

Human Rights and Democracy in Iran: An Interview with Ladan Boroumand

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Part 1: Personal and Intellectual Background

Alan Johnson: What have been the most important influences shaping your enduring political ideas and commitments?

Ladan Boroumand: My mother played a major role because she nurtured the importance of truth in our lives. When we did something wrong she would say 'if you tell me the truth you wont be punished' – which was in absolute contradiction with our outside world, where authority was more important than the truth. My father, Abdorrahman Boroumand, was a liberal opponent of the Shah. Amidst Iran's traditionalist and autocratic cultures he created a more democratic atmosphere within the family. He never tried to impose his will on us. And the fact that we were in the opposition was important. I saw that while many would show respect and obedience to the Shah, inside our family there was always a critical discourse. We gained a sense of the importance of being critical and judging for ourselves.

We learnt something else from our Father. He was a PhD, an ambitious young man, a lawyer, and he wanted to have a career in politics. But at some point he said 'no' to honours and power, in the name of beliefs. We witnessed him dedicate his life to a cause.

Alan Johnson: What books had a big influence on you?

Ladan Boroumand: It's a very interesting question and it takes us to the heart of the problem that we have in Iran. My father was a literate and well-educated man. Although he was familiar with classic texts in political philosophy he was not an

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intellectual in the sense we understand the word in the West. And that was the problem of the nationalists, whether liberals or socialists or authoritarians. So while our father would give us the classics of Persian literature, his younger friends would encourage us to read Franz Fanon and Ali Shariati – third-worldist, leftist and anti-imperialist literature. We did not read the classical authors of democracy such as Jean Jacques Rousseau or Montesquieu – they were out of fashion when we were growing up. We were protected from gravitating to the authoritarian ideologies not by books but the way of life inside our family – the way we talked, made decisions and lived. I came across the theory and idea of democracy as a student in Paris.

Student in Paris

I left Iran in 1975 and went to study political sociology in Paris. I never joined any exile group, though I knew my father's friend, Bani-Sadr, who was an exile in Paris, and also a student. Paris was a centre of student opposition to the Shah and I was approached by the Iranian Communists but I had already acquired a strong liberal culture from my family, so I was reluctant. Yet I took very seriously their argument that social justice would be attained only if we were ready to sacrifice our 'bourgeois freedoms.' I thought we shouldn't dismiss this point. And though I was very keen to keep the liberty I had discovered in Paris, I agreed it would be very selfish to sacrifice humanity's well-being to my individual freedoms.

But I had to make sure their argument was correct. I started to study both Marxism and the situation of workers and farmers in China, the USSR and Eastern European countries. The timing was good; many books were being published on these topics by dissidents. The scope of devastation in China during the Great Leap Forward was unbelievable. And a book by Hungarian dissident depicted the grim situation of factory workers in Eastern Europe. I was outraged that my Iranian comrades were refusing to see the reality and preferred to live in a fantasy land. By 1977-78, I had become a strong supporter of dissidents in communist countries.

Bani-Sadr's group had a more Islamic, semi-liberal atmosphere, so I hung around them. I was trying to figure out the meaning of abstract concepts such as 'nationhood' and 'freedom.' But I was studying at the University of Nanterre, a very leftist university, in the post-1968 years when being 'revolutionary' was still very cool. The Marxist and structuralist ideas that were in vogue were kind of alien to my concerns – what are human rights, what is liberty, what is a nation?

However, a few years later, after the Iranian revolution, I left Nanterre and went to the famous *Ecole des Hautes Etudes En Sciences Sociales*, where many influential French intellectuals were teaching. I studied with Claude Lefort, François Furet, Pierre Manent, and Mona Ozouf. Pierre Manent introduced me to the works of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As I read them I became outraged that in my early years of university there was never any mention of these authors! I thought I had been duped, and that I had wasted my time. Now my real education started.

The Iranian Revolution

Ladan Boroumand: When Khomeini came to Paris in October 1978 I had the opportunity to meet him. My father was sent to Paris as an envoy of the National Front – he knew Khomeini and had helped him in exile. My father was a believer, you see, albeit an open-minded one. In the 1960s and 1970s he had sent his religious taxes to Khomeini through Bani-Sadr.

My father was sent to Paris by the National Front to figure out what Khomeini's plans were. Khomeini told him to tell his friends that they would know about his plans in due time. My father returned to Tehran and informed his colleagues at the National Front that Khomeini was a dangerous man, acting as if the rest of the opposition didn't exist. From then on my father backed Dr Bahktiar who argued that the opposition to the Shah should refuse to come under Khomeini's umbrella.

At about the same time in Paris, in a small printing house owned by Bani-Sadr, I stumbled upon Khomeini's book *The Guardianship of the Islamic Jurisprudent*. I realised that his programme was not democratic and that he believed in the sovereignty of the Jurisprudent – a religious man whose knowledge of the religious law gives him full authority over the nation. I approached Bani-Sadr and warned him. I said 'this is dangerous.' He responded: 'Khomeini has evolved.' I said 'why don't we ask him?' So (laughs) I wrote out, in Paris, very childishly, a series of 13 questions for Khomeini. One was 'what is your message to Iranian youth?' but the other twelve concerned the foundations of the body politic and the state. We handed this to Khomeini's son in law who took it to Khomeini. The message came back 'The Ayatollah wont respond to these questions – he says it's not the right time for this.' I said 'when will the right time be?' He just smiled at me. This was a week or so before Khomeini returned to Iran.

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I realised something was wrong but I was too young, and not educated enough. Later on, Khomeini implemented, step-by-step, exactly what he wrote in that book. I learnt a lesson about the importance of ideology in politics. Always read with care what any leader to be has written. Never think it is not important.

