



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Transcript

**DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN:  
A CONFERENCE IN HONOR OF SIAMAK  
POURZAND**

**PANEL 1: CULTURE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN  
IRAN**

THURSDAY, APRIL 19, 2012  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

**WELCOME/MODERATOR:**

**Haleh Esfandiari**  
**Director**  
**Middle East Program**  
**Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars**

**SPEAKERS:**

**Mehrangiz Kar**  
**Attorney**  
**Independent Journalist**  
**Human Rights Activist**

**Omid Memarian**  
**Human Rights Activist**  
**International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran**

**Roberto Toscano**  
**Former Italian Ambassador to Iran**

Transcript by Federal News Service  
Washington, D.C.

HALEH ESFANDIARI: Good morning. I'm Haleh Esfandiari. I run the Middle East program at the Wilson Center.

I would like to add my voice to the family and thank Karim Sadjadpour for really putting a lot of effort in putting together this meeting. The idea came from Suzanne Maloney a year ago when she contacted both of us and said maybe we should do that, have this program honoring Siamak Pourzand and discuss human rights issues in Iran. And we both jumped at this suggestion, but I think it took us a whole year to put together this meeting, but better today than not doing it at all.

[0:01:47]

I think except the family, I don't know how many more people are in the audience who knew Siamak. I knew him. We were colleagues at Kayhan. And I think – I remember the first day I saw him, he walked into a big – the editorial room of Kayhan, where we were all sitting there, and there was this young man who walked in, tall, dashing and very self --

MEHRANGIZ KAR: Very handsome. (Laughter.)

MS. ESFANDIARI: I said dashing, yeah.

[0:02:24]

MS. KAR: (Laughs.)

MS. ENFANDIARI: -- self-assured; you know, walked in. And I turned around to one of my colleagues on the foreign news desk and I said, who is this person? And he said, don't you know him? He's Siamak Pourzand. And I said, no, I don't know him. He said, OK, I'll tell you who he is. So over the years, I saw Siamak as long as I was a journalist, on and off, at the paper. And then after the revolution, when I would go to Tehran and visit this colleague, he would always keep me up to date of what Siamak was doing. He was in touch with him, and he remains nameless because he still is in Iran.

So – must confess that last night my husband and I – Shaul Bakhash, who was also was in Kayhan, but Kayhan International – we were exchanging memories about Siamak: When did you see him the first time, when did you see him the first time?

[0:03:36]

Anyway, I think what you left out, the family, was he had also a sense of humor. You know, he would – when we would come in the editorial room of Kayhan, wherever he went, you would hear some laughter, so he must have told people something funny, so that also brought them to laugh, and that was, I thought, one of his strong characteristics.

It's an honor to be here, to be part of this group, but now back to the real business. I have asked – our panel is going to deal with culture and human rights. And I don't think

my panelists needs introduction. You have their bios. Mehrangiz Kar is the most prominent woman lawyer, activist, human rights activist, and a prolific writer. We go back to pre-revolutionary time in Iran.

And as I was coming to this meeting, I recalled a conversation I had after the revolution with Mehri trying to figure out what was going on, and she said: You know, when I was a student at Tehran University, the day they built a mosque on campus I knew that the culture has changed. I don't know whether you recall that conversation. So that's something we will touch upon later; I mean, culture, religion and human rights.

[0:05:29]

Omid Memarian, I met him after the revolution. He is a victim of human rights abuse. There is the lawyer; this is the victim. But they could not break him in jail, which was wonderful. He came out as forceful as he went in, and he has been an activist writing about human rights abuse in Iran. And again, I met him in a number of coffee shops in Tehran. We would meet there and he would bring some of his colleagues and we would talk about various issues.

And finally, Roberto Toscano, who is – was the former ambassador of Italy to Iran. I think I met him in Iran once, but I had heard about him. There was a legend that he somehow – he was always there to help human rights victims. And I must tell you an anecdote. In prison, one of the questions I was asked is that – was that, do you know Roberto Toscano? And I – luckily, I didn't know him. (Laughter.) So I said, no, I met him once, which was the truth. And so they left it at that. Because I knew that, you know, had I known him, that would have created another week of questioning focusing on Roberto.

[0:05:05]

So our arrangement with this panel is that each of my panelists will have seven minutes of opening remarks. And I say seven minutes, and I'm going to watch the time.

MS. KAR: It's seven minutes, not 10, not five, and this is Haleh. (Laughs.)

MS. ESFANDIARI: And then I will ask a couple of questions and we will open the floor to your questions; preferably no comments from the audience, just questions.

[0:07:34]

Mehri, OK. You can sit, you can stand.

MS. KAR: I guess one minute is past now. (Laughs.)

I would like to talk about cinema and censorship in Iran, something that Siamak liked that. And always he was working for artists in cinema and giving them better situation and better possibilities, during shah, and then after shah, during Islamic Republic. And now I became so sad when I was – heard that Iran won Oscar this year. And it was really a sad

time for me because Siamak was not alive, because Siamak was working for that all the time. And this is something that, you know, I became sad after that.

So we can say Iranian cinema recently won the Oscar, posing a question in the minds of many around the world, how did Iranian artists manage to create such amazing arts that is now celebrated in the world? How did they do so despite heavy censorship? I can talk about this question and analyze the situation that Iranian artists are working on that.

[0:09:10]

Arts creation is naturally in contradiction with the ideological censorship. The creative mind cannot produce original and timeless arts if confined in an ideological prison. This is a general rule that explains the necessity of freedom of expression for arts creation and artists.

Strikingly, Iran is an exceptional country in which strict ideological and religious censorship and oppression have done wonders to creative arts. In other words, Iranian creative arts have in many ways exceeded expectations and have succeeded to communicate important message beyond the limitations of censorship. In fact, Iranian artists have often led many international festivals and societies of arts for creating exceptional arts despite all the restrictions of the extremist Islamic school. This school is on power in Iran right now, and the culture of this school says the first and the last word in Iran for artists and all people who are working in creative fields.

