

An Open Letter to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Mohsen Sazegara is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute where he will focus on the prospects for political change in Iran and the role of the international community in the movement for democracy in Iran.

In the late 1970s, as an undergraduate at Sharif University of Technology in Iran



Articles & Testimony



On May 13, 2006, Mohsen Sazegara wrote an open letter to Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in response to Ahmadinejad's [letter](#)

<http://www.president.ir/eng/ahmadinejad/cronicnews/1385/02/19/index-e.htm#b3>) to President Bush earlier that month. Mohsen Sazegara is a visiting associate professor at Yale University's Center for International and Area Studies, having previously served as a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. He was closely involved in Iran's Islamic Revolution and held a number of senior posts during the early years of the Islamic Republic before becoming disillusioned and leaving government in 1989. He became publisher of several reformist newspapers that were shut down by regime hardliners; arrested and imprisoned by the Ministry of Intelligence in 2003, he was released after a prolonged hunger strike. The following is the text of his open letter, translated by The Washington Institute. Notes on the translation are included in brackets.

In the Name of God, the Creator of Life and Wisdom:

The Sheikh and the Prostitute

A sheikh said to a prostitute, "You are drunk and every instant you are caught in a different person's trap." The prostitute answered, "Sheikh, I am everything you said, but are you what you appear to be?"

The Honorable Mr. Ahmadinezhad:

With greetings and respect, I read your letter addressed to the president of the United States. I thought I should not miss the opportunity to write this. It really is something for a person to set aside his responsibilities and write a letter to a world leader taking him to task. I doubt that it is appropriate for someone who occupies the office of the presidency to do such a thing, but you have done so nonetheless. You have put a long list of questions—especially about his deeds in other countries and toward their citizens—before the president of the United States. Of course, the United States's own journalists do this—much more sharply and bluntly than you—to their president every day. They question him from various angles. They also printed this letter of yours. His responsibility and that of his government, is to answer their questions—or any question—and to defend his deeds in the arena of public opinion. However, what you did brings to mind a simple point, which, as an Iranian citizen, and with your permission, I will discuss with you. The problems of the president of the United States or any other country concern, in the first place,

the citizens of that country, and only then do they concern the citizens of other countries. For me, too, as an Iranian, the problems of Iran take the first place of importance.

Mr. Ahmadinezhad:

The simple point is this: Put this long list of questions before yourself and Mr. [Ayatollah Ali] Khamenei and ask these questions about the treatment of Iranian citizens and our own country by yourself and Mr. Khamenei. For example, ask:

(1) Do the university students—who you say ask you about the United States and Israel—have the right to ask questions about the deeds of the regime and the supreme leader [Mr. Khamenei]? Or do the Basijis attack them and, in the name of the saints, beat them up and then arrest them? This has happened many times.

(2) Is it possible, in the universities or in the press, to ask you and Mr. Khamenei about the financial assistance to extremist Palestinian groups? Can one ask about the monies Iran has spent in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other parts of the world? Can one ask why the money of the oppressed Iranian nation is spent on terrorist operations all over the world? At one point while I was in prison, during the election for the Tehran City Council, some friends of mine outside the prison proposed my candidacy for mayor of Tehran. They printed my photo on 500 posters and wrote these simple words on 500 other posters: “Forget about Afghanistan, Bosnia, etc.: Help Tehran.” (They did not even dare to write “Palestine” too.) They were arrested forthwith and the posters were collected. A lengthy article of indictment about that election coalition was put in my file as one of my accusations and [in absentia] I was sentenced to six years’ imprisonment.

(3) Can an Iranian citizen ask you and Mr. Khamenei why double standards, multiple standards, and prejudices exist in the treatment of various persons and groups? Why are people not equal before the law? For example, why is the Kayhan newspaper, which is under the supreme leader’s control, or the Islamic Republic newspaper, whose license was previously issued under the supreme leader’s name, allowed to accuse anyone and write every kind of lie, but so far, more than one hundred other newspapers and journals have been closed and journalists have been imprisoned? Or, for example, why do the clergy have their special, separate court? Or, for example, why are Basijis considered insiders and many doors are open to them, but the rest of the country’s youth must constantly fear encounters with those same Basijis and, according to the youth, fear being reported? For example, why can the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps take part in many of the country’s commercial transactions, especially the transport of oil from Central Asia to the Persian Gulf, but the country’s merchants do not have the right to do the same? The Revolutionary Guards can import any good, even alcoholic beverages, from its own special piers in Qeshm and in the country’s other ports by way of smuggling (something monopolized by the Revolutionary Guards’ security divisions), but others are excluded even from importing black cloth for chadors [all-enveloping black garments worn by some Muslim women]. Why is the importing of industrial sugar monopolized by gentlemen such as Mesbah Yazdi and Makarem Shirazi [two hardline clerics], but the country’s traditional and honorable merchants are deprived of the same? In government offices and in hiring practices, why do insiders and proponents of the regime—the so-called Hezbollahi kids—have priority while others, especially non-Muslims, cannot get a foot in the door anywhere?

