

**“THE CHALLENGE OF IMPLEMENTING DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN
IRAN”**

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Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening.

I am indeed honored and glad to be with you tonight. Let me first acknowledge and thank Mr. Martin Lessenthin for his kind introduction, and the International Society of Human Rights for inviting me to this conference.

My first and fundamental observation has been and continues to be this: the relentless pursuit of human rights is the essence of democracy. And, without democracy, human rights cannot, by definition, prevail.

My vision of a future Iran is thus inseparable from these two interdependent ideals and principles. Before I offer my views about how we could attain this goal, allow me to first share my thoughts on the current state of affairs in my homeland.

Since the establishment of the clerical regime in Iran, both democracy and human rights have been grossly compromised. Not only did the people not gain the political freedom, which some may have thought would be attained as a result of the “Islamic Revolution”, but sadly they ended up losing practically all of the social freedoms which had been attained and enjoyed for a long time, particularly since the advent of the Constitutional Revolution at the turn of the 20th century.

One of the immediate questions most people – Iranians and foreigners alike – have pondered upon and asked throughout the years is: Does the factor of religion play a crucial part in Iran’s current state of human rights abuses and lack of transparent democracy? The simple truth and ultimate answer is: Yes. However, the explanation is not so simple. In fact, it is one of the most complex issues faced by a Middle-Eastern, predominantly Moslem society, which aspires to the aforementioned goals of democracy and human dignity while suffocating under an obscurantist and totalitarian, clerical dictatorship.

Even in the most liberal and democratic societies – East and West – religion plays a role and has a place. The problem starts, however, when religion is politicized into a

radical ideology, one which allows the “church” or “clergymen” to interfere in the affairs of the state, and ultimately becomes a theocracy, and actually assumes governance, in the name of such ideology and the self-serving interpretation of God’s law and rule on earth.

When one looks at Ayatollah Khomeini’s vision of an Islamic Government, one realizes that it actually had little to do with the traditional thinking of the Shi’ite establishment. I say this in the sense that his concept of the “Velayate Faghih” (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists) has in effect violated at least two of the most cardinal principles of the Shi’ite faith. The first being that, the only time divine rule could be envisaged to have domain over us on Earth is upon the reappearance of the 12th Imam, who is considered a “Ma’soum” (or non-sinner). Until then, it is not the role of the clerics to govern society in the name of religion. The second being the principle of “Takassore Maraje’”, or the plurality of sources of emulation, in other words multiple high ranking clerical leaders, as opposed to a single source such as the Pope in Catholicism.

There is no question that these tenants of the faith were indeed violated by Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters. This also explains why most traditional clerics opposed this new interpretation and ideology and subsequently remained outside the newly established so called system, leaving a few to take the helm of this modern day theocracy.

Hence, what ensued was the imposition of an absolutist vision of like-minded radical Islamists, leaving most of our society outside their “in-house circle”, and considering all those who objected to their ideology as blasphemers and God opposing infidels. As such, the regime has arbitrarily discriminated against women, ethnic communities, religious minorities, intellectuals, students, workers, and even men of the same cloth!

But this vision was really not meant for Iran and Iranians alone. In fact Khomeini thought to use Iran as a launching pad for the exportation of his vision beyond our borders and attain a regional hegemony with himself at the helm of a modern day Shi’ite Caliphate. This venomous, radical ideology has since been implemented by the regime’s surrogates around the globe while using Iran’s resources at the expense of the people of Iran themselves. It is understandable that the threat of a terrorist-sponsoring regime attaining a nuclear weapon of mass destruction has been the predominant concern of the free world in recent years.

I need not remind this distinguished audience of the details of the systematic violation of human rights in Iran throughout these sad years, nor do I need to inform you of what you already know about the absence of political freedom. All this has been thoroughly documented by numerous human rights organizations over the course of the last three decades, including Amnesty International, The Bouroumand Foundation, The Center for

Human Rights Documentation and numerous other independent and trustworthy organizations. The United Nations is also fully aware of the high number of Iranian refugees, often living in dismal conditions in neighboring countries and elsewhere.

