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Bizarre actions show a leader losing his grip (The Toronto Star, A06)

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There is a crazy, quiet air of desperation around Stephen Harper. On the surface, the Prime Minister is – as always – the personification of iron self-discipline. On television, he speaks in measured tones, his sentences deliberately interspersed with tight little smiles to suggest friendliness.

But the increasingly bizarre actions of his government suggest that this is a facade. In his first term, Harper managed to walk the fine line between pleasing the general public and placating his much more conservative base. Now, with that base uneasy about his interventionist approach to the economy, he flounders.

Almost every week, the government comes up with something new to divert red-meat conservatives away from Ottawa's ballooning deficit.

The most recent was the government's abrupt, and almost certainly unconstitutional decision to prevent Canadian citizen Abousfian Abdelrazik from returning home to Canada.

Abdelrazik's story is Kafka-esque. Returning to Sudan in 2003 to visit his mother, the Montrealer was jailed by local authorities as a suspected terrorist. The Sudanese released him after 11 months, declaring that he was innocent. The RCMP say they have nothing against him. Still, he couldn't get on a plane to come home because the U.S. had, by this time, placed him on an international no-fly list (albeit one that does not bar the repatriation of citizens stranded abroad).

Meanwhile, Ottawa said it would issue him temporary travel documents (his passport expired while he was being tortured) if he could arrange a flight. Last week, aided by luminaries such as former UN ambassador Stephen Lewis, Abdelrazik did so. But just as he was due to board his flight home, Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon announced that no travel papers would be issued, calling Abdelrazik a security risk.

That's not the first time that Harper's government has played the national security card. Immigration Minister Jason Kenney turned Canada into an international joke last month when he declared British MP George Galloway a security risk and barred him from the country.

Like the Abdelrazik decision, that made sense only as a blatantly political move designed to show Harper's core supporters that, in spite of his new economic heresies, the Prime Minister remains an unrepentant hardliner.

So, too, Defence Minister Peter MacKay's otherwise inexplicable public attack on Russia earlier this year for daring to fly a military plane in international air space near Canada.

Even U.S. military officials found MacKay's tirade unwarranted.

Some have suggested that MacKay did this as part of his failed bid to become NATO secretary-general. If so, it was a doomed gesture.

The more logical explanation is that MacKay, like Cannon and Kenney, was acting under orders to appease the Conservative base and allow control-conscious Harper to reassert his grip.

Because that grip is starting to slip. Some on the right of his party were ready to dump Harper when he almost lost government last fall. His conversion to Keynesian stimulus economics alarmed still more, as has his reversal of fortunes in Quebec and his clumsy feud with former prime minister Brian Mulroney.

Events are starting to spin out of control. Another politician might go with the flow. Stephen Harper's instinct is to hunker down and rebuild the dikes.

Thomas Walkom's usual column appears Wednesday and Saturday.

Surreal security case (The Toronto Star, A18)

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Whatever it is about Abousfian Abdelrazik that Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government seems to want to sweep under the table, it is past time that Parliament took a hard, close look at the case.

Abdelrazik is the Montreal man who has been stranded in the Canadian embassy in Khartoum for nearly a year and in Sudan itself for six years while Ottawa has multiplied excuses not to bring him home. On Friday, citing unspecified "national security" reasons, Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon denied him an emergency passport. Yet Ottawa promised on Dec. 23 to provide travel documents if he could muster a paid-up plane ticket, which he did. Cannon's decision is just the latest hurdle Ottawa has thrown in his way.

This is surreal, given that Canada went to bat for Abdelrazik not 15 months ago, asking the United Nations Security Council to remove him from a no-fly list after the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police advised there was no reason for him to be on it.

What gives? New Democrat MP Paul Dewar, the party's foreign affairs critic, rightly wants to know. He is pushing to have Abdelrazik, who denies being "an Islamic extremist," summoned before Parliament's foreign affairs committee. Meanwhile Liberal MP Irwin Cotler warns Ottawa is violating Abdelrazik's constitutional right to return. Dewar's motion deserves support. If it carries and the government refuses to repatriate him, it will be in contempt of Parliament.

