

## Shirin Ebadi on the fight for free speech and human rights in Iran

A transcript of our conversation with Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, who spoke to Free Speech Debate about her book 'Until We Are Free'.



*Free Speech Debate's Sarah Glatte and Maja Sojref spoke to Shirin Ebadi and asked her about the changing role of free speech and political activism in Iran. The video of their conversation is available [here](#). The transcript is below.*

Shirin Ebadi was the first Muslim woman and Iranian to win the Nobel Peace Prize. It was [awarded](#) to her in 2003 “for her efforts for democracy and human rights” in Iran and her “struggle for the rights of women and children”. Born in 1947, Shirin Ebadi trained as a lawyer and obtained her Masters from Tehran University before becoming the first female judge in Iran in 1969. Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, she was dismissed from her role and assigned clerical positions. In

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1992 she obtained her lawyer's license and set up her own practice. Since then, Shirin Ebadi has represented various high-profile cases involving the families of political victims, journalists and child custody cases.

In her compelling book "Until We Are Free: My Fight for Human Rights in Iran" (published by Rider 3 March 2016), she describes her ongoing struggle with the Iranian regime which has subjected her to years of intimidation and violence and eventually forced her into exile.

*In your opinion, how important is free speech to our human dignity?*

The importance of free speech is like the importance of oxygen for staying alive. Without free speech – even though one may not be in prison – one feels that one is in prison. Just as oxygen is imperative to remaining alive, free speech is imperative to human dignity.

*Can restrictions of free speech ever be justified? If so, under what circumstances?*

Free speech must not be restricted under any circumstances. The only exception is stipulated in the Convention for Civil and Political Rights. The convention states that free speech should not be used for war propaganda or for encouraging hate or anything that could be promoting hate against a particular gender, faith or tribe.

*In your book, Until We Are Free, you describe many instances of human rights violations, which you, your friends, family, or clients have experienced. Can you give us one example that is particularly characteristic of how the Iranian regime has dealt with human rights activism and free speech?*

I can mention the case of a young blogger who was a client of mine. One day, this young man wrote a letter to the Supreme Leader, Mr. Khamenei, in which he said: "Mr. Khamenei, I have just finished university. I would like to get married and start a life. But I have no job, I cannot even obtain a loan to start a business. You are constantly helping young Arabs including Palestinians and Lebanese. Imagine I was an Arab and not an Iranian. Could you please help me?" For that letter, this young man was imprisoned. A week later his body was given to his family. This was a very painful incident for me.

*You also describe the fate of Neda Agha-Soltan, the young woman who was shot in the streets of Tehran during the 2009 protests. After a video of her death was posted on YouTube, she quickly became a symbol of the Iranian protests. What effect has the internet had on civic activism in Iran and the spread of information in the face of media censorship?*

The internet has, in effect, come to the rescue of human rights. It restricts the government in harassing people. Let me give you an example. In 1988, the Iranian government executed 3000 political prisoners within a week, one of whom was my brother-in-law. Since the internet was not

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available at the time, not many people heard about this. However, when years later Neda Agha-Soltan was killed, thanks to the internet, everyone around the world found out about it. The news of her being killed spread throughout the world and as a result, the world reproached Iran for it. So in my opinion, the internet can help expose cases of human rights violations.

*To what extent is there free access to the internet in Iran?*

The problem with the internet in Iran is that the speed is very slow and it is also very expensive. According to an international report, Iran ranks among the governments most hostile to internet freedom. Nevertheless, our young people have found ways and means of circumventing the filters installed by the government. This is a very important achievement. However, in rural areas or in small cities, people have less access to the internet than they do in bigger cities and the capital Tehran. As a result, awareness in rural areas about human rights is far less developed than in big cities and the capital.

*In Until We Are Free, you describe the reasons for why you have been forced to seek exile in London. How much influence do you think the Iranian diaspora can have on what is happening in the country?*

The Iranian diaspora enjoys freedom of speech, they do not face the same restrictions as Iranians who live in the country do. So they must make utmost use of this freedom. They should act as the loudspeaker and a platform for the voice of the Iranian people. Their role should be to spread information about what is going on in the country to the outside world.

*How much freedom is there for political activism in Iran today?*

Political freedom in Iran is very limited. To give you an example, look at the elections. In any elections in Iran, be they parliamentary, presidential, or municipality elections, there is a council known as the Guardian Council. The role of the Guardian Council is to vet the candidates for the elections. Members of this Guardian Council are not elected by the people, but are appointed by the Supreme Leader. Anyone who criticises or has criticised the regime, even to the slightest degree, will be immediately rejected by the Guardian Council and thus cannot stand in any elections. In fact, critics of the regime are not only facing trials or imprisonment, they can also never take part in anything political, because anyone who wants to have the chance to stand in any elections knows that being entangled in political matters would mean rejection by the Guardian Council.

*Some claim that the elections of February 2016 constitute a victory for the reformist forces in Iran. Do you agree?*

In the February 2016 elections, the reformists succeeded in winning a few seats in parliament. This does not, however, represent a victory. The reformists have previously held a majority in

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parliament, under reformist President Mohammad Khatami. During the four years that the executive and the legislative branches of government were both in the hands of the reformists, they did not achieve anything, they did not carry out any of their plans. The reason for this failure lies in the political structure of Iran. Based on the Iranian constitution, the Supreme Leader has absolute power. This means that he has the power to veto any legislation, he can make any decision, he can decide to imprison or to pardon someone. In such a system, to speak of reforms and of a victory for the reformists is to miss the crux of the matter. First, it is the constitution that has to be amended before any mention can be made of reforms or of a victory of the reformists.

