

'Ziba' Award Celebrates the Life and Legacy of Zahra 'Ziba' Kazemi

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July 10 marks the fourth anniversary of the death of Zahra "Ziba" Kazemi, a Canadian photojournalist arrested after photographing a demonstration outside Evin prison in Iran following the student uprisings of 2003. Ziba was killed while in the custody of the Iranian judiciary.

The most significant international legal case the Islamic Republic of Iran faces today stems from the death four years ago in custody of Canadian photojournalist Zahra "Ziba" Kazemi. Her son Stephan has launched a civil suit in Quebec against the Iranian government.

Zahra "Ziba" Kazemi was a passionate, mysterious and adventurous woman who started her career as a photographer in her 40s. A woman who lived by her wits as a freelance photographer, she came into prominence as a celebrated photojournalist following her death in 2003. She was an only child; she lost her biological father when she was a baby. Ezat Kazemi, her mother, subsequently married to a man named Keramat, who Ziba loved as her real father. Ziba grew up in Shiraz and continued her education in Tehran cinema school and received her doctorate in arts and literature in Paris, where she lived from 1974 until her migration to Montreal in 1993 with her only child, Stephan.

The camera became a tool for Ziba, a tool through which she could express her concerns about what was happening around us. She travelled almost to all the troubled parts of the world: Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Mexico, Haiti, Africa and Iran. Looking through her camera's viewfinder and focusing on little but important details was her way. Her focus was on ordinary people. With a sincerity matched by her talent and guts, Ziba was able to catch people's human nature by focusing into their eyes. With that she could connect us all together through images from different parts of this world.

In May 2003, she went to Iran from Iraq to get a visa in Tehran to travel to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, two small countries in Central Asia. Her trip coincided with the June student uprising started in Tehran. As a photojournalist she had always reported on peoples' struggling for democracy. She was a witness.

On June 23, 2003 Ziba was arrested photographing demonstrators in front of Evin prison, where countless students were being held following the government's crackdown. Authorities asked Ziba to leave her camera and film and come back the next day to pick them up. Ziba refused and protested. She just could not leave her film with them. She stayed there and exposed the film to light in order to destroy any kind of evidence against demonstrators outside the prison.

How dare a woman stand up to the Islamic Republic like this! They arrested her without any notice to her family and friends. She was tortured and beaten, and slipped into a coma. On July 10, the government unplugged her from life support at the hospital without her family's knowledge. A week later, the Iranian government buried her in Shiraz against her son, Stephan's, expressed wishes.

Ziba was a woman who chose to die with dignity rather than live with shame and humiliation.

What has the Canadian government done in the past four years? Ministers have put up many shows and issued many statements but they have not done a great deal to bring the murderers to justice. Stephan is still waiting for his mother's body to be repatriated to Canada. It is his wish to bring Ziba's body home and, despite the government's repeated promises, there has been no progress. As Stephan said: "Ziba never wanted to be buried; her wish was to be cremated." With the almost unanimous silence of the international community, and the absence of concrete measures from the Canadian government, the ordeal continues.

The Canadian government has refused to take the case to the International Court of Justice and confront Iran on legal grounds. That is why Stephan launched a civil suit in Quebec against the Iranian government, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, Chief Public Prosecutor for Tehran Saeed Mortazavi, and Mohammad Bakhshi, former Iranian deputy chief of intelligence for Evin prison. The case was initiated in July 2006 on the third anniversary of Ziba's death. With great hope and optimism we are anxiously waiting for the court process start here in Montreal.

At the same time, Iran puts up a show every once in a while—a façade of justice—in order to eliminate the civil suit in Quebec. A case in point was Monday, July 2, 2007. According to the Gazette Montreal, "Iran's supreme court held a new appeal hearing on Monday into the death in custody four years ago of Montreal photojournalist Zahra Kazemi." The Iranian government wants to show what happened to Ziba was an internal matter and Iran's judiciary can deal with this case. Strangely none of Ziba's family inside or outside Iran, including her son and mother were informed. They never knew about this supreme court hearing and all the other legal games the Iranian government is playing in order to manipulate international opinion about this very important matter.

On February 2004, Stephan Hachemi established the Zahra Kazemi Foundation to honor his mother's memory. Since its inception, this non-profit has organised multicultural events and photo exhibitions in Canada and abroad. For the fourth anniversary of Ziba Kazemi's death to keep her life and legacy alive, it announced an international photography award called "Ziba." This award is to encourage high standards in photojournalism for single images and for picture stories. The winners of the "Ziba" photography award will receive a cash prize at the award ceremony in Montreal.

The ceremony for ZIBA's photography award will be held on September 23, first day of autumn, the day Ziba-Zahra Kazemi—was born. Information about this award will be announced with greater details in zibakazemi.org in October 2008.

Despite the violence unleashed by world leaders like Bush and Ahmadi-Nejad, there are thousands of people like Ziba who continue to stand up for human rights and freedom every day. We have to honor their lives and courage. As one of Ziba's very old friends from Paris told me: "Ziba was stubborn and fearless, she was brave and never afraid to be herself." Let us join her son, Stephan, in honoring her memory, supporting her case, celebrating her art and witnessing her life.
