoners of conscience.

Ms Sotoudeh’s case is particularly stark. On August 29 last year her home and office were raided. Days later she was arrested and held captive in Evin prison where she has remained. After a brief “trial” in January, she was convicted of “propaganda against the State” and “membership of the Centre for the Defence of Human Rights” — an organisation set up by Dr Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate. She was imprisoned and banned from leaving Iran.

Behind the trumped-up charges, Ms Sotoudeh’s principal offence appears to be promoting the rights of women and children. She has defended juveniles facing the death penalty and was one of the first members of the “One Million Signatures Campaign”, which aims to change laws that discriminate against women. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has recently called for her immediate release. It says that her imprisonment is “arbitrary” and in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The release of prisoners such as Ms Sotoudeh, while important in its own right, also serves a wider strategic significance. Unlike sanctions or the expulsion of diplomats — which totalitarian regimes are skilled at manipulating to their own advantage — securing the freedom of brave activists willing to speak out has the effect of galvanising the millions of Iranians determined to build a fairer, future for their country. It shines a light on the regime’s brutality and exposes its hypocrisy to its own people. Ultimately, the regime fears that more.

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