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Iranian Denialism No Laughing Matter

By: YOAV SIVAN

Inside the Columbia University auditorium where Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad spoke this week, audience members responded with peals of laughter to his assertion that Iran is a gay-free nation. Among the audience members, no doubt, were members of the LGBT community.

As ridiculous as Ahmadinejad's statement was, so, too, was the audience's reaction. Laughter in politics is usually a sign of complacency - a reaction from people who apparently believe they have made so much progress, they can afford to laugh off statements they find absurd and then move on.

Given Ahmadinejad's ruthless killings of LGBT people, where was the audience's outrage? If Ahmadinejad had declared that no one from any other persecuted community lives in Iran today, the audience would have erupted in shouts rather than chuckles.

Can it be that too many LGBT people, joined by some straight progressives, have reached a dangerous comfort level where laughter replaces action? How many audience members left Ahmadinejad's speech asking themselves - and others next to them - how to counter this madman who has executed people because of their sexual orientation?

Ahmadinejad knows he can say whatever he wants on gays and no one will hold him accountable. We'll laugh, all right.

But we will not act.

Neither will the United Nations, for that matter, where Ahmadinejad spoke this week to the General Assembly.

Ahmadinejad had every reason to breathe easy there, judging from recent UN history. On July 26, when an activist asked newly-elected UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, during a speech in San Francisco, to talk about LGBT rights, the activist was escorted out of the hall. Some in the audience giggled, while others called for the daring activist to shut up. Ban quickly reduced the flame, saying merely, "Gay rights is a very sensitive issue..." and allowed his voice to trail off. We are still waiting for what will follow.

Tragically, the UN has run away from everything that has to do with safeguarding LGBT human rights. The most daring thing the UN has done for the LGBT community in recent years was giving mere consultative status to LGBT rights organizations at the UN Economic and Social Council, and even this not without a fight.

A simple resolution calling for decriminalizing homosexuality is still too revolutionary for the UN, ridiculing its pretensions to lead in fighting for human rights worldwide.

Whether at the UN or Columbia, an internationally notorious gay-basher should be welcomed not with laughter or applause, but with bold political action. Ahmadinejad deserves an audience incensed enough to walk out on him, rather than one that treats him like a stand-up act from Caroline's Comedy Club.

As a gay citizen of Israel who belongs to both constituencies Ahmadinejad wishes to wipe off the map, I'm embarrassed at the LGBT community's tepid reaction to the Iranian president's homophobia - certainly tepid in comparison to the justifiably fierce reaction to his psychotic anti-Israel ideology.

The next time Ahmadinejad or some other anti-LGBT despot speaks in America, whether at the UN, Columbia, or elsewhere, the LGBT community must move aggressively to counter the guest and the host. Let them both understand that killing people because of their sexual orientation is no laughing matter.

Yoav Sivan is the LGBT coordinator of the International Union of Socialist Youth and a board member of the Aguda (the Israeli LGBT Association) and the Jerusalem Open House. His website is www.yoavsivan.org.

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