I was worried about what Khomeini intended for Iran, and I wanted to be a witness to the revolution. So, on the pretext of being a student engaged in a field research, I arrived in Iran one week after Khomeini, in the midst of the revolution. On February 11 I was at the Parliament when it was taken by the 'revolutionary forces.' I saw the invasion of the military barracks by the people and I saw how the arms were distributed. I can still see a young man driving a tank and looking at me and asking 'Would you like to drive the tank?' It was a surreal atmosphere – crazy and surreal. It was not a war because the army had retreated and left the city to the insurgents. Kids of 13 and 14 were taking arms.

In this tumult I interviewed teachers, labourers, people from the markets, trying to understand the dreams of each social group. The conclusion I reached was that none knew about Khomeini's *programme*. Their ideal future was a representative parliamentary regime. I also discovered that there were two social groups who were not initially enthusiastic about the revolution or the Mullahs – workers and peasants. I interviewed workers in a cement factory in the city of Esfahan and I witnessed a tension between the engineers and the workers. At the time of the General Strike in October 1978 the workers had not wanted to go on strike so the engineers had paid the bus-drivers not to pick the workers up! And now the workers were afraid of being labelled 'counter-revolutionaries,' worried about the 'revolution' and worried for their livelihood. The same was true of the villagers, whose main memory of the Mullahs was that in 1960 they had opposed the Shah's agrarian reform. To them the Mullahs were a feudal force not to be trusted.

But very quickly Khomeini started to talk about the 'downtrodden versus the Arrogants' – and about class differences between the rich and poor. The less privileged classes began to think there may be an opportunity in the Islamic revolution and began to join the movement. In a couple of months the social landscape changed totally as the middle classes that were the real support of the revolution became wary and some turned to opposition, while – I don't like to use this concept – 'the masses' became pro-Khomeini.

Alan Johnson: What explains the support of so many women for the Islamic revolution?

Ladan Boroumand: Khomeini's official discourse was that he was uninterested in power, and only wanted to fight against corruption, and for freedom. Of course he would also use phrases such as 'within the limits of Islamic requirements' – this was the warning we did not understand. Women did not join the movement thinking these guys would radically restrict their social freedoms. When I interviewed woman teachers, I found that they wanted more freedom, less corruption and to elect their representatives. But in revolutionary situations, each actor projects its fantasy onto the leadership. And because Khomeini was discreet about his real agenda each social actor could fantasise about what the Imam wanted for Iran, and joined the movement on the basis of that fantasy.

Alan Johnson: Soon enough a brutal reality replaced the fantasies. You have written that you witnessed scenes that left you 'overwhelmed by shame.' Can you tell me about that?

Ladan Boroumand: I remember the first executions – of former regime officials. They published photographs of the corpses in the newspapers and plastered these images on the walls. It was horrible. I rang Bani-Sadr and asked why? His response was very perturbing. He said 'They had to kill them because otherwise the *people* would have lynched them.' But I knew that was not true, because I had accompanied Bani-Sadr to the very places these former officials had been held. There was no popular mood against them. The society was peaceful. The revolution was peaceful, really. The hatred was nurtured after the revolution by the revolutionaries.

The shame I felt was due to the fact that I was one of millions of people who had wished for change and my heart was with the movement. I felt responsible for what had happened to these men, who had been denied all their rights as accused and summarily executed. I felt guilty and ashamed and at this moment I turned 'counter-revolutionary.' I did not vote for 'the Islamic Republic' and I became an opponent of the regime. We had overthrown the Shah but now we had another arbitrary regime killing people. We had wanted due process of Law, and human rights, but with this wave of executions – and all those that followed – the regime showed that we had got only a totalitarian system. I returned to Paris knowing I would not return to Iran for a very long time. The day I left there was a huge May 1st parade. Thousands of young Iranian communists were on their way to the

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demonstration, rather satisfied with the work of the revolutionary Courts, unaware that by approving these courts, they were becoming accomplices to their own persecution. As I looked at these young people I felt that the writing was already on the wall for them. And I have never been back to Iran since that day.

An Encounter with Evil

Alan Johnson: You settled in Paris with your father, Abdorrahman Boroumand, a social democrat who was a leader of the National Movement of the Iranian Resistance. On April 18 1991, he was stabbed to death in his apartment building, presumably by agents of the Iranian government. Can you tell me something about your father and why he – and three months later, his friend and leader Shapour Bakhtiar – were assassinated? After all, both were elderly and without international support. Why were they viewed as a threat by the Mullahs?

Ladan Boroumand: After the revolution degenerated, my father came to France, and Dr Bahktiar arrived six months later. They created the first active opposition to the regime and worked together for a decade. Why were they killed? Well, from the earliest days Khomeini's regime was killing its opponents outside the country, but in the early 1990s they started a campaign of liquidation of all opposition figures outside the country. The killings of Bahktiar and my father were part of this wave of assassinations. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the regime had lost an important support on the international scene. It had to figure out what to do in the new world. And when Rafsanjani became president in 1989, there was an opening to the West. The regime feared this opening could encourage the pro-democracy movement *inside* Iran. And of course all totalitarian regimes are paranoid and insecure because they don't have genuine popular support.

There was nothing special about my father's beliefs. He thought Iran should have a representative regime based on human rights, and that those in the majority today should allow the minority to fight for its ideas and become a majority tomorrow. Internationally, they wanted Iran to be an independent country pursuing its own agenda. Bahktiar was getting old but he remained the most legitimate figure in the opposition because he had never been part of the Shah's regime, and he had never worked with the Khomeini's regime. Moreover, he had warned the nation about the huge mistake of rallying around Khomeini. To this day, Bahktiar remains a revered figure. Because my father would be his successor, they killed him first. Then they

killed Bahktiar. The strategy was to eliminate the national democratic movement and in a way they succeeded.

Alan Johnson: The French government failed to react properly to the assassination of Shapour Bakhtiar. You have written that this failure 'gave substance to the Islamist assumption.' What did you mean by that? What is 'the Islamist assumption?'

