

When is "Economic Information" Espionage?
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Washington Post correspondent Jason Rezaian has been cooling his heels in an Iranian prison for nine months without charges until now, when we are finally told that he will stand trial for espionage for having "sold economic information" to unnamed Americans. What this information is nobody has been told. What sort of economic information about Iran could there be that could threaten Iran's security, one wonders! I can imagine quite a few things, but cannot imagine that Jason Rezaian could have secured such information. What are they hiding, eh?

Jason Rezaian is an unlikely spy. He is an American-born and San Rafael-raised journalist with dual US-Iranian citizenship who has been serving as a correspondent for the Washington Post. We last saw him interviewed by foodie Anthony Bourdain, talking about food, Iranian culture, and Rezaian's obvious love for his parents' country, a place he wanted to explain to his American readers. How stupid of Iran's repressive government to have singled him out for such treatment. This is just one more indication, much like the one shown in the movie "Rosewater," of the coming demise of an incompetent regime whose legitimacy has died.

Economic information can be very sensitive indeed. It can indicate things going wrong, hands in multiple cookie jars, people in bazaars or market places being interfered with but not being permitted to complain. In oppressive states, the public only gets around the oppression through underground humor. In Russia, for example, there is the "toilet paper code." When the economy gets really bad, toilet paper gets scarce in the shops. People who come to visit are asked to bring their own. This is not a good sign.

During the latter years of Communism, especially in Poland, visitors were asked to bring bars of soap! Soap was a very acceptable tip in hotels.

In Iran, when the Shah started interfering with bazaar corruption and tried price stabilization, suddenly onions disappeared from the markets. No onions?

In both Russia and Iran today, economic information is closely guarded because their leaders do not want people to know what they are doing. Their leaders certainly do not want them to know that Putin, for example, may be the richest man in the world, may be because nobody can be sure, it is a state secret; but the money he controls is something between \$40 to 100 billion. This is money that should belong to the Russian people, not a nice thing to think of on a cold, dark winter night.

As for the austere, pious Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, he secretly runs an organization called Setad that benefits from Iran's oil and gas holdings, telecommunications, arms industries, and even ostrich farming. (This latter interests us; we have an ostrich farm that does nothing but lose money.) But the Ayatollah commands a portfolio estimated to be about \$95 billion, much of this seized from ordinary Iranians, business people, and religious minorities. Not nice. This information is the result of a six-month Reuters investigation. One wonders how many Iranians know about this, or dare talk about it. But the time will come that they will.

The sad thing is that communists and the Islamic Revolution both promised economic virtue to their miserable, downtrodden populations, yet both deceived them. The communists, almost from the beginning, promised that they would share equally and grow together. But this never really happened. Some were always more equal than others. There were always always more benefits for the party membership and upon the collapse of communism, great inequality burgeoned. Putin has abused his leadership, along with his small inner group of thieves.

The Ayatollas are even worse. They hide behind religious piety and are even bigger thieves and hypocrites to crush their citizens and steal their nation's wealth.

Poor Jason Rezaian is in prison as a warning to anyone who really might dare talk about economic issues in today's Iran. He may have just asked where the onions have all gone. Who knows? A friend of ours who returned recently from a visit told us people were buying almonds by the nut. A Persian joke?

687 words

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