

# Akbar Ganji

**Akbar Ganji** (Persian: اکبر گنجی, born 31 January 1960 in Qazvin) is an Iranian journalist and writer. He was arrested on April 22, 2000 after he took part in a conference held in Berlin on April 7 and 8, 2000. He was imprisoned in Evin Prison in Tehran until his release on March 18, 2006. [1] He holds a Masters degree in Communications.

He is the winner of the 2006 World Association of Newspapers' prestigious Golden Pen of Freedom Award. [2]. He is also the winner of the 2006 Martin Ennals Award. [3]

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## Imprisonment

Growing up in a poor district of southern Tehran, Ganji was initially enthused by the 1979 Revolution. He became a member of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and worked at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. But after becoming disillusioned with the regime, he took to journalism, becoming increasingly critical of the regime's suppression of human rights.

Ganji took part in a conference in Berlin held by Heinrich Boell Foundation under the title "Iran after the elections" held in the wake of the Majlis elections of February 2000 which resulted in a huge victory by reformist candidates. The gathering was termed "anti-Islamic" and "anti-revolutionary" by Iranian state TV, IRIB, which broadcast part of the conference on April 18, 2000. He was accused of having "damaged national security" and initially sentenced to ten years followed by five years internal exile, which meant he would be kept in a specific city other than Tehran

and could not leave the country. On May 15, 2001 an appeal court reduced his 10-year sentence to six months and overturned his additional sentence of five years' internal exile. However, the Tehran prosecutor, challenged the appeal court decision and brought new charges against him in connection with newspaper articles he had written prior to April 2000, and his possession of photocopies of foreign newspapers. On July 16, 2001 he was sentenced to six years imprisonment on charges of "collecting confidential information harmful to national security and spreading propaganda against the Islamic system".

Ganji was on a hunger strike for more than 80 days from May 19, 2005 until early August, 2005 [4] except for a 12-day period of leave he was granted on May 30, 2005 ahead of the ninth presidential elections on June 17, 2005. His hunger strike was ended under unknown conditions and heavy security and information quarantine in Milad hospital in Tehran while many feared his death. He is represented by a group of lawyers, including Dr. Yousef Molaei, Abdolfattah Soltani (who was arrested and put in solitary confinement in 2005 on unknown charges), and the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Shirin Ebadi. While on hunger strike Ganji wrote two letters to the free people of the world: 1 2.

On July 12, 2005 the White House press secretary Scott McClellan said in a statement that President George W. Bush called on Iran to release Ganji "immediately and unconditionally... Mr. Ganji is sadly only one victim of a wave of repression and human rights violations engaged in by the Iranian regime... His calls for freedom deserve to be heard. His valiant efforts should not go in vain. The president calls on all supporters of human rights and freedom, and the United Nations, to take up Ganji's case and the overall human rights situation in Iran... Mr. Ganji, please know that as you stand for your own liberty, America stands with you," the statement went on.

In his recent leave in June 2005 Ganji participated in interviews with several news agencies, criticizing Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, and asking for his office to be put to public vote [5]. This led to a ruling by Saeed Mortazavi, the general prosecutor of Tehran, to arrest him again because of "illegal interviews". He returned to prison voluntarily on June 11, 2005 and started this latest hunger strike.

Ganji was released from prison in poor health on March 18, 2006, after serving the full term of his six-year sentence, according to his family and various count-downs set up on many Iranian weblogs. At the same time, the deputy prosecutor of Tehran,

Mahmoud Salarkia, claimed that 10 days remained from his sentence due to unaccounted days of absence, and that he had been granted a leave for the (Persian) new year. The claim has apparently been dropped since.

