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Cries for Democracy in Iran



By Reza Pahlavi

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thirty years ago, Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran from exile to found a totalitarian theocracy -- the likes of which we have not seen for hundreds of years, perhaps even since medieval Europe. Thirty years ago, Iranian militants took American embassy workers hostage. Thirty years ago was the last time I saw Iran. To this day, I have not been able to return.

In 1979, the new Iranian clerical regime promised the Iranian people a republic. By definition, a "republic" is a state in which the supreme power rests in the body of its citizens. But in the last thirty years, Iranians have experienced an archaic system of theocracy tyrannically take hold.

The struggle in Iran today is about human rights and democracy. The struggle is not about the moderate camp versus the radical camp, rather it pits the forces of state despotism and religious fundamentalism against a nation that demands democracy, rejects military fundamentalists and repudiates the concept of a Supreme Leader. The issue in Iran is not which faction of the Islamic Republic can meet the demands of the Iranian people, but rather what system other than a self-appointed theocratic dictatorship can save Iran.

Every night, the brave sons and daughters of Iran shout from their rooftops for freedom. We know the day will come when those cries are answered, when the system of governance in Iran is one that belongs to the people -- a system that is both secular and democratic.

In the 19th Century, British writer George Jacob Holyoake coined the term "secularism" to describe a social order that is separate from religion and faith but that does not condemn religious beliefs. History has proven that Holyoake's philosophy is a feasible one.

The catch? You need a real democracy.

In a country where one supreme theologian selects six clerics directly and another six clerics indirectly to create an almighty Council of Guardians, and then has those twelve clerics approve the three candidates who can run for president, and then the government disenfranchises the people's vote, you do not have democracy. In a regime that bans coverage by international media, silences and imprisons its reporters, and murders its freedom-seeking youth, you do not have

democracy. In an Islamic Republic, with a Supreme Leader at the helm, it is clear where the "supreme" power vests. And it is not with the people.

I envision a democratic Iran where leaders are elected through free and fair elections, where each individual's vote is a meaningful one. I envision an Iran where social, religious and cultural groups are both tolerated and celebrated.

Democracy, in addition to vesting power in a people, entails a robust exercise of human rights. Iranians have suffered the regime's brutal disregard of their most basic human rights. The world has witnessed the bloody Basij attempting to crush a hopeful and peaceful opposition movement. Daily, accounts of torture, rape and murder at the hands of the current regime amass. The Islamic Republic of Iran has shamelessly eroded the freedoms of equality and expression and the rights to life and liberty to which every human being is entitled.

History has taught us that the respect and revival of these fundamental liberties require a representative, democratic state. The case for a secular, democratic Iran must rest most firmly on this notion of human rights. But the tentacles of democracy would also reach the foreign policy front.

As a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran has never actually been denied their sovereign right to nuclear technology and peaceful civilian use of it. However, without democracy, the world distrusts their motives. The issue is not nuclear capabilities, but rather, whose finger is on the trigger. And currently, that finger belongs to a Holocaust-denying, Hamas-supporting, brutal regime that kills its own people shamelessly. The current regime has demonstrated a perverse lack of transparency in its dealings with the international community. And only when true democracy reigns, can international credibility prevail.

I remain hopeful that in the face of the brutality and intransigence of the mullahs' regime, we will come together inside and outside Iran, in support of the higher ideals of secular democracy, majority rule and respect for human rights. In the aftermath of the June elections, people poured onto the streets to demand the end of tyranny powered by the manipulation of faith. The power of the people of Iran is this regime's Achilles' heel.

Secular democracy now inevitably awaits Iran. Let us remember that in a secular democracy, no one man incarnates what is good for a people. The movement in Iran belongs to everyone.

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