Ladan Boroumand: By killing their opponents outside the country, while negotiating commercial deals with the very states that had given asylum to these oppositionists (and which were responsible for their security) the regime in Tehran sent a message to the Iranian people. That message was 'Look at these Western democracies to which you aspire, and whom you think are your friends. We go on their soil, violate their sovereignty, and kill our opponents, and these countries do nothing because they have commercial and financial interests with us.' The deeper philosophical message is that, for the western countries, democracy and human rights are not universal. When western democracies pursue commercial interests while ignoring their own ideological foundations they indirectly help the development of Islamism and terrorism. Totalitarian regimes always have a universal message, you see. The Islamists think that the whole world should convert to their ideology. What they fear most is a war of ideas with another universalist ideology that would challenge their worldview. By tacitly accepting the elimination of Iranian dissidents on their soil Western democracies seem to endorse the *non-universal* character of democratic rights, since what is unacceptable for a French citizen is tolerated if it is targeting an Iranian refugee.

The French government did not even officially deplore the assassination of Iranian exiles taking place in France. Nothing. We received no word from any official. Bakhtiar died under the very nose of the French police but the state did nothing. For over 36 hours the body was not even found – yet several policemen were inside the house at the time of the assassination and afterward! It is not believable. The investigation was suspiciously inept. Later, rumours circulated that a bargain had been struck by the French state: do what you want to your own people but leave French citizens alone. One day there must be a real investigation about the role of the French state in the case of Bahktiar's killing.

Alan Johnson: Giving testimony before the US Human Rights Caucus you described the day of your father's murder as 'an encounter with evil.' You said, 'the day after the crime we find ourselves with a mutilated soul. And this is precisely

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where lies the effectiveness of Terror. It is not as much for the life it takes than for the faith in human being that it shatters. How then is it possible to find the strength to believe again, and to fight for the human being who is capable of such an act?' It may be of great value to many others if you could say something about how you have lived with those questions yourself and found the strength to believe again.

Ladan Boroumand: When they killed my father I went there before he was taken away. When the doctor said there was no hope I thought: 'in the end they succeeded; they were here to kill us and we were here to be killed.' I had been living in fear for many years. Each time my father was out of the house I knew he might be killed, but the psychological impact was incommensurable with what one 'knows' or anticipates. It is an encounter with evil because it is irremediable, and because the moment the crime is committed there is an eclipse of humanity. A moment is by definition transient but paradoxically those framing the unspeakable become eternal. There is nothing you can do. It is done. The day after I did not want to wake up and if I had the strength to put an end to my life I would have done it. The shame of living after that day was very strong and I survived out of sheer cowardice. There was nothing heroic about it.

One does not believe in life anymore. I recall that the day after I wanted to talk to Holocaust survivors and ask how they managed. I hoped that no one I knew would see me in the street. My work for a decade had been unconsciously seeking to prevent this crime. I had published reports on human rights violations in Iran while my studies on the French Revolution sought to understand human rights, to figure out what politics is, and what the ideological response to authoritarianism and totalitarianism should be. But I could not do anything about the killing. So you ask yourself what is the use of all that work and whether life is worth living. What helps one carry on is friendship and love – the sole antidotes to hatred and murder – and the sense of duty you have to the survivors. It is a long process to learn to live and to continue one's struggle. Slowly, very slowly, you try to figure out how you can remedy the irremediable. And that is, perhaps, why my sister and I created The Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation for the promotion of human rights and democracy in Iran.

The Iranian Revolution and the Left

Alan Johnson: The Iranian left (and the western left, with a few exceptions) catastrophically misjudged the Islamists by supporting the 'anti-imperialist Imam'

– failing to see that along with human rights and democracy, their own survival was threatened. Before it was dispatched by the regime, the left had failed to defend the democratic rights of 'perfumed bourgeois women' and 'bourgeois liberals' so intoxicated were they by their fantasies about 'the anti-imperialist revolution.'

Fred Halliday has argued that 'the central avoidable error of most of the Iranian left [was] its catastrophic stand on "liberalism."' He claims that 'the Left allied with Khomeini to break "liberalism" – that is those moderate democratic forces that opposed the Shah but were against clerical dictatorship.' He goes on: While '[i]n any historical materialist perspective, the "liberals" reflected a more progressive position than the reactionary ideas and policies of Khomeini, the Marxists viewed events through the prism of "anti-imperialism."' For myself, I'd say the repudiation in theory and practice of this basic historical materialist truth by vast swathes of the post-1960s left, including the 'historical materialists,' is now left-wing common sense and the result has been a catastrophic loss of political bearings.

Ladan Boroumand: Well, actually I don't think the Left made a big mistake. If they were to be true to their ideology, which was a totalitarian ideology, then they made the right choice. Yes, they got killed for it, but many Communists got killed for it in the Soviet Union as well. The fact is that between Dr Bahktiar – who represented the option for a liberal democracy – and the creation of a totalitarian system, the Left supported the creation of a totalitarian system. Why? Because that system was much closer to what they wanted than what Bahktiar was offering.

Alan Johnson: Perhaps I am revealing my own wishful thinking about what any Left 'should' support.

Ladan Boroumand: So the real questions are: why did so many Leftists have a totalitarian mind-set? Why were so many so easily absorbed by a totalitarian ideology instead of supporting liberal-democracy? We were an autocratic nation lacking the cultural, philosophical and intellectual heritage of the West. Only ten chapters of John Locke were available in Farsi in 1979 in a book that had not been on the market for 20 years. Liberal ideas were almost non-existent while Lenin, Marx, Fanon were systematically translated. We just didn't have the liberal background that you had in the West that helped you resist and defeat your own totalitarian tendencies in the twentieth century.

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Revolutionary History and Virtuous Minorities

Alan Johnson: In 1999 you published *La Guerre des Principes* (1999) an important study of the tensions between the 'rights of man' and the 'sovereignty of the nation' during the French Revolution. Your central argument is that the revolutionaries created a metaphysical notion of 'the people' and substituted this for the flesh and blood people of France. You wrote that 'the people could not be admitted into the sphere of the nation's sovereignty' and were viewed by the revolutionaries as a 'metaphysical entity par excellence ...an ideal being.' Had your experience of the Iranian revolution shaped your reading of the French revolution?

