

Iran's Peculiar Election

THE VOICE OF AKBAR GANJI

Azar Nafisi

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Today my broken face is the true face of the system in the Islamic Republic of Iran. I am now the symbol of justice that, if viewed correctly, puts on display the full extent of the oppression by the rulers of the Islamic Republic. My worn-out body and face reveal, paradoxically, the proclaimed justice and the true oppression. Anyone who sees me now asks in surprise, "Are you Akbar Ganji? What have they done to you?"

—"Letter to the Free People of the World," 1 July 2005

Akbar Ganji has come to represent the democratic movement in Iran, not simply because of his enormous courage or the originality of his views, but because he has revealed the "true face of the system in the Islamic Republic of Iran." Although he has been in prison since the year 2000 and has been gravely weakened by illness and a two-month-long hunger strike in the summer of 2005, he still stands out as the strongest figure in today's Iran.

Among the former revolutionaries who have questioned the Islamic Republic, none has shown the intellectual and moral courage that Ganji has demonstrated in interrogating and holding accountable not just the Islamic regime but also his own former self. His resistance to the regime's tyranny is at the same time a statement against the young Islamist militant who once eagerly helped to bring about the Islamic Revolution. His transformation from militant Islamist to courageous dissident and staunch defender of democracy and human rights shows how thoroughly the Islamic Revolution has failed to reach its goals. Ganji's transformation gives us a little more hope in ourselves and in Iranian society's potential for change.

Step by step, Ganji has redeemed himself by questioning the very system that he once helped to erect. His firmness and uncompromising attitude spring from an intellectual restlessness and a moral integrity

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that make him constantly seek and reveal the truth. Born in a poor neighborhood of Tehran, Ganji became a radical Islamist while still a teenager, rising to a leadership position in the Revolutionary Guards. By the late 1980s, however, he had begun to have reservations about the direction of the Islamic regime and joined the staff of a new reformist intellectual journal called *Kian*. His participation in a study circle around *Kian* led by philosopher Abdul Karim Soroush opened Ganji's mind to new

ideas, but he would later go beyond any others in that circle in both theory and practice. In the 1990s, Ganji emerged as Iran's most prominent investigative journalist, and became famous for his reports linking the "serial murders" of dissidents at home and abroad with the regime's highest officials. Shortly after attending an academic and cultural conference at the Heinrich Böll Institute in Berlin in April 2000, Ganji was arrested and charged with spreading propaganda against the Islamic system, and he has been a prisoner ever since.

Whether in his readings of Hannah Arendt and Karl Popper or in his investigative journalism, Ganji has acted boldly and frankly, without the timidity and ambiguity typical of so many of his comrades in the reform movement. He would not accept pat answers or opportunistic compromises. For him, the struggle against the Islamic regime has become not only a political but also an existential imperative. In a letter to Soroush, the teacher whom he has now left far behind, he states, "The letters and notes I have written are all nourished from the essence of my life. For tens of pages that I have written, I have lost 25 kilograms of my very flesh and blood."

The radical nature of Ganji's transformation flows not from his political views, but from the manner in which he has chosen to act upon them, proving that the end is indeed the sum of the means employed. Ganji has grasped the important point that, in confronting a totalitarian regime, the first rule is to create a model of resistance that is effective precisely because it refuses to play according to the rules chosen by those in power. He creates a different domain, a space within which he will set the rules. His questioning of the Islamic regime is not only political but also cultural and ideological.

He begins by attacking the regime's attempt to legitimize its rule through its confiscation of religion and its claim to be the sole repre-

sentative and interpreter of Iranian culture. Ganji invokes a different tradition, far more deeply rooted in Iranian culture, the subversive tradition represented by poets such as Molana Jala al-Din Rumi (ca. 1207–73) and Khwaja Shams ud-Din Hafiz (ca. 1310–79) and their harsh and relentless critique of hypocritical clerics and narrow orthodoxies. He thus simultaneously negates the claims of the regime and reclaims the true Iranian heritage through its genuine cultural representatives.

Ganji exposes the ideological nature of the Islamic regime, the way it has used Islam as an ideology to gain and maintain power. Citing Arendt and other Western thinkers, he demonstrates that the regime owes more to modern totalitarian ideologies such as fascism and communism than to Islam and Islamic traditions. He thereby helps to restore dignity to the religion that in his youth he had helped to confiscate.

At the same time Ganji goes beyond religion, ethnicity, or nationality in recognizing the universality of concepts such as democracy and human rights. Thus he brings Iran back to the world, allying himself with democratic elements in his country no matter what their creed, and drawing freely upon the writings of democratic thinkers in the West.

At a time when it might seem that the only alternatives are either to accept and work within the Islamic system or to oppose the regime by its own favored method of violence, Ganji proposes a third option. While rejecting the constitution and the rule of the supreme leader and demanding a secular and democratic Iran, he also calls for a resistance that is nonviolent. His hunger strike, his prison writings, and his calls for an election boycott all point the way to a third alternative.

There are many risks to the path chosen by those whose voice Ganji has become. The struggle is far from over, but when thinking of those risks we should also remember the line Ganji quoted in a letter from his favorite poet, Rumi:

Happy the gambler who having lost all he had possessed
Is left with nothing but the urge to gamble more.