



Ganji: Human rights improved, still short of expectations in Iran

It is not an exaggeration to say that Akbar Ganji is the most celebrated dissident within the ranks of Iranian journalists since the inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. A former supporter of the revolution, Ganji became disenchanted and turned into one of its most vocal critics. He is best known for his work as a journalist covering the 1998 murders of Iranian dissidents in Reformist newspapers, a series which came to be known as “the chain murders” that implicated top governmental officials.

For his work revealing the murders of dissidents and attending a conference in Berlin that was condemned by hard-liners who were reeling after a Reformist victory in parliament, Ganji was arrested and served time in Tehran’s Evin Prison from 2001 to 2006. During his final year in prison, he went on a hunger strike that doctors urged him to end for concerns he would suffer permanent brain damage.

Ganji has won several international awards, including the World Association of Newspapers' Golden Pen of Freedom Award, the Canadian Journalists for Free Expression's International Press Freedom Award, the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders and the Cato Institute Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty. In an exclusive interview via email with *Al-Monitor*, Ganji, based in New York, shared his thoughts about human rights and democracy in the context of President Hassan Rouhani’s administration.

Al-Monitor: The UN secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon, has [sharply criticized the Iranian president](#), Hassan Rouhani, saying, “He has not made any significant improvement” in ending human rights abuses since taking office. Nevertheless, Mahmoud Sadri — Iranian professor of sociology at the Federation of North Texas Area Universities — is optimistic about the new administration and has asked Iranian dissidents and intellectuals to take advantage of this historic opportunity. How do you evaluate the Rouhani administration?

Ganji: The situation has improved from various aspects compared with the [Mahmoud] [Ahmadinejad administration](#). However, it falls short of the expectations of democracy advocates and human rights activists. The Rouhani administration truly seeks to improve the state of human rights, but it has faced obstacles in Iran’s power hierarchy, including organizations that [Supreme Leader] Ayatollah [Ali] Khamenei oversees, such as the judiciary, law enforcement, etc., in addition to the Majles [parliament] that is controlled by the conservatives and some radical reactionaries.

One cannot always think that good and ethical intentions can lead politicians toward good deeds. Consider this hypothesis: If Rouhani and his administration resolve the nuclear crisis, then the economic sanctions will be lifted and the nuclear agreement may result in friendly ties with the United States. Consequently, Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif will be recognized as national heroes who have resolved an intractable issue for the past 35 years.

But achieving such goals requires democratic legitimacy of the government, so that the Rouhani administration would appear strong throughout the negotiations. That would happen if it enjoys overwhelming support at home, if there is not even one political prisoner; the media, civil society organizations and political parties are free; and all minorities regardless of sexual orientation, ethnicity and religion are considered “equal and free” citizens.

Let’s assume that Rouhani and Zarif do not believe in democracy and human rights at all, but they recognize that they cannot move the negotiations with the West successfully forward if domestic oppression continues. Thus, they really want to improve the state of human rights in Iran and democratize the political structure, so that they can address Iran’s most important “national security” problem and protect the country’s “national interests.”

Since his administration came to power, Rouhani has spoken with the supreme leader about freeing the Green Movement’s leaders (former Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi and former Majles speaker Mehdi Karoubi) and political prisoners, guaranteeing that nothing would happen, if they were freed.

Al-Monitor: In January, you wrote a [Huffington Post article](#) titled “The Iran Nuclear Accord Is Good for Human Rights.” It seems to me whenever international pressure on the Iranian government increased, Iran improved its record. For example, Tehran released political prisoners ahead of Hassan Rouhani’s UN speech, including prominent human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh. Don’t you think such actions stem from international pressure? In the absence of this leverage — i.e., international pressure — Iran would continue human rights violations.

Ganji: With regard to “external pressure on an undemocratic regime and improvement of human rights or increased oppression,” there is no law/rule that would address the cause-reaction relationships. At most, one can speak of “correlation.”

As the US secretary of treasury said previously, “The most severe sanctions throughout history against any country have been imposed against Iran.” Well, then, what more can “external pressure” be or achieve? The only option left is a military attack on Iran.