2009 was one of the most challenging years for millions of my compatriots – a year during which the world witnessed the most flagrant violations of both political as well as human rights of our citizens. But last year was not the exception! Sadly it has been the rule over the last 30 years. This time again, when the people attempted to seek yet another way to soften the regime while demanding their basic rights, they were met with a swift and unforgiving crackdown.

Before I go any further, allow me to draw your attention to three of the most pressing and egregious human rights situations involving my compatriots today. I call upon the world's democracies and advocates of human rights everywhere to focus attention on the longest suffering political prisoner in Iran, Mr. Amir Entezam—who even though he is not currently in prison—because he has refused to sign the regime's "tobeh nameh" or "declaration of guilt and repentance" is in virtual prison with no freedoms. Also noteworthy is the case of Ayatollah Bouroujerdi, who because of his belief in separation of mosque & state, is in prison—in dire conditions. It is imperative for the world community to shine a bright light on this holy man's plight and put pressure on the regime in Tehran on his behalf. And finally the fate of tens of thousands of refugees: including journalists and bloggers and other innocents---join us in calling on the United Nations to recognize their status as political refugees & provide them with such protections & supports that only that international body can—and do so with urgency.

Few would argue today that the thought of reforming this regime, whether it be a domestic attempt or a foreign expectation, has proven to be unrealistic and unattainable. Why? Because the very nature of this regime, the very essence of its existence, is in direct conflict and diametrically opposed to the liberal principles of democracy as we understand it and the principles of human rights. Its survival depends on denying what the people of Iran demand. I have said all along, so long as this regime remains in power, Iran will not reverse its course.

Can the situation change in Iran, despite the regime? My answer is: Definitely. It is only a matter of time. However, my concern is for this to happen in the short term, and at minimal further cost to a citizenry that has already paid far too much with lost lives, lost opportunities, lost dignity.

Let me offer you now my vision of Iran's future and the path I propose for its implementation. In light of the limited time I have with you today, I will only discuss the broader issues.

I believe Iranians need to give careful consideration to three predominantly important questions:

1. What is the alternative to this regime, in terms of a political system?
2. How would their rights be upheld and safeguarded under this new system? And,
3. Would this be in conflict with their faith?

In addressing the first question, I would argue history has repeatedly proven to us that a clear separation between religion and state is imperative in order to have the right circumstances for democratic governance. I would, therefore, emphasize the imperative of the “secular” nature of a future democratic system. I would further add the constitution of said democracy should, in my view, be based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This comprehensive document has established standards and principles to which I would refer in addressing all of our social, cultural, religious and political concerns.

As mentioned in the beginning, without a fully accountable democratic system, these principles would be hard to implement. But, it is not just a matter of understanding the need for this alternative. It takes a great deal of commitment and investment by each and every citizen to attain this goal.

This brings me to the second question. Would such an investment usher in a system which would indeed safeguard people’s rights? Here, allow me to offer my observation of a critical point which may have been somewhat unappreciated throughout our history. It is the fact that, as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, I truly believe we Iranians have in fact two kinds of identities: one national and the other ethnic. Throughout the centuries, Iran’s national identity was the predominant factor in the preservation of our culture and civilization. Our great poet Ferdowsi is but one wonderful example of how our sense of identity has been deeply embedded in our collective psyche. However, I would add that we should also recognize the importance of the diverse ethnic and religious identities and the preservation of these cultures and faiths as well. Whether from the outside looking in or whether we introvert and self-observe as we move forward, to view Iranians as a monolithic people would be a gross mistake.

