

Shirin Ebadi, winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize
“Democracy: The Precondition to Peace”
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Respected Minister of Justice, Respected Vice- Principal, Respected Dean of Graduate Studies, Respected Professors, Respected Audience, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am happy that today I am addressing you in this celebrated institution.

A university is a true home, it is a real asylum for all those who assign spirituality top priority in their activities. For those who dedicate themselves to humanity. It is a home not for those who value their bank accounts, but for those who are proud of the books they publish, and the students they have educated. (It is a home) for those who are not proud of material things.

There are many Iranian students who study at this university. Generously, you have given knowledge to my compatriots. I thank you. Also, some of the best Iranian professors are teaching at this university. These Iranian professors and students are in fact the cultural ambassadors of Iran to Canada.

Undoubtedly, the influence of different cultures on each other and acquaintance with the cultures of different nations pave the way for universal peace. But, of course, such influences cannot be one sided. Otherwise it would lead to assimilation. This would destroy nations. We are living in an era of globalization. An era that could gradually lead to the disappearance of geographical borders. It would be the culture of the countries which would define the borders. If we could not preserve our culture and language, we would disappear.

Iran is not only a place on the globe; Iran lives in the soul and heart of every Iranian. Iran will live with its culture and preservation of its national traditions, its literature, its music and its art. So Iran exists only with all these things. It is our responsibility to pass this tradition to future generations, as it was passed from the previous generations to us.

Where did the Egyptian civilization go? A civilization which ruled during its time. The Egyptian civilization was defeated by the Islamic civilization. It went through such sudden transformation that there is no sign of the ancient Egyptian language, Egyptian culture and civilization. But we preserved Iran. We accepted Islam as a religion, but we did not lose our Iranian identity. Even now, in some parts of Iran, for example in Abyaneh, people speak the Pahlavi Dari language. They do not want to lose the heritage of their ancestors.

Beware not to lose your heritage.

Beware not to lose your national identity. Otherwise we will be human beings with no roots and no foundation.

Intercultural relationships should not result in cultural assimilation. Different cultures can find common ground and similarity while respecting the distinctiveness of each. They should identify their mutual needs and they should fulfill those needs *equally*. Democracy and human rights are the mutual needs of all cultures and all societies. Those who do not respect human rights and democracy in the name of cultural relativism are indeed disguising their dictatorial nature with cultural masks. They attempt to violate their nation in the name of national culture or religious culture.

Unfortunately, recently another excuse is given for violation of human rights: that is, the theme of national security. War against terrorism is, of course, a legitimate and rightful struggle. However, it should be within the framework of regulations related to human rights.

We should not exaggerate the mission of security so that, with that excuse, one can suppress any opponent's voice. We must not allow the limitation of legal freedoms of a people in the name of conspiracy theories which are in fashion in many countries and through which hypothetical enemies are created.

Unfortunately, this fashion of limiting freedoms seems to exist in western countries, for instance, in the United States, as well as in Islamic countries, such as Iran. In this situation, the task of defenders of human rights has become more difficult than in the past. They, (rights activists), continue their task under all kinds of limitations, threats, even loss of life, in order to make human rights universal, so that all people will have their rights respected.

In Iran, the struggle for advancement of democracy has resulted in the imprisonment of human rights activists, the defenders of freedom of speech. I pay tribute to people such as Saaber, Ali Khani, Rahmani, Yussufi, Eshkevari, Akbar Ganji, Nasser Zarafshan, Hashem Aqajari, Sayamak Pourzand, Ali Reza Jabbari, and, many others, who are in chains because of their desire to bring freedom to people.

Be praised the memory of those, the martyrs of freedom in Iran:

Zahra Kazemi, who with her death voiced the truth which was not captured by her camera; Mohammad Mokhtari, Mohammad Jafar Pooyand, Saidi Sirjani, Dariush and Parvaneh Foruhar, Zaalzadeh, Dr. Hossein Fatemi, Karim Poorshirazi, and many more who have lost their lives during the past decades.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I come from the Middle East, a land under anarchy and destruction. It has been years that its innocent people have been burned in the fire of war, and the flames are getting larger and larger. There are some discussions about changing the map of the Middle East. This is a sign of cursed goals that are planned for this part of the world. At first it appears as if they are talking about democracy and human rights.

However, we know that the real goal is plundering the national wealth. In the process many innocent human beings are killed, their homes destroyed; and in the ruins of war people ask this question: "Who designed such fate for us?"

As a Muslim who has lived all her life in Iran, I am familiar with the political situation in Muslim countries in the region. I must say there are two factors involved: First, lack or deficiency of democracy. Unfortunately, the majority of Muslim countries in this region are deprived of progressive democracy owing to historical reasons. And this results in people's separation from their governments.

I will give you an example: suppose the owner of a house leaves the door open and walks away. Obviously, thieves steal the valuable items in the house. In such a case the owner of the house is not much less guilty than the thief. People who are distancing themselves from their government are the same. Yet, people who are hungry, people who are not enjoying individual freedom, people who do not have freedom of speech and expression, those who cannot gain employment appropriate to their education unless they have connections, people who see their youth in jail, in short, people in despotic societies, whether religious or political despotism, those people do not want to support their government.

