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Documenting the Persecution of the Baha'i Community in Iran

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The Baha'i Community, Human Rights, and the Construction of a New Iranian Identity A Lecture by Dr. Akhavan in Chicago

February 27th, 2010

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A Lecture by Dr. Payam Akhavan in Chicago

February 24th, 2010

Human rights and Iranian identity

What does it mean to be Iranian? What does it mean to be a human being? These are the questions confronting the Iranian

people at this crucial juncture in their long history. In the incredible and unforgettable scenes that have unfolded in the streets of Tehran, and Isfahan, and Shiraz, and Tabriz, and Mashhad, and Ahvaz, and every other city and town in Iran, we are witnessing a struggle far greater than a mere political contest between different presidential candidates. We are witnessing a struggle for the soul of the nation; a struggle to build a new identity for the Iranian people. The encounter between the protestors and their tormentors is an encounter between the dark past and the bright future. It is an encounter between violence and non-violence, between the courage of those that are willing to sacrifice their lives for justice, and the cowardice of those that savagely beat and murder the defenseless. It is an encounter between the best and worst potentials inherent in humankind.

The millions marching in the streets, youth and women, student and labour movements, intellectuals and artists, web-loggers and journalists, a social movement of unprecedented unity and resolve, have demonstrated that without legitimacy there can be no lasting power. They have demonstrated vividly the deeper meaning of the words democracy, human rights, and the rule of law; words that we throw about loosely in our world without always appreciating the price that must be paid for its attainment. The power of their demands lies in its simplicity. The Iranian people are asking whether the God that we all worship and all that we hold sacred, whether the dreams and aspirations that we have for



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our children, they are asking whether these do not demand that those in power treat their citizens with justice and equality? They ask why the hope of our youth in the future should be extinguished, why our mothers and sisters should be treated with such disrespect in our laws, why our workers should live in such poverty amidst our national wealth, and why a utopian ideology that has long promised both freedom and prosperity has achieved neither?

For the people of Iran, democracy and human rights are not intellectual abstractions. Freedom and tolerance are not about idle theological disputes. For them, these are existential needs in the face of a daily onslaught of violence, deception, corruption, and hatred. For them, these demands go to the very meaning of what it means to be Iranian and what it means to be a human being. What they seek simply is an Iranian nation where every citizen enjoys fundamental human rights.

Justice, equality, solidarity, a culture where religion gives people spiritual fulfillment rather than serving as a pretext for abuse of power, in struggling for this vision of what it means to be Iranian, the countless youth that have stood firm in the face of savage beatings, murders, and torture, speak to a deeper yearning within us all. Through their sacrifices they bring to life the words of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights that: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

After thousands of years of historical evolution, through countless wars and revolutions and ideologies, humankind has arrived at the realization that the foundation of civilization and progress is recognition of the inherent dignity of all human beings. That dignity is not premised on whether we belong to an approved religion or race or political ideology or social class. It is part of what it means to be and to treat others as a human being. On the bloodstained pages of contemporary history, from Nazi Germany and Cambodia to Yugoslavia and Rwanda, from Afghanistan and Iraq to Uganda and the Sudan, we witness the devastating consequences of disregarding our shared humanity. The case is no different for the thousands of our fellow Iranians, be they religious or secular, Muslim or Baha'i, Azeri, Kurdish or Baluch, republican or socialist, man and woman, whose rights have been trampled upon merely because of who they are and what they believe. In the name of Islam, in the name of the divine, those that have arrogated to themselves the right to speak on behalf of God, have murdered and tortured countless sons and daughters of this long-suffering nation. They have corrupted the spiritual longing of its people with the profane lust of wealth and power. The poor in whose name they spoke have become ever more wretched amidst the unprecedented oil wealth of the country. And the end to injustice they promised has brought stoning and hanging of "infidels" and "the corrupt on earth" and "the enemies of God", defined as anybody who dares to challenge the absolute power of self-proclaimed leaders. Women are forcibly veiled to protect men against their own lust and treated as inferior to men that dominate and mistreat them with impunity. And those whose religion is not approved by the State cannot enjoy full rights as citizens. This is the tragedy and despair that has brought the disillusioned millions to our streets.

