

Short Information about Akbar Ganji

Akbar Ganji is Iran's preeminent political dissident. A heroic figure to the democratic movement in Iran, he has been likened to Gandhi and Mandela. The London-based human rights organization, Article 19, has described Ganji as the "Iranian Vaclav Havel." He has been the recipient of over a dozen human rights, press freedom and pro-democracy awards.

Ganji was born into a religious family in 1960, in a poor district of south Tehran. Like many young Iranians of his generation, he was a fierce critic of the US-backed monarchy and an enthusiastic supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini and Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. In the early 1980s he became a member of the new government's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and was subsequently employed in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. But like many revolutionaries, Ganji became increasingly disillusioned with the path his country's revolution was taking, and his thinking underwent a gradual metamorphosis. He channeled his growing frustration with the post-revolutionary status quo into journalism. By the late 1990s he had emerged as Iran's leading investigative reporter, having produced a body of writing critical of the regime's suppression of human rights and crackdown on dissent.

Ganji published these reports in a variety of pro-democracy newspapers (such as Sobh-e Emrooz, Khordad, and Fath), most of which were shut down in the conservative clerical crackdown on Iran's reform movement. He became a household name after the publication of two best-selling books, *Tarik khaneye Ashbah* (Dungeon of Ghosts, 1999) and *Alijenob Sorkhpoosh va Alijenob-e Khakestari* (The Red Eminence and the Grey Eminences, 2000). The former has been described by the Washington Post as "the Iranian equivalent of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*." His books exposed the dark side of authoritarian clerical rule, focusing on the nefarious role of senior religious leaders in the serial murders of Iranian writers and intellectuals. In these books Ganji also exposed the attempt by clerical hardliners to suffocate the free debate and expression which blossomed in the first term of Muhammad Khatami's reformist presidency (1997-2001). These widely-reads books seriously damaged the reputation of former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani and contributed to the defeat of the conservatives in the parliamentary elections of February 2000.

In April of 2000, Ganji was arrested upon his return to Iran from an academic conference in Berlin. In January of 2001, he was sentenced to 10 years in jail and to five years internal exile (upon appeal he was given a six-year sentence and banned for life from working as a journalist). His six-year prison sentence—which he served out in full—ended in March of 2006. Following in the footsteps of Mandela, Havel and Martin Luther King, Jr., Ganji took to writing from his prison cell. His political manifestos and open letters were smuggled out of jail and published on the internet, sparking an intense debate among Iranians about the future of their country.

In 2005, his last year in prison, Ganji went on a hunger strike that lasted from May to August. His hunger strike mobilized the international human rights

community, including eight former Nobel Peace laureates. Thousands of intellectuals and human rights activists around the world spoke out on his behalf. It is generally believed that the global support generated for Ganji during this period spared his life.

In June of 2006 Ganji left Iran. He has been writing and giving talks in Europe and North America, raising awareness about the struggle for democracy in his country, and also advocating against a U.S. military attack on Iran. A handful of these writings were published in April of 2008 under the title *The Road to Democracy in Iran* (MIT Press). It is the sole volume of Ganji's voluminous writings in English translation. Despite repeated invitations he has refused to meet with any member of the Bush Administration, on the principle that the struggle for democracy in Iran must be waged from within the country, without foreign governmental support. His interlocutors have consisted exclusively of human rights groups, civil society organizations, journalists, members of the Iranian diaspora community and Western intellectuals. To date he has met and engaged in dialogue with Jürgen Habermas, Robert Bellah, David Held, Ronald Dworkin, Noam Chomsky, Seyla Benhabib, Michael Sandel, Nancy Fraser, Martha Nussbaum, Marshall Berman, Alasdair MacIntyre, the late Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor.

His interest in meeting with these figures has been twofold. First, he would like to introduce the ideas of leading Western thinkers to an Iranian readership, which has a huge appetite for intellectual engagement and dialogue with the West. His second goal is to update and inform his Western interlocutors about the struggle for democracy inside Iran.

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