

Preface by Dame Ann Leslie

While working undercover in Iran (swathed like a waddling bin-bag in top-to-toe black chador and hejab) I got wearily used to hearing variants of the following nonsense from that ancient nation's current slew of cruel and corrupt masters, 'The leaders of the Islamic world need to be brave and announce: Islam and Western democracy have nothing in common. Islam has nothing in common with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Islam has nothing in common with Western liberalism and that kind of freedom. Islam stands in opposition to these ideas.' Thus spoke Mohammed Reza Jaafari, the Iranian commander of the Lovers of Martyrdom Brigade, which recruits potential suicide bombers, in 2005.

Well, he and the mullahcracy of theocratic Iran must be mighty miffed by what is going on in the Muslim Middle East. During the spontaneous demonstrations which gave rise to the so-called 'Arab Spring', no one in the vast crowds of ordinary people in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, shouted 'Death to the United States!' or 'Death to Israel!' that are the staple chants of highly organised 'spontaneous' demonstrations in Iran, nor was a single American or Israeli flag burned. The cry was for 'Freedom!' Freedom from their native dictators, freedom of speech, freedom of thought and, above all, freedom from the fear that has crippled, impoverished and enslaved them for generations.

True, these demonstrators were Muslims who shouted 'Allah-u-Akbar' (God is Most Great) but for them Islam evidently does not 'stand in opposition' to the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. But when leaders of nations declare that the Western idea of 'human rights' is not 'appropriate' for their own people, they almost invariably mean 'if our people start demanding so-called rights like freedom of speech, assembly and religious belief, we will be in real trouble! As for democracy – don't be ridiculous! Our people are not mature enough for the privilege of having their wishes heard or acted upon by their governments!'

In the holy city of Qom I interviewed an allegedly 'moderate' young mullah, wearing the black turban which denotes direct descent from the Prophet, who told me that the Koran states 'there must be no compulsion in religion' - but when a young Muslim converted to Zoroastrianism, the original religion of Persia, he was hanged for the 'crime' of apostasy. No compulsion in religion? The mullah suddenly concluded that the interview was at an end.

As for the right not to be tortured: the Iranian regime thinks torture is a jolly good thing and is sometimes extraordinarily upfront about it: 'Homosexuals deserve to be tortured or put to death, preferably both', Mohsen Yahya, a high-ranking Iranian official told an astonished British parliamentary delegation in 2007.

Homosexuals are 'enemies of Allah' and so are feminists: Feminism, particularly if it 'infects' devout women, is not popular with the authorities.

The influential Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda recently preached in the holy city of Mashad that Iranian feminists are 'whores who, clutching a piece of paper in their hands to gather signatures, are working for foreign powers and want to destabilise the Islamic Republic'. And that unveiled women automatically 'turn men into beasts'.

In Tehran I attended a secret meeting of these dangerous creatures, a large group of young women who had gathered in a private house to discuss the lack of human rights for women

in Iran. Several of the women were devout Muslims and wore full hejab even though there were no men present. Perhaps the noisy discussion had alerted the police because we were soon raided; as soon as they realised the police were in the building, the women smuggled me out of a back door to safety. Several of them were then arrested.

All totalitarian regimes feel particularly threatened by the Internet and of course do their best to block or censor it. Over the years, both before and after the Tiananmen massacre in China, I would secretly interview grassroots activists who had the temerity to protest against the state's denial of their rights. All too often these brave souls were condemned to long prison sentences or were brutally 're-educated' in the Lao Gai, the Chinese equivalent of the Soviet Gulag. Now with the Internet several Chinese bloggers have become household names – and all too often many have paid the price for their courage with imprisonment.

For far too long, oppressed peoples have been treated like idiot children by their masters. Increasingly those 'idiot children' will not accept that humiliating role any more. The road to freedom and democracy will be long and rocky, with many a bloody set backs, but millions of brave and implacable people round the world are now determined to reach that longed-for destination.