The denial of human rights is not only the problem of its direct victims. It is an assault on our common humanness. Nowhere is this more apparent than laws and policies that make a particular status or belief a crime. In this light, what makes the persecution of Baha'is important is not just the Baha'is themselves. When the Constitution and leaders of the Islamic Republic proclaim that citizens of Iran can be denied the right to education and lawful marriage, dispossessed of their sacred sites, cemeteries, personal property and livelihood, arrested, tortured, and murdered, and subject to slander and hate propaganda, merely because of their religion, this is a crime not just against the Baha'is, but also a crime against the Iranian people, and a crime against humanity. Evidently, the historical animosity towards the Baha'is and their violent persecution by the Islamic Republic has served a useful function of creating an imaginary enemy against which the masses can be

rallied in furtherance of the political ambitions of their leaders' pretension of divine authority. But the injustice has been not only against the Baha'is. It has also been an injustice against all Iranian citizens that long for a nation identified with justice and human rights rather than a culture of hatred, self-deception and violence.

To say that there is only one way to be Iranian, whether through the prism of religious, ethnic, or ideological absolutism that leaves no room for diversity, may be reassuring in a world of uncertainty. But it is an abdication of our responsibility to build a future based on human dignity, of shaping our destiny through enlightenment rather than the deceptive comfort of denial and ignorance. Our identity is not an ancient statue in the ruins of Persepolis waiting to be discovered. Our identity is not to be found in blind imitation of outward pretensions of religious piety. Our identity is a reflection of the moral choices that we make in today's world and our willingness to embrace both our self and the other in a common home. Our identity is a social construction, our nation an imagined community, a shared cultural space in which the lives of our people are intertwined in a mutual search for meaning, prosperity, and progress. Our identity is not fixed in time or place. It is fluid, complex, and constantly evolving. But we have a fundamental choice. And that choice is whether we define our self through hatred or humanity.

The persecution of Baha'is in Iran is not an immutable reality; it is not an irreversible part of Iran's future. It is merely the reflection of the identity that some have tried to impose on the Iranian people. It is the reflection of blind obedience to leaders that elevate hatred to patriotism and transform victims into aggressors. The discrimination against Baha'is, the denial of their human rights, the hate propaganda against them, these are merely a particularly notorious manifestation of a culture of exclusion and violence that has afflicted all Iranians that dare to strive for a united nation in which the equal rights of all Iranians are respected. National unity does not mean national homogeneity.

Throughout its history, Iran has been most glorious and most powerful when it has embraced the diversity of its people. The construction of imaginary enemies as an instrument of power, the instigation of hatred and violence against those that dare to be different, this is an affliction on all Iranians, because they stand to lose a future in which their children will live in equality, dignity, and prosperity. By investing so much energy into hate propaganda to blame the Baha'is for all the evils of the world, Iran's leaders are only confirming the bankruptcy of their own ideas. They are confirming yet again the irrelevance of a backward ideology that only serves the interests of those in power. Will convincing people that all Baha'is are Israeli spies and American agents help explain why Iran's oil wealth has been squandered while people sink into ever greater poverty and misery? Will it explain why our brightest minds are leaving Iran at an accelerating pace? Will it explain why our extraordinary women are treated with such contempt and violence when they merely ask for respect and equality?

Religion and Power

In understanding the logic of hate-mongering against Baha'is, we have to begin from the premise of power rather than religion. The symbolic imagery of political Islam, its search for an authentic self in an imagined past, is often misconceived as a retreat against modernity. But far from being an answer to "Westoxication" (qarb-zadegi), it replicates the structures and ideologies of Western modernity in the clothing of Islam and cultural authenticity. Despite its peculiarities as a tradition-bound theocracy, the Islamic Republic of Iran shares the essential characteristics of other modern authoritarian States. The torture chambers of Evin prison, the disappearance and murder of dissidents, executions based on show trials, forced confessions and television propaganda to create an appearance of legitimacy, these reflect familiar patterns of abuse and control. As Professor Reza Afshari notes in a rebuke of cultural relativist claims by the Islamic Republic: "Claiming authenticity in tradition, while struggling to seize the commanding heights of the modern state, is a spectacular political double-cross."

Theories of religious or ethnic conflict often overlook or belittle the importance of

hate-mongering and incitement to violence as a pre-meditated instrument of political control. During the Yugoslav conflict for instance, it was fashionable to subscribe to Professor Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory as an explanation for the "ethnic cleansing" campaign against Bosnian Muslims. I was serving with the United Nations in Bosnia at that time and was astonished that this had become a prevalent view of the conflict. In Sarajevo, every person that I met came from a mixed marriage and for centuries this city had been a haven of religious tolerance. The reality was that it took a steady stream of myth, fantasy, half-truths, blatant lies, and conspiracy theories emanating from the State-controlled media, to persuade the Serbs that they must all blindly unite behind Slobodan Milošević against the imaginary Muslim enemy. The gradual blurring of the line between truth and illusion reached its apotheosis when the masters of demonology in the Serbian media claimed that the Muslims themselves were responsible for the February 1994 mortar attack on the Sarajevo market that killed sixty-eight civilians.

