

## The return of presidential intolerance and impunity

*Families of Zardasht Osman and Hugo Arce fight for justice*

By Chibli Mallat

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One would have hoped that Guatemala, like many Central American countries, had irreversibly turned its tragic page after the civil war characterized by death squads ended in the late 1990s. The apparently disguised "suicide" of Hugo Arce on January 23, 2008 shows otherwise. You can read a sample of his courage on this page.

One would have hoped that the Iraqi Kurdish leaders cherished their hard-won freedom after the genocidal era of Saddam Hussein. Zardasht Osman, a 22-year old talented Kurdish journalist received persistent death threats after he published the article that The Daily Star also presents on this page. His body turned up on May 6, 2010; he was tortured to death.

The cases are uncannily similar despite the distance. Both spoke truth to power, and both announced their coming death. Their common thread is presidential intolerance, and persistent impunity.

This looks to me as the return of presidential thuggery in countries in which one thought the worst was now behind. The setback is palpable, but the presidents concerned should know that the victims' families and friends will not stand idle. Guatemala is a distant country, but the fight for freedom of expression and the end of impunity is universal. Arce's family is fighting on, in a case taken up by Guatemala's International Commission against Impunity, which is now under threat after the resignation of its chairman.

Like Arce's, the death of Osman will not go away. It is underscoring worrying trends in Iraqi Kurdistan, which had been relatively sheltered from the massive killings current south of the region. The young journalist was killed after he wrote a satirical piece about the nepotism within the family of Kurdish Regional Government President Masoud Barzani – alas also true with Iraq's President Jalal Talibani, whose wife Hero is said to wield far more power than a first lady should. The killing of Osman has remained so far without a single arrest, always a sign of high-level collusion, and the pattern is increasingly recurrent in Guatemala.

In the case of Osman, an extraordinary group of distinguished journalists, including Edward Mortimer, Jon Randal, and Charles Glass, wrote to express their concern to Kurdistan's president.

Like Randal and Mortimer, I am attached to my friendship with the Kurdish president, for whom we fought hard the Henry Kissinger legacy, and successfully so. Masoud Barzani owes it to his father's memory, to the Kurds, to the Iraqis, and to us, his long-time friends, to react at the level needed, and not through the Saddam-like miffed arrogance that his spokesman displayed in answer to the Western journalists' letter. Barzani must think hard about the immense risks he is posing, to his own reputation as the elected president of the Kurdish region, and to the legacy of Mullah Mustafa. It is troubling to see his son Masrur as head of the intelligence services in Erbil. Masrur, whom I remember as a shy, touching boy in London, should not be in such a position, and we need arrests in Osman's assassination. I personally believe Kaka Masud had nothing to do with the death of Osman, and the scant news one has suggests some irate member of the Barzani clan reacting in this brutish manner to the young man's satirical article. Whatever the case, there is no place for clannish cover-up if Barzani wishes to retain his hard-earned sympathy worldwide.

Guatemala has a similar story: the president and his entourage are suspect of having engineered, facilitated, or encouraged the killing of Hugo Arce. Maybe they have nothing to do

with it, in which case they need to accommodate the reasonable demands of his family, which is a proper independent investigation and trial for his announced death.

Five years after the assassination of Samir Kassir in Lebanon, we have not seen a single arrest, and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon continues to fail those who have trusted it to avoid taking justice into their own hands. Recently, three young Lebanese were jailed for affront to President Michel Sleiman in a Facebook exchange. To his credit, Sleiman weighed in to get the three released a few days ago, but the prosecutor should have never arrested them in the first place. Presidents must display a thick skin, or not be in politics. Anyone who wields public power should expect criticism, some of which might be in bad taste, even offensive. This is part of being in the public eye, and critics must be protected, not prosecuted or harmed.

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