Ladan Boroumand: When I started to work on the French Revolution I wanted to understand the West. Here was my question: if these countries are democratic polities based on the assumption that the individual is free and autonomous, then why, during the 19th and 20th centuries, have they denied this right to other countries? My question concerned colonialism and imperialism, but it was not the classical leftist question. Mine was a philosophical question – why a body politic based on democratic principles behaves undemocratically on the international scene. If these principles are really universal, then logically they should also inform the international behaviour of this entity. If these principles are not universal then what are 'human rights?'

I reached the conclusion that each time a western democratic polity behaves undemocratically on the international scene it is by reference to 'the nation' and its 'glory,' 'honour' 'security,' 'interest,' and 'stability.' There is a tension between the nation as a concept, and as a political form, and human rights as a universal principle. You can see this in the UN Charter, by the way. On the one hand, the Declaration of Human Rights, on the other hand, the sovereignty of the nation state. The tension between these two principles are at the heart of the UN's inconsistency and problems.

The only time in the history of western politics that these two concepts were at play in the internal history of one nation was during the French Revolution – they were both included in the 1791 constitution. Both concepts – 'human rights' and 'the sovereignty of the nation' – formed the normative foundations of the state. So I studied how a polity based on human rights could lead to a Government of Terror. By studying everyday legislative debates during several years of the French revolution I discovered that the central category of 'the people' did not refer to real people but was a juridical category that had been filled by an ideological orthodoxy

and which was embodied by a 'virtuous minority.' And that is when I understood what I had been told by Mr Bani-Sadr. Do you recall, he said to me, justifying the first summary executions, that 'the people would have killed these former regime officials?' His response made sense in retrospect. The people he referred to could not have been the real people (40 million individuals). He meant that the orthodoxy of the new regime representing 'the people' required the summary execution of these particular people, because the orthodoxy did not include human rights.

Alan Johnson: You found a 'continuity of political reflexes and expedients before and after 1789,' as each regime was 'informed by the same principle: "the sovereignty of the nation"' interpreted as meaning the sovereignty of a virtuous minority. In Iran, before and after the Shah, virtuous minorities claimed rights to interpret the meaning of this juridical category – 'the people.'

Ladan Boroumand: Yes, the definition of 'the people' applied only to those who espoused the new ideology. Those who opposed it became 'enemies of the people.' And this is how I came to understand that nationhood in the west is not necessarily a rational category made of free and equal individuals endowed with inalienable natural rights and bound by a social contract. In the history of the West, up to WW2, both democratic and undemocratic leaders have embodied the 'sovereignty of the nation.' The 'sovereignty of the nation,' then, does not equal democracy, and nationhood in the west has not been individualistic. To put it simply, if citizens in the US or GB had democratic rights it was more because they were British or American than because they were human beings. That is why representative democracies such as the United Kingdom could, consistently, pursue undemocratic foreign policies. Since the end of WW2 Western polities have gone through a slow but steady trend of democratisation that can be measured both in their internal regime and their foreign policies. The most important of all is the introduction of human rights in their constitutional texts, which would have been unthinkable before WW2.

Part 2: Politics in Iran Today

Alan Johnson: Iran's theo-polity is based on the bedrock principle of Velayat-e Faqih – the rule of the Islamic jurisprudent. Yet this principle may be the regime's weakness. As you have noted, the notion of 'setting up the theologian as political guardian of the people was Khomeini's idea' and many orthodox clerics have always rejected it. Moreover, there now is widespread cynicism about the clergy, especially among the young. And a civil society movement has emerged from 1997, opposed

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to the principle of Velayat-e Faqih, expressing, you say, a new 'philosophical and ideological consensus ... without precedent in the country's modern history' in favour of 'the dignity or intrinsic worth of the human person.' How can the reform movement exploit these contradictions politically? What are the levers? What are the agencies? What are the flash-point issues?

Ladan Boroumand: Many people say the constitution contains two contradictory principles. One is valayet-e faqih, which means the guardianship of the jurispudent, i.e. the leader who knows the laws of God and has total control over society on that basis. Note, by the way, that this principle is a heresy, as in Abrahamic religions only God's power is absolute. Valayet-e faqih puts the Iranian regime at odds with religious orthodoxy and makes it a very modern totalitarian regime. Many go on to say that the principle of valayet-e faqih is flanked by the concept of the sovereignty of the people, and during the reform era of Khatami many people tried to play one of these concepts against the other. In my view, this was an optical illusion on the part of the reformists because the sovereignty of the people in the constitution refers only to a limited sovereignty in 'social life' – i.e. freedom to choose their spouses, their business, to own property, etc. It does not grant the people political power. The sovereignty of the people is defined in the constitution as subordinate to the absolute power of the jurispudent, and that is why the constitution has functioned for 30 years. A constitutional text that contains genuine *contradictions* – like the constitution of 1791 in France, in which human rights and national sovereignty both had normative power – will create a crisis.

So I would not put it, as you do, as a matter of exploiting 'contradictions.' The real problem the regime faces is that some of those who compose it have stopped believing in it and have defected. I will give you an example. The Office of Consolidating Unity was an umbrella organisation for Islamist student associations in the Universities. In the 1980s it was a terror organisation imposing orthodoxy, spying on students and denouncing dissidents to the authorities. Today, the Islamic Associations are virtually dissident organisations! People who were part of the regime have lost faith in its ideology and have defected with a chunk of the institutions which used to be part of the regime. *This* is the internal difficulty facing the regime. On the other hand the social movements you refer to, of women, and other civil society activists which mount a social resistance to the regime's orthodoxy, are the external difficulties the regime faces.

'Two Iran's?'

