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Dissenting Voice of Shirin Ebadi: Representation of Democracy in *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope*

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"Democracy works when people claim it as their own" it is said. Dr. Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize had risen quickly to become the first female judge in Iran. But when the religious authorities declared women unfit to serve as judges, she was demoted to the rank of clerk in the very courtroom in which she once had presided. She eventually fought her way back as a human rights lawyer. Dr. Ebadi is a passionate campaigner for human rights, democracy, and freedom of speech, especially those of women and children. In Iran Awakening, she writes about Iran from within Iran and speaks eloquently about her deep disillusionment with the 1979 Islamic Revolution and of direction that Iran has taken under the guidance of the mullahs. She defends individuals and groups who had fallen victims to a powerful politico- legal system that has been legitimized through an inhumane interpretation of Islam. Her memoir is a grueling account of how a government can forcibly hinder the primary rights of a citizen and filter media or even internet sites. This paper deals with analysis of her views on the repressiveness during the fundamentalist regime in Iran and also she believes that it is up to the Iranian people, who in their own way must transition to a democratic government that is representative of their needs. That belief, along with the conviction that change in Iran must come peacefully and from within, had underpinned all her work.

Democracy is a form of political organization in which all people, through consensus, direct referendum, or elected representatives exercise equal control over the matters which affect their interests. The term comes from the Greek: *dēmokratía* "rule of the people", which was coined from *dêmos* "people" and *Kratos* "power", in the middle of the 5th-4th century BC to denote the political systems then existing in some Greek city-states. Equality and freedom have been identified as important characteristics of democracy since ancient times. All citizens are equal before the law and have equal access to power. Democracy is not only a political system. It is an ideal, an aspiration really, intimately connected to and dependent upon a picture of what it is to be human—of what it is a human should be - to be fully human. Radical democracy is based on the idea that there are hierarchical and oppressive power relations that exist in society. Democracy's role is to make visible and challenge those relations by allowing for difference, dissent and antagonisms in decision making processes.

Today Iran is mostly in the headlines. It embodies 21st-century world politics: a geriatric, Islamic, post-revolutionary, nuclear state amidst a youthful, idea-hungry, proto-democratic, networked society. Reputed to be developing nuclear weapons, the future of Iraq's next-door neighbor is a matter of grave concern both for the stability of the region and for the safety of the global community. President Bush had labeled it as part of the "Axis of Evil," and like all his western counterparts rails against the country's authoritarian leadership. Though the present events trumpet the spread of democracy throughout the Middle East, its interesting to note that Iran has one of the longest-running experiences with democracy in the region.

Few countries today appear as erratic and unknowable as Iran, where Islamist president Ahmadinejad's increasingly striking pronouncements keep leaders awake at night from Washington to Paris. It is widely believed that the spread of democracy will sweep away intolerance in the Muslim

world. The present government system of Iran and its ascent represented a sharp popular rebuke to the republic's clerical establishment.

Dr. Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize had risen quickly to become the first female judge in Iran. But when the religious authorities declared a compulsion on wearing of head scarves and also that women were unfit to serve as judges, then began a slow corroding decline. She was demoted to the rank of clerk in the very courtroom in which she once had presided. She eventually fought her way back as a human rights lawyer. Dr. Ebadi is a passionate campaigner for human rights, democracy, and freedom of speech, especially those of women and children.

“Democracy works when people claim it as their own” it is said. Shirin Ebadi asserts that in many regards, there is more progress toward democracy in Iran than in any other country in the Middle East, perhaps with the exception of Turkey," which would be highly suspect even if one accepted the Iranian position that Israel does not exist. In the election of Ahmadinejad's government, reformers and liberals had largely boycotted the vote. Ebadi’s Memoir offers a revealing glimpse into the paths that democratic ideas have traveled in Iran both before and after the 1979 revolution.

How has the Islamic Republic developed ideologically since the revolution of 1979? What are the best ways of comprehending the country at this critical juncture in its history? In her book, Shirin Ebadi combines her beliefs and lived experience to explain the social milieu and domestic politics of both pre and post-revolutionary Iran. She guides the reader in her memoir through the country's complex identity and actions from the nuclear issue to Iran's perpetual political standoff with the United States, from the future of Iranian democracy to Iranian-Arab relations, from American neoconservatism to Islamic utopian-romanticism, and from Avicenna to Ayatollah Khomeini. She shows a unique empathy towards the understanding of Iran’s cultural turfs.

Ebadi sketches her childhood during the reign of Shah. Despite economical growth, there was much opposition against the Mohammad Reza Shah. He had used the secret police the Savak, to control the country. With strong Shi'i opposition against the Shah, Iran came close to a situation of civil war. The opposition was lead by Ayatollah Khomeini, who lived in exile in Iraq and later in France. On January 16 1979, the Shah left Iran. This was the beginning of Iranian revolution Ebadi does describe vividly how even she and her colleagues had briefly been thrilled like fellow Iranians about the impending change. She felt she had more in common with ‘the opposition led by mullahs’ than ‘the officials who cavorted with American starlets at parties soaked in expensive French champagne.’ Her self righteous patriotism reaches its height when she says that ‘I’d rather be a free Iranian than an enslaved attorney.’