Abdelrazik's lawyers plan to challenge Cannon's decision in court.

But Parliament should not let it go at that. Whether Abdelrazik gets home any time soon, Cannon's ministry has no end of explaining to do. The foreign affairs committee should look into whatever role Canadian officials may have played in Abdelrazik's arrest in Sudan in 2003, his subsequent questioning and alleged torture, whether he is in fact a security risk, and how Ottawa has handled this strange case.

Justice et incohérence (Le Devoir, a3)

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DATE: 2009.04.06
SECTION: LES ACTUALITÉS
PAGE: a3
BYLINE: Cornellier, Manon
WORD COUNT: 942

Le gouvernement Harper semble n'en avoir que pour l'économie ces jours-ci, mais depuis la présentation du budget, on constate qu'il n'a pas perdu de vue une de ses marottes et marques de commerce: la lutte contre la criminalité. Des projets de loi ont été présentés, des décisions prises, et l'on ne s'y trompe pas, les conservateurs n'ont rien perdu de leur vision idéologique ni de leurs visées partisans. Il faudra cependant repasser pour ce qui est des politiques publiques fondées sur les faits, la science ou la cohérence des principes.

Commençons par les plus récentes décisions. Vendredi dernier, le gouvernement a annoncé qu'il ne porterait pas en appel une décision de la Cour fédérale l'obligeant à abandonner sa politique du cas par cas au sujet des Canadiens condamnés à mort à l'étranger. Selon la cour, tous ont droit à son aide pour tenter de faire commuer leur sentence en peine d'emprisonnement. Pour le Canadien Roland Smith, condamné à mort au Montana pour le meurtre crapuleux de deux autochtones, il s'agit d'un revirement important puisque les conservateurs ont cessé de l'appuyer sous prétexte que les États-Unis étaient une démocratie et avaient un système judiciaire équitable.

Selon la porte-parole du ministère des Affaires étrangères, Ottawa va de nouveau aider M. Smith, mais «le gouvernement du Canada continuera de considérer s'il demandera la clémence pour les Canadiens condamnés à mort à l'étranger au fur et à mesure que les cas surviendront». C'est exactement ce genre de politique du cas par cas que la cour a rejeté. Faut-il comprendre qu'Ottawa n'a pas l'intention de se soumettre au jugement de la cour, mais s'y pliera dans le cas de M. Smith parce qu'il est à l'origine de cette décision? Veut-on seulement gagner du temps, en espérant que le prochain cas passera inaperçu? Quand on s'oppose à la peine de mort, on s'y oppose en toutes circonstances.

Toujours vendredi, le ministre des Affaires étrangères, Lawrence Cannon, a fait savoir qu'il ne signerait pas les documents de voyage qui auraient permis au Canadien d'origine soudanaise Abousfian Abdelrazik de revenir au Canada en fin de semaine. L'homme poserait un risque pour la sécurité nationale, a-t-il dit. On se demande bien de quel risque il parle puisque la Gendarmerie royale du Canada (GRC) et le Service canadien du renseignement de sécurité (SCRS) ont écrit qu'ils n'avaient rien associant cet homme à des activités criminelles. Ottawa a-t-il tiré une conclusion contraire parce que M. Abdelrazik figure sur une liste d'interdiction de vol? Le Canada a pourtant tenté d'y faire biffer son nom en 2007, sans succès.

De plus, une résolution des Nations unies précise que cette liste ne peut empêcher un pays de rapatrier un de ses citoyens. De quelle sécurité nationale parle-t-on alors? Sûrement pas de celle du Canada puisque le pauvre homme vit à l'ambassade canadienne à Khartoum depuis mai 2008. Grosse menace...

**

Et il y a ce projet de loi présenté la semaine dernière pour mettre fin à l'enregistrement des carabines et des fusils de chasse. Rien ne justifie cet abandon. Aucune étude, aucune statistique. En plus, les policiers s'y opposent. Qu'importe, les conservateurs restent fidèles à leur promesse et courtisent leur base.

