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thelatest

Clinton, Obama weigh in on plight of Iranian gays

Activist asks campaigns to condemn U.K. deportations

By JOSHUA LYNSEN, Washington Blade | Apr 23, 1:38 PM

Britain's deportation of gay Iranians has emerged as a minor presidential campaign issue after a gay rights group asked each candidate to take a stand.

Equality Forum this month called on Sens. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.), John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Barack Obama (D-Ill.) to encourage British Prime Minister Gordon Brown to halt the deportation of gay Iranian refugees living in Britain.

Malcolm Lazin, the organization's executive director, said such deportations are tantamount to death sentences for the gay Iranians who fled their homeland.

"We wanted to join the LGBT community in Europe by lending our voice and hopefully the voices of our presidential candidates to what we feel is a significant international human rights concern," he said.

Obama's campaign, the first to respond, said in a statement Monday that the senator "believes that the United States and countries around the world have both a legal and a moral obligation to protect victims of persecution based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

"Under an Obama administration, the United States will lead by setting a strong example, which includes making clear that asylum for persecuted people is a bedrock principle of American and international law," says the statement. "Moreover, Obama will exert diplomatic pressure and employ other foreign policy tools to encourage other nations to address human rights abuses and atrocities committed against LGBT men and women."

Ben LaBolt, an Obama campaign spokesperson, would not say whether Obama planned to write to Brown on the issue, as Equality Forum requested.

Lee Feinstein, the Clinton campaign's national security director, said Tuesday that it was tracking the case of Mehdi Kazemi, a 19-year-old gay man living in Britain who faces execution if returned to Iran.

"The campaign has discussed this issue with the U.K. government," he said. "We were encouraged to learn that the deportation order for Mr. Kazemi has been deferred and is now under review."

Feinstein said the campaign would "continue to follow this issue closely."

According to Equality Forum, at least 12 gay Iranians living in Britain risk deportation, including Pegah Emambakhsh, a 40-year-old lesbian whose case last year gained international attention.

Emambakhsh, who fled to Britain from Iran in 2005 after her partner was arrested and tortured, won a delay of her deportation in August after allies circulated her name, case information and photograph online.

Lesley Boulton, an activist leading efforts to secure asylum for Emambakhsh, said the case is still pending and welcomed Equality Forum's efforts.

"Maybe I'm being pessimistic, but there is a sinister silence in the U.K. from our most senior politicians on LGBT asylum issues," she said.

Also silent was McCain's campaign, which did not respond to the Blade's inquiries.

Lazin said the responsiveness of each campaign to Equality Forum's request is an indicator of how each candidate will handle gay issues as president.

"Particularly on the Democratic side, most people believe both of the candidates are relatively similar in terms of their stands on our issues," he said. "I think this is a good way to demonstrate a difference."



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Lazin said each response — or lack thereof — is revealing.

"We feel that if they respond to our request," he said, "that will indicate how they will handle similar types of human rights concerns in their administration."

Equality Forum's request comes as Brown is developing closer ties to all three presidential candidates. The prime minister met with each candidate last week when he was in Washington.


"Clearly, he's interested in building a relationship with each of them," Lazin said, "and therefore this would be a great time for them to be making their position clear."

Lazin said it's important for the presidential candidates, along with gay activists and voters, to take a stand on the deportations.

"I think what's important is our civil rights movement is an international civil rights movement," he said. "And it's important as an international civil rights movement to proactively take responsibility for our brothers and sisters around the world."

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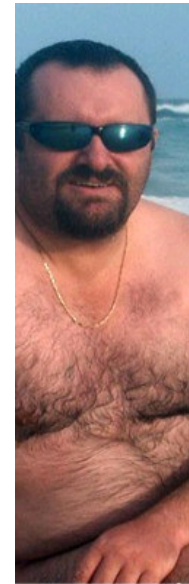
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