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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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● (1310)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

[*Translation*]

This is the 33rd meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

[*English*]

It is October 27, 2009. We continue our investigation into human rights in Iran. We have two witnesses today. Mojtaba Mahdavi is a professor in the department of political science at the University of Alberta; Renee Redman is the executive director of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center.

I invite both of you to begin your testimony. Whoever would like to start can do so.

Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi (Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Alberta, As an Individual): Thanks for inviting me. It's a great pleasure to be here.

We are here to see how we can help Iran's democratic movement. That's the basic concern and question. For that reason, let me briefly say a few words about the nature of Iran's democratic movement as I see it. Then I will be more than happy to have a dialogue with you in the question-and-answer part.

What is happening these days is an authentic grassroots, bottom-up, social and political movement for democracy and human rights. It's a civil rights movement. It's not a velvet revolution; it's not even a revolution. It's a truly authentic social-political movement, and a popular one. This movement is at least a century old in Iran. It began with the 1905 Constitutional Revolution. In the 1950s came Mossadegh's movement for establishing a parliamentary democracy and nationalizing the oil industry; in 1979 came the anti-despotic movement, and then the 1997 reform movement, and just recently the unprecedented and unique green movement of June 2009.

We are all aware of this great history, but let me share a few words with you on the major lessons one needs to learn from such an impressive wave of democratic movement.

The first lesson is that Iran has always been at the forefront of progressive movements in the Middle East, and I think this is very important. Iran has always been a pioneer of change, of radical paradigm shift, in this region. In 1905 Iran was the first country in the region to fight for a constitutional monarchy. In the 1950s, Iran, under the leadership of Mohammad Mossadegh, had the first anti-colonial nationalist movement in the region and established a secular liberal democracy. In 1979 the great revolution brought together all forces against the Shah's despotism and imperialism.

Of course, post-revolutionary politics were different. In many ways, post-revolutionary politics betrayed the actual goals of the revolution. In 1997 the children of the revolution actually challenged the authorities, the Islamic Republic of Iran; basically, they challenged the authority in the electoral process. It was the first attempt, a very peaceful attempt, to challenge the Islamic hard-liners. Recently, in June 2009, once again the people used the only possible venue to voice their minimum demands, and we know what happened then.

This is simply to suggest that we have at least a one-century-old movement for democracy, human rights, and social justice in Iran, so this is not simply new.

The second lesson, very briefly, that one needs to draw from Iran's waves of democracy and democratization is that, in my opinion, the solution comes from within. We should really believe in the people. Unfortunately, if we look at the history of Iran, in many cases, if not all, most often external forces were, if not destructive, not really helpful to the waves of democratic movement in Iran. There were Russia and Britain in 1905; Britain, the U.S., and the Soviets in the 1950s; the United States in the 1970s; the United States under President George Bush and the neo-conservatives in 1997; and in 2009 there were other external forces.

The *realpolitik* of some western countries that simply don't care much about democracy and human rights as a first priority when it comes to economic and political interests are definitely a major obstacle. It's good to know that it was neither the President George Bush regime change policy, economic sanctions, nor even boycotting the election that contributed to this democratic movement. It was people's participation, and people's participation from within will guarantee the success of this movement.

So if this is the case, we should say no to military attacks on Iran by western countries or even hard-liner Israelis. We should say no to economic sanctions on Iran, because they would simply be a collective punishment. In any kind of military attack the first casualty would be the Iranian people and the democratic movement, because the hard-liners would simply use this militarization of politics and play the nationalist card.

We should say yes to putting human rights on the agenda of the negotiations and dialogue with Iran. The focus and attention should not be on Iran's nuclear ambitions or the regime's rhetoric toward Israel and even the Holocaust, because that is exactly what the hard-liners want. They want to shift the focus and attention away from the democratic movement and human rights to a more nationalistic agenda.

In my view, the west should not play in this field and should not play with this card of the hard-liners. I understand this is difficult, but that's the first and foremost priority of Iran. The Iranian democratic movement needs the social, moral, and spiritual support of western society's governments and NGOs. But it will be harmed by any kind of military attack or economic sanction.

I should stop there. I will be happy to share my thoughts with you on the questions asked.