Alan Johnson: Christopher Hitchens visited Iran in 2005 and was struck by the existence of 'two Irans.' 'Iran today exists in state of dual power and split personality. [H]uge billboards and murals proclaim it an Islamic republic, under the eternal guidance of the immortal memory of Ayatollah Khomeini... But directly underneath those forbidding posters and right under the noses of the morals enforcers, Iranians are buying and selling videos, making and consuming alcohol, tuning in to satellite TV stations, producing subversive films and plays and books, and defying the dress code ... The country is an 'as if' society. People live as if they were free, as if they were in the West, as if they had a right to an opinion, or a private life.' And the Iranian lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Shirin Abadi has written that 'Iran's young people remain cheerfully pro-American, the last pocket of such sentiment in an angry Middle East' (213) Is Hitchens right? Is Abadi right?

Ladan Boroumand: They are both right. The big challenge facing the regime is how to recuperate that part of the society which is totally resistant to the regime's ideology and over which it has no control. Each time the regimes cracks down the opposition resurfaces in another way. For example, the women organised sit-ins at Universities, and they were beaten. So they came up with the idea of a one-million signature campaign for women's equality under the law. For example, when the regime arrested part of the leadership of the student movement another set of leaders emerged. The regime constantly tries to control civil society's resistance but it fails because it has lost its credibility.

Khatami and the Reform Movement

Alan Johnson: In May 1997 Khatami was elected President on a reform ticket by a landslide. As you wrote, 'Within a few weeks, the political discourse burst through the narrow framework of the official revolutionary language. Expressions like 'freedom of thought, pluralism, and civil society filled the air' and people hoped for a 'Tehran Spring.' But it was not to be. The hardliners panicked and clamped down.

Ladan Boroumand: Khatami wanted a more dynamic civil society, some freedom, but he always believed in the absolute power of the jurispudent. The reform *movement* happened because of two developments. First, supporters of the ruling elite in the 1980s were sidelined in the 1990s. These people had leftist leanings and were deeply shaken by the fall of the Soviet Union and the demise of Communism. After 1989 these former authoritarians became influenced by writers like Hannah

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Arendt, the Eastern European dissident literature and were slowly converting to democracy. Akbar Gangi is representative of those 'insiders' who campaigned for Khatami and who developed a new discourse of democracy, freedom of press, and so on. Second, a younger generation, who had not witnessed the early days of the revolution, and who had no memory of the Terror which had decimated our generation, were ecstatic about this new language. The old 'insider' leaders who had been converted to more democratic views allied with a younger generation of civil society activists – and that made possible a reform movement.

The reform *movement* frightened the hard-liners who launched a counter-attack: a crack down on pro-democracy figures, serial killings of writers and journalists and dissidents, and the banning of the burgeoning press. And although this crack-down consolidated the defection of many major figures from Khatami's movement – people like Gangi, Sazegara and others – the reform movement was not strong enough to push for constitutional change. But it did create a space for debate during which many people realised that *the constitution itself* is the main problem.

Alan Johnson: Isn't another problem touched on in something you wrote after the 2005 elections. You said that Ahmadinejad appealed to some extent to the poor, and this should have 'alerted the democratic opposition to the need to reach out to the less-educated and poorer strata of society.' Are there any signs that this is happening?

Ladan Boroumand: I was echoing the conclusions of the student movement which argued the debate should be popularised and taken beyond intellectuals and students. For example, the debate about the boycott of the elections was never properly translated into popular terminology. This is exactly what the women activists understood. The genius of the one million signatures campaign is that it takes their cause to the wider society and creates a new conversation. The activists talk to people in the streets, encourage people to approach their family members, and talk about the laws and about equality and rights. They have created a little booklet that explains what gender discrimination is, the impact it has, and why it is important for women to have equality and rights. Slowly the women have become the most subversive movement in Iran. The regime has now understood this, hence the latest crack-down.

Détente or Regime-Change?

Alan Johnson: Your view of the reform movement contrasts with that of Ray Tekeyh's in *Foreign Affairs* in Summer 2007. In urging the West to abandon regime change and pursue détente with Iran he argued the Iranian democratic opposition should be cut adrift on two (mutually contradictory, it seems to me) grounds: it is 'non-existent' and it is an obstacle to détente. Democratisation, he argued, should be pursued indirectly through bolstering 'moderate' conservatives such as Larijani, and by the long-term benefits of 'integrating Iran into the world economy and global society.' How do you respond to that argument?

Ladan Boroumand: There are several points to make here. First 'regime change' is an unfortunate expression. It really doesn't mean anything. It does not tell you what will come *after*. I mean, there was a regime change in Iraq. When the West has diplomatic leverage it should use it only with reference to 'human rights' and 'democratic principles.' This would leave it less vulnerable to criticism.

Second, what people like Tekeyh are promoting is really just the old traditional realpolitik based on the absolute sovereignty of nation-states. His 'solution' has already been tried in the 1990s and it failed. At the time of Rafsanjani that was exactly the stance taken by all western countries, including the United States. But they could not persuade the Islamic Republic to stop supporting terrorism in the region, or behave like a normal nation state. The plain fact is that the Iranian government is not a normal nation-state. Khomeini's people erased the notion of 'nation' from the name of the country's political institutions – the National Assembly was re-baptised 'Islamic Assembly.' There is no 'nation' in the constitutional text of Iran. It is a universalist Islamist regime that has an international agenda.

Third, we must return to the question of 'the West.' The western polities are also a mutating phenomenon. They are in the midst of very profound changes – the sovereignty of the nation-state is giving way to new transnational political and economic forms. One of the reasons for inconsistency and contradiction – such a tragic paralysis with regard to pushing forward democratic agendas – is that foreign policy is pushed in contradictory directions due to this unfinished political mutation in the West itself.

We must also acknowledge the problems of 'interventions' from above. We have, thus far, a failed intervention in Iraq, and Afghanistan is not a real democracy.

