

Testimony of Kambiz Hosseini,
Host of Parazit show on Voice of America Persian
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern
and South and Central Asian Affairs
Hearing on the Situation in Iran:
Human Rights and Democratic Opposition
May 11, 2011 at 10am

Chairman Casey and distinguished members of the Subcommittee and honored panelists and guests, my name is Kambiz Hosseini, and I am the host of the program Parazit on the Voice of America's Persian News Network. This Subcommittee has heard from distinguished policy-maker and human rights activists. I respectfully point out to the honorable Chairman and the Subcommittee that I am a journalist, satirist, and program host. My testimony today reflects my personal perspective; it does not represent the views of the U.S. government. I hope it will be of value to the Subcommittee in considering the critical issues of Human Rights and Democratic Reform in Iran.

I and a talented team of producers began our Program in 2009, with the goal of bringing a fresh and entertaining perspective on events inside Iran to our audience. Our goal remains the same as it was since the beginning: being the voice of voiceless youth inside Iran and projecting what they are whispering on the streets. Despite all governmental pressure to limit basic freedom in Iran, my generation is sending a clear message to the Islamic republic: we want our basic rights as human beings. We criticize the Iranian government with respect, and make fun of political figures in a civilized manner. We offer dialogue and we defend universal human rights and values for all Iranians including those authorities inside Iran who dislike the show because of its anti-censorship spirit. And how we do it?

We do it Persian style! With humor. Dark humor. Dark because nothing bright is coming out of today's Iran, where women are forced to obey laws that are discriminatory, children are being executed, information is censored, prisoners don't have basic rights, lawyers are in jail simply because they wanted to defend human rights, and artists and filmmakers like Jafar Panahi who is an internationally acclaimed director is prohibited from pursuing his art for next 20 years. I believe that currently in Iran the human rights situation is absurd and that is exactly what our program is doing: showing the absurdity of the system to the audience. Believe me - watching irrational and illogical speeches made by officials in Iran are as funny as Waiting for Godot live! And it is working. We have over 428,000 fans just on Facebook, where they leave comments proactively and communicate with us in a manner that sometimes makes us think that they are producing this show and we are their audience. Our broadcasts reach Persian speaking audiences in Iran and the entire Persian-speaking world, including the large Iranian diaspora outside Iran.

As the Iranian presidential elections of summer 2009 and their aftermath unfolded, our show became an important rallying point for many Iranians – particularly young Iranians – to stay connected and continue their quest for democratic change in Iran. We have continued this dialogue with our audience ever since. We use all available communications means to stay connected, and our audience in Iran remains in touch despite the Iranian government's severe limitations on electronic communications and free access to information. It is important to note that many people in Iran struggle to view our program, as the Iranian government has aggressively jammed our satellite broadcasts. In fact, our programs name "Parazit" means "static" in Persian – which is what many Iranian

viewers see when they try to view or listen to international satellite broadcasts their government has jammed.

But we will continue to reach out – for our audience. Our audience is why we do Parazit. I believe our program speaks to – and for – the many people inside Iran who lack the freedom to express themselves. We remain in constant contact with our viewers and fans, and they help shape the direction of our show. When we announce a guest for our program, suggestions for questions flood in from our viewers, and help to inform the questions we ask our guest. In addition, we welcome and respond to viewer feedback on who deserves mention for positive and negative actions within Iran. Through this and other means, we give our audience a chance to speak out about conditions and events in Iran they might not otherwise have.

Perhaps someday the Iranian government will lift the “electronic curtain” it has built around its people. Unless and until that day comes, our show and VOA Persian in general will work to keep the lines of communication between the Iranian people and the United States open. I thank the Chairman and the distinguished Subcommittee for the opportunity to offer my comments, and would be pleased to respond to any questions.