These people under the military invasions are easily tricked by the invaders and they welcome the enemy. Or, they stay in their homes and they do not sacrifice their lives for a despotic government. An obvious example is Iraq. Years of despotic government had caused so much pain for people that they were unable to resist. In less than one month, the country was in the hands of the foreigners. It was even heard that the Iraqi people welcomed American soldiers. Because they presumed that American soldiers were better than Saddam's executioners.

Therefore, lack of democracy is the most important reason for the disorder in this region. And such disorder not only allows military invasion but also produces terrorism. Those people who are deprived, those people who have seen nothing but violence and weapons, are consequently familiar only with the language of force and weapons. They are people who have no one to hear their voice, people who have been under tyranny for generations, and the world remained indifferent towards them. Of course it is possible that these people will go insane, and set up a fire to burn themselves and others.

If these people lived under a democratic and honest government, if these people were not hanged or jailed for expressing their political criticisms, if they were able to voice their demands through appropriate political channels instead of armed guerrilla acts, most probably the world would have taken a different turn.

And now, let us look at the explanations that the governments of this region give for their disrespect of democracy. They argue that Islam is not compatible with democracy. And since their people are Muslims, and Islamic governments consider themselves as representatives and preservers of the religion of their people, hence they should act according to Islamic regulations, not according to democratic principles.

Of course, for this group, Islam is only the government's interpretation of religion. And according to them all interpretations given by other Muslims and religious intellectuals are null and void. These governments take any criticism of any action of the government institutions as equal to criticism of religion, and consider their opponents as hypocrites and hence guilty of capital offense. They believe that since the democratic ideas and human rights are from the West, they cannot correspond with the culture of the East, and particularly not with Islamic culture. They consider freedom fighters as supporters of the West and as traitors, and punishment for such accusation is imprisonment.

Some of these governments, in order to justify their views, rely on terms such as "Islamic democracy" or the rights of Muslim human beings. When these governments face criticism, they defend their stand by holding onto the argument of Islamic democracy. However, democracy has a similar meaning and results in the East and the West. It does not have an Islamic or Christian definition.

Fortunately, a united front of Muslim intellectuals, regardless of political borders, has been established, and it is good news for the liberation of Muslims. This united front does not have any name or leader. Neither does it have any centre or borders. It is located in the heart of any Muslim who cannot tolerate tyranny and who cannot accept nonsense in the name of religion.

Religious intellectuals – and fortunately their numbers are increasing in Islamic countries – are challenging the Islamic governments. And based on religion, they are proving false the claim that every action of the government is according to Islam. They are trying to stop the manipulation done in the name of Islam. And they are screaming that Islam is compatible with democracy. They are saying: "We can be Muslims and respect democracy and human rights." They are saying: "Islam is the religion of equality, Islam disagrees with dictatorship, people should not be tricked by despotic bullies." Such increasing fronts of Muslim intellectuals are the beginning of democracy in the Middle East.

And now, the second reason for war and disorder in the Middle East. Fortunately or unfortunately, Islamic countries of this region have rich resources such as oil. The main artery of world's technology is in the control of this region. Imagine, if, for only three months, the exports of oil from Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain were cut; what a catastrophe this would create in the West, particularly the United States. Therefore, the Middle East, because of its wealth, becomes a target of greed. Visible and invisible exploitation and colonization are there. The new colonizers do not have good relations with those independent governments which aim to protect the interests of their people. They are in good relations with their protégé governments, not with independent minded governments. One good example is the American coup of 18 August (1953) in Iran which resulted in the fall of Dr. Mussadiq, the national leader of Iran, making the Iranian people bear a grudge against the United States for years.

Of course, time passes, and that affects everything. The colonizer's policy at the present time is different from what it was fifty years ago. Moreover, they do not have the same arguments as before. However, the goal and destination are the same, plundering national wealth. And unfortunately, due to the fact that the people of the region are unhappy with their repressive governments, they do not resist, and this is the most dangerous problem of our time.

Therefore, the establishment of a true democracy, not a superficial one, in all Muslim countries in the region, is essential for longlasting peace and tranquility in the Middle East. A democratic government in a country cuts the hand of colonizers. Resistance by the people can put any power in its place. In democratic governments, people become acquainted with and learn about appropriate political discourse. There is no need for weapons and terror. Therefore, gradually terrorism will disappear. The conscientious and liberated people are aware that they should comply and be in harmony with other countries. Hence, they try to work side-by-side with diverse cultures and economic systems worldwide. Ultra-nationalism will be reduced, fundamentalism will be reduced. This is what democracy would bring. We are hoping for the day that real democracy would be established in the Muslim countries, and people would govern their fate.

I know, I know, what I say looks like a dream. In the middle of the existing unrest in the Muslim world, I have a dream. I am talking about a dynamic Islam that totally meets the terms of democracy and human rights; not only totally meets their terms, but also is ready to carry them throughout the world.

In this dream I see a universal humanity. A human being feels the pain and agony of other human beings, in a way, as if it is his/her own. Yes, I was dreaming. I believe dreaming is an important part of human history. It has always been there.

Our challenge today, here, is to dream but act realistically. And remember that many of humanity's accomplishments had started with a dream.

Thank you very much.