[0:11:13]

Nevertheless, Iranian artists have had to pay a high price for achieving such a level of international respect and prominence. Throughout its political history, Iran has never experienced an extensively free environment in which artists could work without the fear of governmental conditions and (privation ?). However, the life of the artists who had managed to find a way to promote their arts during the Pavlevi era worsened after the Islamic Republic of 1979, when the ideological elimination of artists began. As a result, many of these artists had to stay at home and refrain from promoting their arts, were exiled and detained. Ultimately, whether in Iran or exile, Iranian artists faced poverty, isolation and oppression in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution.

[0:12:15]

It is remarkable now Iranian artists have not only tolerated ideological censorship in the past 33 years, but also have managed to find ways around it. While some of the artists, and especially filmmakers, of the pre-revolution era had to adjust themselves to the new ways of censorship imposed in the Islamic Republic, the rest of the younger artists grew up and were educated in the midst of ideological censorship. And yet both groups of artists managed to challenge the foundation of values and cultural principles behind such censorship through their arts.

Among these artists and filmmakers, there are many women who have played an important role as film and theater directors, actresses, designers, authors, poets and other

fields of arts and have expressed their objection against anti-women policies of the Islamic Republic. This is while their art is so delicately done that it even manages to pass some of the toughest measurements of censorship. As such, we cannot ignore the role of artists, and especially female artists, in shaping the mentality of Iranian youth, who now bravely stand up for their rights, claim their cultural and historical heritage and freedom.

[0:14:11]

Despite the tough days of the present time, Iranian artists and filmmakers have succeeded in teaching the world an important lesson, and that is, creative arts – creative arts, if done cleverly, is sufficiently powerful to reverse the impact of censorships. This is how Iranian artists have continually broken the silence that the political system has imposed on them for years, and it was coming from rich culture of that society.

MS. ESFANDIARI: Thank you very much, Mehri.

MS. KAR: It was maybe eight minutes. (Laughter.)

MS. ESFANDIARI: No, it was seven.

MS. KAR: (Laughs.) I was like that. (Applause.)

[0:15:08]

OMID MEMARIAN: Thanks, Suzanne, Karim and Haleh-joon, for having me here.

Over the course of the past few years, we have witnessed a number of positive trends that in my opinion are indicative of a cultural shift regarding how people think about human rights in Iran, at least amongst Iranian civil society. This cultural shift, exemplified by certain emerging trends, is drawing a new map of the significance of human rights in Iran's political and cultural discourse. Simply put, cultural changes in Iranian civil society are making it difficult for the Iranian government to ignore human rights violations in Iran and abroad.

One major trend amongst Iranians has been the marked rise in discussing issues that are perceived as taboo, especially using the discourse of human rights. For example despite the Iranian government's ongoing propaganda against people of the Baha'i faith and its efforts to make any connection to this community a security issue, the topic of Baha'is has come to the surface of human rights discussions in Iran.

Even during the 2009 presidential elections, one of the presidential candidates directly addressed the issue of rights for Baha'is.

[0:15:14]

I believe two major incidents have contributed to these discussions. One was when Nobel Prize-winning lawyer Shirin Ebadi took on the case of arrested Baha'i leaders. Even

though it created a storm of attacks against her, it also laid the groundwork for public discussion, at least in the online community.

The second incident involved the activities of students expelled from universities, young people who were denied higher education because of their political activities or their religious beliefs. These are students who fought side by side for their rights, highlighted their situation and highlighted the situation of Baha'is in Iran more than ever. The sympathy and attention toward this issue was so significant that Javad Larijani, the Iranian government's representative to the U.N. Human Rights Council, last year he publicly denied that Baha'is face any discrimination in Iran, telling the council that Baha'is all have access to education, are not barred from business and so on. This mere acknowledgement was already a reflection of how much the public discourse on Baha'i has shifted.

[0:17:46]

Another issue that Iranians are starting to talk about, at least in the online community and in Iranian civil society among activists, academics, students, is gay rights. This has been slowly entering Iranian civil society discourse as a rights-related issue, even though culturally it's still on the extreme end of social discussions. For example, in an infamous speech in 2007, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed that Iran had no homosexuals. Now, however, partially as a result of increased gay rights discourse, Iran has surely begun to acknowledge homosexuality. Granted it's not always in the best context. For example, in the criteria for military service in Iran, which just recently came out, there is now an article dismissing gays from military service. But the fact of the matter is that the Iranian government is now acknowledging the existence of gay people, something it did not do less than, like, five years ago.

[0:19:00]

Another major trend I've seen over the past few years is the public outreach of political prisoners even from inside Iran's prisons, mainly through the only medium available to them, which is letters, writing letters. Over the course of the past two decades, dozens of political prisoners have written critical letters to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In these letters, families – in these letters, that have explained human rights violations against themselves or against their families or colleagues, we see that after the 2009 election, we have seen a kind of rise in writing these letters – by journalists, by activists, by political dissidents.

Political prisoners have also been writing letters to the public from inside Iran's prisons, which is very unprecedented in such scale. In these letters they call out the government for the human rights violations committed against them, and Iranian government – Iranian authorities have had a lot of trouble digesting these unprecedented actions, and the consistency and determination of the government's critics has led to a higher level of public awareness of the human rights situation.

[0:20:12]

These letters create a buzz on the Internet, and they are being distributed through many different outlets, including broadcast and satellite networks like BBC Persian and Voice of America, which are present here now. And this publicity has been an instrument, an instrumental factor in challenging the regime's narrative regarding the current political situation and its denial of human rights violations both Iran and outside.

Also I can add, as romantic as it may sound, the publication of love letters between political prisoners and their spouses has greatly impacted human rights discourse in the country. Even though love letters from prison have existed since, you know, the –

MS. ESFANDIARI: The first day, probably. (Laughter.)