## Writings

He has written extensively as a journalist in a series of reformist newspapers, many of which were shut down by the Judiciary of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Collections of his articles appeared in books, notably, "The Dungeon of Ghosts" and "The Red Eminence, The Grey Eminences" focusing on the involvement of the former President of Iran, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and his Ministry of Intelligence, Ali Fallahian, in a series of killings of writers and dissidents. He has continued to write in prison. His writings in prison are smuggled out and widely distributed, especially on the web. Most notably he wrote a Republican Manifesto in six chapters in March 2002 laying out the basis of his proposal for a fully-fledged democratic republic for Iran. In particular he argued that all elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran must be boycotted. He later wrote a second book [6] of his Republican Manifesto in May 2005, ahead of the ninth Presidential elections in Iran, specifically arguing for a complete boycott of the presidential elections.

## Iran's democratic voice

In 2006, Akbar Ganji started a tour to visit world leading philosophers, theorists, human right activists. His goal has been said to be introducing Iranian intellectual movements and democratic circles to world leading thinkers. He met many famous figures as Richard Rorty (American philosopher), Noam Chomsky, Anthony Giddens, David Hild and Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, world-famous sociologist and theorist of civilizations.

While in the United States in July 2006, Ganji declined an invitation to meet with White House officials, citing his belief that current US policies were not helping promote democracy in Iran. He was quoted as saying, "You cannot bring democracy to a country by attacking it". He also added that the war in Iraq was promoting Islamic fundamentalism and hurting movements towards democracy in the region.

Ganji declared that his role was as a dissident and journalist, rather than the official voice for a specific opposition party or faction within Iran, which he explained was one reason for his refusal to meet with American political leaders and officeholders.

During his visit he criticized the Iraq war, asserting that rather than undermining the current Iranian regime it had instead bolstered its capacity to repress and terrorize its population. *We do not want the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, this is our problem. Any intervention by any foreign power would bring charges of conspiracy against us... What has happened in Iraq did not support our movement in any significant way.*[7]

He also staged a hunger strike outside of United Nations headquarters in order to highlight the plight of Iranian political prisoners, and to bring international attention to the oppressive conditions felt within Iran.

## Awards and honors

Dissident Iranian university professor Hashem Aghajari(L) shaking hand with Akbar Ganji(R) holds the award from the Association of Iranian Journalists which he accepted on behalf of journalist Massoud Behnoud for his activities in support of freedom of the press in Tehran, Iran May 3, 2006. Aghajari, whose death sentence for apostasy sparked riots in Iran, accepted the prize for Behnoud who has left Iran since his release from prison.

- PEN America, Honorary member (2000)
- Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, International Press Freedom Award (2000)
- The Middle East Studies Association of North America, MESA Academic Freedom Prize (2005)
- Press Freedom Award, Italy (2005)
- World Association of Newspapers, Golden Pen of Freedom (2006)
- Honorary citizen of the city of Florence, Italy (2006)

- [Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders](#) (2006)
- National Press Club, John Aubuchon Freedom of the Press Award (2006)

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## External links

- [Release Ganji! Campaign](#), a portal for news on Akbar Ganji and efforts for releasing him
- [Akbar Ganji](#), a [PEN](#) article on the status of Akbar Ganji
- [CJFE Calls for Ganji's Release](#)
- [Ganji and other dissidents silenced ahead of elections](#), [IFEX](#)
- [113 Iranian Academics Urge Ayatollah Shahroudi to Take Action for Ganji's Release](#)
- [Free Ganji](#), a weblog dedicated to the translation of Akbar Ganji's writings and his freedom.
- [Ganji in hunger strike](#), [Human Rights Watch](#): Leading Dissident's Life in Danger.
- [Letter to the free people of the world](#) written by Akbar Ganji on the 19th day of hunger strike
- [Iran: Radio Farda Interview With Dissident Akbar Ganji](#)
- [Second Letter written on the 30th day of hunger strike](#)
- [BBC profile](#)
- [Iran activist 'snubs White House'](#) BBC article on Ganji declining a White House invitation
- [Ganji's Next Strike Likely at U.N.](#)
- Kaveh Afrasiabi. [What nuclear adventurism? Letter to Akbar Ganji](#), [Iranian.com](#), October 3, 2006.

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