Persia has been for centuries the cradle of a broad mosaic of ethnicities and cultures, living peacefully with each other. As such Iran’s territorial integrity has been preserved, in great part on the basis and willingness of its own people. Beyond the overall political repression, the persistent discrimination of the current regime against many groups has caused great deals of concern and uproar. This is a factor that may threaten the very same territorial integrity of Iran as I just mentioned, should the status quo prevail.

Think of it this way, when a Kurdish or Balouch Sunni Moslem faces discrimination by the current Shi'ia regime, for example, by denying him the right to erect a Sunni mosque, is this justice? When an Iranian Jew or Bahai has been persecuted, simply because of his faith, is this freedom? When a woman has half the rights or voice of a man, is this equality?

I have had the great good fortune of having travelled throughout my homeland during my youth, and around the world during these years in exile. I have come to the conclusion that there are some universal aspirations among human beings, regardless of their nationality, gender, faith, ethnicity or culture. The most important is equality under the law; the guarantee that no citizen would have fewer rights than another under any pretext, and further he or she would have the liberty to believe in any political view point they choose, practice a faith they wish, and so on and so forth...

Simply stated, without such rights, such incentives, why would a citizen be willing to give his utmost to the service of his homeland, or for that matter even be willing to be part of his community instead of opting out for a different community where such rights exist?

It is precisely for this reason I put before you the premise that, without upholding such human rights, there is no democracy. Therefore, in my vision of a future Iran, I would urge my fellow compatriots to commit to a vigilant and diligent upholding of these fundamental principles. We have to be pro-active as citizens, invest ourselves fully in carrying out our civic duties, and not rely solely on the government.

It is critically important to realize it is not sufficient to simply rely on the apparatus of state and a constitution. It is imperative to nurture and strengthen a civil society in order to further assist the implementation and preservation of democratic institutions and mechanisms that serve the citizenry, such as labor unions, free press, and NGOs.

I would also emphasize the constant replenishment of such ideals and measures by relying on the single most important factor: education. It is our first and best weapon against obscurantism, fanaticism, bigotry, racism, and other sinister beliefs – this is true of all societies and cultures. After all, enlightenment was the natural outcome of the dark period of obscurantism, last witnessed during the Christian inquisition in Europe. This is why I am confident that Iran is today the cradle of a post – this time Islamic inquisition, *renaissance*, and the youth of today have demonstrated their bold desire to attain it by bravely sacrificing their lives for the sake of liberty. But is this a struggle against religion, some may think or argue? This brings me to the third question. Would a change in Iran's political system be compatible or coexist with faith?

The ruling clerics have repeatedly accused those of us striving for a secular alternative of leading a campaign against religion. This is, of course, not true. On the contrary, I

would argue that it is in fact in the interest of religion and the clergy itself to have a separation of religion from government. Many of our high-ranking, non-governmental clergymen have attested to this fact for many years. Since the advent of Islam in Iran, the biggest harm done, not only to people, but to the faith itself, has been under this so-called Islamic regime – which I frankly prefer to call the anti-Islamic regime!

Today, our traditional clerics lament about their loss of reverence and empty mosques. Interestingly enough, for a regime that has been chanting “Death to America” from its inception, they must be at a loss to explain why Islam is the fastest growing religion in the US, while many Iranians are turning their backs to it in Iran? I think the answer is obvious. The American Constitution and Bill of Rights values and protects the right of its citizens to freedom of religion under a political system which observes the separation of church and state. The clerical regime in Iran and its constitution obviously does not separate mosque from state, thereby rendering both institutions lacking sorely in meeting the very real needs of the citizenry in spirituality or services. Why do so many persecuted or threatened Iranians – and for that matter other nationalities – seek asylum or refuge in European democracies? Because the secular democracies of Europe offer the opportunity for experiencing a more dignified human existence, a democratic forum and a voice and the freedom to practice your faith whatever it may be. How come persecuted individuals from different countries have yet to seek asylum or refuge in The Islamic Republic of Iran, even persecuted Moslems, unless you count members of the Taliban or Al Qaida fleeing justice?