The persecution of the Baha'i minority is perhaps the most flagrant instance of such demonology in contemporary Iran. Although religious minorities such as Sufis, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Sunni Muslims, as well as Shi'a reformists and even orthodox Shi'a clerics opposed to the Velayat-e-Faqih have suffered human rights violations, they are recognized as "people of the book" whereas the Baha'is enjoy no constitutional recognition or protections. Shortly after the 1979 revolution, clerics deemed all Baha'is as heretics whose blood may be shed with impunity (mahdur ad-dam), save those that recant their faith and "return" to the "true" religion of Islam, as interpreted by the State-sanctioned clerics of course. The accusations against them included everything the clerics held in their conspiratorial phantasm, such as espionage for America, Britain, and Israel, collaboration with the Shah's regime, serving as agents of British, Russian, and Ottoman imperialism, and even collaborators of Wahabism.

Many dissidents in Iran are accused of being a Baha'i and it seems that our numbers have increased dramatically thanks to these accusations! When the writer Hadi Khorsandi was accused of being a Baha'i, he wrote to his friend and said: "I have good news! I just discovered I am a Baha'i. I am trying to determine the exact time but I am not sure. Maybe it was at 4:35 in the afternoon. Anyhow, I know that this has been achieved through inside influence (party bazi) because Baha'is are decent people and they would never accept a drunken gambler like me!"

In 1987, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran reported that the persecution of Baha'is included "torture, arbitrary imprisonment, denial of education and employment, arbitrary seizure of homes and possessions, confiscation of community assets, and seizure, desecration and destruction of holy places." As "unprotected infidels", Baha'is were legal non-persons and denied redress through the courts. For instance, on 21 September 1993, the court in the city of Shahr-e Rey failed to impose a penalty on two killers because the murdered man was, in the language of the verdict, "a member of the misled and misleading sect of Baha'ism." This amounts to judicial approval of murder based solely on the religious beliefs of the victim. A more fundamental negation of human rights cannot be imagined.

The ideological constructions that justify violence against Baha'is have very little to do with religion. The persecution is not about theological differences. It is not about the merit of arguments on the interpretation of Quranic texts or traditions. The persecution is about how differences are accommodated in an authoritarian political system rather than a government ruled by human rights and democratic freedoms. Professor Mohammad Tavakoli points to the historical roots of contemporary anti-Bahá'í sentiments, observing that:

"the scapegoating of Babis was actively promoted by the Qajar state at a time when it faced a serious crisis of legitimacy. To win over the Shiite seminarians and ulama, the Qajar statesmen initiated a well-orchestrated public anti-Babi campaign. By concurrently

'othering' Babis and stressing some national religious traditions ... the Qajar state actively promoted Shiism as the core of modern Iranian identity." (Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Baha'ism and Islamism in Iran, 1941-1955", *Iran Name*, Vol. XIX, Nos. 1-2, Winter & Spring 2001.)

Professor Tavakoli points out that the violent persecution of Baha'is was not the inevitable expression of religious differences: "Instead of encountering the Babis in a seminarian style of dialogue and debate, and thus fostering the formation of a national democratic public sphere, the Shia' hierarchy opted for a violently repressive mode of encounter with Babis and Baha'is." Accusations of Babism, he observes, were utilized "as an effective instrument for silencing the voices of dissent in the formative phase of modern Iranian polity." It is in this respect that the emancipation of Baha'is is a litmus test for human rights in Iran. Evidently, the arrogation by the Islamic Republic of the right to exclude the largest religious minority in Iran from the pale of legal protection, and the attendant political culture of hate-mongering, are fundamentally incompatible with any reasonable conception of democracy. And so long as this hate-mongering and scape-goating against Baha'is is a feature of the Iranian political culture, the prospects of realizing human rights and freedoms will remain remote.

