

AFTER ACID ATTACKS ON WOMEN, ROUHANI SPEAKS OUT AGAINST “DISCORD” “UNDER THE FLAG OF ISLAM”

In the historic city of Isfahan in Iran yesterday, several thousand protesters gathered in front of the judiciary building and shouted slogans against assailants who have thrown acid on a number of women in recent weeks. Even though a spokesman for the Iranian judiciary announced Monday that four attackers had been arrested and that the harshest possible punishment will be handed out, the protesters appeared to feel that not enough is being done.

The Guardian describes the situation that led to the protests:

Assailants riding on motorbikes, in a similar sequence of events, have thrown acid in the face of at least eight women who were driving in the street with their windows pulled down. Local media say the number of victims could be higher. The attacks have so far claimed one life, an opposition website said.

Many Iranians believe that victims were targeted because they were women wearing clothes that could be deemed inappropriate in the eyes of hardliners – a claim vehemently denied by the authorities.

Isfahani citizens, horrified by the scale of vicious assaults, gathered in front of the city's justice department on Wednesday, calling on the authorities to put an end to the crimes which has highlighted the striking challenges women face in Iran, where hijab is obligatory.

A number of protesters in Isfahan chanted slogans that described the attackers as Iran's own version of Isis, the extremist group that has committed many atrocities in Iraq and Syria.

A number of videos of the protest appear to exist. Interestingly, they appear to be from Iranian opposition groups. One of the groups also put up some photos from the protest.

Somehow, I suspect that these opposition groups will be very unhappy with Thomas Erdbrink's coverage of the protest, though. Erdbrink notes that the protest appears to have been organized through social media, which may be a hint that he thinks the opposition groups helped to organize it. The opposition groups would go along with Erdbrink's coverage of a proposed new law at the heart of the controversy:

The acid attacks have prompted a heightened resistance to the new law, which Parliament passed on Sunday. The law is aimed at protecting citizens who feel compelled to correct those who, in their view, do not adhere to Iran's strict social laws. The details of the law, which would officially empower the government and private citizens to give verbal or written statements on social mores, have yet to be completed.

While strict rules on dress, alcohol, sexual relations and much more are not new, the law is aimed at defining crimes against propriety or decency, which in the past would often be corrected informally. In Iran, where most people live in cities and many are highly educated, conservatives are trying to avert changes in attitudes by enforcing traditions.

But Erdbrink points out that Hassan Rouhani spoke out very forcefully against the law,

providing a stark contrast to the image the opposition paints of him going along with harsh punishment meted out by conservatives:

President Hassan Rouhani strongly criticized the new law on Wednesday, saying that he feared it would divide society because, as many observers have pointed out, in reality it offers the country's small but influential faction of hard-liners more power.

"The sacred call to virtue is not the right of a select group of people, a handful taking the moral high ground and acting as guardians," Mr. Rouhani said during a trip to the provincial city of Zanjan. "It is upon all Muslims to exhort love, respect for others and human dignity."

"May such a day never come that some lead our society down the path to insecurity, sow discord and cause divisions, all under the flag of Islam," he said, his voice shaking with emotion.

What a powerful statement. Imagine if Barack Obama said "May such a day never come that some lead our society down the path to insecurity, sow discord and cause divisions, all under the flag of Christianity". And imagine if he said it with a voice shaking with emotion.

Sadly, both Iran and the United States have already reached that point where religious conservatives have caused insecurity, sown discord and caused divisions. And that is what makes Rouhani's statement so dangerously courageous and prevents Obama from ever contemplating doing the same.