

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

**A CONVERSATION WITH NOBEL
LAUREATE SHIRIN EBADI**

WELCOME:

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DANIEL BRUMBERG: Well, good morning everybody. My name is Dan Brumberg, and on behalf of the United States Institute of Peace and the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, I'd like to welcome all of you to this special event – this discussion, this dialogue with Shirin Ebadi. You know, I'm a little nervous; I've never introduced a Nobel laureate before and it's a wonderful opportunity.

I'm not going to say very much because I think you all are familiar with her work, her career, the kinds of risks she has taken in her efforts to promote human rights in Iran and of course universal human rights. As I was going through some material last night, thinking about today's event, I found a piece in *The Nation*, one of my favorite publications – an interview with Mrs. Ebadi in which she says, “The political sanctions should not be used as a last resort. Dialogue has to take place at three levels – at the level of people in civil society, among members of parliament and by heads of government of both countries.”

Now, we come here at an interesting moment. It's a moment where, as we speak, they are celebrating the anniversary of the revolution in Iran. We have a new president in the White House who is pursuing the possibility of engagement in a dialogue with Iran. And while these events and other related events are occurring, I think we need to take very seriously the proposition of today's speaker that among the many dialogues that should take place between the United States and Iran, the dialogue between civil society here and the dialogue between civil society in Iran is absolutely fundamental and not contradictory in any kind of way with the dialogue between governments as well.

So we meet here in that spirit and I would like to welcome Mrs. Ebadi and we very much look forward to what she has to say. Our procedure is we will spend – she will spend about 20, 25 minutes – Karim, is that right – speaking. The translation will follow and then we will open up to discussion with my able colleague to my right here handling that part of the job. So good morning to everybody, welcome and let's get started.

(Note: Ms. Ebadi's remarks are delivered via translator.)

SHIRIN EBADI: Good morning to everyone present here and I'm very glad to be able to talk to you today. There is a history of a friendship between Iranian people and American people. Approximately 2 million Iranians live in American and they have been good citizens for this country and the Americans have been very hospitable to these people and I thank them for that. If each Iranian who lives in the United States has at least five members of his or her family in Iran, just imagine how many people would like to have a good relationship between the two countries – would enjoy having this relationship.

And I hope that in the near future, the political problems between the two countries are solved and we can have normal relationship. I don't think that there are differences that cannot be resolved. I think what exists is just a misunderstanding. In order to resolve the problems, I have always talked about dialogue with no preconditions. And with the new presidency in office in the United States, it looks like the issue of preconditions has been set aside and direct negotiations have been accepted.

Negotiations have to take place at different levels between the people of both countries, between the presidents of both countries and between the parliaments of both countries.

Negotiations should not simply focus on the nuclear issue. It should also concern the progress of human rights. Negotiations should focus on the interests of the people of both countries, not only a few corporations or big entities. I don't want to talk about presidential or parliamentary negotiations, but as a citizen of Iran, I would like to talk to you about the civil society negotiations.

Therefore, I want to talk to you about the relationship between human rights and Islam today. Some non-democratic Islamic countries and also some philosophers in the West believe that Islam and human rights are not compatible. They want to put the Islamic people on a spot, meaning that you either have to accept freedom and equality or Islam. This approach will only be used by non-democratic Islamic countries who will benefit from it because if the people elect freedom and equality, then the government will name them as apostates and can execute them.

Therefore, we have to find another solution. I don't believe in cultural relativism. I think that human rights is universal and it's an international standard for living. And this is why I do not believe in the Islamic declaration of human rights and I do not accept Islamic human rights. If we accept that the Muslims can write an Islamic human rights declaration, then we have to accept that other religions do the same thing. And from now on, we will see Buddhist human rights declarations, Hindu human rights declarations, Jewish human rights declarations and so on and so forth, which will result in the abolition of human rights.

And if the standards are abolished – standards of human rights, then the weaker people in the world will be the ones who will suffer. And unfortunately, Islamic countries are the weakest and I think the politically, it's not to their benefit to support an Islamic human rights declaration. Therefore, as we see, an Islamic human rights is both unacceptable theoretically and politically. And also, a phrase called Islamic feminism – that's wrong too. But let's accept that a Muslim can be a feminist and can defend human rights. And if a government is founded on Islamic criteria, it has to come up with an interpretation of human rights and Islam that are compatible.