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There are serious arguments about how to pursue pro-democracy policies and we human rights advocates and democrats should think of ways of organising at the level of international civil society to make us independent of the short-term political agendas of governments. We should organise a vast network of solidarity that could provide moral support, even material support to people struggling for democracy. It is vitally important for the Iranian reform movement to know that it has supporters in the West beyond President Bush (who is quite popular in Iran).

Fourth, the West has an ideological stake here. To treat the Iranian reform movement in the way Tekeyh suggests would only weaken the West's own ideological foundations and encourage Islamist terrorists. And, anyway, why should the Islamic regime be allowed to support the Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, or other groups in Iraq, while the democratic polities are not allowed to support their fellow democrats!

The Politics of Iranian 'Elections'

Alan Johnson: You have pointed out that Khatami's election victories were 'largely inconsequential' because 'while reform kept winning votes, the unelected organs of the state kept tightening the screws.' The election boycott movement emerged in the 1990s because high turnouts had only 'strengthened the regime's international position without bringing any increase in political freedom.' However, boycotts led to Ahmadinejad. (A turnout in 2003 of a mere 12 percent in Tehran – an Islamist rump – gave us Mayor Ahmadinejad, and, in 2005, President Ahmadinejad.) So how should progressives treat elections in Iran? Are elections still 'a subversive element within a closed ideological system?' Was the 2005 boycott a strategic error? What should democrats do in 2008?

Ladan Boroumand: The Islamic Republic confiscates elections, empties them of their real meaning and turns them into their opposite. Genuinely free elections are an institution that crystallises on the political level the autonomy of the individual. The Iranian regime uses elections to crystallise the negation of the autonomy of the individual. A Guardian decides who is apt to rule you and how they will rule you and which laws they will impose on you. And the regime then calls on you to go and choose who is to do all this to you, from a range of people they have pre-selected! When you play this game you become an accomplice of the denial of your own autonomy. It has been a major ideological success of the regime to trick citizens to go and vote.

Many who have suffered terribly at the hands of the regime do vote, of course. I have a friend who voted for Rafsanjani, knowing full well that Rafsanjani killed his uncle. Many people feel like prisoners, and look to voting to create a 'bigger window in the cell,' so to speak. I do not judge them – it's a moral and individual choice. But Havel says you pay a price when you become an accomplice in your own persecution. We have to defend with all our strength the dignity of democratic institutions and recapture these institutions from the hands of the regime that has confiscated them.

The meaning of Ahmadinejad

Alan Johnson: You have described the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as 'a man who stands squarely at the nexus of radical-Islamist ideology and terrorism.' What is the political meaning of his rise to power, so soon after the high hopes of the reform movement? And how should we interpret the regime's recent actions – the pursuit of the bomb, the Holocaust denial conferences, the 'wipe Israel off the map' rhetoric, the kidnapping of the 15 British sailors? Are these actions the expressions of a newly confident Islamic Republic or desperate efforts to escape deep problems?

Ladan Boroumand: The election of Ahmadinejad is directly linked to the reformist episode. Khatami's new reformist language stimulated the opposition while his drive to modernise Iran's image on the international scene forced the regime to water down its radical ideological rhetoric and rein in, rhetorically at least, its violent agents. But this created new dangers for the regime. The regime risked alienating its own agents causing them to waiver in their loyalty or even fear their own arrest. The regime was running the risk of losing them, psychologically. Now, if elections and modernisation are bringing many electors to the polls, and the world is being given the impression of a 'popular' Iranian regime, well OK, that is a risk worth running to gain international recognition. But once the reform movement grew, and once the boycott began to bite, the regime said, 'Well, we must nurture our own base.'

Under Ahmadinejad, once again the police and security forces can shoot people with impunity and women can be harassed in the streets. His rhetoric about Israel is another expression of this strengthening of the regime's orthodoxy. (Actually, it is a less euphemistic expression of what the Islamic Republic has always advocated.) His policies are aimed at remobilising the hard core supporters of the regime who

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had been disheartened by 8 years of Khatami's ambiguous rhetoric. America's difficulties in Iraq have certainly boosted the regime self confidence, but this is deceptive. Since the election of Ahmadinejad Iran has faced three major popular uprisings in Kurdistan, Azerbaijan and Khuzistan. And it has been challenged by student activists, the women rights movement, teachers, and sporadic strikes and demonstrations by workers.

Part 3: Reforming Islam

Alan Johnson: Let's talk about the reform of Islam. The Iranian human rights lawyer, Shirin Ebadi argues that 'an interpretation of Islam that is in harmony with equality and democracy is an authentic expression of faith.' Drafting a women's rights law she relied on the central texts of Islam taught in the seminaries of the holy city of Qom, and proved that 'a basic right for a women could be guaranteed within an Islamic framework of government provided those in government were inclined to interpret the faith in the spirit of equality.' Like Saad Eddin Ibrahim, interviewed in Democratiya 8, she defends the idea of reinterpretation, or 'ijtihad,' to create a space for 'adapting Islamic values and traditions to our lives in the modern world.' However, she also warns that ijtihad is 'a tricky foundation on which to base inalienable, universal rights' – 'patriarchal men and powerful authoritarian regimes who repress in the name of Islam can exploit ijtihad to reinterpret Islam in the regressive unforgiving manner that suits their sensibilities and political agendas.' Is Islam compatible with democracy, equality and women's rights? How can the gates of ijtihad be opened?

Ladan Boroumand: There are several questions here. First, is religious truth compatible with democracy? You can say 'yes' and 'no.' 'No,' because democracy is based on the assumption that truth is unattainable. Individuals are fallible – what they think is the truth might not be the truth. Democracies organise so each person can individually speak truth but not impose it on the society. But religions insist they know the truth and represent it. So there is always tension between religious faith and democratic beliefs. On the other hand, 'yes,' because according to all Abrahamic religions God is transcendent and there is nothing sacred about the world, which is only the creation of God. Nature is just nature, and man is sovereign on earth. Now, once man is defined as a free-willed entity that will be accountable to God *after death*, we have the conceptual ingredients for democratic systems. I know from my own studies of the theological origins of human rights that monotheism has been a key element in the nurturing and development of democratic philosophy. A nature

that is profane, and a man defined by reason, fallibility, and freewill – historically these elements have come from Abrahamic religions.