Towards a New Iranian Identity

There are in today's Iran the unmistakable signs of a new beginning. Against the onslaught of violence, a different and better future is taking shape. Thirty years after the revolution, the romantic view of the Islamic Republic has given way to a sober understanding of the realities of ideological absolutism and political authoritarianism. In the midst of the uncertainties and dislocations of the transition from tradition to modernity, faced with the challenges for globalization on our national self-conception, we have experimented with a social revolution that has profoundly altered Iran. Like most other political ideologies, the utopia that it promised to its followers has not been realized. On the contrary, the revolution has eaten many of its own children who are now the dissidents and opponents that languish in the same prisons that the revolution was intended to shut down. Iran is today a nation of 70 million among whom 70% are under thirty years of age. This youthful generation is disillusioned, pragmatic, and not content with revolutionary ideological explanations of their bleak future amidst economic and social decline. This youthful generation is internet saavy, glued to satellite television, and aware of the world beyond Iran's borders. The unprecedented protests demonstrate that this generation is not inclined to embrace hatred as its national identity. The Iranian people have awakened to the fact that the momentary comfort of chanting death to imaginary foreign enemies in the midst of an excited crowd is far outweighed by the profound damage that it does to the well-being of a people, to their capacity to live a life of peace and happiness.

Recently, I learned first-hand the measure of desperation of leaders that continue their hate-mongering against a peaceful religious minority while the Iranian people, seeking freedom and prosperity, sinks into ever greater misery. During the summer of 2008, the Islamic Republic News Agency published a story in which they accused me of having converted my student at McGill University, Nargess Tavasolian who is Shirin Ebadi's daughter, to the Baha'i faith. The article suggested that McGill is a notorious centre of Zionism and Baha'ism, that I worked for the CIA, and that Nargess had proven her disloyalty to the revolution by writing her thesis on the incompatibility of certain Islamic punishments with human rights. This was a clear attempt to defame Mrs. Ebadi for her human rights activities and for agreeing to represent the seven Baha'i "friends" (yaran) who had earlier been arrested on espionage charges in May of that year. Some months earlier, Mrs. Ebadi had received death threats from a secret anti-Baha'i organization and it now became clear that this was part of a campaign of slander and intimidation by the Islamic Republic. What astonished me about this article was the fact that the mere suggestion that Nargess was now a Baha'i was in the eyes of the government propaganda machine the worst insult and accusation imaginable against Mrs. Ebadi! I was equally

amazed that the government would have an informant at McGill University to gather information even on Nargess's thesis topic! Surely there are better ways to spend the Iranian people's money rather than spying on my poor student! And while McGill was defamed as a nest of Israeli and Baha'i spies, the children of prominent clerics, including Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, have been educated at the exact same institution! This attack was clearly a mark of desperation by those that have nothing else to offer the Iranian people except weaving conspiracies and creating imaginary enemies. They must be commended for their creativity but not their wisdom. Their desperate attacks were the catalyst for an unprecedented outpouring of sympathy and support by Iranians in favour of the Baha'is.

In response to the Islamic Republic's propaganda, Iranian intellectuals and activists demonstrated an unprecedented solidarity with the Baha'is. Among these, I wish to point out my dear friend Khosro Shemiranie, a prominent Iranian journalist from Montreal, who wrote that: "If we truly are defenders of the right of all humans, now is the time to raise our voice in unison and cry aloud: For as long as the followers of the Bahai Faith are suppressed and imprisoned for their religion and convictions, we are all Bahais!" Others like the famous human rights activist and icon of the 18 Tir student demonstrations in 1999, Ahmad Batebi, asked why the Islamic Republic: "having thorough command over all financial and media resources of the nation, and maintaining belief and insistence on its own divine and absolutely unquestioned mandate and ideology ... and its persistent injection of this belief into all elements of the nation, so afraid of any contact between the people and not only the Bahais but every religious minority group?" The voices of support in this unprecedented reversal of 150 years of intolerance includes no less than Grand Ayatollah Montazeri who also issued a now legendary fatwa stating that Baha'is should enjoy the same rights as other Iranian citizens. Even two of the leading candidates in the June presidential elections saw fit to mention that Baha'is should enjoy equal rights. They did so because they knew that the Iranian people, especially the new generation of youth, are less and less willing to accept an identity built on hatred and exclusion. Iranian student leaders have demanded the right of Baha'is to university education and during the protests in the streets some were filmed chanting: "Ahle hag natarsid, hamayatat mikonim" ("Oh people of Truth, do not be afraid we support you".) Others were chanting: "Bahá'í, Bahá'í, hemaayat mikonim" ("Bahá'ís we will support you.") Many of us never imagined we would live to see this day. Seeing these videos, I thought I was dreaming. These remarkable developments are unquestionably the beginning of a new conception of what it means to be Iranian, what it means to be a citizen with equal rights, and what it means to be a human being.