This is the path that the intellectuals and modern Islamists are taking. In reality, with respect to the religion of the society, they want to be able to apply human rights. In order to open it up a little more, I want to give you an explanation about democracy. In its classical meaning, democracy means the rule of the majority. But let's not forget that many of the dictators came to power with democracy, like Hitler. Therefore, there is a framework for democracy that has to be observed. And the framework for democracy are the criteria of human rights.

This means that a government that has won on the basis of the vote of the majority cannot do as it pleases. This kind of government does not have the right to deprive women, who consist half of the society, from their basic rights, like what happened in some Islamic countries – for example, Iran. The majority that wins does not have the right to stop freedom of speech, like what happened in China. Therefore, the majority that wins does not only take its legitimacy from the ballots but both from the votes and respect for human rights.

Therefore, in a country, for example, if the Islamists win, they do not have the right to deprive people of their human rights on the basis of Islam. For example, recently in Turkey, we observe that the Islamic party won through democracy – through majority. Do we have the right to say that the people of Turkey did not have the right to elect the Islamists? Of course not. But the fact that the Muslims won with the majority of the vote does not mean that they can violate human rights. The same thing is true about Iran.

We are close to the 30th anniversary of the Islamic revolution. The Islamic Revolution came to power with the vote of the people. There is no way that we can say that the people of Iran in 1979 did not want the Islamic Revolution – no, they voted for it. Therefore, the Islamic Republic does have legitimacy for the votes of the people, which happened in 1979. But whether it has legitimacy, its legitimacy can only be proved if it observes human rights. And what is the story of human rights in Iran? What is the status of human rights?

The government of Iran has accepted the conventions on political and economic rights and has agreed to apply that. These two conventions are the two major basic columns of human rights. All of what I'm saying and what the rest of the defenders of human rights in Iran are saying is that now that you have accepted the conventions, why don't you apply them? And in reality, this is what the civil society in Iran says. And this is why I'm bringing up this issue with you, who are from the civil society in America and not a politician – to see and understand what the civil society of Iran wants.

What we want is the application of the international obligations of the government of Iran. Does the government of Iran enforce its international obligations or no? In many instances, no. The basis of human rights is negation of any gender or racial or religious discrimination. Unfortunately, in our laws, there are gender discrimination issues. I will give you a few examples of the laws. The value of the life of a woman is half of that of a man. If me and my brother go out to the street and we are attacked by a terrorist, for example, and we both lose limbs, the law predicts payment of compensation to my brother twice as much as it does to me.

Testification of two women in court equals testification of one man. A man can marry four wives; and several other laws. And unfortunately, these laws are being enforced in a country where over 65 percent of the university students are female and we have numerous women as university professors, medical doctors or engineers at higher levels. And all of these laws were passed after the revolution and this is why most women object to them, because our culture does not accept these laws.

The feminist movement is very strong in Iran. In our laws, we do have discrimination on the basis of religion. The official religions of Iran is Shi'ite Islam, however other branches of Islam and other religions such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity have been recognized in the law. But then there are some Iranians that do not believe in any of the religions that I enumerated, like the Baha'is. They have no rights. For example, the Baha'is have been deprived of attending university from the time of the revolution up to now. Even among the religions that have been officially recognized, there is discrimination.

For example, in Tehran, with a population of 12 million, they have not permitted the erection of even one Sunni mosque. The Sunnis have requested several times but have never been able to get the permit of the government. And in our laws, there are numerous religious discriminations, but since we don't have that much time, I'm just going to name them. Freedom of speech is very limited in Iran and the red line of the media is very strong. All the defenders of human rights in Iran face danger all the time.

I want to talk to you about one of my clients, a gentleman named Mr. Kabutvand (ph), who has been convicted of having founded a human rights institution in Iran and has been imprisoned

for 10 years and is still in prison. You might have heard that the center for the defense of human rights that I happen to be the director of was closed down this month. Of course, we have always announced that although the office has been closed down, but this doesn't mean that we have limited our activities and we continued our activities.

I hope that the situation is such that the defenders of human rights can perform their duties. And thank you for listening to me and tolerating me. If you have any questions, I'll be pleased to respond to them.

(Applause.)

KARIM SADJADPOUR: Well, thank you so much, that was wonderful and we'll go to questions now. If I can ask you to first introduce yourself and be as concise as possible. I'll just start off the first question.