The difference between Islam and Christianity is the difference in the role of the Prophet. Muhammad ruled the political community whereas Christ thought his dominion was not in this world. And that is what allowed Christianity to evolve. In the space evacuated by Christ, men could make human-made laws and deal with their temporal lives. We have a problem in Islam with Sharia law. A profound reform is necessary, but it is also possible. In some areas, Islam is more progressive than Christianity, particularly in the area of gender, because ontologically, in Islam, men and women were created equal, from the same earth, whereas in Christianity woman was created from the spare rib of the man. In dignity and creation man and women are absolutely equal in Islam. You can argue from the ontology of Islam to a reform of Sharia law.

But a reformation of Islam will require profound intellectual debate among theologians. And here is a problem. Christianity has a much stronger intellectual backbone than Islam – there have been thinkers of the stature of St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, the debates of the nominalists in the 13th and 14th centuries, the example of William of Ockham, and the controversies about the status of human beings on earth fought between the Papacy and the Empire. All of this intellectual tumult created elements for a philosophical debate that ended in the social contract. We just don't have this kind of background in the Islamic tradition. That's why it would be very fruitful for Muslim theologians and thinkers to know these debates. One of the projects we should support is the translation of the political and theological debates that took place at the end of the Middle Ages, which were really the key to the birth of democratic ideologies.

Perhaps the Shia are more open to ijihad at the moment. They have the example of the imams who renounced political power. The tradition of the twelfth imam is that he did not go after the power. The only person who waged war and has become a revolutionary hero for Muslims today is the third imam, Hussein. But if you read the traditional stories about Hussein and the war he waged in Karbala you can draw a totally opposite conclusion. The original texts tell that on the eve of the final battle Hussein conversed with God and was given two options; to win the war and rule the community of the faithful, or to be killed and join Him, God. Between the two options – temporal power and joining his friend, God – Hussein chose to be

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killed. And this could be the symbolic myth we need – the religious leader, the heir to the prophet, renounces political power for the love of God.

Alan Johnson: It seems likely that Tony Blair will set up a Foundation after he leaves office and one of its aims will be to stimulate inter-faith dialogue.

Ladan Boroumand: There is a problem right now with traditional theological studies. They are really boring – how to wash your hands, and so on. They spend a lot of their time on nonsense. So intelligent elements of society are drawn to modern studies – engineering, law, and so on. Those who go to religious studies are not necessarily the brightest minds. It is very important to create a space where bright minds will be drawn to the intellectual challenge of theological reform and have the opportunity to study Judaism and Christianity and the debates of these traditions. But we need to be careful. Those interested in the real debate are often in hiding, or are not well known or are scared. The space for inter-faith dialogue must not be confiscated by the well-funded Wahhabists, and other brands of totalitarian Islam, who will seek to stop an authentic dialogue.

'Leninism in Islamist Dress'

Alan Johnson: You have described the Sayyid Qutb's ideology as 'Leninism in Islamist dress' and noted the western 'revolutionary' language in Sayyid Abu'l A Mawdudi, the founder of Jamaat-e-Islami-e-Pakistan. Modern Islamism, you insist, marks the continuing influence of a modern Jacobin-totalitarian European ideology of the 'virtuous revolutionary minority.' You identify a lineage running 'from the guillotine, and the Cheka to the suicide bomber.' Can you please explain your thinking about the relation of the European Jacobin tradition to European totalitarianism and contemporary Islamism?

Ladan Boroumand: They are so many points of continuity. For instance, to read the Iranian newspapers in 1979 and 1980 was to read a 'Leninist' discourse, but instead of 'the communist ideal' we had 'the Islamist ideal.' In both cases you could detect a power that saw itself as God on earth, organised as an all-powerful state, denying the right to individual belief, and reserving the right to define truth about and for the individual. The Iranian regime would look into the eyes of a believer and say 'you are not a true believer, you are not a true Muslim, and you are at war with God.' This was straight out of the Moscow Trials. It was not enough for the person to 'I am a Muslim, I do believe in God, but I don't believe in you.' That distinction

was not allowed to exist, just as it was not possible, as Trotsky put it, to be right against the Party. Another point of continuity was the revolutionary tribunals of the Iranian regime, which were exactly like the Soviet trials and before them, the French Revolutionary tribunals. And of course the status of the leader in the Islamic Republic is very similar to the status of the Leader in fascist or communist systems.

And we have not paid enough attention to the role of 'sacrifice' in Islamism or its roots in the death-cults of the European totalitarian tradition. One of the major achievements of Abrahamic religion was to put an end to human sacrifice for Gods. The symbolic event, of course, is when the Angel stops Abraham from sacrificing his son for God. Suicide bombing is reinstating human sacrifice. This would be outrageous to the Prophet – we have no precedent for that kind of behaviour. It is heresy. In all of this Islamism is more like the modern totalitarian death-cults than a religious faith.

Alan Johnson: Since 9/11 the consequences of Islamism for the West have been plain. But you have written with passion of the tragic consequences of Islamism for Islamic societies, arguing that '[We have] lost the keys to our own culture' as a 'degenerate Leninism ... pass[es] itself off as the true expression of a great monotheistic religion.'

Ladan Boroumand: Totalitarianism in the west did not arise from the confiscation of a religion. It did so in our culture for a number of reasons. First, Islam lacks a formal organised church as an authoritative institution. Second, we lacked the rich philosophical and intellectual inheritance enjoyed by the West. Third, we experienced a rapid modernisation and a turbulent shift from tribal monarchies to nation-states. Fourth, we inherited political institutions from the West and did not go through the intellectual, political and socio-cultural struggle of *inventing* them. Fifth, latterly we have been awash with forms of 'revolutionary' ideology, as the West was. So we were poorly equipped to defend ourselves against the ideological attack of the Islamists. Moreover, the traditional religious seminaries had been more or less deserted by intelligent people and became stultifying places. They could not resist Khomeini's assault. They were outraged by Khomeini but they could not respond intellectually.

