



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“A Conversation with Iranian Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi”
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
1779 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, DC
Thursday, April 21st, 12:30pm – 2:00pm

On Thursday, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted a discussion with Iranian Nobel Peace Laureate **Shirin Ebadi** about her new book, *The Golden Cage: Three Brothers, Three Choices, One Destiny* about the Iranian revolution and the struggle of activists and the human rights movement. **Jessica Matthews**, President of the Carnegie Endowment made opening remarks and **Karim Sadjadpour** moderated the event.

Jessica Matthews opened by highlighting the work **Shirin Ebadi** has done on behalf of minorities, refugees and women in Iran in spite of threats from the Iranian regime and the way she has inspired many both inside and outside Iran to continue their struggle. Moderator **Karim Sadjadpour** briefly discussed the premise of Ebadi’s book as the story of her childhood friend, Pari, and her three brothers each of whom subscribe through three different ideologies and whose story serves as a microcosm of history of modern Iran.

Shirin Ebadi, answering a question on Sadjapour on her choice to highlight the struggles of Iranians in novel form, stated that her motivation in writing the novel was to make it accessible to a wide audience. She hopes that readers of the book will learn about the injustices many have suffered and continue to suffer while also gaining a firm understanding of the Iranian people’s daily frustrations. Through the character, Pari, readers are also exposed to the feminist movement in Iran, Ebadi states. With 65 percent of university students in Iran being women, Ebadi notes that women in Iran are highly educated and are present in all parts of society even despite the number of discriminatory laws in place which degrade women. “Democracy will be brought to Iran by the hands of strong Iranian women,” Ebadi states.

Addressing a question by Sadjapour on whether she believes the 1979 revolution was a mistake, Ebadi stated that the motto of the revolution was “independence and freedom” and that is a cause worth fighting for. **She stated that at the time, many believed the rhetoric of Ayatollah Khomeini that everyone in Iran would be free to participate and contribute to the formation of a new republic.** Khomeini and others denounced the old constitution as a construct of “our fathers and forefathers” which needed to be replaced. She noted, ironically, that activists which have expressed similar sentiments since 1979 have been imprisoned. **Ebadi continued by discussing that under the current political structure, the Guardian Council has excessive power, especially as its candidate vetting privileges, which impinges on the right of the Iranian people to freely elect their own representatives.** Thus, she notes that in the revolution, the Iranian people have not gained any political freedoms, but rather have lost the political and civic rights they enjoyed under the Shah.

Speaking on the Green Movement, Ebadi stated that it is a democratic movement but not an ideological one. She noted that the movement lacks a political structure with no clear hierarchy as **Mir Hossein Mousavi** and **Mehdi Karroubi** are not the leaders but rather a guiding force strengthening the movement. **She states that inside the movement there are two schools of thought on how to move forward. One branch calls for the creation of a new constitution;** however, Ebadi believes that this will result in

bloodshed as the regime is unlikely to acquiesce to this demand. **The other branch of the movement believes that the current constitution should remain in place with certain articles being amended and other articles, which guarantee the rights of the Iranian people, being implemented.** This group believes that as the rights of the Iranian people become reinstated then greater reform and amendments to the constitution can be made. Unfortunately, Ebadi states, the government has made no move towards negotiating with the opposition and believes that they will not. Which school of thought prevails remains to be seen, but it is likely to come at great cost. **The author stated that unlike Tunisia and Egypt, the army in Iran is very much part of the regime and will be unlikely to break with the leadership and support the protesters making non-violent resistance a difficult option for Iranians.** She notes, however, that the use of force has served to delegitimize and weaken the Iranian regime and “governments that do not listen to its people will surely fall,” as seen in the case of Tunisian President **Zine Ben Ali** and Egyptian President **Hosni Mubarak**. **The regime, she says, is not going to last forever as Iran is like “fire under ashes.”**

Sadjapour noting a statistic that 14,000 people have been killed since 1979 questioned how a new government should deal with regime officials who may have been involved in human rights abuses. Ebadi responded by stating that the question is, “what is more important: peace or justice?” She noted that in South Africa truth commissions and reconciliation tactics were successful; however, this is not the case in other countries. Thus, she believes that the choice between reconciliation councils or trials will be dependent on the time and place and what the conditions call for. She noted the example of Pinochet in Chile as an example of a country that chose peace and stability and later addressed the question of justice.

Addressing a question by an audience member on what Washington can do to support the Green Movement and whether the MEK should be delisted and funded, Ebadi stated that the delisting of MEK is a matter for the courts to decide, but believes that the abuses taking place at Camp Ashraf needs to be addressed. On what the U.S. can do to support the opposition movements, Ebadi states that the U.S. and the West should help Iranians gain access to internet which is not controlled by the government via satellite technology.

Addressing the effectiveness of U.S. sanctions on Iran, Ebadi stated that she does not believe the term “sanctions” is appropriate as what the U.S. has actually done is limit the work of corporations inside their own borders. Legally, she states that is not a sanction, but rather a trade regulation. She stated, in addition, that the rhetoric of the regime that nuclear capability is a source of pride for the Iranian people is false. She notes that many in Iran are wary of nuclear energy given the recent events in Japan, especially as Iran sits on multiple fault lines. Additionally, she notes that discussion of the nuclear issue is forbidden by the government and that the government fails to note that neither wind nor solar energy options have been pursued.