Il en va de même pour ce projet destiné à éliminer la possibilité pour les juges de compter en double les années passées en détention préventive. Actuellement, ce calcul permet, si le juge l'estime approprié, de réduire la sentence imposée à un condamné. Tous les partis d'opposition ont donné leur accord de principe, ce qui n'en fait pas une mesure judicieuse pour autant. Elle est beaucoup plus une réponse à l'impression bien ancrée que trop de condamnés s'en tirent à bon compte et étirent même les procédures pour voir leur sentence réduite par la suite. Il y a des cas de ce genre, mais aucune étude n'a été fournie pour le démontrer.

Qu'importe, au lieu d'étudier le problème pour y trouver une solution nuancée et mesurée, le gouvernement a opté pour la totale élimination de la discrétion judiciaire. Le choix est simple, accrocheur et rentable politiquement, mais est-il juste?

A la fin février, le ministre de la Justice, Rob Nicholson, a présenté deux projets de loi imposant des sentences minimales et plus musclées aux personnes reconnues coupables de crimes liés au gang, à la drogue ou perpétrés avec une arme à feu. A plusieurs égards, les mesures étaient inutiles puisque les crimes visés étaient déjà ciblés par le Code criminel. Certaines, par contre, étaient bienvenues. Mais encore une fois, la nuance a cédé le pas à l'argument politique et partisan, afin de plaire à la base réformiste et allianciste, et peut-être à des électeurs urbains traditionnellement réfractaires aux conservateurs.

Le portrait de la criminalité au Canada change avec l'émergence des gangs de rue, la montée de certains crimes, mais aussi la diminution de beaucoup d'autres. La donne évolue aussi en matière de sécurité nationale. Les outils pour s'attaquer à ces problèmes doivent être ajustés en conséquence. Une réponse unidimensionnelle et centrée sur la répression entretient l'illusion que la solution est simple. Elle a aussi le défaut de nier des réalités complexes et de prendre des libertés avec certains principes fondamentaux. Et ce ne sont pas des fantômes qui en souffrent, mais des Smith, des Tremblay et des Abdelrazik.

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Of pompocrats and passports (The Toronto Star, A14)

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Return from Sudan rejected, April 4

What right does the Canadian government have to refuse a Canadian citizen like Abousofian Abdelrazik entry to Canada? Does citizenship not mean anything? Can some nameless pompocrat take anyone's passport and banish them without reason? Welcome to the new world. Heil Harper!

Andy Turnbull, Toronto

Why is Lawrence Cannon interfering in a matter that is literally none of his business as foreign affairs minister? Neither CSIS nor the RCMP has any security concerns about this Canadian citizen.

Given this, Mr. Cannon's position seems dangerously irrational.

I have two questions:

- 1) Are the rest of us safe from Mr. Cannon whenever we leave the country?
- 2) Is it time to submit Cannon – and the guy who hired him – to a few sanity tests?

Herb Alexander, Toronto

THE CASE OF ABOUSFIAN ABDELRAZIK Exiled Canadian challenges minister to explain abrupt denial of passport (GLOBE AND MAIL, A10)

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IDN: 090960149

DATE: 2009.04.06

PAGE: A10

BYLINE: PAUL KORING

SECTION: International News

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE:

WORDS: 652

WORD COUNT: 603

PAUL KORING Abousfian Abdelrazik, the Canadian barred from returning home because Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon has labelled him a national security threat, wants the minister to tell him what he has done wrong.

"I would ask him: 'Mr. Cannon, why do you have doubts about me when the security agencies don't?' " Mr. Abdelrazik said in a telephone interview yesterday from the Canadian embassy in Khartoum where he is marooned in exile.

Mr. Abdelrazik was denied a previously promised emergency passport less than two hours before he was to fly home last week. Mr. Cannon offered no evidence to back up a terse, one-sentence letter declaring Mr. Abdelrazik so grave a threat to Canada that he cannot return.

Nor did he offer any explanation for the abrupt reversal of the government's threat assessment of Mr. Abdelrazik, who has been officially cleared by both CSIS and the RCMP.

Those threat assessments – less than 15 months ago – formed the basis of a request from the Harper government asking the UN Security Council to remove Mr. Abdelrazik from its terrorist blacklist. He had been labelled an al-Qaeda operative and added to the blacklist, without Canada's approval or consultation, by the Bush administration in 2006.