[0:21:15]

MR. MEMARIAN: Yes. It has been forever. The public expression of prisoners' deepest feelings has added an element of humanity and emotion to the plight of these prisoners of conscience. The publication of their letters, even if only parts, has served to shed light on their situation in a way that humanizes them to the public.

And there are other, like, trends that, you know, I think I might go out of time, but there is definitely more to this argument. But I believe the trends I mentioned here indicate an ongoing struggle between the state and the Iranian civil society in the human rights battlefield.

In the interactions between the Iranian government and civil society, including dissidents and those who have been targeted by the government, we see a new kind of sphere. Iranian civil society is using diverse methods to highlight human rights issues, give voice to the voiceless, address previously taboo issues and, most importantly, make the human rights situation in Iran something its government cannot longer ignore. If Iran's human rights situation is being highlighted in many different ways, it's because of a series of actions and interactions, forceful initiatives and emerging cultural trends that have made Iran's human rights situation a very important thing.

[0:22:43]

MS. ESFANDIARI: (Laughing.)

MR. MEMARIAN: Anyhow, I think I addressed most of the things I wanted to mention and – (laughter) – we can discuss the rest in the Q-and-A.

Thank you, Haleh. (Applause.)

MS. ESFANDIARI: (Laughs.) Thank you. The master of ceremony is standing there and he keeps on looking at this watch I have and makes sure we are on time.

[0:23:06]

Roberto.

ROBERTO TOSCANO: Well, when Haleh's running the show, there is no problem in knowing when your time is over.

The link between human rights and culture is to me evident, but unfortunately for many people, too many people, when you talk about human rights, you focus about political rights, which, of course, is important, but culture has a very, very special, very deep link to human rights, and especially in a country like Iran.

Cultural freedom has two sides. First, you have the right to have access to cultural products. And second, you have the right to produce culture. So you have the right as a producer of culture, as a consumer of culture. And the regime's – nondemocratic regime's trying to infringe on both aspects.

[0:23:58]

The case of Iran is very, very special because whereas in many countries, nondemocratic countries, regimes try to block the flow of culture, the Iranian regime is in a contradiction, for two reasons. First of all, it's in a contradiction because the cultural heritage of Iran is such that no regime, not even this regime, can afford denying it. What they do is they try to appropriate it in a very ambiguous way and a very contradictory way.

And the second is the link between culture and education. Education has progressed in the country quantitatively. The best thing for a regime would be to have people – a regime like the Iranian one, people highly educated but prevented from having access to free culture. But this contradiction cannot be resolved. A population like the Iranian population cannot be kept down culturally. And you see the contradictions.

We talk about cinema. You know, people in this country who have seen "A Separation" say, how is it possible, a film like that, made in Iran? Yes. Because there are certain skills by those who produce culture. I remember some friends told me, you know, once you present a draft for a script, let's say, you put something really outrageous in there and so you're sure the censor will focus on that and will not notice what you really want. (Laughter.) This is one.

[25:40]

And then, of course, not everything succeeds in that. One of the things that I enjoyed most when I was ambassador in Iran was being the owner of a movie theater inside the residence. We had a projection room, and we were showing Italian films, of course – that was my job – and Iranian films that are not shown in Iran – which justified some of the suspicion that I raised in the regime, although I never did anything subversive, but that's subversive enough.

So for the regime, culture is on the one hand something that they cannot really confront too openly. Besides, they love it when an Iranian film wins prizes abroad. The best thing would be to win prizes abroad and not be shown inside. Great. (Laughter.)



[26:38]

But on the other hand, they fear the – why? Not because artists produce ideological creations against the regime. You know, if you have put ideology in your artistic creation, it's bad politics and bad art. I mean, think of what socialist realism was. You know, that really – but even if you do not do that consciously, if you talk about real people, real problems, real issues, that is already subversive. And regimes don't really know how to handle that, luckily.

And in Iran this is especially the case, because whoever is familiar – unfortunately, to my shame, I never learned the language, so I don't have access – direct access to the literature, but as far as films are concerned, this was my main contact with Iranian society. And what comes out is something that surprises the world. People who have seen “A Separation” say, oh, I thought that Iran was about Tehran, chador and nuclear issue.

[27:50]

Well, there's something else, isn't there? And that something else allows people to know the richness of the country, but also puts the government, the regime, in a very difficult situation. There have been fluctuations. There have been moments of more repression, moments of less repression. The regime, of course, only wants to survive, and sometimes it thinks that in order to survive, it can open up a little more, then it gets scared and becomes more repressive. The game is always the same, but the stages are different.

In the meantime, what I think we should do is express all our solidarity to people who still manage to produce good culture even in those conditions. It would be unfair, and although unfortunately sometimes it happens, to say that if you stay in the country and work in the country and produce culture in the country, you have to accept some compromises, therefore, I don't accept and I don't value your production, this is not fair. It's not useful.

Some people go out and so, of course, they are free to say everything they want. But even if you are honest – you cannot say everything but whatever you say is honest, that is good for the people who have to live there. And remember – we had five years in the Soviet Union in the 1970s, and we had a friend who was writing about Italian culture. And she said, I have to be very prudent, but I don't want to go out; I want to write for my own people here. And let's understand that and let's not be overly critical of the difficulties and sometimes of the compromises that one has to accept in order to tell some of the truth, with honesty and in a very important and very useful way.

Thank you. (Applause.)

[29:50]

MS. ESFANDIARI: Thank you very much.

I'd like to put a question to all three panelists. And this is a general question. Are traditional cultures undermining citizens' human rights?

[00:30:14]

Roberto?

MR. TOSCANO: Oh, it's a wonderful question. But I don't need seven minutes; I need many more. (Laughter.)

MS. ESFANDIARI: No, you have –

MR. TOSCANO: And now she gives me three probably.