As we know, it's the 30th anniversary of the revolution now and I wanted to ask you to reflect a bit on the last 30 years. And you were a judge during the time of the Shah and if you can kind of compare the Shah's time with now on the human rights perspective. Is it easier to be a political dissident now or was it during the time of the Shah? Is it easier to be a religious minority now or during the time of the Shah?

MS. EBADI: In order to be honest with you, I have to tell you that they were both bad, both during the Shah's reign and now. I'm sure that you all listened to me when I said that the Islamic Revolution happened on the basis of the vote of the people. If people are happy with their situation, will they revolt? Naturally, no. A revolution symbolizes the unhappiness of the people. But things were different then: bad and different. Now they are bad and different. (Laughter.) In any way, bad is bad.

During the Shah's reign, I was a judge. After the revolution, I was told that I could not continue to be a judge because I was a woman. And I was demoted; I became the secretary or the clerk of the court that I used to be the judge in. I could not tolerate that situation. I went back to practicing law, I got my license to practice law and I am practicing law at the present time as an attorney. What we're working on is to make the government, regardless of the name of the government, to observe human rights.

MR. BRUMBERG: I'm just going to follow up with an equally tricky question and then we'll open it up to the audience. When we, the United States, raise the question of human rights with Iranian colleagues – and I raised this question with your president some weeks ago in New York – when we raise the issue, the response is, it's a matter of national sovereignty and that the U.S., in raising the question of human rights, is trying to undermine the Islamic Republic. How can we raise the question of human rights and address this question that is raised by the Iranian regime of national sovereignty?

MS. EBADI: Human rights is an international concept. And it's above the national laws of any country, even the constitution of any country. And the international law tells us that governments cannot refer to their national laws in violation of human rights. On the same basis that the government of Iran speaks about violations of human rights in Palestine, any other country has the right to speak about violations of human rights in Iran. We don't accept double standards.

This means that the government of Iran cannot claim that it can talk on the situation of human rights in the United States but the United States does not have the right to talk about this situation of human rights in Iran. This is why I recommend that negotiations should take place at three levels, specifically at the level of civil society in order to clarify this issue.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Please, in the front. Wait for the microphone; I think there will be a microphone.

Q: (In Farsi.) Mahdiah Javid from Voice of America. And I'm asking her about how she observes the role of women in Iran's civil society.

MS. EBADI: We have to be proud of the role of women in Iran. And they are present in every – at every level of our social activities. Even one of the vice presidents of Iran, one of the vices of Ahmadinejad, is a woman. She is, of course, the representative of the Islamist extremists, but she has been able to impose herself on Ahmadinejad. (Laughter.) But the most important issue is that our laws are not compatible with the social situation of women in Iran and cultural situation.

If I give you an example, it will clarify it: Imagine the vice of Ahmadinejad wants to go to the U.N. and represent the people of Iran. Pursuant to the law, any woman who is married has to have the permission of her husband to obtain a passport. Now, if this woman wants to represent 70 million people, the population of Iran at the United Nations has to beg for a permit the night before she leaves. And if there's a fight between husband and wife and the husband doesn't permit the wife to go, what's going to happen to the chair of Iran at the U.N.?

And this is a small example, but it shows you how there is no compatibility with the high level of the situation of women in Iran and the laws in Iran. There has to be reform. They have to be amended.

Q: Hi. I'm Ali Wyne. I'm a junior fellow here at Carnegie. And I was just wondering, there has been a growing discussion about how the dissident movement in Iran, and, more broadly, the human rights movement, how it's using Internet-based technologies; so platforms like Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, how it's using those to become a growing force in Iran.

And I was wondering if you could, one, if you could comment on that and, also, if you comment on how you, if at all, have been able to use those technologies to empower yourself and your movement.

MS. EBADI: Fortunately, technology has helped freedom of speech. And in Iran, using the Internet is very common. Of course, the government filters many of the sites. For example, all of the sites on women's rights have been filtered. And also the Web site for the Center for the Defense of Human Rights was filtered right on the same day that it was put up. But the youth in Iran know very well how to handle the filters and break them. (Laughter.) And they find ways to go to different sites.

Then the government comes back and re-filters them. But within two or three days, the young people break the filters and go back. It has actually become a race and a game between the young people and the government who break and re-filter.

Q: Barbara Slavin from the Washington Times. It's very nice to see you here back again. I wanted to ask you, why do you think the government has become more fixated on security? Why has the crackdown increased over the last couple of years? What are the reasons for that? And do you anticipate any improvement with the Obama administration or is this trend going to continue?

