

Appeals Court upholds guilty verdict in show trial against Iranian Jews

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On September 21, the Iranian Appeals Court issued its ruling in the case of ten Iranian Jews who last July were given long prison sentences for allegedly spying for Israel. The court felt compelled to drop the charge of espionage, reflecting the contrived character of the case. Nevertheless, it upheld the charge of "cooperation with a hostile state."

The court reduced the prison terms of the condemned, but most still face considerable jail time—from two to nine years. The Appeals Court ruling apparently fell short of US expectations and the State Department issued a restrained protest, saying it was "disappointed" in the decision. However United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan said he was "encouraged" by the ruling.

From the outset the prosecution of the Jews, who reside in the southern city of Shiraz, has been a mockery of due process. The defendants were held incommunicado for 18 months, during which time they were denied contact with lawyers or relatives, and then tried in secret.

The frame-up victims are salesmen, craftsmen, students, teachers and clergymen. None of them had access to material that could have been of interest to Israel. No proof upholding the accusations against them was ever submitted to the public.

The prosecution and trial, which featured televised confessions of some of the accused, was designed to whip up anti-Semitism and thereby bolster support among backward and right-wing sections of the population for the increasingly discredited Islamic fundamentalist regime.

It is a crime in Iran to visit Israel, a trip that family members acknowledge several of the accused had made. Such visits and telephone conversations with relatives in Israel appear to be the only "crimes"

committed by the condemned.

Two days before the Appeals Court verdict, the spokesman for the defendants' lawyers, Ismail Nasseri, said state functionaries had used death threats in an attempt to force the attorneys to "admit" to the alleged espionage activity of their clients.

The Iranian regime made much of the fact that two Muslims were among the accused. The appeal of these two defendants, who were only indicted after there had been an outcry over the anti-Semitic nature of the trial, is yet to be decided. One is an army officer; the other is employed in the armaments industry.

Although they are the only defendants who might, by virtue of their occupations, have had access to state secrets, they received comparatively mild sentences. The initial court claimed the Jews had enticed them with "wild orgies" and then blackmailed them—a typical anti-Semitic cliché.

The trial fostered a pogrom atmosphere against the Jews of Iran. In at least one case, religious fanatics set a Jewish shop alight. According to newspaper reports the numbers of Jews trying to leave Iran rose dramatically.

Islamic fundamentalist gangs like Hisbollah, the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij militia, who recruit their followers from among the most backward and fanatical religious elements, were encouraged by the anti-Semitic show trial to proceed not only against religious minorities, but also against other "hostile and treacherous elements", i.e., to terrorize protesting students and workers. They relied on the cowardice of the so-called "reformers" headed by President Khatami.

Khatami has rejected all criticism of the trial and defended the "independence" of Iranian jurisprudence, which is, in fact, dominated by his right-wing opponents. In recent months the judiciary that Khatami defends has banned the newspapers and magazines of

his supporters, thrown critical journalists in jail and condemned protesting students, while acquitting their murderers in the police and militia.

Despite all this, protests from Western governments and media over the anti-Jewish frame-up have been remarkably muted. The US is seeking to improve relations with Iran in order to compete with its European rivals for access to the country's rich oil resources and markets.

Iran already has close economic and political ties with most Western countries. The German company Linde was awarded the contract to construct the biggest plant in the world for Iranian natural gas. Lucrative orders worth several hundred million marks are either being prepared or have already been sealed with German, British and Italian firms.

Consequently, there is considerable pressure by American companies on the US government to lift its sanctions against Iran. The Iranian “reformers” are also striving to work with the US and achieve the lifting of sanctions. They are supported, although with some hesitation and in private, by their conservative opponents.

In this respect the fate of the unfortunate Jews plays an important role. From the end of August to the beginning of September a large Iranian delegation was in New York for the United Nations summit. A number of deputies from the Iranian parliament, including a Jewish deputy, a female deputy and the speaker of parliament, Mehdi Karrubi, met with Republican and Democratic representatives of both houses of the US Congress, as well as Jewish-American organisations. Afterward the American side indicated the meeting had been “warm and friendly”, and that they were “impressed” by the presence of Jewish and female parliamentarians from Iran. They considered the meeting successful in “breaking the ice” between the two countries.

Karrubi, who also described the meeting as “sincere”, later met with the representatives of American oil companies and together they called for an end to sanctions. Iran's foreign minister Kamal Kharazi was even given permission to visit a number of American universities and meet there with academics and representatives of US oil companies—an unprecedented step for such a high-ranking Iranian government official.

During the UN summit and because of Kharazi's attendance, US Secretary of State Albright made a special trip to a meeting with Iran's neighbour Afghanistan, and afterwards spoke of the “common interest” shared by the US and Iran with regard to drug trafficking in Afghanistan. She also attended a meeting at which Iranian president Khatami spoke on his favourite theme: “dialogue between civilisations.” Khatami and President Clinton listened to one another's speeches.

Nevertheless, attempts to establish closer relations were overshadowed by the trial against the Jews, which a few journalists and demonstrators managed to keep in the public eye. The Clinton administration had said it would do everything in its power to assist the accused. For their part, Khatami and other members of the Iranian delegation defended “independent Iranian justice” while indicating that a lessening of the sentences was possible at the appeal stage.



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