● (1315)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor.

Madam Redman, would you like to begin?

Mrs. Renee C. Redman (Executive Director, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center): Thank you very much for inviting me.

I am the executive director of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, and I have submitted a statement, but I wanted to say a few words as well.

We are right now in the throes of an investigation while preparing a report on the human rights abuses that followed the June 12 presidential elections in Iran. While the human rights situation has fallen from the headlines and we are not seeing massive demonstrations—in the west, anyway—it continues, and in fact there's reason to believe that the human rights situation has become worse since June and July.

There is not much reliable information right now, as I'm sure you know. Foreign journalists are essentially barred from operating within Iran. Domestic journalists are being arrested, and we have received word that many are on their way out of the country. Some have already managed to leave the country. This is not a good sign.

In September, three organizations that were investigating prisoner abuses were closed down: the Association to Defend Prisoners Rights, as well as the two campaign offices of the two major opposition figures, Mousavi and Karoubi.

We see four areas of concern right now. These are not new to Iran, and that's one thing I'd like to say, that how the Iranian government is reacting to expressions of dissent and calls for more democracy is not surprising. These are methods that they've used since the revolution—and probably before. The four areas are the demonstrations, the arrests and imprisonments, the trials, and the executions.

The demonstrations, of course, went on pretty much until the end of July. There have been a few after that. They were brutally put down: people were killed, people were hurt. The Government of Iran states that 27 people were killed in connection with the demonstrations. Reliable sources put the number at 72. We believe it's probably actually much greater than that.

Many demonstrators were arrested. However, other people were also arrested and continue to be arrested. Journalists were arrested; lawyers were arrested; leaders of human rights organizations, women's rights organizations, and Kurdish rights organizations were arrested; and students were arrested. Recently, earlier this week, 60 members of the Islamic Iran Participation Front were also arrested. This is not even a party; it's an opposition movement. So we're still watching these arrests go on.

Once people are in prison in Iran, the political prisoners are subject to very harsh conditions, often including torture. They're interrogated. They spend lengthy periods in solitary confinement. They often are not allowed to speak with their lawyers or their families. We're seeing a lot of pleas and demonstrations lately by family members and lawyers asking to have contact with their clients.

People do die in prison in Iran on a fairly regular basis, I hate to say it, for lack of medical care and because of the treatment they've undergone.

Many people are forced to confess. That is the goal of a lot of these treatments. And there have been, of course, a series of demonstrators and other activists “confessing” on Iranian television. Many of them, even after they confess, are still kept in prison.

We saw, beginning on August 1, some mass show trials. On August 1, a trial of about 11 men was shown on state television. It was a picture of men in pajama-like prison outfits, looking emaciated, some dazed and some confused. A document called an indictment was read. It wasn't a legal indictment as we or the Iranian judicial system would recognize, but more of a political statement about their fomenting velvet revolutions and corresponding with foreign human rights organizations and foreign governments.

The second trial took place on August 8. It was much the same event. There was a second indictment.

After that, apparently the show trials did not have the desired effect and they have not been public since then. We believe there have been three sessions after the initial sessions at the beginning of August. However, people have been sentenced.

The first sentences came down last week. The first four were for executions, and those sentences were not for demonstrators. Three of the men had been arrested before the presidential elections. The first three were sentenced to death for allegedly being members of a monarchist movement. One of them, a man named Ali-Zamani, gave a televised confession on Iranian television stating that he had travelled overseas and met with monarchists and had come back to Iran with a goal of fomenting trouble and so forth. But he never did anything and was arrested before he actually did anything.

● (1320)

The fourth person is allegedly a member of the Mojahedin-e Khalq, a movement that has been fighting the Iranian government since the revolution, sometimes violently.

I believe there are about 20 people after that who have been sentenced that we know of thus far. They have various terms for imprisonment and whippings. One, of course, is the Iranian American scholar, Kian Tajbakhsh, who was sentenced to 15 years based largely on the fact that he had at one time received money from George Soros.