I can add hundreds of other cases to this list of prejudicial treatments and treatments with double and multiple standards, cases that have been institutionalized in the country’s constitution and in our ratified laws. In our constitution and ratified laws, four classes of citizens have been defined with unequal rights: The clergy and the laity are unequal in terms of their eligibility to occupy the country’s top positions. Men and women are different in terms of their political, social, and economic rights. The Shiites and Sunnis are different in terms of their civil and social rights. And Muslims and non-Muslims are unequal in terms of their eligibility to occupy the country’s responsible positions and their treatment by the legal system. These are the official and legal cases. Beyond these, many varieties of prejudice exist in the country, as well. Did you know that the apartheid regime in South Africa allowed only for

different treatments among whites, blacks, and other racial minorities, whereas in our Iran, as I enumerated above, we have at least four classes of citizens whose social and political rights are different from each other? This is in addition to dozens of other forms of prejudice—between the regime’s insiders and outsiders—that are practiced every day.

(4) Can the ordinary press and citizens of Iran ask you and Mr. Khamenei on the basis of what right have you caused the country to be gripped by crisis over outdated second- or third-hand technology imported for uranium enrichment? You must be aware that the country’s National Security Council has announced to the press that it does not have the right to write anything on its own about the nuclear issue and that it must only reflect the regime’s official interpretations and those of its news agency. You and Mr. Khamenei probably know that the uranium enrichment technology purchased with billions of dollars of Iran’s money, second-hand through Libya from a profit-seeking Pakistani scientist named Abdul Qadeer Khan, is the most outdated technology among the five prescribed methods for uranium enrichment in the world. Not only does this not constitute a scientific advance at all, but also it will have no economic benefit for the country.

You are probably aware that this method of yours and Mr. Khamenei’s for creating crises and covering up the country’s ills has already caused Iran’s economy to stagnate and has cost the country billions of dollars worth of damage. God have mercy on us when the country is subjected to economic sanctions. Can one ask you and Mr. Khamenei to leave the decision-making on the policy for such a mistake up to the people’s vote? In fact, can one request that you ask the true landlord—that is, the nation—if it is willing to tolerate poverty, hunger, and misery for the sake of building an atomic bomb in Iran which at most is considered a vehicle for the preservation of the current regime and Mr. Khamenei’s power?

Mr. Ahmadinezhad:

Like you, I have studied engineering, but I have also had the opportunity to study history. As a matter of fact, for a short time I even taught the history of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Europe, but I was not allowed to remain at the university. The biggest infamy in the history of the Catholic Church is the trial of Galileo. Believe me, the church’s encounter with Galileo in that trial was much wiser and more humane than the encounters of Mr. Khamenei and his courts with Dr. Hashem Aghajari. Dr. Aghajari was sentenced to death on the charge of insulting the Prophet Muhammad, only because of his criticism, in a confidential manner, of Mr. Khamenei. After the country’s universities were beset by unrest, Mr. Khamenei and his courts were compelled to retreat; they sentenced Dr. Aghajari to life imprisonment. This university professor spent several years in prison, officially due to a speech but, in fact, due to a criticism. Throughout the history of the Middle Ages in Europe, discussions about and criticisms of religious principles continued. The treatment meted out to Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush because of his speeches and religious discussions in Iran never happened even in the darkest years of the Middle Ages. In this regard, the record of the clergy that has taken over power in Iran is one of the darkest records of clergy throughout history. And the likes of Mr. Mesbah Yazdi still have not abandoned this method. Can one ask you why you follow a cleric like Mr. Mesbah Yazdi who is the enemy of modern social science?

Why do you falsely claim that scientific research is suppressed throughout the world? Science has been globalized for a long time. Take a look at the Internet—that is, of course, if you are able to pass through the filters of the country’s intelligence apparatuses. You will see that thousands of research centers in the world are conducting scientific research day and night and making their findings available to others. In the United States alone, more than 100,000 scientific research projects are concluded each year and their results are published. In large European countries that have a population almost equal to Iran’s, this number is about 20,000 annually. Did you know that in Iran, annually, there are only about 300 scientific research projects, the majority of which are conducted by Iranians residing outside the country? If you have any doubt about the withering of science and knowledge and the deadening

of the exciting scientific atmosphere in Iran, just take a look at the sad state of the social sciences in the country. The regime cannot tolerate even an evaluation of views. Let us not even speak of the sad story of the assassination of the likes of Dr. Ahmad Tafazzoli [a prominent professor of Iranian culture and literature, who was found dead in January 1997; the authorities were rumored to have been behind his death] or the accusations leveled against Dr. Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub [(1923–1999) a prominent scholar of Iranian culture and the history of literature] and dozens or hundreds of other cases that one can mention about the treatment of the country's university professors, researchers, translators, and cultural elite.

