



Spotlight on Iran



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Socio-civic campaign against the sanctions launched in the wake of Rowhani's election for president

Top Iranian economists and academia members have recently launched a public relations campaign with the aim of bringing about the removal of the economic sanctions imposed on Iran. Those behind the campaign are seeking to take advantage of the election of the new president to raise international public awareness of the harm caused by the sanctions to Iranians and enlist the aid of major figures and civil society institutions in Iran and the West to fight the sanctions.

In recent weeks the campaign has been joined by academia members of Iranian descent living in the West, notable Iranian intellectuals affiliated with the reformist faction, civil activists, and private sector leaders. Those taking part in the campaign are not only demanding that the West lift the sanctions, but also calling on decision-makers in their country to take a realistic, pragmatic stance that will make it possible to reach an agreement with the West on the nuclear issue.

The campaign against the sanctions is increasingly gaining prominence in the Iranian press and on social networks. It reflects the efforts made by its initiators, most of them affiliated with Rowhani's supporters and allies, to give a boost to the president's efforts to promote a political arrangement that will allow the economic situation to improve as well.

Top Iranian economists and academia members have recently launched a public relations campaign with the aim of bringing about the removal of the economic sanctions imposed on Iran by appealing to public opinion in Iran and elsewhere. Those behind the campaign seek to take advantage of Hassan Rowhani's election for president to raise international public awareness of the harm caused by the sanctions to Iranians and enlist the aid of major figures and civil society institutions in Iran and the West to fight the sanctions. The campaign is increasingly gaining prominence in commentary articles published in the Iranian press, interviews given by the campaign's participants to media in Iran and the West, activity on social networks, and conferences. The initiative against the sanctions is headed by top Iranian economists affiliated with the president's supporters in the political center and the reformist camp, including Dr. Ali-Naqi Mashayekhi, Dr. Mousa Ghaninejad, Dr. Mohammad Mehdi Behkish, and Dr. Sa'id Leylaz.

Last month, Mashayekhi, the dean of the School of Management and Systems at the Sharif University of Technology in Tehran, considered one of President Rowhani's allies, published an article in the economic daily *Donya-ye Eqtesad* in which he called on Iranian intellectuals to raise their voices in protest against the "inhuman" sanctions. Mashayekhi, who has held a number of top economic posts in the academia and the government starting in the 1970s, spoke in his article about the severe economic and social consequences of the sanctions, which include inflation, disruption of economic activity, growing unemployment, poverty, shortage of drugs, psychological effects brought about by the poverty and unemployment, and increasing corruption and crime.

The top economist called on the elites of Iranian society to make themselves heard all over the world to protect the impoverished families suffering under the burden of the sanctions, the unemployed youth, the children who are facing difficulties as a result of their families' poverty and unemployment, and the sick, who cannot afford to buy vital drugs. He said that, now that the moderate government headed by Rowhani has been installed, it may be worthwhile to create a civil movement that will take action against the sanctions and be an important means to complement the government's diplomatic efforts as it is working towards the removal of the sanctions. He called on influence groups such as university lecturers, economists, private-sector entrepreneurs, journalists, doctors, artists, jurists, teachers, and engineers to send the public opinion in the United States and Europe a message of peace that will diminish the status of the "war-mongering" pressure groups operating in the West.

Mashayekhi said that, during Ahmadinejad's presidency, Iranian intellectuals had no sufficient motivation to lead a protest against the sanctions, but that things have changed in the wake of the election. The civil and popular movement against the sanctions can bring the voice of Iranian resistance against the sanctions to the ears of governments and NGOs in the West and strengthen the position of the new government in Iran in its talks with the West.

He called on representatives of Iranian elites to send a jointly agreed-upon letter to the leaders of the G5+1 countries to express the Iranian people's opposition to the sanctions and describe the inhuman effect they have on Iranian society, which has proven its desire for peace in the last election. According to Mashayekhi, sending the letter will prepare the ground for speeding up the talks between Iran and the West, help the government, and open up the path for the active participation of intellectuals and civil society institutions in promoting processes of change in Iran (<http://www.donya-e-eqtasad.com/news/743153>).

At about the same time as Mashayekhi's article was published, Mousa Ghaninejad and Mohammad Mehdi Behkish gave a joint interview to the economic weekly Tejarat-e Farda, in which they called for a civil movement in Iran against the sanctions. In the interview, Ghaninejad said that, now that Rowhani has become president, there is no more reason for the international pressure on Iran to continue, and conditions are ripe for Iran to bring up a demand to lift the sanctions. He said that the unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States on Iran have no legal basis whatsoever and that they push peace farther away since they are a hindrance to world trade, a major factor that encourages friendly relations between nations. Ghaninejad said that the experience in Cuba, Iraq, and North Korea has proven that economic sanctions are ineffective for achieving political objectives. The civil campaign against the sanctions, he said, can influence international public opinion just like the public campaign against the Vietnam War in the 1960s and the 1970s brought the war to an end.