You know –

MR. TOSCANO: – I think that cultures – cultures are an important part of human development. You know, one of the problems of the contemporary world is – relates to time. The past is not there, and the project for the future is not there. But if you live only in the present, there is no space. It's like, in geometry, the dot doesn't have any dimension. You cannot do anything with it, neither morally nor culturally. So we – you need the past.

[00:30:55]

The problem is when the past becomes a paralysis and prevents you from moving ahead. Usually that doesn't happen naturally, because naturally things evolve. But when somebody takes hold and tries to impose – and here's the political part – and says, this is it; you don't move from here. And this, unfortunately, is all – especially done by religions and people who run religions, and people who tell you, this is so. And you ask, why is it so? And the answer is, God says so. OK, OK?

[00:31:33]

MS. ESFANDIARI: Omid ? –

MR. MEMARIAN: Yeah, I –

MR. TOSCANO: God hasn't been consulted usually.

MR. MEMARIAN: I think Iran's human rights crisis definitely has a political aspect to it, but I think it's a cultural issue as well. You know, it's very deep cultural thing.

[00:31:51]

I remember I was talking to somebody, like a few days ago, that, you know, somebody was tortured inside prison. And you know – and I was telling that – he was asking me – and I said – actually it was Maziar – who's here. And what – why – what do you think about the entire thing? You know, how people can torture somebody inside prison, you know, and then live their lives? And – and I told him that when I was, like, beaten by my interrogator or when I was – during the long interrogation sessions that we had, what I got from the whole thing was that, this person see me as “the other.” And so for him, I didn't have any rights. So he was very comfortable doing anything with me.

And this “me” (sic) and “the other” thing in our cultural is very deep – “we” and “the others.” So, for the Iranian government, they are – so we are “the others,” and they are capable of doing anything with “the others” – intellectuals, dissidents – and so anyways – and, you know, it’s not just the Iranian government. Even in the – you know, amongst – among the Iranian people, I would not even – me, as an Iranian citizen, even we have that kind of “we” and “the others.” And it’s very – it’s deeply rooted in our culture.

[00:33:11]

And I think for – if – we cannot deal with human rights issue – issues in Iran in the long run without addressing these cultural obstacles that have been attached to our culture for a long time. And when I see that they’re in – (inaudible) – tradition, female rights, that kind of “we” and “the others” is much more loose and different. So, anyways, I think that, definitely, that’s cultural, and it’s not about the Iranian government. If we had a democratic government in place, I think, now, and still we had Iran, you know – had human rights issues definitely. And this is – that’s why, you know, we have to work hard – harder and harder, and now we deal with some of the urgent things – like, for example, the arrests, torture, you know – these kind of things. But, in the long run, we have to move deep to address these issues.

MS. ESFANDIARI: Is it cultural?

[00:34:04]

MS. KAR: I believe that, you know, traditional culture is not particularly, in Iran, against human rights standards. It’s for all countries. And I guess, even in United States, if you do have a referendum about homosexuality, I’m sure you cannot predict that a hundred percent of the American – they agree with that. So it’s not something very particular for Iran; it’s for all societies.

[00:34:38]

Something that is very important is we can find a kind of democracy and when we can find a kind of democracy, all open – (inaudible) – they can show themselves, they can describe themselves, and then we will follow the majority in parliament. Now, something that is problem in Iran is the parliament is not a mirror of all society. Just a part of people – they do have representatives in the government, in the parliament. And so we cannot stop working for human rights, and we cannot say the reason is traditional culture in Iran, which are against the human rights.

[00:35:45]

I can give you some examples of my experiences in Iran, because, as you know, I practice as lawyer in Iran, 22 years in Islamic Republic of Iran. And mostly women who were coming to my office, they had hijab and sometimes they had very extreme hijab, and they were not following the government, just their hijab was by choice. But when they were talking about their family cases – like divorce, like custody and some others – when I was

explaining that all legal system is Islamic and you do not have absolute rights for having divorce or absolute rights for having custody, they were asking me, who wrote and approved this legal system? And when I was saying that this is coming from clerics, and this is according to the Islam principles, they were becoming so angry. And they were saying that if Islam is that, we are not Muslim. And they had very extreme hijab, very extreme Islamic veil, and sometimes they were following government, sometimes not.

[00:37:25]

So we can say for something like adultery, yes, you are right. The society and traditional society is an obstacle for having a part of human rights standards that, you know, cover this issue. But it doesn't mean that Iranian people, they agree with stoning as a punishment. It doesn't. This is matter – this is matter that government in Iran is behind of the traditional culture of Iranian people. So I guess we don't have stop our activities for having better situation – human rights situation in Iran and working and struggling for having a kind of democracy. I don't know how, and I don't know what time we can get it. But I am sure we will get it because of the rate of educated people in Iran.

[00:38:37]

MS. ESFANDIARI: OK.

Omid, you mentioned in your opening remarks that there was – love letters were written from outside prison by women, mostly, to their husbands, and this was – this love-letter exchange was between the wives of the leaders of the reformist movement as I recall and I collected them. But wasn't this a break with our culture that you do not express these intimate feelings, you know, openly in an open letter addressed to the community basically? You're addressing your husband; but this is an open letter and talking about very intimate issues like, I look at the moon and I miss you at night or –

MR. MEMARIAN: Can I kiss you?

[00:39:40]

MS. ESFANDIARI: Yeah, I miss your kisses. And these are traditional people who, as Mehri said, probably observe the hijab because they are believers and so on. But they use this – do you think they use this vehicle of writing open letters in order to attract the attention of the people to the violation of human rights of their spouses in prison?

MR. MEMARIAN: I think definitely. I think it's not just reformist leaders. (Inaudible) – has written a few letters –

MS. ESFANDIARI: Yeah, exactly, yeah.

