

Foreword: Towards a Culture of Human Rights in Iran
Payam Akhavan

The common misconception of extreme violence is that it is committed by cruel and malicious rather than 'normal' people. It is true that throughout history, authoritarian rulers have enlisted mentally unstable and criminal elements as torturers in order to execute their diabolical designs. But history also teaches us that beyond deviants at the margins of society, large-scale systematic violence depends exactly on the willingness of 'normal' people to dehumanise their fellow human beings. In proposing the now famous expression 'banality of evil', Hannah Arendt remarked that the Nazi executioner of the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann, was not at first glance the monster many had imagined:

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together.

Like other totalitarian regimes, the Islamic Republic of Iran consolidated its power through constructing an ideology that legitimised and normalised violence. From the Khmer Rouge extermination of 'class enemies' in the killing fields of Cambodia, to the 'ethnic cleansing' of Bosnian Muslims by Serbian forces, to the genocide of Tutsi 'cockroaches' by Hutu extremists in Rwanda, radical evil has always been justified in the name of a greater good. The discourse is always that of purification, justice, and heroism. In order to mobilise the masses in furtherance of such designs, the intended victims must first be dehumanised, so that violence against them is justified, and even celebrated. Similarly, through a steady diet of hatred and propaganda, the Islamic Republic elevated rape, torture and murder of dissidents to an act of worship, an expression of faith, homage to the divine. In order to perpetuate institutionalised violence, the modern state must also create a culture of violence. A paradigmatic image are the public hangings in Iran's streets and squares, a horrifying spectacle reminiscent of the medieval torture rituals in European cities that were meant to instil fear and obedience to the sovereign. As lifeless bodies hang from cranes, the 'normal' citizen is made to believe that human life is worthless, that justice is the equivalent of violence, and that it is aggression rather than reason that is the arbiter in society. This process of internalization has a profound effect. The 'role model' provided by the Iranian leadership in turn percolates through successive strata of social life, from the political space, to the work place, to the school, to the family, such that there is a direct line connecting the wife-beating man with the violent institutions of the state.

Consistent with its pedigree, the security state in contemporary Iran continues to be inherently based on violence, whether actual or potential. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Basij militia, the judiciary, the prison system, the state media, are all part of a single transaction of intimidation and violence, an Orwellian equation in which torture and hanging is equated with justice and progress. The democratic transformation of Iran thus cannot be reduced to mere 'regime change' whereby one group of tyrants replace another, only to perpetuate the same status quo, perhaps in a different ideological or polemical guise. The real and lasting change is what we have witnessed in the emergence of the most vigorous civil society in the Middle East, embracing a remarkably diverse cross-section of Iranian society at the grassroots level, as ordinary people awaken and begin to re-define what it means to be an Iranian citizen, and what it means to be a human being. In effect, the struggle for human rights in Iran is a struggle to reclaim a lost humanity, to normalise non-violence instead of violence.

As the Iranian people undergo this historical transition, as they labour to build a new culture of human rights, a new national identity based on shared values and dialogue rather than violence, the international community must stand in solidarity with them. Even if decision makers are not particularly interested in the suffering of the Iranian people, they should be aware that a government defined by systematic hatred and violence, is neither a reliable nor stable member of the community of nations. For years, the nuclear question has eclipsed human rights, and today the exclusive focus on this issue threatens to remove human rights from the UN agenda altogether. Yet it should be blindingly obvious that the demilitarization of the political sphere and the re-imagining of the Iranian national interest in light of the daily civil needs of 'normal' people in a non-violent society are inextricably tied with the progressive dismantling of the patterns of violence and abuse that have brought the Iranian people to this difficult juncture.

There is, in other words, an imperative need to embrace a new conception of power, one based on the consciousness that violence and denial of our human essence is the ultimate form of weakness.

