

THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

POWER OF ONE

Shirin Ebadi, winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize, assesses Iran's new president, the outlook for human rights, and the threat of war

After Iran's revolutionary regime stripped Shirin Ebadi from her position as a judge in 1979—she had become one of the country's first women magistrates in 1969—it might have learned a lesson: don't mess with Iranian women. The move fed Ebadi's determination to battle injustice in the Islamic Republic. With tenacity and courage, she became a founder of the country's women's rights and human rights movements. She took on the most dangerous cases, representing political prisoners as well as the families of intellectuals murdered by government death squads.

In 2003, Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts for human rights and democracy—the first Iranian and the first Muslim woman to receive the honor. Her acceptance speech in Oslo underlined her embrace of humanity and clarity of thought, qualities that have made her a unique moral voice. She decried global poverty, and the deaths of millions from AIDS; she went on to rebuke the United States for using terrorism as a pretext for war. And she warned, six years before the Green Movement protests in Iran, that if nations fail to respect human rights, “human beings will be left with no choice other than staging a rebellion against tyranny and oppression.”

For thirty years, Ebadi's office was a cramped basement lined with bookshelves below her modest family apartment in Tehran. These days she mostly works on planes and in hotel rooms as she moves around the world delivering talks and attending conferences, defending human rights and raising Iran's case wherever she can. Death threats escalated after the regime crushed the democracy demonstrations four years ago, forcing her into exile in London. Iranian journalist Nazila Fathi interviewed Ebadi for the *Cairo Review* via Skype on June 23, 2013.

▷ Shirin Ebadi, Berlin, Sept. 18, 2012. *Thomas Trutschel/Photothek/Getty Images*

NAZILA FATHI: *How do you interpret the election results?*

SHIRIN EBADI: First, I need to explain that the elections were not free in a true sense, and so the reformist faction was not able to nominate its real candidate because it knew that



he would not survive the vetting by the Guardian Council. Their ideal candidate was [former president] Mohammad Khatami, but they knew that the Guardian Council would not approve him. So then, they shifted to Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, thinking that he could attract voters. Rafsanjani was the head of the Expediency Council and no one imagined that the Guardian Council would bar the head of the Expediency Council from running. Hassan Rowhani was not the reformists' first choice at all. But none of their candidates survived the vetting and so the reformists were divided: those who favored supporting Mohammad Reza Aref or Rowhani, because they were closer to the reformists' position; and those who decided to boycott the election altogether. It was toward the last days of the campaign that the reformists noticed that Rowhani could win, if Aref pulled out of the race. Aref did withdraw, and so the reformists threw their support behind Rowhani.

NAZILA FATHI: *What does Hassan Rowhani's victory mean?*

SHIRIN EBADI: People are extremely happy because the regime did not rig the vote the way it had in the past. People had expected Rowhani's election, and so they see the honest vote-count as a step forward. But I must say that it's a bit early to judge and say that Rowhani's election is really going to be a step forward. We need to wait.

NAZILA FATHI: *How do you interpret the turnout and the high vote for Rowhani, considering the anti-regime uprising and the repression four years ago?*

SHIRIN EBADI: The Iranian people are very unhappy with their situation and want change. But don't forget that in the past thirty-four years, they have lived through a revolution and eight years of war with Iraq. People are tired of violence and bloodshed. They want to live peacefully and bring about peaceful change. That's why they saw the honest vote-count as a step forward and were thrilled. People are extremely discontent, but they are aware that if they resorted to violence, the regime would brutally confront them. Iranians don't want to follow the Syrian model.

NAZILA FATHI: *Saeed Jalili was Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's favorite candidate, yet he managed to garner only four million votes. What does this say about Khamenei's popularity?*

SHIRIN EBADI: According to the Iranian constitution, Khamenei holds maximum power while the president holds minimum power. It is natural that when people are discontented, they blame the most powerful leader for their problems.