"How can you say I am a threat when the Canadian security agencies say I am not? . . . On what grounds do you make your accusations?" Mr. Abdelrazik, 47, said yesterday, challenging the minister to explain.

Apparently, no evidence is needed. An obscure section of the Canadian Passport Order says "the Minister may refuse or revoke a passport if the Minister is of the opinion that such action is necessary for the national security of Canada or another country." Nothing more than the minister's opinion is required and government officials have refused to disclose the basis for Mr. Cannon's.

"Pursuant to section 10.1 . . . the minister has decided to refuse" Mr. Abdelrazik an emergency passport, a government lawyer said in a letter Friday, effectively nullifying the efforts of nearly 200 Canadians who had chipped in to buy him a ticket home.

Mr. Cannon's use of the section is apparently the first time it has been used to deny a Canadian citizen overseas the travel documents needed to exercise the right – guaranteed under Canadian and international law – to return home.

"The government is now in violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms," Liberal MP Irwin Cotler said.

For nearly a year – ever since the government granted Mr. Abdelrazik "temporary safe haven" in the Canadian embassy in Khartoum – it has repeatedly changed the requirements he must meet before it would give him an emergency travel document to replace the passport seized while he was imprisoned in Sudan.

At first the government said he needed only a confirmed flight reservation. When one was obtained last September, it refused to issue the travel document. Then, in December, it promised in writing an emergency passport if Mr. Abdelrazik had a fully paid ticket.

When one was purchased in defiance of government regulations that make it illegal to provide help to anyone on a UN blacklist, Mr.

Cannon said Mr. Abdelrazik must get himself off the list, despite the government's previously failed efforts to have him delisted.

Washington apparently vetoed the government's delisting request.

"At some point this has to stop and the government has to do the right thing and bring him home," NDP MP Paul Dewar said.

Mr. Abdelrazik said his hopes of returning to his family in Montreal after six years of imprisonment and exile in Sudan were crushed Friday. But scores of letters and messages, read to him by his lawyers and faxed to the embassy, have buoyed his spirits.

"Those Canadians who sent me messages of support have touched me deep in my heart," he said. "I am so thankful for the letters, all of the support means so very, very, very much to me."

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Sudan; Canada

SUBJECT TERM: internal security; terrorism; suspects; civil rights; political; statements

PERSONAL NAME: Abousfian Abdelrazik

Still stranded in Sudan (GLOBE AND MAIL, A12 (ILLUS))

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PAGE: A12 (ILLUS)
BYLINE: JAYSON LAPLANTE
SECTION: Letter to the Edit
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE: Winnipeg MB
WORDS: 106
WORD COUNT: 131

Jayson Laplante Winnipeg The absurdity of calling Abousfian Abdelrazik a national security threat while allowing him to reside in the Canadian embassy in Khartoum is apparently lost on our Foreign Affairs Minister (Canadian Can't Come Home, Cannon Says – April 4).

Am I to understand that an understaffed group of diplomats is better equipped than the full cadre of Canada's law enforcement agencies and courts to keep this seemingly dangerous man under control? Does our government have so little faith in the ability of our police and our laws to keep us safe? If I'm seeking protection from evildoers, should I move to a Canadian embassy?

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Canada; Sudan

SUBJECT TERM: human rights; internal security; travel; civil rights

PERSONAL NAME: Abousfian Abdelrazik

Still stranded in Sudan (GLOBE AND MAIL, A12 (ILLUS))

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IDN: 090960076

DATE: 2009.04.06

PAGE: A12 (ILLUS)

BYLINE: HUGH WHITELEY

SECTION: Letter to the Edit

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE: Guelph, Ont.

WORDS: 76

WORD COUNT: 99

Hugh Whiteley Guelph, Ont.

* What scandal is Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon trying to hide? Based on the apparently unsupported assertion that Abousfian Abdelrazik poses a security threat so severe that he can't return home, Mr. Cannon has created the penalty of perpetual exile and imposed it on Mr. Abdelrazik. Are we expected not to notice due process being thrown out the window? Mr. Cannon's action is so preposterous that it must be a smokescreen. But for what?