And then just a question about you personally; you have been harassed very severely: Are you going to be able to go back in the next few months or are you going to stay in the West for a while? Thank you.

MS. EBADI: The fact that the government accuses everyone of taking measures against the national security is not a new thing and it is not only Iranian. In general, when governments want to limit individual rights, they usually refer to national security. And I think this is a general rule all over the world. I am an Iranian. I have been born in Iran. I was raised in Iran. I work in Iran and I will die in Iran.

After I finish my speaking tour in America, I will go back to Iran right away. I travel abroad because I do some international work, but my base is in Iran and I always go back to Iran. And, on Friday, I am going back to Iran.

Q: My name is Judd Harriet (ph). I'm a documentary film producer. The response of the government of Iran to renew dialogue with the Obama administration has not been favorable. My question is, can we proceed with a dialogue at the civil-society level in the face of hostility from the Iranian government?

MS. EBADI: As I said earlier, over 2 million Iranians live in America and I think that the majority of them want a better relationship between the two countries. You know that many people are awaiting visas to come to this country and visit with their family. You know that numerous Iranian students received acceptance from American universities but were not able to get a visa to come in. Do you know that many Iranian students who are in American universities studying here cannot go back for summer vacations to visit with their family because they fear that they will not be able to get a visa and come back?

On the basis of what I told you, it's natural that the people of Iran want a normalization and better relations between the two countries. And I hope that, through negotiations and dialogue, we can resolve the problems between the two countries. But regarding negotiations between civil society, I think that it has been started from a long time ago through the members of the media who come to Iran, through the students who live here, through the professors who are exchanged.

And I hope that political issues do not in any way hurt the relationship between the civil societies and the people of Iran and the people of the United States.

Q: My name is Stephanie Brancaforte. I'm teaching at George Washington University and also doing a lot of work on internally displaced people around the world.

When you won the Nobel Prize, of course human-rights activists and feminists around the world were very pleased and I think even felt a tiny bit of ownership and recognition themselves.

And I was wondering, what can human-rights activists and feminists do to support your movement in Iran? Or is it ultimately counterproductive given the political situation?

MS. EBADI: The support of the people of the world from the feminists in Iran is very important for us. And we want to ask you to please continue to support. For example, if a person is caught for feminist activities, please object. Broadcast and translate the news or translate then broadcast the news regarding the feminist activities in Iran or the people who have been apprehended in this regard. If the world does not speak about the feminists in Iran, the situation will get worse.

Q: (In Farsi.) You had said the relations and dialogue between Iran and the United States shouldn't be in the interests or shouldn't help a specific group or company. And the opposite of that is, I'm wondering what groups would be opposed to relations between Iran and the United States, and for what reason? And I'm Bill Samii from the State Department.

MS. EBADI: You work for the State Department; you should understand what I said very well. (Laughter.) During the Shah's reign, in 1953, America spoke with Iran. But what happened is that the oil companies in America benefited and Dr. Mossadeq was toppled. Or the attack on Iraq – what was the benefit of it for the big companies, some big companies? The people of Iraq were killed. And the taxpayers in America are paying heavily for it. But some of the companies – the shares of some of the companies grow. Therefore, when I say that the negotiations between the two countries should benefit the people of both countries, not only some companies, you understand what I'm saying.

Q: (In Farsi.) I speak in English okay and I'll translate. Welcome to America. My name is Fariborz "Frank" Fouladi, procurementusa.info. I'm a human rights and peace activist. The first situation is access to food, access to shelter, access to health care and access to education. These four things – it's a major issue that each government should make sure – as we do in Maryland – in Montgomery County, Maryland – I would like to introduce you to Montgomery County, Maryland. If we are doing this – make sure these food issues are taken care of for our citizens, that is, in my opinion, is basic human rights, are we working on that with children, with women and disabled in Iran?

MS. EBADI: Are you going to translate yourself? (Chuckles.)

I'm just going to give you a general answer, because if I want to get into each of them, we have to spend a lot of time here. All of what you said needs a big budget – financial budget. Pursuant to the statistics of the government of the Islamic Republic, the poverty line for a four-member family is under 500,000 tomans. Therefore, 70 percent of the workers will fall under the poverty line. And it's natural that, when 70 percent fall under the poverty line, the accessibility to health, to education and to food will be very limited. But I want to talk to you a little bit about the source of poverty in the world.

