



Rouhani's Republic Of Fear

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Will the real Hassan Rouhani please stand up? Since his election last summer - and especially since the start of nuclear negotiations with the West last fall - Iran's new president has become a darling of the U.S. and European diplomatic set. The soft-spoken leader who now serves as Iran's political face is widely viewed as a "moderate" counterpoint to his firebrand predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as well as a guarantor of a much-sought-after nuclear deal with the West.

On the latter point, the jury is still out. Nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 powers (the U.S., the UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany) are continuing apace. But it's far from clear that a durable nuclear settlement, especially one that will be acceptable to both Tehran and the West, is actually in the offing.

Regarding Rouhani's reputation for being a moderate, however, it is already clear that he has not delivered on his promises. To the contrary, despite campaign rhetoric about the need to promote greater human rights and democracy within the Islamic Republic, Rouhani has presided over a deepening wave of state repression during his time in office.

The most conspicuous indicator has been a surge in executions. In 2013, the Iranian regime executed, it is estimated, a staggering 660 people, with two-thirds of those killings occurring after Rouhani took office in August. In the first quarter of this year alone, the Iranian regime killed nearly 200 individuals - the highest pace of state executions in more than a decade and a half. Iranian officials, moreover, aren't shying away from this grim tally; to the contrary, according to Mohammad Javad Larijani, the head of the Iranian judiciary's perversely named Human Rights Council, the international community should "be grateful for this great service to humanity."

Internet repression has also widened. Two years ago, in his Nowruz address to the Iranian people, President Obama warned that an "electronic curtain" had descended on the Islamic Republic, thanks to the Iranian regime's systematic efforts to isolate its citizens from the World Wide Web. Today, those efforts are more frenetic than ever; in the past year, Iran has launched a new Internet filtering program, blacked out a number of social-media platforms, including Twitter and WhatsApp, and convened a new "Supreme Council for Cyberspace" to oversee and regulate online access by its citizens. For these efforts, Iran has been named an "enemy of the Internet" by journalism watchdog Reporters Without Borders.

Iran's beleaguered news media similarly find themselves under fire. Since Rouhani took office last year, several newspapers have been shuttered by the country's judiciary, under various pretexts, including that they were guilty of "spreading lies and insulting the holy precepts of Islam." This state of affairs has imposed a sort of intellectual orthodoxy on journalism within the Islamic Republic. A recent survey of the Iranian press by journalist Hadi Anvari found that up to 60 percent of all content featured in the country's "reformist" media is pulled from sources affiliated with the regime's feared clerical army, the Revolutionary Guards. In other words, Iran's hardliners increasingly control both the conservative and the liberal narrative.

The state of political dissent in Iran is equally telling. Ahead of Rouhani's inaugural speech to the U.N. General Assembly last fall, the Iranian regime made a show of releasing a number of dissidents. That, however, was simply a cosmetic gesture; the U.N. currently estimates the number of "political prisoners" in Iran at 850, while Human Rights Watch and other NGOs believe the number to be higher - perhaps considerably so. Among the incarcerated is Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini, as well as Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi, both of whom served as leaders of Iran's abortive Green Revolution back in 2009.

The West has tended to turn a blind eye to these deformities. Eager for some sort of nuclear compromise with Tehran, Washington and European capitals alike have pinned their hopes on Rouhani as a political leader who is both willing and able to moderate his government's radical policies. The sorry state of civil society in Iran, however, suggests that Rouhani isn't part of any such political solution. Rather, he remains a faithful reflection of the repressive ideological regime established by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini some 35 years ago.

That's a useful fact for the United States and Europe to keep in mind as they pursue nuclear dialogue with the Islamic Republic. It would be a real tragedy if, in their push for détente with Tehran, Washington and European capitals glossed over domestic developments there, and thereby helped to consign the Iranian people to a deepening republic of fear.