NAZILA FATHI: *What is your opinion of Hassan Rowhani?*

SHIRIN EBADI: Well, it depends from which angle you want to look at him. Rowhani

made a comment that made headlines. He said, “It’s good for the centrifuges to spin, but the economy must spin, too.” Some people optimistically think that Rowhani will be the man who can end the standoff with the West over Iran’s nuclear program. And perhaps by resolving that problem, the sanctions would be lifted, and therefore, part of the pressure on people would be eased. But I want to point out again that it is the leader, Khamenei, who makes major policy decisions, and based on what we know so far, Khamenei has not changed his position on nuclear policy. Therefore, Rowhani’s statements are merely slogans. If he wants to change those policies, he needs to have influence over Khamenei. Otherwise he cannot do anything. Let’s remember that Khatami was a reformist president for eight years and during four years of that time, he had a parliament dominated by reformists on his side. For four years, the reformists had their grip on the two major branches of government, the executive, and legislative, but they couldn’t implement any of their plans because Khamenei blocked them.

NAZILA FATHI: *What do we know about Hassan Rowhani’s relationship with Khamenei? Does he have influence over the leader?*

SHIRIN EBADI: Political relationships and decision-makings are often carried out behind closed doors. People don’t see anything, meaning they are strangers in the Islamic Republic and don’t need to know those details. I have no idea what kind of relationship the two men have.

NAZILA FATHI: *Will the human rights environment improve under Hassan Rowhani’s presidency?*

SHIRIN EBADI: It’s too early to say anything. But if he wants to improve human rights, Rowhani needs to require everyone within the establishment to abide by the law. He must take a step to secure the release of Mir-Hossein Moussavi, his wife Zahra Rahnavard, and Mehdi Karroubi. None of them was ever put on trial or heard the charges against themselves. It is not even clear who gave the orders to put them under house arrest. And to keep them under their current conditions is clearly illegal. The need for their release has nothing to do with the fact that they were leaders of the Green Movement, but with the fact that keeping them under arrest is illegal. If Rowhani can secure their release in the first week of his presidency, that shows he is willing to use his authority as president to improve human rights.

NAZILA FATHI: *What impact did Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency have on Iran?*

SHIRIN EBADI: Unfortunately, his presidency over the past eight years has been destructive. His performance in all areas was negative. He doesn’t earn a positive point on the economy, foreign and domestic policy, or human rights.

NAZILA FATHI: *What's your assessment of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's impact on foreign policy and the economy?*

SHIRIN EBADI: They are all related. When foreign policy is bad, it isolates the country. When a country becomes isolated, its trade with the outside world decreases. When trade decreases, it directly undermines people's daily economic lives. Tourists don't travel to a country that lacks security, which again undermines the economy. Therefore all problems are linked and I cannot separate one from another.

NAZILA FATHI: *What is your personal opinion about Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?*

SHIRIN EBADI: During his first term, he presented himself as a man utterly obedient to the leader. But during his second term, after he felt he had power, he began making statements that were different from his earlier positions. Maybe he hoped that he could build a support base for himself among the people. I believe he is an opportunist.

NAZILA FATHI: *What is the meaning of the 2009 uprising in Iran?*

SHIRIN EBADI: It has had a great impact on our history because the Green Movement is and was a peaceful movement that shows people's discontent towards the regime. It was a massive movement that embraced people from different backgrounds. It is not a party-based movement—it is network-based and grows horizontally. This movement is still alive, and the best sign was the slogans that people were chanting just last week. One of them was: "Moussavi, even though it was late, I got your vote back."

NAZILA FATHI: *How do you describe the political situation in Iran today, considering that the 2009 uprising did not turn into a force like the Arab spring?*

SHIRIN EBADI: Iranians are extremely unhappy but are not willing to get caught in violence. In the meantime, the regime is willing to resort to any measure to repress dissent. Under such circumstances, people have no choice but to resist so that in the long run, the regime gives in. This is a long-term process.

NAZILA FATHI: *How do you see the role of the reformists? Can they survive?*

SHIRIN EBADI: This will depend on the international situation and the sanctions. If Rowhani manages to ease sanctions and release political prisoners, it will help reformers to solidify their position.

NAZILA FATHI: *How is the human rights situation in Iran today?*

SHIRIN EBADI: It is in its worst situation. Political prisoners cannot enjoy the rights that other prisoners are given in prison. Their living conditions are tough, meaning they don't get enough food, their health is bad, and they receive almost no medical care.

Several prisoners have died in prison over the past four years. The latest victim died this week, Afshin Osanloo, a labor activist. He had served three-and-a-half years of his five-year jail term and was supposed to be released in eighteen months. He had a heart attack in prison. The government claimed that he passed away at the hospital where they took him. But his sister said in an interview that he had died by the time they dropped him at the hospital. He was only forty-two or forty-three, which reveals the poor living conditions in prison. There were still signs of torture on his body from the time of his arrest.