And I have proposed to the United Nations a convention regarding the attack on poverty. There may be several reasons for poverty in the world, but there are two that are prevalent in almost all countries. The first one is a high military budget. The governments have to accept that their military budget does not exceed the budget for health and education, both. And the governments

that do have foreign debts and cannot pay their debts, if they accept to dissolve their military and only use their police, their foreign debts should be forgiven.

Therefore, as you can see, the military budget in every country, and in the United States, is one of the reasons of poverty for all of us. You know how many folds is the military budget more, in the United States, than the health and education budgets? Therefore, we should not accept higher military budgets in all countries.

Q: My name is Viola Gienger from Bloomberg News. I was interested in your point about increasing the dialogue at the civil society level. There have been some groups on both sides who have been in contact – have had some dialogue. What do you think – and that doesn't seem to have produced much – what do you think needs to change in that respect, and how, practically, can that be translated into a change in government policy on each side?

MS. EBADI: I believe that when I speak about a dialogue and negotiations between the civil societies of each country, that brings awareness to the people. And when people are aware of the issues, that will impact the way they vote. If we bring hatred to the world and just talk about hatred all the time, that will impact our votes. However, if we bring friendship and if we can bring – and talk about commonalities between the two societies, then that will impact the vote as well.

Q: Thank you, Sanam Anderlini, MIT Center for International Studies, research affiliate. I'm going to ask in English, if you don't mind. You said that many Iranians want normalization, and there are certainly many in the U.S. who support negotiations based on mutual respect and mutual interest, as President Obama said, for normalization. But there are also many here who believe in pressurized diplomacy and think that the nuclear issue is the key issue and that, if it doesn't get resolved, sanctions and more isolation is the way to go.

And I just want to get a response, that if we don't get a breakthrough – if we don't get normalization and the external world – Western world, however you want to frame it – increases its sanctions and isolations on Iran, how do you think – in your opinion, how do you think the Iranian people – the next generation of young people growing up without jobs and opportunities and isolated, how will they react to their own government, to the U.S. and outside world? Who will they blame? And how will we see a change, if we take eight years in advance – if we go and look forward eight years?

MS. EBADI: I have said numerous times that I not only do not accept an attack on Iran – a military attack on Iran – I don't even accept the threat of a military attack on Iran. And also, with all economic sanctions on Iran, because any economic sanction will deteriorate the situation of people, but does not hurt the government. And a threat of a military attack will result in the government becoming stronger and use national security as a result of oppressing people. What goes on in Iran is, the people respect for democracy and human rights in Iran and this demand can only take place in a peaceful situation.

And I am glad to tell you that all of the groups that work in Iran on human rights and democracy issues are peaceful groups and none of them are underground groups and none of them are armed. And what I am asking is not to make the situation in Iran worse so that the government will become stronger and start oppressing people more.

Q: I'm Elizabeth Thompson. I'm a historian at the University of Virginia. I had the pleasure of hearing your former president, Mr. Khatami, at our institution a few years ago. And he spoke about your constitution, and we historians recognize the difference between the 1906 constitution and the 1979 constitution – both were brought forth by democratic movements of the people of Iran, but the later constitution reflects a change, perhaps because of 1953, and the subversion of the idea that Iranians and Americans and all people share a universal basis of democracy, law and human rights by the cynical abuse of the idea of universal law by those with power in the world.

You spoke today about both the basis of pragmatic – and a political basis of a claim to universal law – universal human rights that exists prior to Islamic law – but also, a theoretical basis. And I wonder if you might comment on how important it is to return to the arguments of, maybe, 100 years ago, in the age of Jamal-al-Din Afghani and others that Islam and other – and all human civilizations share basic principles prior to their religions – or how can we define a universal basis for human rights in the post-colonial age? Yeah, that's a long question. I guess, to put it very shortly, is it necessary to make the theoretical argument to the ayatollahs and the mullahs, or can we proceed on what I think you're saying is a pragmatic claim by all the nations of the world that universal human rights exist and must be honored? Thank you.

MS. EBADI: What I'm talking about is not to convince the ayatollahs or the priests to accept anything. What we're talking about is, where the ayatollahs and the priests govern, what do we do there? In such societies, religion has to be interpreted such that human rights can be applied. You don't find any religion that says murder or torture is good. All the religions say that people have been created by god and they're equal.

But what we're talking about is people misusing a religion. In the medieval ages, the government of the church proved that. This is why I believe in separation of church and state. But in a society where religion has not really been separated from government, what do we do? This is when we have to come up with an interpretation of religion in such a way that we can apply human-rights standards.