*How likely do you think it is that there will be reform in Iran in the near future?*

I believe that eventually, reform will happen in Iran and the reformists will be victorious because the majority of the Iranian people are against the current system in the country. However, the people are not resorting to violence because they do not want what happened in Syria to happen in Iran. They know that once they take to the streets, the government will relentlessly kill them, as they did in 2009. The silence of the Iranian people does not mean that there is no discontent among them. I am convinced that no government can sustain power when it is opposed by the majority of its people. Our people will continue their resistance albeit in a peaceful manner. I am sure that gradually and inevitably, they will be victorious and democracy will reign in Iran.

*Why are women's rights and freedoms often particularly targeted by authoritarian governments such as in Iran?*

One of the sources of oppression of women in countries like Iran is the existence of a patriarchal culture. This kind of patriarchal culture not only oppresses women but it also contravenes principles of democracy and equality more generally. In my opinion, democracy and the rights of women are therefore two sides of the same coin. In less democratic countries such as Iran, the situation of women is far worse, they are constantly being oppressed. However, the kind of oppression that women face varies from country to country, depending on the culture and civilisation of that particular country.

*You have argued that the women's movement in Iran has been unique compared to women's movements in neighbouring countries. Can you elaborate on this?*

Iran has a very ancient and rich civilisation. Around 2500 years ago, we even had a ruler who was a woman; we had not a king but a queen. In fact, the oldest religion in the world, Mithraism, actually started in Iran and in Mithraism, God was a woman. Similarly, in the Iranian language, we do not have "he" or "she" as they have in many other languages. Instead, we have the same pronoun for both sexes, which shows that the root of equality actually existed in Iran, as already evident in the language.

In Iranian history, there are many precedents of a strong women's movement. Around 55 years

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ago, Iranian women were given the right to vote and go to parliament, even before the Swiss women were given such a right. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution the government adopted many discriminatory laws. But that did not mean that Iranian women accepted their fate, they resisted it in many ways. At the moment some 60% of students at Iranian universities are female and we have many lecturers at universities who are women. In fact, we have had female lawyers in Iran for more than 70 years. Before the revolution, we even had female judges but unfortunately, the regime has prevented women from practising as judges.

All of these factors have contributed to the development of a strong feminist movement in Iran. Since Iranian women are highly educated and very aware of the discrimination against them, the feminist movement in Iran has remained strong, despite the discrimination.

*In your book you mention several cases of religious discrimination. You mention the struggle of the Sufis which you supported. You also describe an instance in which a prosecutor questioned why you, as a Shia Muslim, were defending someone from the Baha'i faith. In your view, what role does freedom of religion play in Islam?*

Islam, like any other religion, has many interpretations. For instance, one church in the west may be against the marriage of homosexuals, whereas another one may approve of such a marriage. Or one church may be against abortion and another church may be pro abortion. The same applies to Islam. A modern and progressive interpretation of Islam is in keeping with the needs and exigencies of today's society. Islam, like all the other religions, also accepts different faiths. To prove that, let me recite a Surah from the Holy Qur'an in 109.6 says: Say, "O disbelievers, For you is your religion, and for me is my religion."

So how can anyone say that Islam does not approve of other religions when there is such a Surah in the Holy Qur'an?

For that reason I proudly accepted to defend members of the Baha'i faith in Iran. This angered the Iranian government to such an extent that the security forces threatened me to force me to resign – but I refused to do so. In order to stop them from harassing me, which they were doing continuously, I approached one of the religious leaders as a source of emulation in Iran, who was called Ayatollah Montazeri. When I asked him: "Can a Shiite defend member of the Baha'i faith?" he responded: "Of course- you should do so even if you are not sure that they are innocent. It is your duty to do so." Having obtained this fatwa from the late Grand Ayatollah, I managed to silence the authorities. However, sadly, as Ayatollah Montazeri became a dissident later on, his word and his fatwa did not produce any changes in the country.

*To what extent can religion be, specifically in the Iranian case, a source of empowerment, a source of resistance, or even just a source of conciliation?*

From a personal perspective, I am a Muslim, in fact I am a practicing Muslim. However, politically, I

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am secular, I believe in the separation of religion from power. The reason for that is that the state should not be allowed to abuse the religious sentiments of the population. Whenever religion enters power, it causes disputes. In my mind, the best scenario is that anyone should be free to practice their own chosen religion and they all should have equal rights, irrespective of their religion. Religion must be private. One should practice religion in the privacy of one's home. The state, by contrast, should not be religious.

Religion will not necessarily be a source of unity since there are various interpretations of religion which could cause disputes. Look at Europe during the Middle Ages or look at the situation in the Middle East at present. All these disputes are caused by the different interpretations of religion. Religion deserves respect but religion must be personal, it must be practiced at home. It should not be in the hands of the government, it should not govern any society, it is democracy that should govern society and by that I mean a secular democracy.

*"Until We Are Free My Fight for Human Rights in Iran" by Shirin Ebadi (published by Rider 3 March 2016) is [available online and in bookstores here](#).*

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