

Outrage! and the Iran Hangings: Chronicle of a Manipulation

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This article was written in August and was reproduced in several Latin American LGBT media, such as Notigay (Mexico) and Sentido G (Argentina). An edited version was published in the 1-14 September issue of the leftist newspaper *Diagonal* (Madrid). This English translation is based on one that appeared on Indymedia. It has been checked against the Spanish original and amended.

IN MID-JULY of this year a news item was circulated on the internet about two minors who were hanged in the Iranian city of Mashhad for having had homosexual relations. When after some weeks a very different version of the events became available, according to which it appeared that Mahmoud Asgari and Ayaz Marhoni, both above the age of 18, had been sentenced for the rape of a boy younger than themselves, many demonstrations had already been called outside Iranian embassies in various cities, and the Islamophobia of certain gay and lesbian groups had been unleashed.

The email which detonated the international reaction against Iran cited as its source an Iranian student association, and, in another account, a Teheran newspaper. In both cases, the news was dated 19 July and included images of the two boys as they walked to the gallows and as the noose was placed over their heads. At this time the election of the new anti-Western Iranian president was very recent, and the crisis between Teheran and various Western capitals (Washington, London, Paris and Berlin) over the continuation of the Islamic Republic's uranium enrichment plan was about to break out. The British association Outrage, known both for its continuous struggle for the rights of gays and lesbians as well as for its enthusiasm in denouncing any Muslim government, translated the news item and promoted its diffusion over the internet. Coverage of the event in the mainstream media was zero, which unfortunately came as no surprise to gays and lesbians who almost never merit the attention of the international news agencies, regardless of how

bloody may be the cases of state homophobia committed in various countries in the world.

This first account, which was rapidly propagated through the web, stated that the boys were minors and that they had been executed "for the mere fact of being gay". The note included their declarations: "We didn't know it was a crime and thought it was something normal because everyone does it." Within a few days, 200 people were demonstrating in front of the Iranian consulate in Milan, organised by ArciGay and other Italian gay and lesbian and human rights organisations. Outrage called for a demonstration in London. On various gay and lesbian websites and in internet forums promoting sexual freedom, and by means of email messages, people were urged to sign and send letters of condemnation to leading officials in Teheran, always emphasising the homophobic character of the hanging. In subsequent accounts new information was included: in addition to the death penalty imposed on the young men, they had also been sentenced to 228 lashes and the total time they spent in prison was 14 months. Indymedia Beirut, in its "Queer" section, called for several different forms of protest, although – perhaps suspecting where this all might be headed – it specified that "the campaign against these crimes can never serve as a justification for the military invasion of Iran".

The campaign bore fruit in high places: the Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, a high-ranking official in the Swedish government and the mayor of Florence, among others, announced that they would be sending protests to Iranian diplomatic authorities, and they were followed shortly by the

presidency of the European Union. The Dutch government froze expulsion proceedings against Iranians. Even two members of the US congress requested that Condoleezza Rice – whose government is by no means gay-friendly in the policies it adopts towards US gays and lesbians – should investigate the case and clarify the facts.

None of these persons mentioned the fact that the sentence was motivated by the homosexuality of the young men, although they made reference to their (reported) age. Nevertheless, the credit for this outcome undoubtedly goes to the campaign led by gays and lesbians in cyberspace: other recent executions of underage persons by the Iranian regime – there was at least one during the earlier months of 2005 and a minimum of five in 2004 – have produced nothing like this sort reaction.

The first documented investigations of the case appeared online around 25 July, signed by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International. These associations had consulted *in situ* with local human rights organisations and NGOs. In light of this new information, they pointed out that the death penalty was imposed on these young men for the rape of a 13-year-old boy (who, according to some accounts, was coerced at knifepoint and also suffered the theft of his bicycle), that both of the authors of this crime were above the age of 18 at the time of the hanging, and that at least one of them was also over 18 when the crime was committed. The rest of the information from the first accounts remained valid. The hanging of the two young men was still branded as repellent and disproportionate in these new versions, and the signatory organisations called for letters of protest to be sent to Iranian governmental authorities, but they based the case on grounds very different from those of the first calls for condemnation. “It’s not a gay case”, Paula Ettlbrick, executive director of IGLHRC, stated in a 28 July interview.

