

## The politics of Roxana Saberi's imprisonment

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, APR 24 2009

The arrest and imprisonment of Roxana Saberi, an Iranian-American journalist, by the Islamic Republic has been at the centre of world attention this week. On 10 February, Ms Saberi, 31, was arrested for buying a bottle of wine, an act banned under the country's sharia law. However, many observers were suspicious about the reason given for her detention. Conventionally there are defined procedures for people who break the Islamic codes of conducts in Iran; in this case, there was no transparency in terms of the official charges nor was there any certainty over a potential legal trial. Subsequently, the prosecutors changed claims that she had actually been arrested for working as a journalist without a valid press card. This rapid switch alarmed many, who were afraid that the accusations made against Roxana Saberi were simply the pretext for a political game. Soon after that, she was accused of espionage for the United States.

Although, the American authorities rejected the accusations, The Revolutionary Court, which primarily deals with national security issues, sentenced Ms Saberi to eight years of imprisonment.

In recent years a number of academics and journalists with dual nationalities have been persecuted, accused of plotting a so-called "velvet revolution" in the Islamic Republic. Particularly since the arrival of president Ahmadinejad to the centre stage of Iranian politics, the country has witnessed further securitisation of the social and political environment. This has resulted in extreme sensitivities towards Iranian nationals who have any type of intellectual or professional connections to the West. Nevertheless, there is no certainty that Ms Saberi's case fits into this familiar story; it is likely that there are other political objectives behind her persecution. This is not a classic case of the Islamic Republic's mistrust of a journalist with connections to the outside world. Rather, it seems likely that some factions of the regime are attempting to prevent further normalisation with the United States.

This controversial imprisonment of an American citizen has occurred just as there was an expectation of a thaw in Iranian-US relations. In March, president Obama used the occasion of the Iranian New Year to send a promising message to Tehran. Although, he did not impress every faction of the Iranian political elite, his commitment to a "new approach" was seen as a potential breakthrough for Iranian-US relations. Obama's initiative resulted in some excitement over a new beginning and further cooperation between the two countries; hopes were boosted when Tehran and Washington mutually expressed their willingness to talk.

However, just as some people in Washington still view Iran as an unchangeable member of the "axis of evil", in Tehran there are hardliners who do not want improved relations with what Ayatollah Khomeini called the "Great Satan".

Anti-Americanism has been part and parcel of the political discourse for about thirty years. The Islamic Republic -and in particular the hardliners- claim to base their power on a revolution, which ended American "semi-colonialism" in Iran. Therefore, the notion of "resistance" against what they describe as American "hegemony" is part of an ideological superstructure, which has not been disputed since the revolution. It is for this reason that any attempts for political normalization with the United States have been undermined.

About two years ago, there was a heated debate among the Iranian political elite regarding Ayatollah Khomeini's "real position" on America. The debate started when a pragmatist former president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, quoted

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Ayatollah Khomeini in his multivolume memoirs, claiming that during his life time the Imam approved a proposal to omit the rallying slogan “Death to America”. Although Hashemi Rafsenjani is known as one of the most dominant figures within the establishment, his book was banned and collected from bookstores a few days after its publication. The episode starkly reveals the levels of sensitivity regarding the question of normalizing ties with the United States.

Ideologically, the hardliners in Iran cannot see any difference between Bush and Obama. For them, Bush and Obama both represent the same system, which historically has been determined to “sabotage” the Islamic Republic. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has also advocated this view. He is not only the most powerful political actor in Iran, but also the ultimate source of inspiration for the hardliners.

Ironically, while there are still hopes for the beginning of talks between the Islamic Republic and the United States, last week the government granted a licence for a mass protest of hardliners and, for the first time, the resonance of “down with Obama” was heard in Tehran. At the same time, the president expressed his willingness for mutual talks with Washington. All these inconsistencies can only manifest the embedded factionalism, which is now an undisputable feature of the Iranian political system. There are multifarious different centres of power, which can all pull the strings and affect the political affairs of the country. Even within the same governmental organisation there are different factions constantly striving to upstage their rivals.

Normalising relations with the United States is a game changer for some factions of the Islamic Republic. In that light, it is not too surprising to see that some small but powerful sections of the security apparatus are seeking to preclude any change in relations with the “old ideological enemy”.

The question is not only ideological. For example, if there is any chance of a thaw with United States, Iran will have to limit the role of the Revolutionary Guards and secret agents, restricting their influence beyond Iranian borders. That could limit their operations in countries such as Lebanon and Iraq. Hence, either on the grounds of realpolitik or on the grounds of ideology there is enough reason to presume that some factions of the Iranian political system do not have much interest in normalising ties with Washington.

However, now the fate of a young journalist is at stake, she has been detained for three months and there is no certainty about her imminent release. If she is not guilty of spying, it is tragic to see her a victim of this political game. Next week the lawyer of Ms Saberi is submitting an appeal to a higher court. If this is really a political game, the court will be an arena for various factions of the Iranian political system to flex their muscles. In any case, the new verdict by the court of appeal will have an impact on the future of relations between Tehran and Washington. If she is convicted of spying whilst American authorities categorically reject the allegations, there will be little prospect of a breakthrough to normalise ties between the two countries.

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