NAZILA FATHI: *How many political prisoners do you think there are since 2009?*

SHIRIN EBADI: The government never gives such numbers. What we learn is based on what prisoners' families tell reporters. The government tries hard to discourage them from speaking out. It warns the families that speaking to media outlets outside the country is a crime and that if they speak to reporters overseas, the authorities will arrest them. There was a Kurdish activist named Shirin Alamkouhi, who was executed in 2010. Authorities detained her sister and mother for three months after they'd killed Shirin because they had given interviews to the BBC Persian service.

NAZILA FATHI: *Why do you say the human rights situation is worse?*

SHIRIN EBADI: The human rights situation has not been good since the beginning of the 1979 revolution. That was why the United Nations appointed a special human rights rapporteur to report on Iran's human rights violations. There was always a rapporteur for Iran until the election of reformist president Mohammad Khatami in 1997. Khatami tried to improve Iran's standing in the international community as well as its human rights record. However, the situation worsened after his presidency and so in 2011, the United Nations appointed a new rapporteur, Ahmed Shaheed, who is a Muslim. Unfortunately, Iran has refused to cooperate with him. The human rights situation is very bad in Iran. Many have died. The situation for political prisoners is worse than the situation for prisoners who have committed major crimes.

NAZILA FATHI: *How do you assess the state of women's rights in Iran?*

SHIRIN EBADI: Fortunately, despite pressure, the women's movement is alive and active. Members of the movement get together regularly. For example, they meet and visit families of political prisoners, gather for a birthday event or other reasons. They are active, and the reason for that is because this movement is a civil movement not a political one. Women will pursue their demands no matter who comes to power. Women have become very creative in terms of coming together and keeping their movement alive. For example, if you recall, the regime executed over three thousand, and according to some accounts, even a higher number of political prisoners, in 1989. Their mothers

have come together and established a group called Mothers of Laleh Park. They hold a vigil in Laleh Park regularly and this reminds people of what happened.

NAZILA FATHI: *Your lawyer, Nasrin Soutoduh, remains in prison. What are her prospects?*

SHIRIN EBADI: She is a lawyer and my colleague. One of the charges against her was her cooperation with me at the Center for Human Rights Defenders. She was sentenced to six years in prison and has already served three years. She is innocent and has committed no offense. She should be released, but unfortunately there is no sign that she will be released.

NAZILA FATHI: *What role does the Internet play in Iran today?*

SHIRIN EBADI: The Internet plays a very positive role. In 1989, the regime secretly executed more than 3,000 political prisoners and because the Internet was not available, people didn't find out about the executions. But today, you see that the entire world learns about the death of a prisoner like Afshin Osanloo in a matter of half an hour. Without doubt, the flow of information helps improve the situation. If people are unaware of realities, they cannot improve the situation.

NAZILA FATHI: *How do you view the impact of international sanctions on the Iranian regime?*

SHIRIN EBADI: Iranian authorities make their decisions behind closed doors. Perhaps the sanctions have had indirect effects on decision makers; by that I mean by not rigging the votes, the regime wanted to show the international community that the system is democratic.

NAZILA FATHI: *Have the sanctions hurt the people or the regime?*

SHIRIN EBADI: People have suffered the most. They feel intimidated by them, but the sanctions have led to a drop in the regime's oil revenues too.

NAZILA FATHI: *Labor movements in particular seem disturbed by the effects of sanctions. Will workers influence the regime's calculations?*

SHIRIN EBADI: I have a different view. I believe when the sanctions pressure the regime, the regime goes after its own people. The Islamic Republic is at its weakest position, economically and politically, and it has lost its popular legitimacy. Therefore, it is using extreme pressure against civil movements. The regime's oil revenue has dropped dramatically and the value of the country's currency has plunged by a third. And inflation is skyrocketing.

NAZILA FATHI: *What is your opinion about sanctions?*

SHIRIN EBADI: I am against economic sanctions and I am in favor of political sanctions. And by that I mean measures that undermine the regime without hurting people. For example, the Iranian regime is broadcasting programs in sixteen different languages via satellite. It depends on Eutelsat, Asiasat, and Arabsat for beaming the programs. Why not block access to these satellites and cripple its propaganda arm? These kinds of sanctions do not hurt the people but hurt the regime. Or, for example, Western countries can blacklist authorities who violate human rights, ban them from getting visas to travel outside the country, and seize their bank accounts overseas.