I believe the great majority of Iranians are no longer influenced by the desperate rhetoric of a regime that has lost both its political and religious legitimacy. Instead, they believe, as I do, that we should move beyond this regime and secure our aspiration to a secular, democratic system and a government which will guarantee all that this regime has denied us as a nation.

Having said all this, we must remain mindful of another dynamic, beyond what we as Iranian citizens have to contemplate and do, which plays an important role in relation to the overall evolution of our country’s situation. I am referring to the role of the international community, particularly that of western democracies. Campaigns of non-violent civil disobedience in many countries were ultimately successful as a result of explicit support from the free world. Today, Iranians expect, and I might add deserve, the same degree of commitment and support from democratic societies. Specifically, we expect the world to realize that the central issue for us is not the peripheral so called “nuclear issue”, but in fact the question of human rights and political freedom, and lack thereof in Iran.

While for many years, many western governments would – in the name of *‘real-politik’* and economic interests – brush this pivotal issue of human rights and democracy in Iran

under the rug, they can no longer be indifferent and allow it to be ignored. Beyond what respective governments could or should do, the people-to-people relationship is just as important, if not more. By this I mean that Iranians could benefit from more overt expressions of solidarity by people organized under different structures the world over. For example, support from labor unions for Iranian workers in the event strikes can be organized; or support from foreign NGO's to Iranian NGO's to bring special attention to the plight of political prisoners and give them financial support to help them with their medical and legal expenses; or technological assistance to circumvent Internet "blocks" and cyber spying of the regime, and exposing entities or companies who, despite such a deplorable climate, continue to do business with Iran while hurting the people – Nokia & Siemens being the most recent and most egregious examples; or by putting pressure on those politicians who still insist on "talking with Tehran" while reducing this to a simple nuclear negotiation – as though leaders who sanction the rape and murder of their own children can be trusted to enter in to reliable agreements. Special funds and foundations are already in place, and more could be set up to implement important international activities in support of the Iranian people. Such an investment by the free world would help expedite a win-win outcome. There is no question that change will have to come at the hand of the Iranian people. But the cost could be heavily reduced as a result of the active participation of the international community. As Dr. Martin Luther King has said: "In the end we will forget the words of our enemies, but we will remember the silence of our friends."

In closing, let me reiterate democracy and human rights for Iran is not just a slogan; it is our unique hope for salvation and the fundamental element which will bring long term political stability as well as put our nation back on the track of modernity, progress and prosperity. Iranians have come a long way, particularly in this last century. We have paid a heavy price while learning valuable lessons. As such, we are stronger as a society and perhaps clearer in our collective vision of a better future.

I place my faith and hope in today's generation of the young and brave sons and daughters of Iran; a generation which not only understands the values of democracy, liberty and human dignity, but is also willing to pay the price for it; a generation which recognizes the importance of respect for diverse views and endorses tolerance and pluralism; a generation which understands that only by defending the individual or collective rights of all can one hope to have his or her own protected. Today, Iran does not lack the knowledge or the tools in the sense of both its human and natural resources. I am confident the vision I shared with you tonight, which is also shared by millions of my compatriots, will soon be attained. It is, however, through an unwavering commitment to the ideals I have enumerated tonight that we will guarantee its survival and perpetuity.

I leave you this evening with the certain knowledge that this first revolution of the 21st century, this "Twitter Revolution", is an epic struggle for human rights and dignity waged by my compatriots. This is a battle for the soul of a nation; a nation credited with the first ever documented Declaration of Human Rights, dating back to the time of Cyrus the Great, the replica of which adorns the Great Hall of the United Nations. This struggle will end with the Iranian people reclaiming their rightful place, as the leaders they were some 3000 years ago and first appreciated the significance of the rights of each and every human being. As a Persian poem's says: "The end of a black night is white."

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