Lastly, I just want to mention something that gets lost sometimes in the conversation about the post-election upheaval, which is that executions are not new to Iran. It is the country with the second highest number of executions after China. But these really escalated between the presidential elections on June 12 and President Ahmadinejad's inauguration on August 5. The government announced that it had executed 115 people in that time. It did not name them, so we don't know who they were. At that time, or soon thereafter, a moratorium was supposedly put on executions. However, earlier this month, a young man was executed for a crime that he committed when he was under the age of 18. He was reportedly actually hung by the mother of the young man whom he had killed in a street fight.

So I would urge this committee as well as the Canadian and U.S. governments to not forget about human rights when we are in dialogue with the Iranian government. This situation has not gone away; it's just more underground.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, both of you.

We have 35 minutes left, and if we are very diligent in sticking to our time limits, everybody will get a chance to ask a question, seven minutes for the first round and five for the second.

We begin with the Liberals, and Mr. Cotler.

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

I'm going to put my question to both of the witnesses, although I think the issue was more directly addressed by Professor Mahdavi in a more conceptual sense in his remarks. That is, much of the witness testimony before this committee and much of the discussion outside this committee by decision-makers, policy-makers, scholars, Iranian human rights activists, and the like, has identified four distinct but interrelated threats emanating from what's called Ahmadinejad's Iran. I want to distinguish the latter from the people and public in Iran who are targets of massive domestic repression. I think what you said, Professor Mahdavi, is important in appreciating the century-old, and even longer, civilizational underpinnings of Iran and its important historical role.

The question with respect to these four interrelated threats is what is to be done. I would agree with you that the military option should not be on the table. I would also agree with you—though maybe not fully—and maybe with Ms. Redman as well, by inference, that it's been a mistake in Obama's engagement with Iran, which I support, to focus on the nuclear issue. While I understand the focus and I understand why the nuclear threat, for all the reasons you appreciate, which I need not go into, is seen as being serious enough to focus on, I think it has had the effect of marginalizing, if not sanitizing, the other threats, in particular the massive domestic repression.

Having said all of that, we come to the question of what is to be done. Many of the Iranian human rights people with whom I speak and work—some of whom have appeared before this committee—have in fact said that while initially they did not support sanctions, they now do support sanctions, let us say, since June 12. While initially they felt that Iran had the right, like any other country, to the peaceful uses of atomic energy, they are concerned that what might be called the "serial" violations of UN Security Council resolutions by Iran and its accompanying deceit may have in fact invited the sanctions that would not otherwise be there to hurt Iran.

I was just at part of a conference this morning where two Iranian human rights people made the point that Iran is now at a tipping point. In their view, while the change would have to come from within, this regime change could be facilitated by targeted sanctions, directed not against the Iranian people but against the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, for example, who now control 80%, let's say, of Iranian commerce and the underpinnings of the energy infrastructure, the petroleum industry, and the like. So they are in favour of targeted sanctions directed against the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the companies that help facilitate what the Revolutionary Guards are doing, whether it be the sale of surveillance equipment or the like. These kinds of targeted sanctions may help to bring about what all of us would like to see, an indigenous people's movement that would succeed in restoring Iran to the civilizational roots that are at its core.

That's my question in that regard.

● (1325)

Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi: Thank you very much for a very thoughtful and interesting question.

Here are a couple of points. I see your points on the targeted sanctions. It's different with the blanket kind of sanction that western countries, particularly the United States, imposed on Iraq and other countries, for instance, which was quite destructive. On the targeted sanction, first of all, how can we be sure Russia and China would be a part of this sanction? If they are not cooperating with the sanction, again, it will be irrelevant.

The second point is how we can know what exactly to do about the so-called Revolutionary Guards, companies, or the financial resources. What source of reliable information do we have to get this kind of information and to be really targeted on it, right to the point?

The third point is that I guess any kind of economic sanctions would play into the hands of, again, the Revolutionary Guards, because they have already created a kind of mafia economy, a black market economy. Again, another round of economic sanctions, in my view, will play into the hands of the Revolutionary Guards in different ways, because there is always one way or another to exploit Iran's economic resources and get out of these so-called sanctions. But if we can find, perhaps, specific names or institutions with really, really reliable information, this might have some sort of positive impact on Iran's democratic movement.