Alan Johnson: Is it your view that to defend and advance democracy we must – in part – defend Islam against Islamism? That we need to frame Islamism as having imported the worst of the West – the totalitarian idea – against which a reformed

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Islam and an internationalist democratic impulse must join forces to defeat? I'd like to talk about this as you strike me as one of the very few people who seek to think strategically about the battle of ideas we need to wage and win.

Ladan Boroumand: As a liberal and secularist I am not the best person to defend Islam against impostors. As a student of political ideas however, I believe deconstructing Islamism in the name of Islam would be a good strategy. There are now a new generation of theologians who are more learned, and deplore the manipulation of the faith by Islamists. Many have non-theological backgrounds in engineering and other modern disciplines. There are religious thinkers in Iran who have put forward alternatives. One is Mohammad Modjtahed Shabestari who is thinking religion in terms of human rights and believes there is no contradiction. This movement is just emerging and should be nurtured. These thinkers are persecuted and the West should seek a protective role. For instance, a religious scholar Iran who was a feminist spent years working on the texts, finding a basis for equality between men and women. In a blink of an eye they stormed into his house, arrested and defrocked him, and confiscated all his notes. We have not heard from him since 2000.

Alan Johnson: How can we protect these reformist theologians?

Ladan Boroumand: In Europe protection came as a by-product of the tension between the Papacy and the Empire. The Imperial Court would protect those theologians who argued against the Pope's right to control temporal life and political power. If the worldly Princes had not protected these theologians they would have been burned at the stake. So what the West could do today is to create safe spaces for these debates to take place, free from the assaults of the revolutionary Islamists. We should have seminaries in the West to stimulate a real dialogue. I do *not* mean a culturally relativistic polite exchange of pleasantries, but challenging debate of the kind we witnessed in the 19th century between Ernest Renan and Jamal-el-din Afghani. Renan wrote a piece sharply criticising Islam and instead of taking umbrage, burning embassies or beheading hostages, Afghani took his pen and responded to him. We should be uncompromising about freedom of expression if we want a real debate to take place.

Part 4: The Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation

Alan Johnson: You co-founded and help to run The Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation for the promotion of human rights and democracy in Iran. How did you come to set it up and what are its goals?

Ladan Boroumand: The Foundation was created in March 2001 by my sister, Roya Boroumand and myself. We talked earlier about our father's assassination as an encounter with evil and how, slowly, we learned to live again. But the feeling of guilt never left us. The four children are all still dealing with this and we all believe that it is our duty to make sure that justice is done. When we saw the changes in Iran in the 1990s, and the rise of a new generation that wants democracy, we decided the time was right to set up the Foundation. We had long had this in mind.

Alan Johnson: Please tell me about the Foundation's memory project for victims of the Islamic Republic – Omid.

Ladan Boroumand: In 1982 we published a report 'Iran: In Defence of Human Rights.' At that time we were outraged that each political party was defending the rights of its own 'martyrs' while supporting the execution of those outside their ranks. We realised the problem was not just persecution by the Islamists but the failure of much wider layers of Iranian society to understand that no one's rights could be protected unless everyone's rights were protected.

Omid is a bi-lingual virtual memorial, library and resource-centre. We seek to list every person killed by the Islamic Republic of Iran and create a file and a virtual memorial to them, telling the story of how and why he or she was killed. The only common denominator is that each victim is a human being who was killed while the due process of law was violated and his or her rights as a defendant were denied. It is our way of paying homage to the victims and to posthumously restore their rights.

Omid is our way to remedy the irremediable. Evil consists in the eclipse of humanity and in Omid we can acknowledge each victim's humanity and create a space for empathy. We provide their loved ones with a forum to talk about them and even to mount the defence that they were not allowed to mount when they were alive. We are also sending a message to the killers: here are the people you wanted to erase from the surface of the earth and they live on in a virtual world and they are demanding justice.

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We want justice for our father but we won't get it if we don't fight for the right to justice for all fathers, all brothers, all mothers, all sisters, and all children. There is no right for us if there is no right for them. Our individual interest will be protected only when theirs is too. We want to tell our fellow citizens that we understand this, and invite them to understand it. And we want to send a message to the world about the Islamic Republic of Iran: this regime pretends to be an 'Islamic' regime but has killed thousands and thousands of Muslims; it pretends to be popular but rests on violence.

Grief is profoundly unsettling. You can collapse, but you can also be overwhelmed by the need to understand and act. Your mind can become very open to learning. We want people to visit Omid and to learn – about human rights and how to argue for them. So we have also created a virtual library, and are translating the most important human rights instruments and classical texts on democracy. It is a work on progress. We have also dedicated a collection of the library to the memoirs of former prisoners, to tell their story. We also offer scholars and activists a resource bank of information about the Iranian pro-democracy movement.

We have had over 400 people completing online forms, telling the story of their loved ones, many from the Islamic Republic of Iran. We interact with them without knowing them. They send pictures of their loved ones and we complete the case of each person slowly by interacting with the victims. Omid is the initiative of the Boroumand Foundation but we want it to be the project of the Iranian nation one day.

Alan Johnson: What are you working on now?

Ladan Boroumand: At the Foundation we are working on the translation of democratic classics. Right now we are translating John Locke's *Second Treatise*, Vaclav Havel's *The Power of the Powerless*, and some of *The Federalist* papers. I am also working on an article for The Journal of Democracy assessing the prospects for the civil society movement in Iran. Later I would like to write a book based on our work at Omid, about the pattern of violence exerted by totalitarian regimes.

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