

ICC Meeting # 13–December 03, 2015

ICC Board Meeting

Attendees

1. Arsalan Kahnemuyipour
2. Arshak Shojaei
3. Behrouz Amouzgar (Phone)
4. Bijan Ahmadi
5. Mitra Saffari
6. Reza Ghazi
7. Soudeh Ghassemi

Absent:

1. Farhang Farid
2. Shahram Namvarazad

Observers:

This was the first time an ICC board meeting allowed for the presence of observers. There were 5 observers present. Their names are being withheld as their approval to reveal their names was not obtained.

In line with one of the 2015 election promises concerning the transparency of the ICC board, Arsalan made an introductory and welcoming note to the observers.

1. Minutes of November 18, 2015

Minutes of November 18, 2015 to be reviewed by board and any changes to be received by tomorrow noon.

2. Yalda Party (December 11, 2015)

The following subjects were discussed:

- 73% of tickets are sold.
- Food will be served as buffet.
- Soudeh will take care of MC.
- Mitra and Soudeh will take care of music and will coordinate with the singer.
- Arshak will help in design of certificates.
- 12 invited guests (i.e. those who have been in parliamentary or municipal elections over the past year) have confirmed attending the party. One invitee has confirmed that he will not attend. The contact information of Mr. Borujerdi is not available yet.
- Each certificate recipient will have the opportunity to give a one-minute talk.

3. Policy Committee

- Bylaw Revision Subcommittee has held 7 meetings and published 5 minutes of their meetings.
- Mr. Shams's suggestion with regard to establishing a subcommittee under Policy Committee to supervise and criticize the ICC board was discussed and Behrooz advised that since policy committee is under the supervision of the ICC board, this committee cannot be placed under the Policy Committee. The board decided not to pursue this suggestion.

4. Cultural Committee

For the occasion of International Day for the Elimination Violence against Women on November 25th, an event will be held on December 06, 2015. Mitra emphasized that these kinds of events are aimed at promoting a culture of dialog and democracy within the Iranian Canadian Community and it would be beneficial if all ICC board members and board candidates could try and attend these kinds of events.

5. Public Relation Committee

- With regard to the biased article that CTV, Metro and Toronto Star published, following the action by ICC and the petition which received close to 3000 signatures, CTV removed the article from its website; Toronto Star removed the picture from its website (though it kept the article); and Metro confirmed that the information was not complete but didn't offer an official apology.
- Around 100 attended the second pub night and 5 to 6 people signed the membership form.
- Two workshops are being currently planned for Newcomers.

6. Ashura Event and received emails

ICC received 10 e-mails with the same text signed by ten different individuals about the Ashura event and some reactions to this event in the community. For the occasion of Ashura, a procession was held in Toronto which was attended by a group of Iranian Canadians. In response to this event, several community members reacted by writing articles or posting comments in social media condemning this event. A few of these comments associated the event with ISIS and made other comments that some in the community found offensive. Those who sent ICC e-mails requested that ICC take action in response to these comments and articles.

The text of the e-mail with the names removed is given below:

Text of e-mail sent to ICC about some reactions to the Ashura event:

To the ICC's board of governors:

"Over the past few days I have talked to a number of friends and ICC members regarding the need to refute the recent onslaught of personal attacks against our fellow Iranian Canadians who participated in the mourning procession of Ashura. This event despite its legal legitimacy protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, Section 2 became the subject of confusion among many Iranian Canadians as certain individuals tried to label it under pejorative terms. Some of the local media in the community have also been influenced by this and published articles in condemning the event as barbaric and uncivilized. The magnitude of such negative propaganda disseminated by these groups has gone beyond the Iranian circle and the sheer ignorance of their messages (e.g. Iranian Shia Storming Streets of Toronto) have induced fear among none Iranian Canadians who associated the black clad mourners to ISIS. Some of the messages commented under the Facebook posts of these rather antagonistic figures are clear threats to use violence and can be interpreted on par with hate speech.

This is rather unfortunate as many other similar religious and non religious processions in this city have been organized while no similar controversy has been risen out of them. Given the popularity of the Ashura commemoration within the Iranian Muslim community and the likelihood of its occurrence in the future, we would like to know whether ICC would want to clarify its position vis-a-vie the freedom of religious beliefs and freedom of association in order to be the voice for those who have become the subject of insults and humiliation as a result of these individual's recent campaign of fear and shame.