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Canada; Sudan

SUBJECT TERM: human rights; internal security; travel; civil rights

PERSONAL NAME: Abousfian Abdelrazik

Still stranded in Sudan (GLOBE AND MAIL, A12 (ILLUS))

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL
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PAGE: A12 (ILLUS)
BYLINE: JUSTUS HAVELAAR
SECTION: Letter to the Edit
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE: Campbell River, B.C.
WORDS: 55
WORD COUNT: 72

Justus Havelaar Campbell River, B.C.

* I regret not donating to the fund that bought a plane ticket home for Abousfian Abdelrazik. But now I'm both angry and worried: What kind of precedent is it when a government minister gets to decide which of Canada's citizens can return home? Sign me up for helping to finance the court case.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Canada; Sudan

SUBJECT TERM: human rights; internal security; travel; civil rights

PERSONAL NAME: Abousfian Abdelrazik

Gov't obduracy over Canadian demands answers (The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon), A6)

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The federal government's unconscionable treatment of a Canadian who's been forced into an existence in limbo at its embassy in Khartoum has reached the absurd point where the politicians who persist with prolonging the abuse of Abooufian Abdelrazik's rights need to be held personally responsible.

Six years after Mr. Abdelrazik was jailed and tortured in Sudan without being charged while on a trip to his birthplace to visit his mother, his return to Canada is being prevented by various roadblocks put up by the government in Ottawa.

The latest of these was a one-sentence letter delivered Friday to his lawyers that said Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon has refused to grant Mr. Abdelrazik a temporary passport that would have allowed him to fly home immediately.

According to the Justice Department, the minister believes Mr. Abdelrazik, who was placed on the UN Security Council's watch list initially by the Bush administration, is a threat to the "national security of Canada or another country."

This even though both the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and the RCMP have formally advised Ottawa they have no grounds to believe that the Canadian citizen is a terrorist, and the Sudanese government has cleared him of any links to Al-Qaida and affirmed that he poses no threat to international interests. That Mr. Abdelrazik has been living for 11 months in the lobby of Canada's embassy after former Foreign Affairs minister Maxime Bernier granted him "temporary safe haven" suggests that Ottawa, too, considers him as posing no threat.

So, why Mr. Cannon at this belated date made a complete about-face on a written commitment made by the Harper government just three months ago to grant Mr. Abdelrazik an emergency passport if he could produce a paid ticket for a flight home remains highly puzzling.

Is it that the minister is privy to security information on Mr. Abdelrazik that's of such a top-secret nature that not even Canada's main security agencies know of it?

Is it that the information to which Mr. Cannon is privy gathered by a third party that couldn't share it with CSIS after the agency bizarrely and incredibly claimed this week that it wouldn't accept evidence gathered through torture or other harsh means, even though CSIS itself has been implicated in Mr. Abdelrazik arrest and treatment in Sudan? This, if true, at least raises questions about the ethics of Mr. Cannon and his government.

Or, is this case demonstrative of a pervasive racist attitude within the Harper government, as some opposition members in Canada suggest? When the government's handling of the case of Brenda Martin imprisoned in Mexico is contrasted with its failure to act decisively to extend full protection and defend the rights of Canadians of a darker hue such Mr. Abdelrazik, Abdullah Almalki and Muayyed Nureddin who've faced abuse at the hands of foreign authorities, the racism charges suddenly don't seem so far-fetched.

Even before Mr. Cannon backtracked Friday in rescinding the offer of an emergency travel document to Mr. Abdelrazik after a group of 160 supporters in Canada found an airline willing to fly the man to Canada and bought him a ticket, the minister set an impossible and ridiculous precondition for his return.

That was for the man to get himself removed from the UN 1267 blacklist — something that even Mr. Bernier as minister had failed to accomplish in 2007 after providing evidence that the RCMP and CSIS had cleared Mr. Abdelrazik.

What's particularly striking is that persons placed on the list have the express right of return to their country of citizenship, and Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms requires the government to permit citizens to re-enter Canada.