On the issue of nuclear policy, if I may say a few words, from the Iranian perspective, I think this is what they simply argue. They suggest Iran has a legitimate right to pursue its nuclear policy for three major reasons. The first one is national prestige. Iran is the regional power, no matter whether shah or sheikh, ayatollah or zellolah, Islamist or post-Islamist governs the country. Iran is a major regional power. It's for this very reason. Nuclear science is the cutting edge of science at this point, and sooner or later Iran needs to get to this point, from the national prestige concern.

The second line of reasoning is for an alternative source of energy. We know that at this point Iran imports refined oil, which is quite a shame for some of the Iranians, they say. Iran is a big exporter, and at this point, thanks to the economic sanctions, and to some extent targeted economic sanctions in the past 30 years or so, Iran desperately needs refined oil. For this reason, they simply think they need another kind of alternative source of energy, and at this point they think that nuclear would be the first and the most important alternative source of energy.

The third line of reasoning for justifying Iran's nuclear policy is the security issue. For the security issue they have three reasons. The first one is that the longest war in the post-Second World War period, the Iran-Iraq war, was imposed on Iran for eight years. Iran was targeted by chemical weapons, and no one really cared about Iranians' complaints during the eight-year war because Saddam Hussein was instrumental in getting rid of the ayatollahs, and of course many western countries and even the Soviet Union were not happy with the Iranian government and they simply didn't care about their demands.

The second security concept, they say, is the fact that under President George Bush the U.S. had a regime change policy—the issue of the axis of evil—and was constantly threatening for regime change. Of course, they simply suggest that Iraq was not a nuclear power but was invaded, whereas North Korea, which was a nuclear power, was safe and was not invaded. So this gives some sort of *realpolitik*, rationalist and realist kind of thinking.

The third line of reasoning on the security issue is—

● (1330)

The Chair: Try to keep that brief, because we're running over our time in this round.

Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi: Sure. This is the last point.

Iran is in a very dangerous neighbourhood. Almost all neighbouring countries are nuclear powers: Russia, China, Pakistan, Israel, and the United States.

They suggest that they do not want to make a bomb; they want to follow what's known as the Japanese option, which is that currently over 30 countries in the world, including Japan, Canada, Brazil, and South Africa, have the capability of making a bomb but they are not necessarily making it. Their logic and rationale is different, and that's their argument.

● (1335)

The Chair: *Madame Thi Lac, s'il vous plaît.*

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Welcome everyone and thank you for joining us today.

Mr. Mahdavi, you spoke at some length about the nuclear industry and I'd like to ask you a question about this subject. In “Iran in the World: The Nuclear Crisis in Context“, a book that you co-authored, Mr. Huntley discusses the unique situation that prevails in Iran and the reasons for the country's nuclear ambitions. He explores this issue from the state's perspective and underestimates the importance of the nuclear program to the country's regional politics. He explores the link between this program and Iranian nationalism.

The program is understandably highly symbolic for Iranians. I know you talked about it at considerable length, but I'd like you to briefly touch on the reasons for this program.

[*English*]

Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi: Thank you.

Very briefly, the issue is nationalism. As I mentioned, this is a great civilization, a regional power, and they really want to be on the cutting edge of science, technology, and political power. For this reason, we know that some political authorities play the card of nationalization of the oil industry—Mohammad Mossadegh, in the 1950s—and make a comparison between oil nationalization and the current nuclear policy. They simply suggest that it's about national prestige, national identity, and security for the state.

Almost all the people, even the opposition, support national rights for having a nuclear capability. No matter whether they are reformists or hard-liners, or even some of the opposition, they suggest this is a national right and that it is based on NPT's articles. They suggest this is a legitimate thing with respect to nationalism.

My point is that Iran has a legitimate right to the enrichment of uranium, but at the same time Iran has a legitimate right to enrich democratic values and institutions. We should not sacrifice one type for the other one. We should follow uranium enrichment, which is a national right, and also enrichment of democratic values and institutionalization of democracy.

Even some realists in the United States suggest that sooner or later the world will be facing a nuclear Iran. Of course, I'm not supporting this personally. I'm a big believer in pacifying the nuclear issue. A nuclear-free Middle East would be the perfect and ideal policy. For the people of Iran, even a great number of the opposition, the nuclear issue is not the first and foremost priority, but at the same time it's a nationalist issue and they support Iran's legitimate right for this.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: My question is directed to both witnesses. Realistically, what kind of influence can Canada have on the Iranian government in the area of human rights, given the current context of the negotiations within the international community on Iran's nuclear program?

