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Comment

Abdelrazik versus Harper

A lose-lose situation in which a man who is guilty of nothing but having a certain kind of name, skin color and religion has seen his life shattered

Gerald Caplan

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To the very end, the Harper government maintained a consistent attitude toward Abousifian Abdelrazik: mean-spirited, callous, destructive. Instead of announcing that they were willing at long last to allow this innocent Canadian citizen to return home from Sudan, instead of a hint of remorse for his ordeal, instead of explaining how our government intends to help him restore the life they stole from him six years ago, all he and we got was a begrudging eight words from the Minister of Justice. A Federal Court Judge, in a stinging rebuke to the Harper government, had ordered that Mr. Abdelrazik be returned home to Canada within 30 days. The Minister graciously announced that "the government will comply with the court order" and sat down again.

I first wrote about Mr. Abdelrazik's awful plight in this newspaper on March 13. I explained that a growing group of Canadians were outraged by his treatment and were determined to help him come home. Although the government declared it a crime to do so, many of us had donated money to buy him a plane ticket for the long flight from Khartoum to Montréal. Now he's coming home.

How do we account for the government's belated capitulation to the Constitution, commonsense and public opinion? Who made this happen?

First must be the astonishing courage and resilience of Mr. Abdelrazik himself. Imagine going to visit your family abroad one day and not returning for six terrible years. Imagine living in the lobby of the Canadian embassy in Khartoum for more than a year, barely tolerated by its staff, and being toyed with by his own government, repeatedly being promised his freedom and then having it stolen away at the last second. From hope to despair, depression, frustration, time after time after time. Dreaming of seeing his family in Montréal, then having the dream shattered every time. Yet the man seems never to have succumbed to hopelessness, and seems always to have acted with dignity.

Still, he returns home to what? No money, no work, a family he needs to get to know again, and post-traumatic stresses that are hardly imaginable. I hope he sues the government for millions, though nothing can ever repair the damage so gratuitously and deliberately caused him.

Second is the wonderful, mainly anonymous grassroots activist movement that has pushed his cause for so many months. These are the kind of people, often young, who get behind the hardest causes, these days often meaning the victimization of Arab- or Muslim-Canadians. They raised the money, they worked the media, they ratcheted up the pressure on politicians and all they got back was the satisfaction of fighting the good fight. Who says there are no Canadian heroes?

Third are the legal counterparts of the activists, a handful of lawyers who worked on the case for almost two years - all pro bono. The activists and lawyers worked hand in hand, reinforcing each other's determination

and strategies. At a time when greed seems to be the driving motive for much of what happens in our society, these lawyers give us hope.

Fourth is Paul Dewar, an NDP Member of Parliament, and Paul Koring, a Globe and Mail reporter.

The Liberals were deeply compromised on the Abdelrazik file. He was first arrested by the Sudanese secret police at the request of the Canadian government when that government was headed by Jean Chrétien. He was imprisoned twice in Sudan for long periods and brutally tortured when Paul Martin was prime minister. So the Liberals ducked this issue until relatively recently. Luckily, Paul Dewar carried the ball, repeatedly embarrassing though not shaking an intransigent Harper government. At this low moment in our political life, Dewar reminds us what public affairs should be all about.

As for Paul Koring, he gave the story serious coverage long before most other media thought it remotely newsworthy. Just as the Liberals eventually jumped on the growing bandwagon, so did other media in the last several months. But Koring was first. Mr. Abdelrazik owes much to the two Pauls.

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If the good guys are clear in this case, so are the bad ones. Nothing negative enough can be said of the roles of the Chrétien, Martin and Harper governments. Although the evidence against Abdelrazik was flimsy at best, the Liberal government shamefully determined that he would never be allowed to return to Canada.

Once Harper took over in 2006, and it was already obvious that there was no evidence at all against Abdelrazik, active sadism characterized our government's position. It was as if a decision was consciously made to make his life as intolerable as possible, to break his will, to destroy his humanity. Which is what they tried to do.

Why? For what conceivable reason? Until the American election, maybe to appease the fanatics in the Bush administration. But since? Why should our government continue to torment this man? There seems only one answer, however unpalatable: Because they could. They had not a shred of evidence against the man, but they believed they could operate with impunity. For that, Mr. Abdelrazik's life has been shattered. Yet he is guilty of nothing but having a certain kind of name, skin color and religion.

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