Perhaps what's at stake is a fear in government that Mr. Abdelrazik, upon his return, might initiate legal action against the government for having abrogated his rights by farming out his torture to the government of Sudan. With CSIS requesting a formal investigation into the case to clear its name in Mr. Abdelrazik's arrest abroad, is it possible that Mr. Cannon's obstructionist approach has to do with protecting others who made a colossal blunder?

What is clear is that Mr. Abdelrazik cannot live in the embassy lobby forever and will eventually be in a position to seek redress for the abuse of his rights. When that day comes, it shouldn't be all Canadians who should have to compensate him as they did with Maher Arar, but politicians such as Mr. Cannon who've dragged on this fiasco far too long.

Bring Abdelrazik home (Calgary Herald, A8)

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BYLINE: Kris Kotarski
SOURCE: For The Calgary Herald
WORD COUNT: 661

The government of Canada is afraid that when he returns home, Abousfian Abdelrazik will talk.

That is the only possible reason why a Canadian citizen who has been publicly cleared of all suspicion by CSIS, by the RCMP and by the Government of Sudan, is still stranded abroad after six years, living in the lobby of the Canadian Embassy in Khartoum, while our Foreign Minister declares him a threat to public safety and refuses him a passport to return home.

If Canada is a nation of laws, then we cannot stand for this. When Abdelrazik returns home, we should all hope that he follows the lead of Maher Arar and, as publicly as possible, blows open the security structures that allow any Canadian citizen to be treated in this manner.

Abdelrazik was visiting his mother in Sudan in 2003 when CSIS officials asked Sudanese authorities to detain him on terrorism suspicions. Abdelrazik was suspected of some unseemly connections to terrorism suspects in Montreal, and although he was held and interrogated for 11 months (when he claims that he was beaten and tortured, and has the scars to prove it), the Sudanese government released him after concluding that he was an innocent man.

Since then, Canadian authorities repeatedly balked at bringing him home, first by excusing delays because he was placed on the U. S. no-fly list, and later by refusing to issue him travel documents. In the meantime, Abdelrazik was arrested again in 2005, and held for another 10 months before the Sudanese released him, claiming that they could not continue to hold an innocent man. During this period, Canadian consular access was denied, and with Sudan's human rights record, we can all infer what his second stay in prison may have entailed.

After being released for the second time in 2006, Ottawa signalled to Canadian diplomats that Abdelrazik was not to be issued travel documents. Although there is no black-on-white proof in the public domain, it is not unreasonable to infer that this was because in 2007, the FBI visited Abdelrazik for another interrogation session, once more without Canadian consular support.

By 2008, Abdelrazik began to speak out in public, and by 2009 a public campaign raised money to bring him home and placed pressure on the Canadian government to issue him travel documents. Last Friday, April 3, 2009, six years and 10 days to the date that he arrived in Khartoum, Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon stated: "We denied the passport on the basis of national security." That's pure nonsense.

If Abdelrazik remains a threat to national security, then why is he living in a Canadian Embassy?

If Abdelrazik is a threat to Canadians, then why have CSIS and the RCMP cleared him of allegations in public?

And why is Canada asking the Sudanese government to detain our citizens? This is a government accused of crimes against humanity, and we're asking them for help?

On the surface, Abdelrazik's case seems like a mirror image of the Arar fiasco, where the Government of Canada tried to prevent another one of our fellow citizens from coming home and speaking out about the brutal treatment at the hands of our sometime allies in what used to be called the global war on terror.

Like Arar, Abdelrazik's return home is less of a threat to national security and more of a threat to national credibility.

In May 2008, I wrote that the actions of my government made me feel relieved my last name is Kotarski, that I do not worship in a mosque, and that my skin colour is lighter than the current U. S. president.

Sadly, almost one year later, it seems that very little has changed.

"If Mr. Abdelrazik's last name was Martin, would there be a different outcome?" said Paul Dewar, the NDP's foreign affairs critic, referring to the case of Brenda Martin, for whose repatriation no expense was spared when she was convicted of fraud last year in Mexico.

"I would ask Canadians to ask the government the same question: if this had been someone with a different skin colour and with a different last name, would there have been a different outcome?"

Kris Kotarski is a Calgary writer.

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