Q: Thank you. My name is Homeyra Mokhtarzada. I'm from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. I'd like to ask your thoughts about a sensitive topic, and I would understand if you couldn't comment, but I'd like to get your thoughts on the power and the rule of the supreme leader, Mr. Khamenei.

His power is so enshrined in not only the foundation of the Islamic Revolution and state, but in the modern Iranian state. And I'm wondering if you think that, you know, for Iran to make progress, from every respect – human rights, politically, economically – if his role needs to be re-examined, and where, from the Iranian constitutional perspective, does that need to start?

MS. EBADI: In the constitution of Iran, the major authorities are that of the supreme leader. And the supreme leader is on top of the three powers. Is violation of human rights in Iran referred to the constitution and his role? In order to find the answer to this question, let's look at the situation of Iraq during Saddam Hussein. Did they have a supreme leader or no? Did the violation of human rights during Saddam's reign have anything to do with this issue? Or what is going on in Sudan – they don't have a supreme leader. But the situation is such that even the Security Council referred the case to the ICC for – (inaudible).

And I have said numerous times, as a defender of human rights, that I am not talking about the name of the government; I am talking about the acts of the government. The government of Iran is such that it violates human rights. During the Shah's reign, we didn't have a leader but we had human-rights violations. Therefore, the first response to your question is that the type of government and the name of the government is not important for me. What counts is, how do they act with people?

And that second question is whether the constitution can be changed or not – theoretically, yes. In law, no law is eternal. Any law can be changed. Even in the constitution, there are a few lines about how to change the law. But whether that will happen or not, that's a different story. It depends on the people and what they want and the fact that – and how much they insist on what they want and their demands.

MR. SADJADPOUR: In the way back, again.

Q: Kevin Slaten, the Carnegie Endowment. I had a question about the role of the U.N. in advancing human rights in Iran. What is the role of the U.N., and how far should the U.N. go – what do you think are the limits of what the U.N. can do – without harming the people of Iran or being counterproductive?

MS. EBADI: The role of the United Nations regarding progress of human rights is important in all of the countries of the world, specifically Iran. The problem is, though, that the United Nations does not have the power to do what it does because of the way it's been founded. There are two major defects in the foundation of the United Nations. First of all, it's not democratic. Some countries have the veto right, and that's not correct. The second thing is that, in the United Nations, it's the governments that decide. And in many countries, the governments do not represent the people. Therefore, what they decide does not make people happy and it's not in the interests of the people.

And I have always proposed that the representatives of the NGOs participate in the United Nations in order to resolve this issue. At least they will have a right to speak there. And one of the ways to strengthen the United Nations is that the United States accedes to international conventions. I do appreciate very much the fact that President Obama closed down Guantanamo, but I hope that one day, the United States will ratify the ICC convention and will join the International Criminal Court. One of the reasons of weakening for the United Nations and/or the ICC is the fact that the United States does not agree with them, and this is not correct. And I want to ask you, all of the citizens of the United States, to write to President Obama and ask him to ratify the ICC and strengthen the ICC this way.

Q: My name is Josh Yaghoubzadeh. I'm a student at UCLA. (In Farsi.) My question is, many say that Ahmadienijad came to power because many people were disillusioned by the reformers and Khatami because they didn't bring about the change they promised. So I want to know, with the elections coming up soon, do you think that the reformers have a chance and that they might be able to bring about change, now that Obama is president here?

MS. EBADI: The fact that – whether the reformists will come into power or not is a question, but the second question is if they come to power, whether they can bring change. And if

they gain power in any sense – if they gain power, they should review the eight years that they were in power and see what they had done and see what changes they can bring. I will give you one example. During the last year of the sixth parliament, which was the last year when Khatami was in power, he brought in two laws or two acts to the parliament. One of them was regarding the supervision of the guardian council on elections.

This was a very important bill, and if it had been passed, it would have played a big role in the political future of Iran. The parliament – the sixth parliament – passed this law, but the guardian council returned it to the parliament for some amendments. But unfortunately, there was not much time left for the sixth parliament; they didn't get to it, so the law has been sitting there forever and it hasn't been passed. And I always think it would have been much better if they had introduced the bill at the beginning of the sixth parliament; then they would have had four years to negotiate and challenge the bill between the two authorities and, maybe, come to a conclusion. At any rate, if they gain power, the reformists should review what they have done in the past and rectify their mistakes so they can have a better influence.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Thank you. We have only about 10 minutes, so why don't we bunch together three questions. I'll take one from the front and the middle and the back. Why don't we start in the front, please, first.

