



Book The Road to Democracy in Iran

Akbar Ganji
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Recommendation

The author of this collection of short essays was imprisoned in his native Iran for advocating universal human rights based on freedom from pain, fear and intimidation. Akbar Ganji, dubbed Iran's "most famous dissident," distills his arguments into a few pivotal points that are openly, clearly idealistic – even more so in light of the policies of Iran's rulers. Ganji's essays are not practical, but philosophical, although he is very down-to-earth when he describes the plight of Iranian women. *BooksInShort* recommends them to those who are interested in finding out more about Ganji and, to a much lesser degree, learning more about Iran's political environment.

Take-Aways

- Author Akbar Ganji, an investigative journalist, was imprisoned in Iran for six years after he traced a series of murders of Iranian intellectuals to Iran's secret police.
- He has been called "Iran's most famous dissident." His ideas include the following:
- Iran must change and should institute slow, democratic reform.
- Pain, a common bond that unites all people, can serve as the basis for establishing universal human rights.
- Human rights are the ability of people to determine their own future while being free from individual physical intimidation and fear.
- The guiding "principle of an authentic life" is individual control over one's destiny.
- Iranian society today operates on an apartheid policy based on religion, race, gender and political allegiance.
- Iranian society systematically discriminates against women on religious grounds.
- Islam has three distinct interpretations: modernist, fundamental and traditional.
- Islam remains largely traditional, stressing authority and belief in Mohammed. It accepts traditional hierarchies and divinity's dominance in everyday life.

Summary

Foreword: Piety and Democracy

Akbar Ganji was once a commander in Iran's Revolutionary Guard. He objected to the repressive government and became an investigative reporter in the 1990s. He traced a series of murders of Iranian intellectuals to the hands of Iran's secret police. He was imprisoned for six years as a pro-democracy dissident. In 2005, the last year of his sentence in Evin Prison, Ganji undertook hunger strikes for a total of "more than 70 days." While he was in solitary confinement, his weight fell to 58 kilograms.

"In Iran liars claim: we have no political prisoners and no solitary cells, there are no hunger strikes in our prisons, our prisons are like hotels."

Over the course of Ganji's imprisonment, the nation's prosecutor, Saeed Mortazavi, and the head of its Justice Department, Abbasali Alizadeh, issued a string of contradictory public statements: They claimed Ganji was being taught a lesson, that he had medical problems, that he did not have medical problems and, finally, that he had a respiratory illness. Prison officials beat him. One prison guard put a drug dealer into Ganji's cell and told the dealer to kill him. When Ganji screamed and alerted the other prisoners about his new cellmate, the authorities backed off. Mortazavi told Ganji's wife, "What will happen if Ganji dies? Dozens die every day in prisons; Ganji will be just one of them."

"Today, my broken face is the true face of the system in the Islamic Republic of Iran."

Ganji's particular crime was criticizing Ayatollah Khamenei, then Iran's unelected leader, who clamped down on those who pushed his limits on "religious democracy." Ganji protested against human rights violations perpetuated by Iran and other oppressive regimes. He asked why society only discusses human rights as defined by regions, religions and civilizations, and he advocated universal human rights as an alternative. Ganji studied the great philosophers, and advanced a concept of universal human rights that differs from Aristotle's rational philosophy. It also conflicts with the teachings of Confucius, according to authorities in Malaysia, China, Taiwan and Singapore who rejected universal human rights in 1992 for that reason.

"Has there ever been a time when human beings did not suffer from anxiety and fear, anguish and despair, injustice and oppression?"

Ganji proposes that pain is a common characteristic which unites all humans and can serve as the basis for establishing universal human rights, in that people should be free from threats and harm. However, if a society feels threatened, its people may curtail their own rights. For example, nations can conduct more inspections and institute heavier security during terrorist threats. The difference is that the citizenry must instigate these restrictions of personal liberties, not the government – and the loss of freedom must be temporary. People must monitor what transpires during these emergencies when rights are temporarily suspended. In the past, certain groups have capitalized on such suspensions to advance their political goals and inflict suffering, which is wrong even during the process of building a more just or egalitarian society. Here, Ganji draws on philosopher Karl Popper's "negative utilitarianism." Popper advocated the least amount of suffering for the greatest number of people and said that the pursuit of a utilitarian vision does not justify inflicting harm. Ganji's ideas center on universal human rights, as follows:

The Basics of Human Rights

Human rights require freedom from individual physical intimidation and fear. Its ideals insist that people's freedom to determine their own future is a pivotal "principle of an authentic life." This means you can live the way you see fit as long as you do not infringe on the rights of others. Such an approach leads to a pluralistic society. However, in reality, shared political power is rare. Power is concentrated in institutions – and even families – and few of those who have it want to share it. At the national level, difficult, commonly bloody engagements usually accompany efforts to democratize political power. Such fights often involve the "lower classes" supported by intellectuals.