[00:40:21]

MR. MEMARIAN: – and you know, we have seen a lot of exchanges. So, over the past few decades, you know, the Iranian government has tried to establish – to make

dominant a number of narratives. When it comes to relationship between men and women, the narrative – the dominant narrative exposed by the government in the – in public spheres is to – is not to talk about your feelings. It's like a – people do not talk about it.

But even – but now, they free – they openly talk about their deepest feelings and, between the lines, they express how they're frustrated by the situation and their condition and all that. So in – overall, I think the big picture – what they do is to challenge the government's narrative, challenge that kind of narrative that the government has spent a lot of money on that, you have – we are – a number of institutions over the past three decades. And that's, I think, very important, to challenge the government's narrative, to humanize the situation, to give voice.

[00:41:22]

So, for many people, human rights is a – you know, it's not an issue, for sure, in Iran. But when you hear that somebody is talking – but Iranians are emotional and, to some extent, romantic, if that's a plus, and that attracts the attention of other groups so they penetrate different layers of society by doing that. So I think – and it's very, like, innovative way of spreading out the message.

MS. ESFANDIARI: Roberto, is this sacrificing culture for the sake of human rights?

MR. TOSCANO: No, you know, before, Omid said something very interesting, that the regime – all regimes try to make the opponent or even the dissident as “other.” The moment when this “other” reveals the depth of human, not political, but human feelings, then it becomes more difficult for the regime to represent this “other” person as an alien subject, as somebody who is maneuvered by the Mossad or whatever. He's a human being who speaks and thinks and feels like you. And this weakens very much the possibility of, you know, expelling the dissidents from the community of normal people.

MS. ESFANDIARI: Mehri, you want to add something to the –

[00:42:54]

MS. KAR: Yeah, just I would talk to audience that something is very problematic in Iran is all ordinary aspects of social lives and individual lives – all are political according to this political system. And that's the reason we – sometimes we mix political and social and something that is not political. But there is punishment for that, and they do that under the name of Islam. I'm not sure that's Islam; I'm not expert in Islam, but I guess a religion cannot, you know, work in all aspects of a human being and, if they do that, they cannot stay for more than a thousand years.

So they are using and abusing some interpretation of Islam for having more power, and I believe that all ordinary aspects of lives in Iran now means very political and ordinary people in Iran – and they are in a struggle with this kind of government. And I would like to say that something that the people are very sad with that is the lack of freedom – social freedom and not just political freedom. Because for political freedom, a minority, like us, we

are in trouble with that; but majority of people they like to continue their lives – and very normal lives – and they cannot do that.

[00:45:03]

So the lack of social freedoms is something that – we were not facing with that during Shah, before Islamic Revolution. And that – that's the reason now young people, young generation they criticize their parents that why you did the revolution in Iran because we can see the film and the reports from before revolution and we can understand that you did – you did have social freedoms. And I guess in some society like Iran, the first thing that now young generations, all classes of Iranian people, they are working for that – is social freedoms, more than political freedoms.

MR. MEMARIAN: Can I add something to this discussion?

[00:46:03]

MS. ESFANDIARI: Sure, if you can – go ahead.

MR. MEMARIAN: Over the past, you know – I'm just going to say how the trends I mentioned, how it has affected not only, like, the Iranian people, but even the Iranian authorities.

For example, last year I was in Geneva during the Human Rights Council, and I – and as usual, I just go approach the Iranian delegation, and I talked to a number of them during the session. And I could see that how the change has come even to the Iranian authorities.

[00:46:31]

Some of them, behind doors, are – you know, not on the record – but they sympathize with what was happening. And during the session, I remember that none of the Iranian diplomats were sitting behind their chairs. So it was like they were just walking all around the hall, and it was like they were embarrassed to sit down there and listen in to what was happening. And I heard from one of the delegation members that there were some forces within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that – they didn't really put that much effort to have a better response to the council's questions, and it was, like, that some people actually like the fact that Iran – Iran's case goes to the council and get – and you know, and they – a resolution being passed by the council. So in – I can see how it has changed even part of the government.

[00:47:28]

And – however, and I believe in general that the Iranian government is not a black and white, like – it's not black and white. And in many cases we have seen, there are elements within the judiciary, there are elements within the establishment, that they really want to help and – but because of the dominance of a minority from the intelligence, you

know, they are incapable of doing anything. But it – I just wanted to share that the wave of change, you know, has affected the layers of the Iranian authorities as well.

MS. ESFANDIARI: Roberto?

[00:48:06]

MR. TOSCANO: What Mehrangiz Kar said is very important, but also at the same time very problematic. If it is true that there is a demand for political freedom, which is felt by an elite, and a demand for social, cultural lifestyle, especially on the part of the – that's felt by nonelite, then there you have the political problem of the opposition in Iran. I think that what we have to do is to prove the truth, which is if you don't have political freedom, then also the other freedoms are precarious and they're not really something that you can count on. And it's very, very dangerous because today in China, the Chinese government doesn't bother people about the way they walk around in the street or even the books they read; you know, they don't care. But still they maintain a strong hold on the politics.

So I think whoever wants a future for Iran, a free Iran, a democratic Iran, an Iran as a normal, international subject, will have not to give up on this and will have to work on establishing the links which exist between political freedoms and even lifestyle. Otherwise the regime, sooner or later, will understand, and it's already understanding now.

[00:49:25]

You know, Ahmadinejad is not particularly focused on the – on hijab, OK? And even the subliminal messages – these priests who will bother you, I will not. But that doesn't mean he's a democrat. So let's be very, very careful not to allow the regime to brand people who want political freedoms as elite and people who do not want – will not care about the concerns of common people. Again, go back to films. Go to "Crimson Gold" by Panahi. Go to the – "A Separation." You see the social split. And the regime thrives on this social split.

