

No Solidarity with the German Journalists Arrested in Iran?

Public indifference encourages the regime

by Matthias Küntzel

The prison in Tabriz is old, its walls dilapidated, its sewage system in disrepair. Tehran has been holding two German journalists behind these walls since October 10th, because they had demonstrated their interest in Sakineh Ashtiani, a 43-year old Iranian woman facing execution. The two men are Marcus Hellwig, a 35-year old professional journalist for Germany's largest Sunday paper "Bild am Sonntag" (circulation: 2.2 million), and Jens Koch, a 45-year old photojournalist.

During the first eleven days of the journalists' captivity, even officials from the German embassy were refused visits. The captives were not allowed to contact their relatives until the eighth week of their imprisonment. The prisoners continue to be prohibited any contact with lawyers even to this day. What crime have they committed?

In the beginning, they were accused of a visa offence – they had entered the country as tourists in order to circumvent the censorship restrictions on journalists. Observers assumed there would be a warning followed by a quick expulsion from the country, but nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, Iran's state news station presented the prisoners during the fifth week of their captivity, on November 15, as "spies". The single piece of proof: their notes from an interview that they had conducted with Sakineh's son, Sajjad. Espionage is among the crimes that carry the death penalty in Iran.

Whether or not these accusations will also play a role in the future remains uncertain. Esfandiar Rahim-Mashai, who is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's closest associate, recently stated that "we don't have any evidence that they acted as spies" - the matter, however, remained "an issue for the judiciary".

According to “Reporters Without Borders”, there has never been a comparable attack on freedom of opinion in Germany’s recent history.

This fate of the two journalists was reported on in Germany – nothing more was done, however. The Federal Government practiced “quiet diplomacy” and did not respond to the accusations of espionage.

On December 2nd, Germany’s Bundestag passed a resolution on human rights abuses in Iran – still, there wasn’t a single reference to the imprisonment of the German journalists in the resolution.

The Axel Springer AG, which employs both reporters, has also remained discrete. In the beginning, its spokesperson claimed not to have any knowledge about the arrest of its employees. It was not until Tehran publicly displayed the journalists in its state owned media that “Bild am Sonntag” admitted to having sent the two reporters to Iran. While it has since expressed solidarity with the journalists, it still hasn’t disclosed their names.

There is no doubt that Tehran’s regime is among the world’s most brutal. These two German journalists represent valuable hostages for the regime with which it can exercise tremendous pressure on a Federal Government, which has already shown itself to be an uncertain ally in enforcing international sanctions. What reason does Tehran have to voluntarily discard this trump card?

Diplomats acting behind the scenes certainly need to keep a low profile, but it doesn’t make sense to me that the German parliament and representatives of the media and civil society have also been speaking in whispers. Do they believe that protests would harm the prisoners and pussyfooting around would increase their chances?

The hopes pinned to getting Tehran to give in by showing restraint are at the same time understandable and inappropriate. They are understandable, because normally, one would expect one’s partner in a negotiation to repay generosity in kind. They are inappropriate, because the accepted patterns of dialogue do not pertain to Iran’s revolutionary regime. This regime considers

kindness a proof of weakness which provides it with extra latitude. Barack Obama experienced this when his gesture to reach out a hand to Tehran was simply rejected. We are experiencing this now as well – Berlin reacted to the imprisonment of the German journalists with exceptional levels of restraint. Tehran only drew encouragement from this reaction, escalated the conflict with the accusations of espionage and continues to keep the journalists behind bars.

It is time to learn from these experiences. Tehran must sense that public opinion in Germany and elsewhere rests on the side of the two journalists. Our neighbours have shown us how it's done. When French journalists are detained or abducted, their colleagues see to it that every day during the French public station's main news broadcast, photos of the journalists, their names and the number of days they have been imprisoned are inserted into the programme. This creates pressure for action.

The fact that international pressure can have an effect was shown by the solidarity with Sakineh Ashtani. The regime suspended her stoning, which had already been ordained. Sakineh, however, continues to be in danger – indeed, great danger, because in addition to the Germans, authorities also detained Sakineh's son Sayyid and her lawyer. If the prison conditions are so wretched for the Germans, how must they be for Sakineh's son and lawyer?

Since October 10th, solidarity with Sakineh can no longer be separated from the efforts to free her son and lawyer and the German journalists. The “Bild am Sonntag” reporters are still stuck where Sakineh herself is stuck – the dilapidated prison in Tabriz.

Translated from the German by Robert Blasiak