Shapour Bakhtiar as Shah’s new prime minister with the help of Supreme Army Councils couldn't control the civil situation anymore. Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran. Processes against the supporters of the Shah started, and hundreds were executed. On April 1, after a landslide victory in a national referendum in which only one choice was offered (Islamic Republic: Yes or No), Ayatollah Khomeini declared Iran an Islamic republic with a new Constitution reflecting his ideals of Islamic government. Ayatollah Khomeini became supreme spiritual leader (Valy-e-Faqih) of Iran.

Subsequently many demonstrations were held in protest to the new rules like extreme regulations on women's code of dress. In November, the republic's first Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan resigned. In 1980 Abolhassan Beni Sadr was elected for president. Initially there was a period of euphoria like during the months of ‘Allaho akbar’ when Khomeini had played skillfully on the religious emotionalism of the masses in his campaign against the Shah. But soon things changed. Multiple centers of authority emerged within the government.

It was a government that controlled neither the country nor even its own bureaucratic apparatus. Central authority had broken down. Hundreds of semi-independent revolutionary committees, not answerable to central authority, were performing a variety of functions in major

cities and towns across the country. Factory workers, civil servants, white-collar employees, and students were often in control, demanding a say in running their organizations and choosing their chiefs. Governors, military commanders, and other officials appointed by the prime minister were frequently rejected by the lower ranks or local inhabitants.

Ebadi's inspiring memoir *Iran Awakening* offers a first-hand look at her remarkable life and Iran's human rights struggle. She was forced to resign as Iran's first female judge when the revolutionaries decided that women were unfit for such roles. As a result of their protest they promoted all former female judges to the position of "experts" in the Justice Department. Unable to tolerate the situation any longer she put in a request for early retirement and it was duly accepted. The Bar Association had remained closed for some time since the revolution and was being managed by the Judiciary, so her application for practising law was turned down and ended up housebound for many years. Finally in 1992 she succeeded in obtaining a lawyer's licence and set up practice. She turned her law practice into a base for rights campaigning, taking cases of dissident writers, intellectuals and pro-democracy activists that other lawyers deemed far too dangerous. She juggled motherhood and a career and at a time when "intellectuals are turning up dead all over the country."

In Iran Awakening, she writes about Iran from within Iran and speaks eloquently about her deep disillusionment with the 1979 Islamic Revolution and of direction that Iran has taken under the guidance of the mullahs. She defends individuals and groups who had fallen victims to a powerful politico- legal system that has been legitimized through an inhumane interpretation of Islam. Her memoir is a grueling account of how a government can forcibly hinder the primary rights of a citizen and filter media or even internet sites.

On September 22: Iraq massively invaded Iran, in the belief that Iran is too weak military to fight back. Iraq was claiming territories inhabited by Arabs like the Southwestern oil-producing province of Iran called Khouzestan, as well as Iraq's right over Shatt el-Arab. Some battles were won in the favor of Iraq, but a supposedly weakened Iranian army achieved surprising defensive success. What followed was a sporadic unstable form of power that could hardly be called as 'Democratic Governments' who were too frail to stand for stable and long periods. In July 1981, Beni Sadr was removed from power by Ayatollah Khomeini and former Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Rajai was elected president but in August President Rajai and his prime minister were killed in a bombing. In October, Seyed Ali Khamenei was elected president. He was one of the founders of the Islamic Republican Party, which dominated the Majlis (the national legislature) after the 1979 revolution.

By summer of 1982, Iraq's initial territorial gains had been recaptured by Iranian troops that were stiffened with Revolutionary Guards. The Iraqi forces were driven out of Iran. The war extended to shooting of boats in the Persian Gulf, in an attempt to hurt the other country's oil exports. On 20 August 1988, a cease fire was signed between Iran and Iraq.

Following Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989 of a heart attack, Khamenei assumed the role of supreme spiritual leader and Hashemi Rafsanjani, speaker of the Majlis (parliament) was elected as a president. In 1990-1991 Iran condemned both Iraq's invasion in Kuwait and the allied forces actions against Iraq. Rafsanjani was re-elected in 1993 but stepped down in 1997. From 1995 there was total ban on trade with Iran by USA. In 1997 Mohammad Khatami was elected president by gaining almost 70 percent of the votes cast. He pursued political reform and opposed censorship. He was a reformist towards democratisation of Iran's society and willing to normalize the relation with west and reduce tensions in the region. Although popular among much of the Iranian public, these policies met considerable opposition from conservatives who controlled the legislature and judiciary. It is interesting that Khatami was again re-elected as president in 2001 election by greater mandate (almost 78%) of Iranian people. In 2005 Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected as Iran's sixth president.