MR. MEMARIAN: I think there's a – there's a difference between China and Iran in that regard that in Iran, any changes in the – in lifestyle is a political statement. In Iran, we have – like the issue of hijab is not just a lifestyle thing; it's one of the identities of the Islamic Republic. So if you have some – you know, if you change that, like if we see it kind of changing that department, then there is something happening in the political part as well.

[00:50:35]

MS. ESFARIANDI: Isn't hijab the problem of choice? And that takes you to the basic human rights of the citizen – I mean, the – OK, let me now open the floor to the question.

Pete Royce (sp) in the back. Just wait for the mic, and I think it –

Q: I enjoyed the panel very much.

MS. ESFARIANDI: Is the mic working? Can you hear him?

Q: OK. Can I ask you a question –

MS. ESFARIANDI: They can't hear you. Sure.

[00:51:01]

Q: I just want to say that I think the best testimony to the warmth and strength of Siamak Pourzand are his wife and daughter who spoke here, OK? With that, I have a question. I was very relieved to hear from Mr. Memarian the things you're easing up in attitudes toward the Baha'is and the gay population. But my real question is – can you hear me? You don't look as if you can.

MR. : I do hear you, yes.

MS. ESFARIANDI: Do you hear him?

Q: You can hear me? OK.

MR. : Yes, of course.

[00:51:32]

Q: My concern is – and I think it's hopeful that these changes are more generational than anything else. As time goes by, as the old-timers who have all these hatreds of Baha'is die off and new people come in and can't quite understand the stigma, that things are going to get better. Is there hope with generational change for an easing of human rights in Iran?

MR. MEMARIAN: I totally agree with you. I think there are a number of elements that contribute to these changes. One of them definitely is generational. One of them is changes we have in the – like, communication technologies for sure. But the fact that we have the Internet and we have the social networking websites – we have – people can create content, the fact that we couldn't – we didn't know about Baha'is a lot in Iran because there was no forum to talk about this issue; there was no forum for those who were under pressure in Iran to talk about it.

[00:52:41]

Now many of them, you know, record videos, and there are human rights organizations report on them, and they are present in international forums, and the news about them, you know, is all over the place. So then, you know, my mom and dad – they have to listen. You know, they hear that. So they listen to Voice of America. They might, like, watch two hours of entertainment but, you know, half an hour of news. And you know, they hear about that, and it comes to their conscience on that issue.

I think the generational – it's definitely – and there are many factors involved in this. And that's why I'm so positive about, you know, moving from that place.



[00:53:25]

MS. ESFARIANDI: Mehri, you want to add something?

MS. KAR: Just – yeah, just like – add something to this dialogue because that arise when Muslim Iranian people outside the country – because inside the country, it's not possible, as you know. Talking about Baha'is people is a very dangerous taboo in Iran, inside Iran. But when Muslim people, Iranian Muslim people outside Iran – they have started to support human rights of Baha'is people. It was very beneficial, I guess, because as you know, a very grand ayatollah, Ayatollah Montazeri, had a very positive reaction on that. And he issued a very important fatwa. And it was the first time a Shia grand ayatollah issued a fatwa about Baha'i people. It was the first time. And I think that's a very important positive result of this dialogue. And it would be effective, and goals for the future of Baha'is who are living in Muslim country. He said that Baha'is people has – (in foreign language) – and it means citizen rights. And this is the first time a Shia – grand ayatollah in Shia who talked about citizen rights for Baha'is people. And this is the result that we honor – (got it ?).

[00:55:16]

MS. ESFARIANDI: Yes, please.

Q: (Off mic.)

MS. ESFARIANDI: Just wait for the mic, please.

Q: Hello, I'm Farhad Mehti (ph) of coming from Azerbaijan. This is a neighboring country to Iran. And my question about cultural rights of minorities. As we know, the cultural rights is a part of human rights, of course. But during the shah times and after the revolution, Islamic revolution, there was others in Iran – they don't have, you know, their own newspapers; they don't have their own schools. Do you think that if the regime will change in Iran, let's say in five or 10 years, will others – you know, will – they will be granted the right to have their own education on their own language or have their own newspaper and media and so on? Thank you very much.

[00:56:02]

MR. : Can I add –

MS. : (Inaudible.)

MS. ESFARIANDI: Let Mehri go, and then – yeah, go ahead.

MS. KAR: Right now during these – I cannot say during these 33 years, because it was not possible, talking and criticizing the government for a long term. But these 20 years, I guess all human rights activists, particularly since reform, since 1997 in Iran, this dialogue was opened. And human rights activists – they are and they were talking since 1997 about

cultural rights according to human rights for minorities in Iran like Kurdistan and like some other part of country who their original language is not Farsi. And now human rights activists – they are working for them, and they do have their human rights activists among themselves, but unfortunately, they are at risk, like all human rights activists inside Iran.

[00:57:20]

So you are right, and we cannot – we cannot get kind of democracy country in future if Iranian people and Iranian government, they don't give some other part of Iranian the rights for having the language at the school and the newspaper in their language. Without that, democracy is not possible. But we are not happy with something like divided Iran. We like having human rights in Iran and respect for human rights.

MS. ESFARIANDI: OK.

Roberto?

MR. TOSCANO: Well, you know, Iran – Persia was an empire. And this reflects in the ethnic composition of the country. But at the same time, it is a nation-state. Now, there is a tension between nation-state, which wants to be homogeneous ideologically – all nation-states, not just Iran – and the reality which comes from history. How can you balance these two dimensions? Only with democracy and with change.

[00:58:38]

It seems to me very significant that areas of minority ethnic composition were overwhelmingly, in Iranian elections, for the reformists. This means that they know that only reform – a reformist approach to the handling of power in Iran can allow for the necessary spaces for their cultural autonomy.

In Italy, we had in northern Italy, in the German-speaking area, a very difficult situation. In the '60s we even had terrorism. And some people there wanted to split from Italy and join Austria. The solution was language freedom, administrative autonomy, a lot of money. (Chuckles.) And now, of course, there is Europe, so that the border is still where it was, but it doesn't mean much. We should make borders – not change borders, which means war, but make borders insignificant. Same thing should be done in Kashmir, for instance. You don't change the borders.