Suggestion: Considering the controversy of the issue, I suggest that in order to maintain a neutral position and at the same time avoid any possible association with religious organizations perhaps ICC can declare its position **only** in regards to "freedom of association" and the peaceful nature of religious processions. This way members of the Iranian Muslim community can too find representation in ICC through public reiteration of their civil rights and ICC can also avoid direct confrontation with other groups who seek to link the congress to nefarious political agendas or infamous individuals."

There was a very long discussion about the different aspects of the event and the reactions to it. Three specific options were discussed:

Option 1 (Suggested by Bijan, seconded by Soudeh): Issue a public statement from ICC in line with what the e-mails had requested. The full motion is below:

Given ICC's mandate to uphold and defend the interests of Iranian Canadians in social spheres and its commitment to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms I propose that the ICC president prepares a statement on behalf of the board to be published in Persian weeklies expressing disappointment about islamophobic comments and discriminatory statements published by few individuals in social media and in Persian weeklies regarding the public Ashura ceremony held in Toronto and urging our community members to treat each other with tolerance and understanding and to respect freedoms enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Individual Rights including freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of religion and freedom of association.

Option 2 (Suggested by Behrouz): Issue a public statement, but in the statement instead of just addressing one side as being intolerant, the statement should address both sides as not respecting freedom of expression very well.

Option 3 (Suggested by Arsalan, which received additional votes from Arshak, Mitra, Reza, Farhang): Do not issue a public statement from ICC because this is not the business of ICC. Instead send an e-mail as a response to these individuals. The text of this e-mail is below.

Text of e-mail suggested by Arsalan as response to the Ashura e-mails above. This was adopted by the board and sent to the individuals who sent the e-mails.

“Dear X,

Many thanks for your e-mail and apologies for the delay in responding. The board of directors of the Iranian Canadian Congress has deliberated on the content of your message and would like to share the following as a response.

As you have indicated in your message, recently a group of Iranians in Toronto used their right to freedom of association and held a procession to commemorate Ashura. As witnessed in some photos, Canadian police provided security for them and, fortunately, the procession was completed with no incident. In reaction to this procession, a few individuals in our community left comments in various social media venues or wrote articles in Persian weeklies condemning this event. Several of our board members share the sentiment with you that some of these comments were totally distasteful and even offensive. Crucially, the majority of the board does not see it as the business of the Iranian Canadian Congress to look around the various internet or media outlets and pass value judgments about statements that individuals within our community have made about various issues. We, therefore, find issuing a statement with respect to these comments outside the mandate of this organization. Had the individuals been prevented from holding the Ashura procession by the government or even private individuals, our response could have been different.

We are fully committed to promoting tolerance and inclusiveness in our community. One of the first documents we put out after the new board started its work was a code of conduct for all ICC meetings. This document, which can be found on our website, focuses on tolerance and acceptance of all individuals with no discrimination based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliation, etc. We also held an event on the occasion of the International Peace Day whose main theme was tolerance. We will continue to do everything in our power to promote these values in our community. Nevertheless, in our opinion, tolerance cannot be achieved in the environment of condemnation, especially when it comes from an organization whose goal is to represent the Iranian-Canadian community in its entirety. Our goal is to promote the culture of tolerance in the whole of our community. If the behaviour of a segment of our community is intolerant toward another segment, ICC’s condemnation of the behaviour of that segment will not necessarily lead to a more tolerant and inclusive community, but will most likely isolate that segment and push them further into their intolerant behaviour. Our attempt to be more inclusive of one segment of our community should not come at the cost of giving the impression that we are excluding another. While the current

board has done nothing to suggest that we are not inclusive of the more religious segments of our community, we would be more than happy to take a more proactive stance to underline our inclusiveness in this respect. In future, we will look for ways of showing positive gestures toward this sector of our society in contexts which fall within the bylaws and mandate of the ICC as a non-religious, non-partisan and non-profit organization. Also, in order to address the concerns raised with respect to the Ashura procession and the reaction to this event, we would like to hold a panel discussion and invite the organizers as well as the critics of the event to come and have a constructive dialogue about all the issues surrounding this event. It is in this environment of dialogue where we can hope to internalize tolerance and acceptance of one another in our community.

In conclusion, we appreciate your concerns about the lack of tolerance in our community and invite you to join us in the path toward a more inclusive and tolerant society, a path that passes through exercising tolerance in our own behaviour, promoting peaceful dialogue and enhancing the education of these values in our community.

Warmest regards,

Board of Directors of the Iranian Canadian Congress”

Note: None of the motions received enough votes at the meeting, but the options were later shared with board members who were absent. Farhang Farid voted in favour of Option 3. With five votes, this option has enough votes to move forward. The above response was sent to all the e-mail writers.

The other items were tabled due to time constraints.