NAZILA FATHI: *What is your position on Iran's nuclear program?*

SHIRIN EBADI: It is all wrong. Many countries are shutting down their nuclear reactors for safety reasons, while Iran insists on building its own in Bushehr. Iran's reactor is situated on fault lines and in fact, an earthquake shook Bushehr just this week. People are very concerned that a nuclear disaster like the one in Japan could repeat itself in Iran. In the meantime, Iran gets a lot of sunshine but the regime has not invested even ten dollars in solar power plants. Nuclear power plants are not safe for the environment. What do they want to do with the nuclear waste? I believe that we need to suspend uranium enrichment immediately—immediately—so that we can ease the sanctions.

NAZILA FATHI: *Is Iran developing a nuclear weapon?*

SHIRIN EBADI: I cannot make a comment because I have no information on that.

NAZILA FATHI: *How can the dispute between Iran and the international community best be resolved?*

SHIRIN EBADI: Iran must stop enriching uranium.

NAZILA FATHI: *What are your concerns about the possibility of a foreign attack on Iran?*

SHIRIN EBADI: I don't see such a threat.

NAZILA FATHI: *Can Iran learn lessons from the Arab democracy movements and change in the Arab world?*

SHIRIN EBADI: These countries are very different from one another, but I hope that the Egyptians learn a lesson from the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Within four months after the victory of the revolution, before we had a parliament, a constitution, or a president, the Council of the Islamic Revolution voted that an Iranian man could marry up to four wives. That was the day that the regime laid the cornerstone for one

discriminatory law against women after another. Because Khomeini was a charismatic character, Iranians did not oppose these laws. And so women began losing their rights and this became a trend to oppress other social groups as well. I hope the Egyptians and the Tunisians remember this and do not allow this to happen to their women.

NAZILA FATHI: *How do you view the role that Iran has played with the Bashar Al-Assad regime in Syria?*

SHIRIN EBADI: I am very sorry that by sending financial aid, weapons, and even fighters, the regime is helping Assad to kill civilians. Iran has to end its interference in Syria as soon as possible. It is the Syrians who should decide the fate of their country, not foreign states.

NAZILA FATHI: *What is the focus of your work today?*

SHIRIN EBADI: I left Iran in 2009. Many of my colleagues are still in prison. It is impossible to do any kind of human rights activity inside the country. That is why I live outside Iran. I travel around the world because I see myself as the spokesperson of my people. Because of censorship in Iran, the world cannot hear the voice of the people. It is the duty of Iranians outside to echo the voices of those inside Iran. I publish human rights reports every month in English and Persian and send them to international institutions. If you want to know where I live, I must say that I spend most of my time in airports and on planes. I have an office in London to organize my activities. In 2010 I founded a non-governmental organization called Center for Supporters of Human Rights. We hold various events, including seminars on women's rights. We have an event during which we examine the impact of the women's movement on Iran's democratic movement. This project has attracted universities and they are co-sponsoring seminars on the subject.

NAZILA FATHI: *What kind of pressure do you receive from the regime?*

SHIRIN EBADI: Authorities went after my sister and my husband after they realized they could no longer arrest me. They arrested both of them. They tortured my husband to a point that he agreed to make false confessions against himself and me. They videotaped his confessions and broadcast it nationally for two consecutive nights. My sister came down with heart disease because of both mental and physical pressure in prison. Fortunately, both of them have been released, but the authorities constantly send me death threats through them. The regime seized all my assets and properties and put them on sale. With my Nobel Prize financial award I had bought an office for the Center for Defenders of Human Rights. They sold the office and took the money.

NAZILA FATHI: *Tell us about your exile?*

SHIRIN EBADI: I had made a commitment to speak at an event in Madrid months before the date for the [2009] election was announced. Therefore, I left Iran a day before the election with only a carry-on bag. I was flying KLM and had two stops before getting to my final destination, so I thought it was wiser if I travelled light. By the time the conference was over, Iran was no longer the country that I had left. Several of my colleagues were arrested and my family back in Tehran urged me not to return. My daughter was an intern in the Hague at that time. Instead of going to Iran, I showed up at her apartment. Since then, I consider myself a spokesperson for the Iranian people. A court sent a letter to my home in Tehran and summoned me. I have decided not to return as long as I cannot do human rights work inside the country.