

## The (Im)moral Logic of the Show Trial

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The Huffington Post  
August 8, 2009

Last week, leading reformists in Iran appeared in Tehran's Revolutionary Court sporting gray pyjamas and plastic slippers. They were unshaven, had clearly lost weight, and seemed dazed. According to Human Rights Watch, many if not all of the defendants were subject to harsh and violent interrogation techniques. Of course, the regime denies that "torture" was involved; and if you bought the Bush administration's take on what isn't torture, then the Islamic Republic's version comes for free.

Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a cleric and vice president to former President Mohammad Khatami, went on the stand. Denied his robe and turban but gripping a piece of paper that served only as a stage prop, he swore profusely to plotting for years with fellow defendants and foreign powers to overthrow the Islamic Republic. Abtahi's daughter said that a few days before, in one of the only visits she got with her father, he told her he was being forced in to take pills that made him dizzy and lose concentration. A gaunt Maziar Bahari, veteran *Newsweek* reporter and celebrated documentary filmmaker, confessed that in some of his articles he unwittingly aided the alleged conspiracy, made all the more pernicious because of its call for peaceful protest. Bahari's wife, who fears her husband may be kept for a long time, doesn't want to think about the baby she carries.

Khatami and unsuccessful presidential candidate Mir Hossein Moussavi courageously denounced the "show trials" and "torture" in their country, a specter from Stalin's purges so hauntingly described in Arthur Koestler's classic, *Darkness at Noon*. But their calls for reform, like Gorbachev's attempt to reform the Soviet system, can probably only be achieved by the regime's collapse, which is what the trials are designed to forestall.

In Koestler's true-to-life novel, the state interrogator explains to the old Bolshevik why he is being tortured into publicly confessing that he plotted to bring down the regime at the behest of foreign powers. It's that the masses are much easier to mobilize against foreign plots than home-grown dissent. "Truth is what is useful for humanity, falsehood is what is harmful," explains the interrogator, where "truth" is defined by the Revolution as incarnated in the opinion of its Supreme Leader, No.1.

In this revolutionary logic, anything that runs counter to the wishes of the Supreme Leader, no matter how sincere or honest or supportive of other aspects of the revolution, are "objective crimes" against a regime whose first duty is to survive, no matter the cost in human lives or suffering, in order to ultimately save "humanity." Likewise, the coerced confessions of Bahari and others are, in the logic of the revolution, objectively "true," however far from their actual actions and motives. The irony is that Bahari's well-meaning attempts to explain Iranian nuclear ambitions and other confrontational policies from the regime's standpoint, like Khatami's and

Moussavi's attempts to "save the Revolution," are (correctly) taken by the Supreme Leader and his devotees to be even greater signs of counter-revolutionary perfidy than outright hostility.

A lesson here is that our own cultural conception of political morality, which is centered on liberty and justice for the individual and the belief that ends do not justify means, is not universal; but it may not even be as common as we think in our society or as uncommon in others we don't like. Another lesson is that basic notions of what is moral or immoral do not neatly separate along the secular-religious divide.