[00:59:47]

Now, the problem is that now with this globalization, which has created a loss of identity and loss of power, people rediscover their identities, and they become micronationalists. And a micronationalist is even worse than a macronationalist. (Laughter.) They usually – when they gain their own independence, they start persecuting the little minorities that are inside. It happens in the Caucasus. It happens in Eastern Europe.

So let's be very careful. Let's not just fall in love with all separatist causes. The best solution would be claim your rights, obtain your rights with some sort of federal system,

autonomy system; we don't care. But moving from that to having your own angry and nasty and nationalistic little country is not a solution.

MS. ESFARIANDI: Omid?

[01:00:40]

MR. MEMARIAN: I think the discussion about ethnic minorities in Iran, even within this – and the Iranian government is a very live discussion. I remember that during the – Khatami's era, and the minister of interior did a very, like – an extensive research on this. And they – the result was very interesting that – for the stability of – the political stability of the country, we have to give more freedom to ethnic minorities and religious minorities and to fund them, as you mentioned, and to, you know, develop these provinces.

But it's not coming from the Islamic republic. Even during the shah, the main perception about, like, Kurdistan and the other provinces that – like neighboring – the border provinces was to keep them underdeveloped. That was a major policy that was in place. And there is – this conversation is – was actually – I'm not sure about the – Ahmadinejad's era, but it was alive during Khatami's era. So there were some people who said, you know, we have to give them freedom; that we – there should be ways to let them practice whatever – to speak their language, have their newspapers and all that. And there was a force within the Ministry of Interior, other departments that they were against that.

[01:02:05]

But I think if we had that kind of environment, like a government that is committed to democracy or to some sort of democracy, then those kind of arguments and discussions will rise to the surface. And I think it's not far – in my mind, it's not far from happening.

MS. ESFARIANDI: Shera (ph). Yes, here. And – yeah. Everybody – (inaudible) –

Q: Thank you very much. I'm Shera Khatab (ph), a visiting scholar with the Woodrow Wilson. And I come from Egypt. And this discussion has been very enlightening for us for the phase that Egypt is going through now. In Egypt, we have a huge cinema industry. They call it the Hollywood of the East. Many of the people working in this industry have declared that they are planning to leave the country now with the advent of the Islamists. What advice would you give to people in this sector, this cinema sector? And I think you would also – because really, there is a scare right now for the people working in the cinema industry. Thank you.

[01:03:20]

(Off-mic exchange.)

MS. KAR: I have been in your country a few months ago, and before Ikhwan al-Muslimeen won. That –

Q: The Salafists – (off mic) – they're more –

MS. KAR: And Salafists, yes. Yeah, you're right. And now perhaps they join with each other. And that time it was during the last Friday before Ramadan. And it was the first time Islamic people, Islamic – political Islamic people, they monopolize Tahrir Square – they're trying. And their voice is – they're purely Islamic and nothing else. It was the first time.

[01:04:16]

And the time I became scared in your country. And I remembered our revolution in Iran. And I became so sad. And then I was talking to very intellectual people in Egypt about this danger that I could see that is coming. All of them, they were saying, no, you cannot understand this society; this is different. And then I insisted that, no, this is not different; why you don't use our experiences. They were saying, no, you are Shia and we are not Shia. (Laughter.)

Q: It's insulting.

MS. KAR: Yeah, that was over there. That – and I went back to United States, and I was following the news. And then I saw something that I predicted. I became so sorry. And I was going to some very important Muslim scholars in some think tank, and I said that you can – you can work now for the region, except Iran. And why there is not exchanged our experiences? Why they don't know anything about Islamic constitution of Iran? Why they don't know anything about the Islamic penal code of Iran? And all these think tanks, they didn't care about that. And I don't know why, because they believed that if the people – they want something like Islamic government – doesn't matter – they (think ?) they can get it so that that's –

[01:06:15]

Q: (Off mic) – the division between Sunni and Shia – it's the – (off mic) –

MS. ESFARIANDI: I'm sorry, you cannot –

MS. KAR: (Inaudible) – it's very minority. Sunni is very – Shia is very minority in Egypt. And this minority, they do not have any mosque in Cairo, like Iran. In Tehran, Sunni people – they don't have a mosque in Tehran. It's very similar. It's very similar. So if we had some opportunity to exchange our experiences, now I guess the region was not like this because half of the population of this region are female, and if they knew that, what kind of lives, you know, Iranian – you know, Iranian women – now they are under pressure. By the name of Islam, they were not following the situation. And they were not voting (them ?).

[01:07:25]

But as you know, there is not any political party and organization except Ikhwan al-Muslimeen and then Salafists who they are – they are helping Ikwhan al-Muslimeen in Egypt. And something that, you know, we suffer of that is lack of democracy and the

history of dictatorship in this region. And you are right, it's dangerous, and perhaps you lose something like national income because in this country – I guess this country is not very attractive for tourists, and your income is coming from tourists. I'm so sorry for that, but hopefully, Egyptian people, by democracy, you know, they threw them far from the center of government if they will work against the human rights and women's rights in Egypt.

MS. ESFARIANDI: Roberto and then Omid.

[01:08:34]

MR. TOSCANO: Yes, I wish I could say something very positive. And I am positive enough and optimistic in the longer run, but it's going to be tough. Why is it going to be tough? It think it's not a problem of democracy if we define democracy correctly. It is true that in spite of what we had thought – because we had seen the young people, you know, the people of bloggers – we had – we made a mistake in assessing the social forces at play. Democracy means an Islamist majority. What we don't have there is pluralism, is liberalism. So democracy by itself, meaning majority rule, is not by itself a guarantee.

