

Lecture to the British Pugwash Group by Dr. Shirin Ebadi

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Before receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for her courageous work for Human Rights in Iran, Dr. Ebadi was one of the first female judges in the 1500-year history of Islam, but had been forced to resign after the 1979 Revolution because the ayatollahs held that women were too emotional and irrational to hold such a position. In her lecture she first described how, under the US-supported Shah (1953-1979) there had been considerable personal freedom, but no political freedom and strict censorship. Many people therefore welcomed the Revolution.



However, although the new Iranian Government has signed the Convention on Human Rights, there remains strong discrimination in some areas. A woman's life and a woman's testimony are valued as half those of a man. A man can divorce his wife almost at will, but divorce is very difficult for women. A woman cannot leave the country without the written permission of her husband. Yet 65% of university students are women, women have long had the right to vote, and women can hold virtually any job. There is thus a gap between the law and the real lives of women. There is also religious discrimination, with a few recognised religions. Members of non-recognised ones are denied entry to the universities and are harassed by government-supported pressure groups.

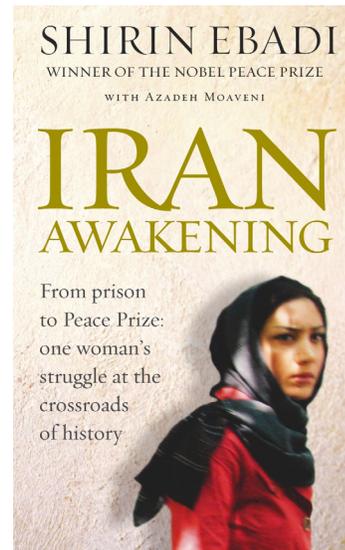
Dr Ebadi was careful to present a balanced picture: Iran has advanced along the road to democracy, but has not yet achieved it fully. Freedom of expression is better than under the Shah, but criticism of the principles of the Constitution is forbidden and journalists are sometimes imprisoned. A 12-member Guardian Council, with six of its members clerics and the other six selected by the head of the judiciary who is himself a cleric, must approve presidential candidates and can veto parliamentary decisions.

The Government argues that, since the majority of the people are Moslem, they must follow the Moslem view of human rights. But Dr. Ebadi,

herself a devout Moslem, argued that Islamic law is interpreted very differently in the many countries of the Islamic world, with some Islamic countries banning such punishments as stoning and amputation. Iran needs an interpretation in keeping with the modern world.

Dr. Ebadi believes that public pressure can bring about change, and there have been signs of greater flexibility since she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. She emphasized that Iranians are proud of their country, and that threats of invasion merely served to unite the country behind the Government and would retard progress towards Human Rights.

Until she took the matter to court in the USA, it had been impossible to publish her book there. *Iran Awakening. From Prison To Peace Prize: One Woman's Struggle At The Crossroads Of History* [Rider&Co., **ISBN:** 1846040124 (hardback); 1846040132 (paperback)] is essential reading for understanding the complex dynamics of Iran today.



The meeting was also addressed by Dr. Ali Ansari, an Iranian specialist from St. Andrew's University. Dr. Ansari focussed on the current concern that Iran's nuclear enrichment programme might be aimed at the manufacture of nuclear weapons. He emphasized the need to review the bases of the issue, starting from the close relationship between the USA and Iran in the early 20th century followed by a feeling of betrayal engendered by the CIA-backed coup of a democratically elected government in 1953. This and subsequent involvement of the USA in Iran's internal affairs has led to an overriding desire for 'independence' from USA domination. Negotiations are unlikely to be successful until mutual understanding and a degree of trust has been built.