[*English*]

Mrs. Renee C. Redman: I'm not privy to the negotiations between Canada and the west and Iran, but I firmly believe, and my organization believes, human rights has to be part of that dialogue. You can't have a negotiation with a country and completely ignore the brutal suppression of any form of dissent within that country.

● (1340)

Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi: I think we need to have a tough dialogue. Military attack is not an option. Economic sanction, at least a blanket economic sanction, is not an option. Boycotting dialogue again is not an option at this point.

We have to be realistic and choose between bad and worse. The bad thing is having dialogue, but the worse thing is just boycotting dialogue. At least with dialogue you have some instrument to put pressure on the Iranian government. Human rights should be the first and foremost priority.

The Chair: Mr. Marston, please.

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

I want to welcome you here today. We're very pleased to hear the comprehensive view you laid out there and the context you put it into.

The members of this committee are going to get tired of hearing this, but I was in Saudi Arabia in 1979 during the revolution. The impact on Saudi Arabia at that time was such that you could literally see the fear in the eyes of the elite people in Saudi Arabia, everywhere you went. When the King moved at all, the guards were tripled. I'm sure they're shaking over there still, to this day.

You mentioned that the supreme leader is unwell. Or maybe I just heard that someplace; I've had 11 e-mails while I've sat here today. It's getting interesting.

But you certainly mentioned a tipping point. If Khameini is ill, is there a natural leader out there anyplace who's going to stand out and galvanize this situation?

From everything we've heard and from what we've seen on the clips that come out of the country, the youth there are far beyond ready. You can see that. They have to be literally beaten back, and in some cases actually destroyed as a result of it. But is there a natural leader?

You've talked about targeted sanctions and the Revolutionary Guard. It brings to mind another question. When I hear Revolutionary Guard, I think solely military-style people. It's beyond that, is it not? It's into the more professional side of the community as well.

Perhaps you could deal with those first. Then I have another quick one.

Mrs. Renee C. Redman: I'll let him address whether there's a natural leader.

I will say, though, that it's more than students who are looking for change. We also see that people who are looking for change are not looking to overthrow the government; they're looking for change within the government structure right now.

Again, we don't know the details, but there is definitely a power struggle going on within the clerical establishment. Much of that is based on old grievances and fights that have happened over the last 30, 40 years. One reason it may be escalating is that Khameini is apparently unwell.

Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi: What is happening in Iran should be analyzed on two levels, a state level and a societal level. At the state level we have factional politics, divisions and power struggles between reformists, conservatives, and even within the conservatives—traditional conservatives versus neo-conservatives in Iran, run by Mr. Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khameini, the leader, who he's aligned with, and the Revolutionary Guard people. On the societal level, as I mentioned, it goes back to over a century ago with demands for democracy and democratization.

What is happening today in Iran is unique in a number of ways. There is an epistemic shift in the discourse of people, which means they simply want a peaceful democratic evolution; they don't want to use violence. They're very civilized, with new and novel methods, and I've learned quite a lot from this new generation. Of course, they don't really descend to any charismatic leader, unlike my generation and even the generation before; they don't need a charismatic leader.

I received a letter from Iran, and I'll just read one sentence from it. It talks about this new generation, this movement, and it says that in the history books of the 21st century, the first chapter will be about them, the Iranians. In the introduction they might write that important events have happened before them, events like 9/11 and wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, but those were the odds and ends of the previous century, with an outdated language, and with 20th century tools—which means airplanes, bombs, and bullets. The letter goes on to say that this is a new thing, and they are true children of their time, 21st century Iranians. It will be written that they were the social movements in which all of them were leaders and all of them were the organizers. The letter went on to describe how a movement without a command centre was acting so well orchestrated, and how amazing this movement was.

At this point, the social democratic movements in Iran are far ahead of Mr. Mousavi and Karoubi, two leaders. At the same time, these people are playing a positive role, and we should really appreciate that.