"The common experience of pain is thus the foundation for human rights."

Since social wealth is a by-product of economic wealth, people must believe they are equals before they can work together in social and economic settings. Once people are equal, everyone has access to knowledge. Improved communication technology makes such access easier. More open information highlights the differences between modern and traditional societies, and shows how repressive governments differ from democracies.

"The idea of universal human rights is founded on the belief that human beings, in spite of some large differences, share a common human essence."

People who understand these differences strive harder to attain a higher standard of living, which then makes them responsible for acting against social injustice. Working to correct societal wrongs enhances their humanity, since tolerating injustice demeans the human condition. Intellectuals have a special responsibility to promote universal rights, especially in Iran where abuses have been rampant. These abuses include imposition of the death penalty for non-Muslims and others, prison sentences for "dissidents," the closure of more than 100 publications over the past eight years and many other actions that block the roads to democratic reform.

Democracy and Reform

Most revolutions are inherently violent and rely on political upheaval, but Iran's current democracy movement is reformist, humanistic, informally organized and evolutionary. To succeed, it must be peaceful and not harm innocent bystanders. Trying to change a society peacefully is a long-term process. This realization aligns with Aristotelian "cultural essentialism," which says cultural change in beliefs, rituals and emotions, must precede deep societal change. However, Iran presents a special situation. Even though some Shia seminaries propagate superstition and prejudice, it is possible to be Shia, Muslim and a reformer who believes in democracy. Yet some politically powerful clerics promote superstition through inherently undemocratic Shia fundamentalism since it bolsters their power. They "disdain...the rational mind," and use violence to enforce religious law and interfere in citizens' lives. They oppose the West and pluralism.

"Only movements that remain dedicated to peace, freedom and ending prejudice at every stage of their evolution can achieve victory and remain righteous."

Reformists believe religious life under modern Islam is compatible with democracy. This contemporary view of piety embraces humanistic morality and rejects Islamic jurisprudence. It believes in the separation of the state from religious institutions, and objects to the ruling clerics' unequal privileges and power. Reformers object to the Islamic advisory councils that act as "guardians," supervising the public and promoting prejudice, especially against women.

"Together Islam and the West must free themselves of the shackles of their historical memories."

Iran is isolated from the international community, but foreign military intervention is not the right way to depose its regime. Such military action could cover up foreign intervention in domestic affairs, creating more injustice for Iranians. Civil disobedience is the way to achieve humanistic goals. Violent, brutal actions violate universal human rights and play into the oppressors' hands. To help Iran break out of its isolation and avoid military intervention, reformers must develop a foreign policy that includes both U.S. negotiations and Iranian self-determination. The reform movement should acknowledge the shortcomings of the past and hold the oppressors accountable, but should move toward reconciliation without letting punishment outweigh forgiveness.

Bigotry in Iran

Iranian society practices an apartheid policy based on religion, race, gender and political allegiance. While one class of people has "special rights" based on religious status and gender, another is downtrodden. However, the world has largely ignored Iran's rampant "gender apartheid." Clerics cite Koranic scripture to justify this discrimination, and to solidify their political and religious hold over women. Yet, Iran's oppressed women still have lots of potential power, which is why the regime tightens its grip over them during times of political unrest.

“If these goals of democracy and human rights are valuable to us, we must struggle to achieve them.”