[01:09:14]

But can you love secularism more than democracy? In that case, you have to be for a dictatorship, like Turkey was for many, many years – keep them down because they are not pluralistic; they will impose their own – this is very delicate. And you know the debate is there all over the area.

I don't think that choosing pluralism over democracy, meaning imposing freedom – in quotation, but that's what it is – is a solution. The only solution – well, you know, I come from a Catholic country, and the Catholic Church didn't accept democracy and pluralism just like that. It's quite a recent phenomenon as history goes. The only hope is that people, since young people know what they want, they have their – in spite of the religious traditions and pressure and power, they will learn. And they are learning already, incidentally, also in Egypt. I don't see many other alternatives.

[01:10:13]

MS. ESFARIANDI: (Inaudible.) Yes, just if there is another question, I'll take two questions, and then we'll put an end to this session.

The lady here. Yes, please. (Inaudible.)

Q: Thank you. I am Emarsa Deri (ph). I wanted to express my respect for Siamak Pouzand, first of all, and his dear family. We run Tavaana, which is an e-learning institute for Iranian civil society. And this conversation today – this morning's conversation comes up often in our virtual classrooms with students from inside Iran. It's a very popular, if you will, topic right now in Iranian civil society, you know, the role of culture versus the role of politics.

[01:10:54]

I just wanted to insert into the discussion that there's an important piece of this that hasn't been discussed so far, and that is education and the education system and its impact on the development or the hindrance of culture. As we talk about the improvements or the positive developments culturally, we shouldn't forget that looking at the education system, things are getting worse. They're getting significantly worse, and not just in the universities and academic freedom and the crushing of student movement at the universities, but from, you know, kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, the curriculum is changing. The infringements on girls' freedom inside schools is changing. The insistence on a very militaristic attitude towards outsiders, particularly Israel and the United States, is changing for the worse. All of this is happening while we discuss all these positive developments in culture. So we shouldn't forget the impact of this curriculum and the repression in the universities on the long-term development of Iranian children.

[01:11:55]

MS. ESFARIANDI: OK. Just let me answer quickly your question. We have two more panels, and the problem of education will be tackled probably in the next panel when we deal with media.

So I think we are just – the lady had – did you have a question? I saw you raise your hand.

Q: Yes.

MS. ESFARIANDI: Let's take the mic and then –

Q: But I don't think – maybe the woman who just said something maybe negated what I was thinking. But my name is Margo Zimmerman (sp). And as an outsider, I just wanted to take the opportunity to ask the panel, as someone who gets her news about Iran from newspapers still, why is it that the Arabs – and I know what I read at least is that Iranian –

MS. ESFARIANDI: You have to be very brief – short.

[01:12:55]

Q: Yeah, sure, OK – that Iranian education is much better now than it was a long time ago, that the middle class is growing, that women have more jobs. And I'm just wondering why the Arab Spring in Egypt and in Yemen, Libya, other places seems to carry on, whereas the "Aryan Spring," if you will, in Iran – (laughter) – seems – you know, it's gone. We don't hear anything. And I just want the opinion of you people as experts as why this isn't happening, because I always think with improved education, you're going to get more people, and we're going to stay in the forefront.

MR. : OK, can I –

MS. ESFARIANDI: All right, Suzanne and Karim, am I right you will tackle the problem of education in one of the two panels? Yes? OK.

[01:13:46]

MR. : But this is a wider question.

MS. ESFARIANDI: OK, yeah. Thirty seconds –

MR. : Thirty seconds.

MS. ESFARIANDI: – each of you, to answer this question, and we'll stop there.

MR. TOSCANO: You know, the regime in Iran is stronger because it's not just a dictatorship. It's an oligarchy, which has occupied several – it's more flexible. You can get rid of Ahmadinejad, and you're still there as a regime, first. Second, the social dimension – in – people went to the streets in Iran saying, where is my vote? In Egypt, they were saying, where is my bread; where are my right – it was wider, and it was socially wider, much wider.

[01:14:20]

And this is a problem for the Iranian opposition. And I think that events in the Arab world were easier, but more superficial. When things will change in Iran, it will be more difficult to change, but it will be more substantial.

MR. MEMARIAN: When I look at the Arab Spring and the experience that Egyptians are going through, I think we Iranians are a few decades ahead of a number of countries in the region because three decades ago we experienced how mixing religion and politics worked and how – when it's in place, you know, how it's – how it functions. So in 2008 Iranians are – they – we had the experience of a revolution. And we knew that in our – if you have a revolution and, you know, you know – you don't know what happens afterwards.

[01:15:14]

So I think they were a little bit more cautious. It was more mature. The – as you mentioned, it was just about my vote, which is a very, like, clear and specified, like, a demand. And so it was not anything about revolution. It – at some point, it turned to some other directions, but in general, it was about the election. And I think the fact that we are – Iranians are – that the political forces in Iran, civil society forces, political dissidents – they are careful and cautious is because of the experience we had during the revolution and how you rise and you overthrow a regime and in that chaotic environment, one group, you know, comes and hijack the entire thing. And so that kind of a sad experience – I think that was one of the things that we had in mind. It was in all of subconscious.

MS. KAR: Just I can say that the history of the struggle for democracy or something is very different between Iran and our – other part of the region. And that's why everything is different. And as Omid said, something that happened in Iran was different. They were

saying, where are our vote. And they were not saying and asking for regime change in Iran or something like that. And the language of Iranian is Farsi. The language of other region is Arabic. And Iran is a Shia society and Muslim society, and others mostly are Sunni. And everything is very different. It's not true that they are very similar with each other.

[01:17:00]

MS. ESFARIANDI: That brings us to the end of this panel. Leily when she started her presentation with saying that she brings greetings from her sister Azadeh. Azadeh is a friend of a lot of us in this room. We do miss her, but I took a picture of you, and I already emailed because – (inaudible).

Thank you very much. And we finished on time. (Applause.)

(END)