I don't think we have a charismatic, unique leader at this point, but in the future we may or may not. We will have leaders, and the leaders will come from within, definitely. That's the point. Of course, Ayatollah Montazeri is one great source of irritation, the grand ayatollah who's opposing the current leadership. He may or may not be a potential leader at this transitional moment.

My understanding of the social movement, the current movement, is that we have to be patient. It's not going to solve the issue in a few weeks or months. It takes time, and it will be more and more mature. That's the first thing.

What was the second question?

● (1345)

Mr. Wayne Marston: Really, I don't recall it being so much a second question as a comment as I was going through.

Do I have time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have one minute exactly.

Mr. Wayne Marston: One of the things I was going to question is about the struggle internal to the government. Is that to remove the clerics, or is it just a more aggressive view, perhaps?

Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi: The new thing that's been happening since the 2005 presidential election is that we have a new generation of Revolutionary Guards, military men, who are coming to power. Some people argue that they simply want to change the political structure of the regime and get rid of the clergy, and we'd have a kind of Pakistani-style of authoritarian politics.

In my view, Iran is not Pakistan. This is wishful thinking for these guys. This is not going to happen, thanks to the rich history of the democratic movement. But for some reason some of them really want it. On the other hand, we know how powerful some of these clerics are and we know the power struggle between Iran's neo-conservatives, led by Ahmadinejad and Mr. Khameini, versus traditional conservatives, as well as Hashemi Rafsanjani and others.

I don't think they can get rid of the clerics at this point.

The Chair: Mr. Hiebert, and then Mr. Sweet.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you both for being here today. I really appreciate your testimony.

You mentioned what we should not do as a state, and part of what we're doing as a committee is looking at things we can do. In our report we're looking for recommendations we can make to the government. We've heard a number of suggestions, like sanctions. But on the other hand, people say Iran can get everything it needs through shell companies, importing the products through neighbouring countries. We've heard about dialogue, which is what the U.S. seems to be focusing on. But then other people say it's ineffective and it's a stalling tactic used by Iran. Some people have said we need to use the levers that are available through the United Nations. Other people say that's also a stalling tactic. It's also been suggested that Canada take action through the International Court, I think through the genocide provisions. Maybe we could provide some other support for the democratic movement.

These are the kinds of things we've heard. I'd be interested in knowing what you would recommend Canada do to address the problem of promoting human rights in Iran.

● (1350)

Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi: That's a hard question. My short answer is moral and spiritual support for democratic movements, and, if possible, putting pressure on other fellow western governments to put human rights on their agenda. The first issue really should be human rights, not Iran's nuclear issue, not even Ahmadinejad's rhetoric against Israel or others. These are simply playing in their fields and with their cards.

Mrs. Renee C. Redman: I'd have to agree. I'm not equipped to make suggestions to you as to whether you should encourage sanctions or not. But convincing countries to observe the human rights of their population is, as we know, a long-term effort.

I think one of the most important things Canada can do right now is to not let it fall off a high level of interest. It has to be brought up all the time. I think it has to be brought up in negotiations. I think it also needs to be brought up with the UN. I am not naive enough to think that all of a sudden one speech or one paper is going to change everything. I think it's a long-term effort, and I think Canada is in a good position to continue with that effort.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much for taking the time to be here and for your testimony. I just want to reconcile something.

Mr. Cotler mentioned he was talking to some people knowledgeable about Iran and felt that Iran was at a tipping point. I want to ask you that question, but I want to resolve something in my mind. You said there's a mindset that did not want to overthrow the government, yet both of you are actively working on a democratic movement. This government has no semblance of legitimacy as far as democracy is concerned. Help me to reconcile that, that it wouldn't be an overthrow. It would certainly have to be an overhaul. I'll leave that to you.

And are we at a tipping point in history as far as the Iranian people are concerned?

Mrs. Renee C. Redman: I want to clarify something. My organization is not working for the democratic movement. Our position is that whoever is in power in Iran must observe human rights and that it's up to the people of Iran to decide what form of government they'd like.

He can address the history of Iran. I would just say that Iran has had a lot of revolutions in the last hundred years. This may be another tipping point.

Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi: That's actually a very good question. If you ask the opposition, especially the exiled opposition, monarchies, mujahedeen, or some of the leftists, they will tell you that they simply want to overthrow the regime, get rid of it. But they have not succeeded in the past 30 years or so, and obviously they won't do it from here. It's thousands of kilometres away.

But when you ask the new generation in Iran, the children of the revolution, they will say they're not happy with the social, economic, and political policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thanks to the actual revolution and some of the unintended consequences of the Islamic Republic, you have a new generation, a massive demographic change, a systematic paradigm shift, a new generation who's familiar with everything that's happening in the world.

But they are realists. They do cost-benefit analyses. They want to see what they can do, and they want to set goals. At this point, they are not seeing things in black and white, zero to 100. They're ready to work within the system. For this reason, they voted twice for Mohammad Khatami in 1997. We know that reformists failed to deliver on their promise, thanks to the structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In 2009, they were ready to play within the restricted system. They voted for one of the candidates of the establishment. None of these four candidates was revolutionary or radical. They realized that the regime is not going to tolerate even Mr. Mousavi or Mr. Karoubi. So what they see is this: they want radical change, but they know it's not possible at this point. This is the first thing.

The second thing is that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a hybrid regime. It's a very complex system. It's not a totalitarian regime like North Korea or Saddam Hussein's Iraq. It's not a Stalinist, fascist, or Nazi regime. It's a combination of totalitarian and authoritarian, with some quasi-democratic elements in it. What Mr. Mousavi and Mr. Karoubi and some of the reformists, former President Khatami, really want to do is empower the pluralist and democratic nature of the constitution. Is it possible? I'm not optimistic about this, because the lion's share of power goes to the Vali-e-Faghih, the supreme leader, and the reformists are not really powerful. But they wanted to try it, so they are resolving this so-called contradiction.

● (1355)

The Chair: I had one question that I think you may have partially answered, but I want to make sure I haven't misunderstood. You made reference to people being accused of trying to create a velvet revolution. I assume that was a reference to what happened in Czechoslovakia.

One of our witnesses several months ago described how he had been arrested, imprisoned, and forced to confess to trying to create what he referred to as a “colour revolution”. I wasn't sure if that was a reference to what occurred in Ukraine, with their orange revolution.

Is that what is going on here? We see an opposition trying to do things that were done in other countries. They have a democratic constitution, and they want to see it enforced. It's a revolution in the sense of pushing out a group of people. But is it a revolution in the sense of replacing the constitution or overthrowing it?

Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi: If the velvet revolution means a United States-backed, made-up revolution, rather than an authentic one, if it means a foreign-made uprising, what's happening in Iran is not a velvet revolution. It's an authentic social civil rights movement.

But if velvet revolution means a peaceful evolutionary process that hates violence and wants to empower the good side of the constitution, then this term may be appropriate. What's happening in Iran is not coloured, but it's green. It's not a velvet revolution, but it's a peaceful civil rights movement. It's an authentic movement.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Silva.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Maybe Professor Mahdavi can elaborate further on his thoughts.

I do agree that the reform has to come from within and it has to be indigenous. I do see a paradigm shifting as well, especially with the young people. I think in some large part the Internet has played a great role in terms of informing them of what's happening on the ground that they're not getting from their government.

But I don't buy into the argument that the only thing we can do is moral and spiritual. I rather think we can act more effectively than just prayers on the international scene. I do think there is a moral position that Canada has to take that goes beyond just words.

Taking aside the military option, which is not an option at all, there are the diplomatic and multilateral efforts that we can do. But you have sort of discarded that. I'm not sure why. I'm not sure why you would discount even the multilateral efforts and the diplomatic efforts that can be taken by Canada on that front.

● (1400)

Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi: I wish that international politics were not based on the *realpolitik*. But the fact is, international politics are based on the *realpolitik*, which always means that political and economic interests are the first things. I wish international politics were based on human rights, democracy, and all of these things, but, quite frankly, this is not what we see. Democracy and human rights always come second next to the political and economic interests.

As I mentioned to a colleague here, moral and spiritual support, yes, but of course if Canada can do much to put human rights and democracy as the first and foremost issue, in terms of pursuing countries like the United States or others who have some form of dialogue with Iran, then, yes, we should do this.