Correcting gender prejudice requires changes in Iran’s laws, culture and politics. Given Iran’s refusal to sign the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which 185 other nations signed in 1979, this will be very difficult. To date, all of the traditionalist ayatollahs, except one, have refused to support the convention. Any Iranian who brings up women’s rights can be imprisoned, since advocacy can be construed as a criticism of the Prophet Mohammed. The government can even kill those who are merely suspected of raising this topic and it faces no recrimination if the courts find that it administered the death sentence to avenge heresy. Deep prejudice against women occurs in several categories:

- **“Health and the value of life”** – Women get less medical care, endure more illnesses and “suffer more than men from hunger and malnutrition.” This is, in part, because Shari’ah law puts greater monetary value on a man’s life than a woman’s. If a man kills a woman, and her family kills him in revenge (which Shari’ah allows), the woman’s family must pay “blood money” to the killer’s family since his life was worth more than hers.
- **“Sanctity of the body”** – Traditional religion in Iran does not respect a woman’s right to control her body. Rape and abuse are common. Shari’ah law generally considers women chaste, but says that wearing immodest clothing invites unwanted sexual acts. This means male aggressors often go free. Religious law says a woman must comply with her husband’s sexual demands at any time and allows men to “physically punish an unruly wife.” As a result, rape within marriage is rarely prosecuted. If a man rapes a married woman, the aggressor can be prosecuted for violating her husband’s property rights, not for attacking the wife. Women who have affairs are publicly whipped or stoned.
- **“Dress”** – The Islamic Republic forces women to wear head coverings and modest dress in public, though Iran’s former monarch, the Shah, did not require head coverings. Women cannot leave their homes without their father or husband’s authorization. With such restrictions on their mobility, most women cannot attend school. Illiteracy limits their political participation.
- **“Work outside the home”** – Iranian women also need a male relative’s consent to work outside their homes. Even with permission, they cannot hold certain government or public sector jobs. This also curtails their political power. Traditional law justifies such bias by saying women are too emotional and irrational for such positions as judgeships.
- **Education** – In many areas of Iran, females lack equal access to education, in part due to disagreements about the role of *fatwas* and other religious injunctions.

“We believe that the cost of a revolution exceeds its benefits.”

While religious modernists have issued new interpretations of Islamic laws to encourage better treatment of women, Iranian class distinctions give precedence to the “ruling Court,” including all religious traditionalists. Women face discrimination in divorce, custody, freedom to assemble, and the ability to become citizens and transfer citizenship to their children. Some modern Islamic theologians interpret the rules more liberally and are trying to make small, specific reforms.

Islam and the West

Western cultures have had a confused relationship with Islam, primarily because the West is largely Christian and secular. Over time, western Christians have changed their religion to accommodate modernity, though they acknowledge their religious heritage. The West enjoys material superiority and a powerful military, which has accelerated its global domination. In contrast, Islam remains largely traditional, and stresses authority and belief in the prophet Mohammed. It accepts traditional structured organizations and the dominance of divinity in everyday life. Islam began to decline around the time of the Renaissance, which marked the rise of Western civilization. Today, Islam is in a defensive mode, which helps explain the rise of fundamentalism and terrorism. To complicate the situation, Islam has three distinct religious interpretations:

1. **Fundamental Islam** – Fundamentalism interprets the Koran and Mohammed’s teachings literally. It subordinates reason to faith, and it values reason only when it reveals literal truth. Shari’ah, fundamental observance, is practiced in all aspects of daily life. Shari’ah rejects pluralism and sees the West as antithetical to Islam.
2. **Modern Islam** – This school of Islamic belief recognizes rational thought as the engine of the discovery of truth and knowledge. It emphasizes morality and the spirit of Islam, while acknowledging the need for religion to adapt to contemporary circumstances. It believes that a secular society can co-exist with an Islamic one.
3. **Traditional Islam** – This branch combines fundamentalism and modernism, stressing the need to lead a spiritual, moral and ethical life. It accepts pluralism and understands the need to separate religion and the state. Traditional Islam is critical of the West, but blames Islamic society itself for the poor conditions in Muslim nations.

“The precondition for peace is tolerance, and the precondition for tolerance is that the pious of all faiths must accept religious pluralism and give up the conviction that their faith is superior.”

When Islam begins to accept the West on its own terms and not as its rival in a religious conflict, it can begin building a new spiritual relationship with itself and the global community.

About the Author

Akbar Ganji, a former Iranian military commander and investigative reporter, is a noted dissident. He was jailed for six years in Iran for advocating human rights. Since his release in March 2006, he has been active with the human rights movement outside Iran.