We should look back at past experiences. Iraq was under the most severe economic sanctions for 13 years, which killed 500,000 children under the age of five. When Madeleine Albright, then-US secretary of state, was asked if the sanctions were worth killing that many children, she responded affirmatively: “It was worth it.”

Did the external pressure on Iraq lead to improvement of the state of human rights in that country or did it increase Saddam Hussein regime’s oppressive measures? When a dictatorial regime sees itself confronted with an external threat and danger of being overthrown, it increases domestic

oppression. Therefore, this matter turned into a life and death situation. Ultimately, after proving the George W. Bush government's lies about existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and Hussein's relationship with al-Qaeda, President Bush gave a 48-hour warning to the Iraqi government to leave power, and then attacked and invaded Iraq. But, we need to know the following:

First, [economic sanctions](#) represent the collective punishment of a country's people and do not necessarily lead to dictatorships' downfall.

Second, long-term sanctions destroy the internal infrastructure of societies. Millions of people struggle with death. They do anything to stay alive. Staying alive becomes their main concern. To stay alive, ethical values are undermined, meaning that theft and fraud become ordinary, accepted matters. Consequently, trust that is the basis of social capital is destroyed. Because of the sanctions, the oppressive regime's increasing level of oppression, the internal destruction of society, is not visible. It is only in the aftermath of the dictatorship's downfall that we will witness the visible spread of a wave of hatred, revenge and violence.

Third, in a life and death situation, the state of human rights, democracy and freedom completely falls by the wayside.

Fourth, consider Iraq's example again. Before, the invasion al-Qaeda forces did not exist in Iraq, but they were born and bred as a result of the US sanctions and the US attack on Iraq. This story has been repeated in Libya and Syria. Consider the Syrian tragedy where "external pressure" has also destroyed society. Is the state of human rights better in Syria as a result of the external pressure? The murderous [Bashar al-] Assad regime and his opponents, according to various reports by the United Nations Human Rights Council and other human rights organizations, have committed war crimes and atrocities against humanity. Currently, terrorists from 70 countries similar to al-Qaeda are fighting in Syria.

Iranian, US and European officials have professed that economic sanctions against Iran have affected [Iran's economy](#) negatively. Last year, the economic growth rate fell to -5.8%. The inflation rate rose to 40%. The corruption rate climbed, and other negative outcomes followed. We should ask ourselves, what is the impact of recession on ordinary people's lives?

The middle class, as a vehicle of democracy, has been transformed to the impoverished class, and its democratic movement may lose its agents. Democracy is the product of the balance of power between the government and civil society.

The transformation of the nuclear agreement from temporary to permanent, improvement of Iran's relationship with Western governments, rekindling of ties between Iran and the United States, lifting of all the economic sanctions and alleviation of foreign threats can help empower the people through their mobilization and expansion of civil society. In that sense, the regime's focus and its supporters will not be on discovering conspiracies of foreign governments and military attacks to destroy the regime. Let's not forget that democracy and human rights have a direct relationship with economic development.

Al-Monitor: You have opposed US aid to Iranian dissidents and human rights activists. What are your key criticisms against such aid? What actions should foreign countries — in particular the United States — take or avoid to improve human rights and democracy in Iran?

Ganji: The opposition that I have spoken about consists of groups and people that advocate regime change in Iran, so they can come to power. It is not possible for the leaders of a country to be indebted to other foreign governments, including the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Russia and China. In that case, they will become the greater powers' pawns. Look at the groups that have received financial aid from foreign governments in the past 35 years. What have they done? Do their terrorist and espionage activities constitute human rights activism, or are such activities considered criminal in all countries, including the United States and Israel, and are they strongly punished?

However, I support educational financial aid, including student scholarships and research fellowships for scholars. Just think about what would have happened if the \$1.5 trillion that was spent on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would have been used toward education and development of the Middle East, and how that would have changed the region. Why do Western governments, the United States included, not grant scholarships to tens of thousands of talented and smart Iranian youth as students in social sciences?

Western governments should protest all human rights violations; they should give ethical and spiritual support to pro-democracy and human rights activists; they should file complaints at the UN Human Rights Council and ease the process of bringing perpetrators to justice. Moreover, Western powers should stop selling weapons of torture and oppression to dictatorial regimes. Ultimately, they should allocate financial resources to form independent labor unions and improve the state of human rights.