Ghaninejad and Behkish in an interview to Tejarat-e Farda

The top economist called on authors, economists, intellectuals, civil activists, human rights activists, and Iranian nationalists to commit themselves to the campaign against the sanctions, make the voice of the civil society heard, and send the world a message of peace. He said that, during Ahmadinejad's presidency, intellectuals in Iran faced serious limitations and therefore remained indifferent. Now is the time to harness the powerful energy that they have for the campaign against the sanctions.

Behkish, too, argued that the presidential election results make it possible to launch a civil movement against the sanctions. He said that, with the international atmosphere changing in Iran's favor, there is now an opportunity for cooperation between civil institutions in Iran and their counterparts in the world, particularly in Europe, in order to convince them to take action for lifting the economic sanctions (<http://tejarat.donya-e-eqtasad.com/fa/packagestories/details?service=economy&story=0d820a57-6ca0-4a76-8b40-b400ef08f87f>).

Another top economist behind the campaign against the sanctions is Dr. Sa'id Leylaz, who served as former President Mohammad Khatami's economic advisor. In an interview given to the Fararu website, the reformist economist said that, during Ahmadinejad's presidency, there was no coordination between the government and the citizens, and even within the government itself there was no unity or solidarity to allow Iran speak in a single voice on the sanctions to the international community. The provocative policy pursued by Ahmadinejad's government, such as the statements on Holocaust denial, the calls for Israel's destruction, and its erroneous economic policy, also did nothing to contribute to the fight against the sanctions. After Rowhani's

election for president, the tension between Iran and the West can be laid to rest and the economic policy can be changed. It is now time to organize a civil-popular movement to prove to the world that the sanctions won't make the Iranian regime and people back down.

Leylaz noted that the movement against the sanctions has to be led by former top politicians who are not involved with the government and enjoy the public's trust, such as Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, Mohammad Reza Aref, or Nateq Nouri. The movement's strategy should be to try and isolate the United States in its efforts to escalate the sanctions, and prove that there is no basis for the American argument about Iran being dangerous. If Iran adopts a moderate foreign policy in the regional and international scene, its relations with the world's countries can be improved and it will be able to make itself heard more convincingly. Iran must declare to the world that it is interested in nuclear technology for peaceful purposes and in IAEA monitoring, thus influencing public opinion in the West and eventually in the United States as well (<http://fararu.com/fa/news/156312>).

In recent weeks the anti-sanctions campaign has been joined by academia members of Iranian descent living in the West. For instance, British-Iranian economist Prof. Mohammad Hashem Pesaran published an article in the daily *Donya-ye Eqtesad* expressing his support for the removal of the sanctions. In the article, Pesaran wrote that, it has been proven in the past one hundred years that economic sanctions hurt the citizens but in most cases are unable to change the foreign policy of the country on which they are imposed. What is more, they strengthen the radical groups in those countries as well as the status of interest holders who enjoy access to state resources and take advantage of the sanctions to become stronger.

Pesaran noted that Iran and Western countries must strive to reach a diplomatic solution as soon as possible—one that will serve the interests of both parties and take advantage of the opportunity offered by Rowhani's election for president. He warned that if that opportunity is not used to obtain considerable progress in the talks between Iran and the West, the result will be despair and the strengthening of radical groups in Iran and the West.

Speaking about the civil movement against the sanctions, the top economist said that writing articles and speeches and publishing memorandums as part of the public campaign can help the new government in Iran. Iranian experts need to appeal to politicians in the West and explain to them that the sanctions hurt mostly the citizens,

and that the West needs to take action to strengthen Rowhani, who represents Iran's moderates and peace-seekers. Politicians in the West have to be convinced that, if the golden opportunity created in the wake of Rowhani's election for president is not used to reach an agreement between Iran and the West, the result will be a weakening of both Rowhani's status and their own. At the same time, experts in Iran must also convince Iranian politicians to adopt a more realistic approach and acknowledge the fact that the continued isolation of their country may damage it in a way that will be impossible to reverse in the future and will compromise its power and regional influence (<http://www.donya-e-eqtasad.com/news/744623>).

