

Our April 18 Meeting at the Library was a talk by a long time friend and fighter for justice. Rudy Simons talked about his trip to Iran with people from across the United States. There were 23 of them. Until the time of his trip in March, Iran had issued only 300 visas to Americans in 2007. One thing which united the tour members was opposition to war in Iraq and the Bush administration in general. I think it is safe to assume all were opposed to bombing Iran as well, though I cannot remember that point being made. One of the people on the tour was fluent in Farsi, and a full-time guide courtesy of the government of Iran was also part of the group. According to Rudy, that person was always helpful and did not seem to try to control the content of the tour. However, the guide did say that he would never take a position on anything which conflicted with official policy.

Conversation with Iranians was valued, even above seeing the holy and historic sites. Rudy estimated that there were over 1000 conversations with Iranians, though many were with subsets of the tour group. Many were with academic and professional people, many with people involved in religious work, some with people working to improve civil institutions and government, and many who did not fit any of these categories. It seems that many people knew of the tour group and wanted to talk to them. On a darker note, Shirrin Abadi, the Nobel Prize winner, communicated that she wanted to meet with the group, but felt that she could not because of political reasons.

Rudy's impressions of the politics of Iran were a mixture of what he knew previously and what he learned while there. For instance, he knew that the religious authorities are the ultimate authorities. Thus, all candidates for office must be approved to run by religious authorities. All laws must be in harmony with Islam, and there is a form of religious judicial review by the appropriate judicial councils. Though Rudy did not mention it, these religious councils recently ruled that people who killed people "acting immorally" could not be judicially liable because killing of the immoral is justified by the Koran. Furthermore, even if the killers made a mistake, only their intent was deemed to matter. Civil and judicial professionals were aghast, and there will probably be an attempt to mitigate this ruling, but this illustrates how exasperating it is for Iranians to live with theocracy and arbitrary law. Another area in which the hand of religious authority is heavy is the regulation of what a woman may wear. Rudy said that all women in the tour group had to conform to dress regulations, though jail would probably not be the first sanction for improper dress. For an Iranian woman, jail might be a minimum sanction.

In spite of the arbitrary, oppressive, and sometimes harsh nature of Iranian law, the tour group did find many people saying that they would like a more democratic and less theocratic society, one in which self expression trumped political and religious control. Since many of those to whom tour members spoke were not average Iranians, Rudy said he could not even guess how widespread such opinions were. Those willing to stick their necks out, however, were few. He said the tour group saw a group of women demonstrating for pay equal to that of men. Later he learned those women were arrested.

He then told us that regardless of how widespread such views were, a military campaign against Iran by the United States would stifle immediately the expression of democratic and liberal opinion.

The tour itself was mostly to three cities and some of the countryside in between. These cities were Tehran, Isfahan roughly 200 miles south of Tehran, and Shiraz, roughly 250 miles south of Isfahan. Several sidetrips were made, most notably to Yazd, one of the main centers of Zoroastrian religion. In fact, some of the first pictures Rudy showed were of the Zoroastrian center of worship in Yazd. He then showed pictures of a Jewish community in Isfahan. Isfahan is considered one of three centers of Judaism in Iran; the others are Tehran and Kerman, perhaps 600 miles southeast of Tehran. He also showed one picture of a small but nicely proportioned Christian church.

Iran is becoming more purely Muslim. Religious proselytizing is prohibited. In effect, this means that the state may force non Muslim people into uncomfortable existence and all non Islamic religious communities are forced to turn inward. They must socialize and marry within their community (or they can convert to Islam). Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity are all protected legally, but their numbers diminish. While in Isfahan, Rudy asked about the number of Jewish people in Iran. He got estimates of a few thousand to slightly less than 20,000. I looked up some numbers in Jewish Virtual Library, and there found that the Jewish population in 1948 was about 100,000 out of a population of perhaps 20,000,000. By 2004 it was around 25,000 in a total of roughly 65,000,000. On the eve of the Islamic revolution in 1979 there were around 80,000. While these trends are probably not so severe for the other legal religions, they show an unmistakable trend. For the Bahai the situation is dire because they are considered apostate Muslims, and that is illegal. Very few are left of what was considered a vital community prior to the Islamic revolution.

Again, according to Jewish Virtual Library, principals of Jewish schools have been replaced by Muslims, and the sabbath is no longer allowed to be Saturday. Whether Christian schools are similarly governed, I do not know. Iran wants a small but protected Zoroastrian population, so their situation is probably not dire. That does not stop them from emigrating.

Each of the three legal non-Muslim religions has a representative in Parliament. Each is required by law to support Iranian foreign policy and to refrain from undermining Islam. According to Rudy, the Jewish representative lives in the US. What a farce!! (and almost a good pun).

Rudy felt that he had met people who were friendly, outgoing and wanting to engage the world in a constructive way. I have met several Iranians living in Ann Arbor and that is my impression too. Rudy also suggested that this attitude is too precious to discard recklessly, as we are presently doing.

After his talk I asked Rudy whether he saw evidence that Iran was preparing for war. He said he did not. I then asked whether Iran felt like a militarized society i.e. lots of police and soldiers telling people what to do. He said he saw no evidence of that.

Clearly, Rudy's take on his visit was optimistic in the sense that he felt ordinary Iranians wanted to be on friendly terms with Americans. I think ordinary Americans want to be on friendly terms with Iranians too, at least when they meet actual Iranians. The elites seem to be what divide us, at least in the present. I think Rudy would say that if we accept such power relationships passively, the elites will probably continue to divide us.