In subsequent news follow-ups an Iranian lawyer declared that while homosexuality is illegal in Iran, and in the penal code is punishable by various kinds of sentences up to and including the death penalty, this “is never applied in the case of homosexual relations between consenting adults”. Several reports indicated that in Iran women are considered legally adults at age 9 and men at age 15. Some human rights associations requested that protests not focus only upon this case, as the abuses of the Iranian regime are many, and they encouraged protesters to direct the mobilisation against all of these abuses. Between the date of the two young men’s deaths and 2 August, five more people have been hanged in Iran for various reasons, without the slightest condemnation from the international community.

No one denies that the homosexual character of the rape might have been used to increase the sentence, although no source cites any statements to this effect in the judicial ruling, and the possibility is mentioned in some reports as a mere hypothesis. Other sources indicate that another motive for judicial discrimination might have been the fact that Mahmoud and Ayaz both belong to an ethnic minority: in a Persian majority country both of the hanged boys were Arabs. Their families come from the border area with Iraq and, like thousands of other Iranian Arabs, they were forced by the authorities to abandon their homes and to settle in Mashhad (in the north-western part of the country) during the Iran-Iraq war, a policy the Iranian authorities maintained for fear that the Arab minority might ally with the neighbouring country. Mashhad is “the holiest city of Iran”, very conservative, and it was in this city that the two young men were recently tried and executed.

At the beginning of August, an article by US journalist and activist Elizabeth Weill-Greenberg pointed to the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), an organisation based in Paris, as the probable source of the false information. This organisation, according to its own website, advocates opposition to the regime of the ayatollahs by any means necessary – including military intervention – in order to impose in Iran a Western-inspired system of elections and a free-market economic model, backing capitalism and “foreign investment by those industrialised countries which wish to collaborate in the reconstruction of Iran”, measures which from the standpoint of opposition to economic globalisation might be interpreted as a complete dismantling of the country at the hands of Western multinationals. The NCRI has already chosen the person who will preside over the government of the “new Iran” during the “transition period before elections”, who is none other than the president of their own organisation. In the political programme of the NCRI the recognition of the state of Israel is also included.

At this moment the ball seemed to be in the court of Outrage, the main force behind the international protest. It appeared that the easiest thing to do would have been to acknowledge a certain prematurity in their initiative and to reorient their campaign. But despite the evidence contained in the new information, this organisation did not change its position: “We will not give the benefit of the doubt to Iran. We have no reason to believe that this has been a case of rape rather than a consensual relation: perhaps the rape accusation is false and has been promoted by the mullahs in order to undermine the protest’s international support. We all know that it is a homophobic regime.” When asked which sources they relied

upon in maintaining this attitude of suspicion, they shamelessly included “the Iranian opposition in exile”. Outrage maintained the call for a demonstration in front of the Iranian Embassy in London on 11 August, which was attended by around 100 people, while rallies were also held in Dublin, San Francisco, Paris and Montpellier. The group Outrage has great prestige among gay and lesbian organisations around the world due to its long history of struggle against homophobia. However, one of its most controversial actions in recent years consisted in turning up at a Palestine solidarity demonstration in London with placards accusing the Arafat government of homophobia. Also, Outrage has periodically made strong statements against Islam as a whole.

In an interview with an Iranian gay activist conducted by Nikolai Aleksiv of the GayRussia group, and circulated on the internet during this period by the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), the activist points out that strong homophobic repression exists in Iran, exemplified by the closure of 15 gay websites and the non-existence of bars or nightclubs, but that the regime no longer systematically persecutes sexual minorities. He adds: “There are cinemas and parks which serve as meeting places for gay men and, though everyone knows they are there, no strict measures are taken for their eradication.” Sex-change operations are legal and are explicitly supported by the government. The law continues to punish “repeated homosexuality” with the death penalty, but this code is not applied. In the progressive media timid proposals to “respect different lifestyles” occasionally appear. The principal problem which gays and lesbians face in Iran is “lack of information”. The Iranian activist declares that he has not the slightest knowledge of the real motives for the death penalty imposed on Mahmoud and Ayaz.

On 3 August Faisal Alam, a US queer activist from a Pakistani family and founder of the Al-Fatiha group (made up of US queers of Muslim origin), argued in the magazine *Queer* that the campaign of condemnation had been launched without the slightest attempt, on the part of the groups that called for it, to confirm the truth of the allegations, in contrast to the three major human rights organisations which alerted people to the imprecision of the information on which the protests were based. The author, who points to the forces of the Iranian opposition in exile as the promoters of the confusion, suggests the creation of an international network of groups promoting sexual liberty between industrialised countries and those of the “Third World”, in order to avoid misunderstandings of this kind and have access to direct sources of information. This network would also serve to coordinate international

protests in accord with what might be helpful in the countries where the cases of abuse occur – like Iran, in this instance, where the campaign may have involuntarily provoked a worsening of institutional homophobia – and thus avoid effects that are contrary to those intended. Alam places this manipulation within the framework of the growth of Islamophobia in Europe and North America, and of the “Axis of Evil” campaign of the Washington government. Finally, he asks how US public opinion can protest against the death of some presumed minors when their own country does the same – it is one of the only five countries on the planet where this occurs. Of the 21 cases of capital punishment imposed by the state on minors since 2000 throughout the world, 13 have taken place in the United States.