Reformist intellectuals join the anti-sanctions campaign

In recent days the campaign against the sanctions has been joined by a number of notable Iranian intellectuals affiliated with the reformist faction. A conference held in Tehran earlier this week as part of the anti-sanctions campaign featured a lecture by Prof. Sadegh Zibakalam, one of the most notable intellectuals affiliated with Iran's political center. In his lecture Zibakalam spoke out against radical circles in Iran which argue that the sanctions have not hit the country's economy and even caused it to develop advanced technologies thanks to which it has been able to overcome the sanctions. He noted that the sanctions have brought no achievements for Iran, and that action should be taken to lift them while taking a realistic stance and avoiding populism and empty slogans (<http://isna.ir/fa/news/92052614966>/زیباکلام-باید-به-مساله-تحریم-واقع-بینانه).



Conference against the sanctions held in Tehran, with Prof. Sadegh Zibakalam (left) and Dr. Mohammad Ali Dehghani in attendance (source: www.facebook.com/NOsntn)

Sa'id Hajarian, one of the most prominent intellectuals in the reformist camp who was severely injured and handicapped in an attempt on his life carried out by radical right activists in March 2000, also expressed his support for the public campaign against the sanctions. In an interview given this week to the reformist daily E'temad, Hajarian argued that Iranian intellectuals cannot remain indifferent over the sanctions that are hurting the country's citizens. He laid the blame for the United States escalating the sanctions even after Rowhani's election on the Zionist lobby, radical Republican activists, Baha'is, and Iranian exiles working for the Mojahedeen-e Khalq opposition organization and royalist opposition organizations.

In addition to criticizing U.S. supporters of the sanctions, Hajarian also criticized Iranian radicals who are opposed to improving the relations with the West, have no interest in resolving the crisis with the West, and keep claiming that the sanctions have no effect on Iran. He noted that such international bodies as UNICEF and the International Labour Organization should have taken action to lift the sanctions, which are causing serious damage to Iranians, forcing factories to shut down, and leading to widespread unemployment among workers and young educated people. He said that Rowhani should negotiate with the Europeans and the United States until the crisis is resolved and the sanctions are lifted. At the same time, efforts should be made to raise international public awareness of the sanctions' severe consequences, such as the shortage of drugs (<http://www.etemaad.ir/Released/92-05-27/204.htm>).

Activity on social networks and mobilization of civil society activists

Starting in the second half of July, the public relations campaign against the sanctions made its way to social networks as well. On July 16, those behind the campaign created a Facebook page, which has more than 11 thousand "likes" at this point. The administrators of the page write that the objective of the No Sanctions campaign is to show opposition to the international sanctions and raise international public awareness about their severe humanitarian consequences. The Facebook page contains reports on the impact of the sanctions, statements of support from intellectuals and academia members in the world for their removal, and reports on the activity of those who oppose the sanctions in Iran (<https://www.facebook.com/NOsntn>).

Since the public anti-sanctions campaign was launched, it has also been joined by civil society activists and private sector leaders. In late July ISNA News Agency reported that young Iranians belonging to a group called Ambassadors of Peace and Hope joined the campaign. One of the activists, Hossein Naqashi, told the news agency that

the activists intended to bring into the campaign those belonging to the third and fourth generations of the Islamic revolution, who grew up in a reality of economic sanctions. He noted that the key message of the campaign against the sanctions is that, not only do the sanctions undermine the chances for peace and democracy in Iran, they are also an impediment to economic, political, and social development, and go against the right of all people to a better life. Those in charge of the campaign, he said, seek to create a broad-based national agreement and social solidarity around the demand to lift the sanctions, encourage a national discourse on the issue in which representatives of all social groups will participate, and take advantage of social networks to appeal to international public opinion and influence it into demanding the removal of the sanctions, which violate Iranian human rights (www.isna.ir/fa/news/92043119311).



Labor union activists and private sector leaders have also stepped forward to support the public campaign against the sanctions. Activists from two labor unions (the Mechanical Metal Workers Union and the Paint and Decoration Construction Workers Union) have recently published a call for their European counterparts to work for lifting the sanctions, which, they said, are violating the rights of Iranian workers and exacerbating poverty and unemployment (<http://www.akhbar-rooz.com/news.jsp?essayId=54277>). At the same time, the daily Donya-ye Eqtesad reported this week that twelve heads of Iran's chambers of commerce expressed their support for the campaign against the sanctions and called for their removal. The heads of the chambers of commerce, including Mohammad Nahavandian, the head of Iran's Chamber of Commerce who was recently appointed as President Rowhani's office chief, and Yahya Al-e Eshagh, the head of Tehran's Chamber of Commerce, called for seizing the political and economic opportunity presented by Rowhani's election for

president to step up the fight against the sanctions and have them lifted (<http://www.donya-e-eqtasad.com/news/747529>).