Q: Toni Verstandig, Aspen Institute. I wanted to get back to the issue of dialogue in civil society, which I think is very crucial. There's an inherent tension between participating and reaching out to promote dialogue in civil society – and Aspen Institute, in fact, had a very open and transparent program in which we had an active series of seminars with Iranians, two of whom were recently arrested and convicted – Iran activists – and tried and convicted for fomenting a velvet revolution. It weighs very heavy on us, and I'd like to ask you, how can those of us who want to promote and enhance dialogue deal with the reality, as Barbara in her previous question – the crackdown that's occurring and risks for those who want to participate in these very open and transparent dialogues?

Q: Merrill Smith, with the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. Iran has been a generous host for about a million Afghan refugees for many, many years now, and I noticed your book on the subject last year, which I enjoyed very, very much.

My question is, is there a force or constituency in Iranian civil society for the rights of refugees – particularly Afghan refugees, but others as well – to a more normal life, since it's not possible for them to go back to Afghanistan? And secondly, is there any potential for civil society engagement between American civil society groups, such as our own, and Iranian civil groups to pursue the rights of refugees and better policies in Iran and elsewhere? Thank you very much.

Q: (In Farsi.) My name is Samir Rashangi (ph), and I'm a student, and you were speaking earlier about the role of Baha'is in Iran, and as someone that's representing Baha'i people who have been persecuted in Iran, what is the Iranian reaction in the civil society from all this persecution? What can be done besides going to the government and representing these people who have been persecuted for so long?

MS. EBADI: Regarding dialogue between the civil societies of Iran and the United States, I must reiterate that there are, naturally, problems. You're right, the government of Iran is suspicious

of the people who engage in these kinds of negotiations. And on the other hand, the government of the United States is suspicious as well – they don't issue visas. Non-issuance of the visas and apprehension of the people who – in Iran – who want to talk to the civil society are both sides of a coin.

These problems exist, but I think that we have to smooth the path. We have to tell our governments not to look at civil society with suspicion. And when I speak about negotiations between civil society, I prefer people from different professions to talk to their colleagues. For example, the teachers talk to teachers in the United States; the members of the media talk to the members of the media. I know it's difficult, but I think that we have to pave the path.

Regarding the Afghani refugees in Iran, fortunately, the civil society is sensitive to the issue and tries to help them. For example, one of the problems that the Afghans have in Iran is that, since they don't have a residence permit, the government does not issue birth certificates to the children who are born to these refugees, and therefore, they can't pursue education. The civil society in Iran has built a few schools for the children of the refugees, and we do teach them so that they – we teach them literacy, so that they can read and write.

However, unfortunately, we cannot issue any degrees. The civil society is concerned about the problems of the Afghani refugees and can address a few of their problems. But as you know, they have numerous problems, and it's the government that has to take responsibility and address the more important issues. And, of course, when we speak of negotiations, the rights of the refugees should be addressed as well.

And regarding the Baha'is, as I said earlier, unfortunately, they are discriminated against by laws. And regarding the issues of the Baha'is, the civil society is very sensitive, and we have worked a lot on that and the defenders of human rights at the Center for the Defense of Human Rights have gone to administrative courts and have tried to obtain the right to higher education for the Baha'is. And seven of the leaders of the Baha'i faith in Iran were apprehended approximately nine months ago and they are among my clients; I defend them. Therefore, we do what we can in order to fight discrimination against all, including the Baha'is.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Unfortunately, we have to conclude the session now. I'm going to give Dan Brumberg the last word, but I just wanted to thank you all again for coming and to thank Mrs. Ershadi for a wonderful job interpreting and thank, again, Mrs. Ebadi who, in my opinion and I think in the opinion of all of the Iranians here, is truly a national treasure. Thank you.

MR. BRUMBERG: A final word as you prepare to return. There's been a great deal of discussion this morning about the Iranian constitution, an interesting document that I've read closely. The Iranian constitution does guarantee freedom of speech and assembly. The problem is that that very same document does not guarantee freedom after speech. (Laughter.) And we can only wish Mrs. Ebadi a speedy and safe return and good luck in promoting freedom of speech and freedom after speech as well. Thank you.

(Applause.)

(END)