One last nuance that should be added to the initial accounts of the events is the use of Western concepts to describe types of sexuality in other cultures. It is an error to speak of “two gays” to define two young Iranian men around 18 years of age who, if the present information is correct, imposed by intimidation a sexual relationship upon a boy of 13, as this behaviour is perceived as perfectly “heterosexual” within the dominant culture of that country, as long as the perpetrators adopt the active role in the penetration. What is more, far from being a “gay” act, it could even be taken as a homophobic act on the part of the rapists, as it is the “manly man” who can, by violence, “fuck the faggot”. It is possible that the Western LGBT movement, in the name of the rights of gays and minors, is ironically demonstrating in favour of two young heterosexuals who chose this 13-year-old minor as a victim because he was or appeared to be gay.

The sources continue to present a certain confusion at the time of completing this article, and much information remains to be confirmed. The theory that it was the Iranian regime which disguised as a “rape” case a sentence for homosexuality, though it has lost credibility over the past weeks, may yet prove to be true. With the passage of time, however, the theory defended by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and IGLHRC appears to be the most reliable. The anti-Iranian campaign which has been promoted by certain gay and lesbian groups has been based on information that is heavily biased, incomplete and sometimes plainly untrue. It certainly appears to be a premeditated exercise in misinformation. Also suspicious is the warm reception of these mobilisations on the part of conservative parties and groups which have never defended gay and lesbian rights, or have even promoted openly homophobic initiatives, like the Republican Party in the United States. Unfortunately, the protest campaign, which we should characterise as at the very

least unwise and poorly documented, is now unstoppable, despite the appearance of contradictory information and clarificatory accounts: up until today, the petitions continue to circulate, maintaining the version that Mahmoud and Ayaz were hanged “solely” for being gay. It is understandable that our rage at the continued homophobic abuses we see should lead us to immediate reactions that are not thought through; but this could result in our being converted, while believing ourselves to be struggling for the liberation of gays and lesbians, into mere puppets of greater interests.

Around the same time as the events recounted in this article came the death of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, whose regime is an ally of the United States and other Western countries. In the Spanish State, as in other neighbouring countries, there was an official day of mourning – which in the municipality of Marbella, where the monarch regularly spent his holidays, was extended to three days. The obituaries in the European and North American press heaped praise on him, avoiding any condemnation of the dictatorial regime he presided over and remaining silent about its horrible human rights abuses. No media mentioned the beheadings of homosexuals which frequently take place in the public squares of his kingdom. As recently as 14 March a couple of men were beheaded for “living in sin and socially displaying their homosexual relationship”. Between 9 and 20 April of this year, 202 homosexuals and transsexuals were arrested during two gay parties and were sentenced to prison terms of up to two years and to floggings which varied, according to the case, between 200 and 2600 lashes. The prison term is calculated so that the prisoners may receive all the lashes stipulated in the judicial sentence, at a rate of 15 per day, interrupted by resting periods in order to avoid the death of the detainee. Today, while you are reading this, they may be receiving those lashes. No gay or lesbian group has initiated an international campaign to denounce these events.

Note: The author of this article is a gay activist. He is opposed to the death penalty and is aware that Iran is among the most homophobic regimes in the world, and he denounces it accordingly. In the 1990s, the author participated in an international campaign similar to the one analysed in this article – on that occasion directed against the Cuban regime, and orchestrated, as was reported much later, in Florida. While that campaign was taking place, death squads presumably trained by the Pentagon were killing gays, lesbians and transsexuals in almost all the other countries of Latin America; these cases were only revealed years later. The campaign against Cuba, motivated by events such as the closing down of gay parties, became so harsh that the US group Human Rights Watch published a report which stated that “there is no serious or emergency situation for the gay and lesbian population of Cuba”. Various reports on human rights included the names of 12 Latin American countries in which “there are extremely serious situations of homophobia”, including frequent assassinations carried out by ultra-right groups in the face of the authorities’ passivity, “to which we see no reaction whatsoever on the part of the international activist groups”.

Sources

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