Ebadi, a committed Muslim, during all this turmoil has battled for an interpretation of her faith that is compatible with democracy, convinced "that change in Iran must come peacefully and from within". For her efforts she has been imprisoned and threatened with death by those who denounce her as an apostate "for daring to suggest that Islam can look forward, and denounced outside the country by secular critics of the Islamic republic, whose attitudes are no less dogmatic". But she is far from a lone, friendless voice in Iran and has many allies and supporters.

After receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 Ebadi was greeted at Tehran airport by a joyous crowd numbering "hundreds of thousands". Among her admirers was the granddaughter of Ayatollah Khomeini, who placed a garland of orchids around her neck. Iranian society is riddled with such bizarre paradoxes "Janus-like traits which puzzle, bemuse, and infuriate the outsider." Yet with headlines across the Western world screaming of a new era of international history in which Cold War rivalry has been replaced by a fundamental clash of civilisations, we cannot pander to ambiguities. Her Iran, and everything I had assumed about it, was dissolving before her eyes.

Her narrative reminds us how modern Iran, with its glowering visage of Khomeini once, is a now pale similitude of the days when Persia was the intellectual treasury of the world, and its culture a model of sophistication. Shirin Ebadi is earnest when she says that "…nothing useful and lasting can emerge from violence." Her writing reminds us of "the long reach of history in the Persian psyche" and of an ancient gripe by its people of "having been misrepresented to the world".

She writes how resentment at the regime's broken promises it was difficult not to suppose the whole country was disillusioned and weary and resentful and simmering. Democracy's a very fragile thing. Extreme care of democracy should be taken. As soon as one stops being responsible to it and allow it to turn into scare tactics, it's no longer democracy. It may be an inch away from totalitarianism.

Modern democracies have to make their system work much better than it does currently. That means making democratic decision-making effective, reintegrating constitutional liberalism into the practice of democracy, rebuilding broken political institutions and civic associations. Perhaps most difficult of all, it requires that those with immense power in our societies embrace their responsibilities, lead, and set standards that are not only legal, but moral. Without this inner stuffing, democracy will become an empty shell, not simply inadequate but potentially dangerous, bringing with it the erosion of liberty, the manipulation of freedom, and the decay of a common life.

Conclusion

The memoir reveals that the Iranian experience is far ahead of would-be Islamist states; they understood the limitations of theocratic rule better than any other Islamic nations, and the continuing debates on the nature of ruler ship were probably the world's most intellectually sophisticated. Every factor was in place for its evolution, which it would be a pity to usurp. She reminds us that it's much easier to wage war than to solve the challenges of peace. As proof of her against her so called Pro American allegiance at a press conference last month in Paris, Ebadi defended Iran's right to nuclear energy, and addressing the prospect of a U.S-led war against Iran was quoted as saying, "We will not allow an American soldier to set foot (in Iran). We will defend our country till the last drop of blood."

This paper is an analysis of her views on the repressiveness during the fundamentalist regime in Iran and also she believes that it is up to the Iranian people, who in their own way must transition to a democratic government that is representative of their needs. Regarding oppression of women in Iranian society she had always interpreted one refrain: an interpretation of Islam that is in harmony with equality and democracy is an authentic expression of faith. It is not religion that binds women but the selective dictates of those who wish them cloistered. That belief, along with the conviction that change in Iran must come peacefully and from within, had underpinned all her work. She says in her memoir "When I heard the statement of the Nobel prize read aloud, heard my religion mentioned specifically alongside my work defending Iranian's rights, I knew at that moment what was being

recognized: the belief in a positive interpretation of Islam, and the power of that belief to aid Iranians who aspire to peacefully transform their country."

A woman who was 'sidelined by the Islamic Revolution but stayed in Iran and carved out a professional and political role in the forbidding theocracy that emerged.' She feels that the 'cold antagonism between the United States and Iran made communication between the two societies more urgent than ever.' It is impossible to impose democracy on a country through military force. In the past, it has been movements for freedom from within tyrannical regimes that have led to flourishing democracies; movements that continue today. This doesn't mean abandoning one's values and ideals; It is Ebadi's interest to help foster democracy through the diplomatic and economic resources at our disposal. The institutions of democracy – free markets, a free press, a strong civil society – cannot be built overnight and they cannot be built at the end of a barrel of a gun. The freedom from want and freedom from fear are only realized once the personal and material security of a people is ensured as well.

Shirin Ebadi in her Epilogue says 'Iran, for its part, must peacefully transition to a democratic government that represents the will of the majority of Iranians…. Iranians are too tired of blood letting and violence. Many are willing to go to prison or risk their lives for their dissent, but I don't see Iran today as a country where people are ready to pick up weapons against their government.'

Ms Ebadi makes her stand very clear when she says that "The threat of regime change by military force endangers nearly all of the efforts democracy minded Iranians have made in these recent years.' The Iranians overlook their resentment of the regime and move behind their unpopular leaders out of defensive nationalism. She feels that she cannot relax and in the near future be ready to retire because people like her are needed to protect Iranians from their government. Revealing the truth about Iran as it is today, with a brief look at its past, was one of her incentives for writing Iran Awakening.

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