

Catholic Social Teaching, Human Dignity, and Political and Civil Rights

A Case Study: Seeking Freedom and Dignity in Iran

Article 19 : Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20: Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

-United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

The 1948 United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a moral commitment assumed by all mankind. There is a profound truth to this [because] the rights described in the Declaration are based on human's very nature and their inalienable dignity as persons created by God.

-Pope Benedict XVI, 2007 World Peace Message

Introduction

The primary social teaching of the Church is the dignity of the human person; this is the ground of all the social teachings. Flowing from the dignity of the human person in society are human rights. Pope John XXIII discussed these rights in detail in his 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris, Peace on Earth*. Pope John emphasized that humans' dignity "involves the right to take an active part in public life, and to make their own contributions to the common welfare of fellow citizens." The right to take part in public life, to freedom of expression and sharing of information, and the right to peacefully assemble are part of the set of rights termed "civil and political rights." Unfortunately, these civil and political rights continue to be violated in the global community. In 2009, an election in the country of Iran set off a series of actions that exemplify both the human person's desire for truth and freedom and the violent suppression of human rights that those in power sometimes employ in the effort to keep their power.

Background

Known as Persia until 1935, Iran became an Islamic republic in 1979 after the ruling monarchy was overthrown. The new, conservative and repressive government was led by a religious scholar (the Supreme Leader) who, according to the constitution, is accountable only to the Assembly of Experts, a popularly elected 86-member body of clerics. There is also an elected president, who answers to the Supreme Leader, and is responsible for relations with other countries as well as practical budget and administrative affairs and the appointment of ministers and officials. Mahmud Ahmadinejad was elected president in 2005. His regime was marked by increasing international disapproval, with the U.S., the European Union and the United Nations all supporting economic sanctions against Iran for suspected support of terrorism and its nuclear weapon building goals.

Within Iran, support was growing for more responsive and responsible leadership. The presidential elections of 2009 became a crossroads for the people in this nation.

"The Catholic Church never ceases to give encouragement to those concerned for the common good and peace among nations. For its part neither will Iran, a bridge between the Middle East and sub-continental Asia, cease to fulfill this vocation."

-Pope Benedict XVI, Jan. 16, 2009

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2009 Iranian Election: The Cry for Reform and the Violent Response

--June, 2009: The presidential election in Iran was plagued by vote fraud that re-elected President Ahmadinejad and defeated opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Massive protests began the day after the election and grew in size after the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, declared the election fair. The non-violent demonstrations were met by increasing force, and a young woman, Neda Soltani, was killed. Many demonstrators are injured and many arrested.



--June, 2009 on: Modern technology helps news of the violent Iranian government response circulate in international circles and helps the growing opposition movement communicate, grow and develop. News of the "Green Revolution" (Mousavi's supporters wear green scarves or clothing), and the measures against it, spread widely in the world.

- June, 2009 on: Human Rights Watch documents three cases of sexual assault in Iranian prisons on persons arrested since the June, 2009 demonstrations; many more are being reported.

--November 19, 2009: Seven members of the The Liberal Student and Alumni Association (LSSA), a four-year-old campus group active in peaceful demonstrations, were arrested. 4 were later released, reporting physical abuse; 3 remain in custody after "confessing" to having ties to a dissent group, reportedly under harsh treatment. These 3 are now charged with "being at enmity with God" which is punishable by death.

-- December, 20, 2009: Three members of the Committee of Human Rights Reporters (CHRR), a group who have been monitoring human rights violations in Iran for nearly five years, were arrested. Four more members of the group have since been arrested.

-- December 27, 2009: massive protests were held in Tehran and other cities to mark the Shi'a religious observance of Ashoura. At least five demonstrators were killed, including the 32 year-old nephew of the opposition leader Mousavi.

-- Dec. 28, 2009: Prominent Iranian Journalist and human rights activist Emadeddin Baghi, the 2009 recipient of the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights, was arrested but not been publically charged with a crime. Amnesty International is concerned that he will be subjected to (as he was in a former imprisonment because of his human rights support) ill-treatment and medical neglect in detention.

(For Continuing Information on Human Rights abuses in Iran, see the Human Rights Watch website: www.hrw.org)

Prayer

God, you created humans to seek truth and freedom. We ask you to hear the cries of the people of Iran who are risking their lives and well-being to witness publically for justice in their beloved country.

We seek to be in solidarity with all those who cherish human dignity. We ask you to open our eyes to the human rights violations that continue in Iran. We ask you for the will and courage to advocate for international concern and support for the people of Iran. Grant all members of the human family peace and freedom from fear, oppression and violence. In the name of the Prince of Peace, we pray. Amen.

- Christians and other non-Muslim religions make up only about 2% of Iran's population of nearly 66 million.
- The nation has six dioceses or archdioceses.