Hatred and identity

The suffering of the Baha'is is not because of anything the Baha'is have done. Their suffering is merely a reflection of how their tormentors choose to construct their identity. To define a nation, a religion, a revolution, through hatred and imagined enemies, is an injustice against those that are the victims of such hatred. But it is also an injustice against those that perpetuate such hatred. To treat others with inhumanity is to deny our own humanity. To behave unjustly towards others is to negate our own inherent nobility.

A story from the youth of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre explains the role that hatred plays in shaping our self-conception. He tells of a classmate who failed an exam on French literature while a Jew, the son of immigrants from Eastern Europe, had passed. Sartre's classmate resented that a Jew could understand French poetry better than a true Frenchman like himself. He admitted that he had not studied for this subject which he did not enjoy. But the explanation for his failure was based on his dislike of the Jew rather than his own actions. Sartre writes that: "Far from experience producing his idea of the Jew, it was the latter which explained his experience. If the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him." This reminded me of an almost identical story my father told me about his childhood when he was vilified by his teacher for having mastered his lessons in the Quran better than a Muslim child. The evils attributed to the Baha'is do not

arise from experience or historical fact. Their demonization arises from anti-Baha'ism which either distorts or invents experience and historical fact to suit the tormentor's purposes. Baseless accusations, distortion and fabrication of historical facts, conspiracies linking Baha'is with Russian and British Imperialism, with Wahabism and Zionism, with American conspiracies, the portrayal of Baha'is as "foreign" agents, as enemies of Islam and traitors to Iran, the depiction of Baha'is women as promiscuous, seducing pious Muslims into joining a "wayward sect", these outrageous constructions in the perverse imagination of the hate-mongers says far more about their self-conception, their needs and purposes, than it says anything about the Baha'is. For such people, the Baha'is are a blank screen on which they can project all the fears and fantasies of their own making, all the negative qualities that threaten and endanger them. So it can be said that if Baha'is did not exist, they would be invented by the anti-Baha'is!

To seek the truth is to invite uncertainty. To search for answers in our longing for transcendence, for an elevated spiritual existence, we cannot avoid the frightening realization that we are not in control, that our reasoning is at best tentative, that new realities may intervene to cast doubt on time-cherished beliefs and assumptions. Where fear keeps us back from our journey, love propels us forward, and allows us to abandon our idols and vain imaginings as the price of union with our beloved. Those who define their self by hatred of others are searching for comfort, for avoiding the terrifying uncertainty and ineffability of truth. The anti-Baha'is have chosen hatred because hatred is their faith. That is how they choose to interpret the sacred text of the Quran, that is how they choose to define patriotism as Iranians. In doing so, they escape responsibility and doubt. They can blame everything on the Baha'is; for them reason is not an obstacle, because their simplistic creed of hatred provides all the answers, however illogical and contradictory it may be. In joining the violent mob, in chanting death to others, in deluding himself that murdering the "infidel" will bring divine blessings, the anti-Baha'i is made to feel good, and virtuous, and powerful, and to forget his feelings of inferiority, his guilt for abandoning responsibility and the demise of his nation. In the crowd, in the trance-inducing cries of hatred, he discovers a false identity by losing his inner-self, by fleeing the promptings of his conscience and the painful longing for truth, by opting instead for self-deception through an easily accessible and seemingly permanent but utterly hollow belief, devoid of humanity, without even a hint of the spiritual transcendence that unites man with his creator. In this way, the man who lives by hating others is a coward that cannot admit his cowardice to himself.

The emancipation of the Baha'is is also about the emancipation of Iran. It is about emancipation from hatred, ignorance, and violence. It is about building a future in which a divided and backward looking Iran is transformed into a nation that unites its diverse peoples under the banner of human dignity and true civilization and reclaims its place as a leader among nations; an Iran in which the measure of patriotism will be compassion and respect for the rights of all Iranian citizens. At long last, that day is within our reach. But a long and tortuous road lays ahead, and each and every one of us must arise in solidarity with the Iranian people, to struggle for a common justice, and to contribute his share at this unique moment in the history of our beloved home.

Source: [Gozaar, A Forum on Human Rights and Democracy in Iran](#)

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