On diplomatic boycotts, yes, but look at what's happening now between Iran and Canada. They do not have good relations. I'm not sure how much power Canada has at this point to put pressure on the Iranian government in the absence of any meaningful dialogue or diplomatic relations. I don't know what else we can do but put pressure on governments and the United States—which has some sort of dialogue with Iran—that democracy and human rights should be the first and foremost issue.

The Chair: I'm going to see the clock as being five minutes to two o'clock in order to allow Mr. Sweet to ask an additional question.

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

I don't think I'll need five minutes. I just have one question, but it's another tough one. I thought I'd try to explore this a bit.

We had some testimony previously that indicated some concern about the manipulative nature of this regime in Iran. The concern is that it's using dialogue about the nuclear issue to distract countries that would engage on human rights, that they'd be so happy about being able to have access to Iran on the nuclear, that Iran, the regime, could deal with the opposition with impunity and continue this violent crackdown on human rights. That's my concern.

I know you're pro-dialogue, or at least you mentioned it was the lesser of evils. This is my concern, and I'm asking if you have any input around dealing with such a thing and the manipulative nature of that regime.

Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi: Yes, as you mentioned, that is another tough question. In a tough dialogue, human rights would be the first issue.

On the nuclear issue, I don't know actually. Some people suggest that a nuclear Iran with a nuclear bomb would be immune in the sense that no one could really overthrow Iran if it went nuclear. I personally don't buy this argument because look at what happened to the Soviet Union. Internal dynamism basically overthrew the whole system and regime.

What some of the realists—even in the United States, people like Brzezinski and others—suggest is that sooner or later Iran will be a nuclear power, and let's face it, that is the issue. I don't think they are irrational in the sense that they will do stupid things.

This struggle we have in the Middle East is about the balance of power and who has the monopoly, or the nuclear issue. But when it goes to the dialogue, if the question is that Iran really wants to use dialogue in order to go with its nuclear policy, and gets attention on the democratic and human rights issue, I guess western governments can put human rights and democracy first and foremost on the agenda. Put this on the agenda as the first issue and talk about this. I know this is not going to happen, thanks to the *realpolitik* of international politics. I don't think the nuclear issue should be the weak point of Iran's dialogue with the west. I understand, of course, they are going to misuse it. There is no way we can basically hinder this process, but between bad and worse, let's say we would be having a dialogue in order to put some form of pressure on Iran. Imagine if you simply boycott Iran and we have no dialogue. What source of pressure or instrument would we have to pursue on policy? Would it be military attack or economic sanctions? International courts are what some of the opposition actually, including Akbar Ganji of Iran, are simply calling for, for crimes against humanity.

Is it workable at this point? Is it possible? What sorts of facts do we have at this point? Is it really a genocide happening in Iran? There are different ways. I'm not a lawyer. At this point, I don't know because these terms have their own legal interpretation for definite crimes, and “crimes against humanity” has its own definition. For sure, there have been systematic violations of human rights and crimes against humanity, even if you kill one person, but I don't know even the *realpolitik* at this point. Is it doable at least in the short term? I'm not really an optimist.

Iran's democratic movement is caught between a rock and a hard place, as you say. To some extent, domestically these guys are masters at playing with different cards to consolidate their power and the real politics of international politics and diversity in international politics. Russia and China have their own interests in Iran. For western countries, Europe—versus the United States—has its own interest. At this point, we know that the United States' priority is security in Afghanistan and Iraq, and they need Iran for this dialogue. To some extent they are under pressure by Israeli lobbies on the issue of nuclear policy, because Israel definitely wants to be the only nuclear guy in the Middle East. This means that the issues of human rights, democracy, and all of these are secondary and marginal. This is the difficulty of Iran's democratic movement.

● (1405)

I am grateful to all of you who care about human rights and democracy, and to the Canadian government, which is one of the rare western governments in the world that actually cares about human rights and democracy as an important issue.

The Chair: Thank you.

That concludes this meeting. We've run out of time.

I am grateful, as is the whole subcommittee, to both of you for taking the time to come here at no small inconvenience to you. Thank you.

We are adjourned.

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