

Australian government exploits Iranian soccer players for pro-war propaganda

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A saga this week, involving the defection of six members of the Iranian women's soccer team to Australia, has been an exercise in political cynicism and staggering hypocrisy on the part of the country's Labor government.

Labor has breached the most basic diplomatic protocols, incited a media hysteria and exploited the women, in an attempt to put a gloss on its active participation in an illegal US war aimed at regime change and the annihilation of Iranian society.

The team was in Australia for the Asia Cup tournament. During their opening match against South Korea on March 2, several team members did not sing the Iranian national anthem.

The Australian media trumpeted that as a "silent protest," and claimed that the women would face dire repercussions if they returned to Iran. When the women sang the national anthem in their next two matches, the media portrayed it as even more alarming, suggesting, without evidence, that they had been pressured to do so.

The transparent aim was to create a hothouse atmosphere. Right-wing elements of the Iranian diaspora mobilised, protesting outside the Gold Coast hotel where the women were staying and calling for them to defect. Politely described by the press as "human rights activists," the most prominent among the protesters were supporters of the Shah, the US-backed dictator overthrown by the 1979 Iranian revolution. These layers enthusiastically support the bombardment of Iran.

Alongside the Iranian fascists in campaigning for the defections were Australian federal agents, mobilised by the Labor government.

As per an account in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), "As the Iranian women's team jogged off the field of the Gold Coast's Robina Stadium on Sunday night, Australian officials were waiting for them. Their purpose was to signal in the strongest possible terms that if any of the young women wanted to talk, there were people standing by to help."

Overnight Sunday, Australian time, US President Donald Trump, the persecutor of immigrants, butcher of Gaza and now of Iran, joined the campaign.

Taking time out from ordering the bombing of Iranian desalination plants, hospitals and schools, Trump took to social media to proclaim himself to be exceptionally concerned about the plight of the Iranian football players and demanded that the

Labor government give them asylum. He called Prime Minister Anthony Albanese at 2 a.m. Monday morning Australian time to convey that.

The ABC account indicates it was sometime in the early hours of Monday morning, Australian time that five members of the team signalled they wanted asylum, i.e., only after the Labor government and Trump himself had placed them at the centre of a global controversy. The women were ferreted away by the Australian Federal Police (AFP).

By Monday evening, they were pictured alongside Labor's Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke. The colourless career politician, who boasts of his "tough" approach to border control, was grinning like a Cheshire Cat, as he signed papers granting the women humanitarian visas and a fast-track to permanent residency.

What Labor did next was even more extraordinary. Burke travelled frantically from Queensland to Sydney, effectively tailing the remaining members of the team, along with AFP officers. When the team arrived at the airport to leave, each member was separated, placed alone in a room with AFP and Border Force officials and "offered" the possibility of defecting.

That was not only a gross breach of diplomatic protocols, targeting Iran. It was also a transparent act of intimidation. Is the public seriously to believe that vulnerable young women, some of whom do not speak English, would have felt comfortable alone in a room with Australian spooks and cops?

The operation secured two further defections. But in an indication of the pressure that was likely applied, one of those women subsequently reversed her decision and said she wanted to travel home.

For Labor, the timing of the defections, which it did so much to orchestrate, was golden.

On Tuesday morning, amid the whole saga, Labor formally joined the war against Iran, announcing the deployment of air-to-air missiles, an advanced command warplane and 85 troops to the United Arab Emirates. It had already been among the most enthusiastic supporters of the war and was a de facto participant, including via the presence of Australian personnel on a US attack submarine that torpedoed an unarmed and defenceless Iranian vessel off the coast of Sri Lanka last week.

Openly joining the war, however, was a significant step, which Labor knew would provoke already substantial anti-war sentiment. In that context, the defections provided it with an opportunity to posture as a “humanitarian” defender of Iranian women, even as it was committing to joining the blitzkrieg of Iran.

An official media that is wholly complicit in the illegal war has dutifully performed its role, hailing the defections and expressing not a shadow of doubt that Burke and co. were motivated solely by a passionate concern for the welfare of the Iranian women.

In addition to the orchestrated and pro-war function of the defections, the media has not raised any of the obvious questions.

To the extent that the women did not want to return to Iran, it may not solely have been for fear of the country’s repressive regime, but also because of the blanket bombardment that is underway.

And what of the Labor government’s attitude to asylum seekers, including of Iranian descent? The latest available Home Affairs figures, from last September, show that 78 of the 1,025 people held in Australia’s “immigration detention” centres are Iranian nationals. Another 46 are in “community detention,” for a total of 124.

These people are deprived of all of their basic rights and are in a state of permanent and unending limbo. Given that they cannot return to Iran, the majority have no prospect of release. That is, the Labor government is imprisoning 20 times more Iranians than the six soccer players it offered refuge to. Burke, as the Home Affairs minister, is the political leader who holds the prison keys.

The ongoing detentions are not an aberration, but a continuation of decades of persecution of refugees by successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike. They have transformed the country into a “model” for attacks on refugees, that is openly cited as an inspiration by authoritarian and nationalist governments around the world.

On Tuesday, i.e., amid its gloating over the defections, Labor extended that record. It announced urgent legislation that would permit the government to bar existing visa holders from certain countries from entering Australia. Labor government ministers openly declared the laws are directed against a surge of refugee applications from people fleeing the war against Iran that it is participating in.

That is part of a broader crackdown, including against citizens. For weeks, Labor has been blocking the return from Syria of 11 women and 23 children—all Australian citizens with valid passports—because of alleged various links to killed or imprisoned Islamic State (ISIS) fighters. The women and children have not been convicted of any crime.

But Burke and other Labor leaders including Albanese have railed against them, for supposedly going against “Australian

values,” effectively declaring on that basis that they have no rights. In granting the visas to the Iranian defectors, Burke was at pains to stress he was confident they would adhere to those purported “values.”

There is more than a whiff of fascism to that line, which presents citizenship and democratic rights as being dependent on “loyalty” to the state and to the government.

That is hardly an exaggeration. The old adage, “A man is known by the company he keeps,” applies in spades.

Yesterday, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a guest opinion piece by Reza Pahlavi which declared that “Australia did something important this week,” presenting Labor’s orchestration of the defections as a benchmark for governments around the world to match in their provocations and war against Iran.

The *Herald* politely described Pahlavi as “Iran’s exiled crown prince.” He is the son of the Shah, the brutal US-backed dictator ousted in 1979. Pahlavi junior has lived as a ward of the American state for most of his life, continuously agitating for US-led regime-change and revelling in the bombardment of his homeland that is underway.

After his first agitated social media post about the Iranian team, Trump reassured his followers that the Labor government would “take care” of the situation and was “doing a good job.”

The son of a dead dictator, pining for his “right” to rule despotically over the Iranian people on the back of US bombs and missiles, and the war criminal in the White House, who is not only setting the world ablaze, but is seeking to establish his own dictatorship through the overthrow of the American Constitution. That is the company that Albanese, Burke and the Labor government keep.

The task is to build a socialist movement of the working class against all of these monstrous forces, including the Labor government, whose lurch to the right is a symptom of a capitalist system hurtling to the abyss. Only such a movement can put an end to war, authoritarianism and establish the fundamental social rights of the working class, to peace, equality and the right to live anywhere in the world, free from oppression and persecution.



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