Iranian President Raisi: The Hanging Judge

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yatollah Khameini’s choice of Ebrahim Raisi to be the country’s new president via a sham “election” has renewed interest in the mass executions of the summer of 1988. That summer, Iranian authorities murdered a minimum of 5,000 political prisoners under the direction of a four-man death panel, which included Raisi. Iranian authorities have, of course, engaged in political executions ever since taking power in 1979, but this was the most intense period—about a 100 or more a day over about two months. More recent, contemporary executions have also targeted popular figures. But Raisi’s role in that earlier period has emerged over the years from the families of the dead, as well as those who survived or escaped incarceration, and even some regime officials who attempted to stop the massacre.

Heart of Darkness

According to multiple witnesses, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini appointed Raisi to a four-man committee in 1988 to organize and preside over the massacres. Raisi had proven his bona fides by serving at the age of 20 as a prosecutor for the district of Karaj, a large satellite city of Tehran, then for the province of Hamedan, and in 1985, as deputy prosecutor of Tehran.

Those who would be executed by the committee had already been sentenced to years in prison—but not to death—during the 1980s for opposition to Khomeini’s clerical rule. Many were arrested for merely distributing or reading political tracts criticizing the regime. It is clear from the family photos of those executed that most were in their early twenties; a minority appear to be young teenagers or in their thirties. The photos of the dead resemble a high school or university yearbook, but these “graduates” ended up in the Iranian gulag.

In late July, prison authorities ended all family visits to political prisoners and ordered them interrogated. Typically, interrogators would ask prisoners if they would publicly plead “guilty” of treason, denounce the actions their colleagues, spy for the Iranian regime, participate in regime firing squads, or run through minefields at the Iran-Iraq war front. If a prisoner said no to any of these questions, he or she would be condemned to death. Those condemned were either killed by firing squad or hanged. One witness recounted guards pulling at bodies twitching on nooses to complete the executions. Some speculated that hangings were preferred because they were quieter and did not draw the attention of neighbors. The mass executions came to an end in September.

In late October that year, family members of those executed were summoned to the prisons and given the personal effects of their loved ones, then told to leave immediately and not to “make problems” about the executions. Some information about the locations of mass graves eventually leaked out, but to this day families have never been told about burial sites. Moreover, authorities have sometimes broken up commemorative gatherings at presumed burial sites. A comprehensive Amnesty International report provides a window into this period in extensive detail.

Regime Motives

While the manner and scope of the mass executions are fairly well understood, the exact motivations of the regime, including Raisi’s personal motivations, and the timing of the killings are less certain and deserve further study. Historians and observers have posited several possible driving forces. First, there is the a possibility of a grotesque, utilitarian reason: overcrowded prisons. The regime had arrested thousands of prisoners in the 1980s. By 1987, the situation had become so bad that prisoners had adopted the word “sardini” for having to sleep with their heads adjacent to the
Mexico and San Diego before being forced out to earn a living. Those whose borders they crossed were increasingly viewed as illegal immigrants by both governments, and the strategy worked: Both friends and neighbors remained cooped up inside, fearful of crossing over.

The influx of refugees into border cities and states after 1988 caught both sides by surprise. In Mexico, President Miguel de la Madrid was increasingly concerned about the potential for economic and political instability. In the United States, President Ronald Reagan was intent on curbing illegal immigration and on making a deal with Mexico as a basis for increased bi-lateral ties.

In 1989, Mexico and the United States reached a deal that would allow a 50 percent reduction in the number of refugees in Mexico, in addition to $3 billion in aid for development in the countries where refugees had fled. Mexico agreed to the plan, and the United States agreed to fund it. The agreement also provided for the establishment of a refugee aid project that would help to provide education and training for refugees.

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Despite the success of the project, the United States and Mexico were still divided on the issue of refugees. Mexico was concerned about the potential for economic and political instability, and the United States was intent on curbing illegal immigration. The two sides were unable to agree on how to deal with the refugee problem, and the issue remained unresolved.

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However, while several Arabic news sources have published articles mentioning allegations of Raisi’s involvement, the overarching reaction from the broader region has been silence. This should be understood as self-censorship, enhanced in light of nuclear talks, potential Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, and Iranian reach within several Arab countries. Therefore, supporting those who do call for international investigations into the issue, and subsequent repercussions, is all the more important.

Over the long term, one can only hope that there will be one day a museum in Tehran dedicated to the memories of the regime’s victims. Such museums have been built after the fall of dictatorships in Latin America and Central Europe to commemorate victims. These museums have tremendous emotional impact, particularly when they display the photos of the victims. The faces look out to the observer as if to say: do not forget us, especially those of you with whom we shared this earth, however briefly.

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