Mr. Ahmadinezhad:

I, too, believe in the one God and the prophecy of just men. I believe that every religion tells the truth in its own language and that the world and its people, whether they choose to or not, move toward the oneness of the universe. As Hatef Esfehiani [an eighteenth century Iranian poet] said, "There is only one and there is none other than him."

Permit me to use your own words in order to seek testimony from the prophets and put forth specific questions bearing on the case of Iran:

(1) In your view, if all the divine prophets and the magnanimous Prophet of Islam, in whom you and I believe, had been in Iran, would they have been prepared to execute 4,148 prisoners in Iran's prisons in less than forty-five days? Fortunately or unfortunately, this was done at the express order of Mr. [Ayatollah Ruhollah] Khomeini himself in the summer of 1988, and when his designated successor Mr. [Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali] Montazeri objected, he was discharged. The victims were buried in mass graves in Khavaran and other places and, to this day, eighteen years after the fact, their survivors do not know where their loved ones are buried. Even worse, should they wish to hold services for their loved ones, they will meet with physical and verbal abuse at the hands of the regime's henchmen. One of the three people who arranged this crime against humanity, Mr. Pourmuhammadi, has been employed by you as minister of interior. He in turn has appointed several prison guards as provincial governors so that he can make the Iranian nation understand that Iran is one large prison.

(2) In your opinion, will the holy prophets or just men, or in fact any ordinary person who has even a modicum of chastity and honor, be prepared to become the head of a regime in whose prisons people's daughters and wives are violated? Do not say this is not so. When, in the first decade of the Revolution, I was occupied with the country's affairs, now and then I, too, heard such things and said, "This is not true. It is an anti-Revolutionary rumor." I could not even imagine that in the Islamic Republic's prisons, certain persons would not take pity even on married women. Thank God that I was thrown in jail, became ill due to hunger strike, and was able to leave the country as an opponent of the regime for the purpose of seeking medical treatment. As a result, during this trip, the regime's opponents trusted me, came to see me, and told me their stories. They told me of the crimes committed against them and the violations they endured in prison. If you doubt any of this, I will ask my dear friend Mr. Reza Allamehzadeh to send you a copy of the films that he has taped—with the permission of their husbands—in the course of interviews with a number of these ladies. Do not say these have to do with the past. Last summer, in fact during your presidency, this happened again in Kurdistan. If I had the permission of my dear sister—and her husband—who suffered this fate and managed to take her tired and trembling body abroad, I would have mentioned her name. But you can ask your security organization: They will know her name.

Outside Iran, I have listened to the accounts of dozens of people whose loved ones have been killed in prisons, who themselves have been tortured to the point of death, who have suffered homelessness and misery, who have been dispossessed of their homeland, or whose families are still under pressure in Iran, but who consider it an honor to call themselves Iranian and to defend that land and who are even concerned about the reputation of the country's leaders. Really, why should such noble and honorable citizens be driven away from the country? I do not know if you have seen the other side of the coin of the Islamic Republic or if you are only occupied with leadership, the Majlis,

and the ministers. The other side of the coin of the current regime is persecution, torture, exile, misery, and execution.

(3) In your opinion, if divine men ruled in Iran, would they have been prepared to carry out more than 300 assassinations inside and outside Iran? In your opinion, when Ali Amir-al-Mo'menin, Imam Ali, the Leader of the Believers (peace be upon him), the first Imam of the Shiites, allowed his worst sworn enemies, namely Khavarej-e Nahravan [followers of Imam Ali from Nahravan who left his side and became his enemies], to criticize him and even to bring disorder to his pulpit and his assemblies, and Ali himself did not resort to arms until they did, do you and Mr. Khamenei have the right to assassinate your political opponents? Both inside and outside Iran, all manners of people—from writers to bazaaris, from singers to actors, from political activists to cultural researchers—have been assassinated. A long list exists of the assassinations by the Iranian regime around the world. Those assassinated were not only Iranians, but also citizens of other countries. Because he revealed some of this information, Akbar Ganji was imprisoned for years; even now, prison casts a shadow over his head. Because he defended the rights of the families of the victims of serial murders, Nasser Zarafshan is still in prison. The case of the assassinations in the Mykonos Restaurant in Berlin is still only half-finished. The perpetrators of these assassinations are in prison, but the cases of those who ordered these assassinations—that is, Messrs. Khamenei, Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ali-Akbar Velayati, and Ali Fallahian are still open. The cases of the explosions in Beirut, Saudi Arabia, and Somalia have not begun yet.

One could add to the list of these questions to the point of writing several books but the questions put forth so far suffice by way of example. However, at the end of this letter, permit me to write about liberalism and democracy, whose vogue has, in your opinion, come to an end.

Mr. Ahmadinezhad:

Did you know that the rule of reason is the crown jewel of liberalism? Have you heard the sentence, “Dare to know” (Sapere aude)—from Horace, the ancient poet of Rome—which Kant quoted in his Response to the Question: What is Enlightenment? This sentence is the true essence of liberalism: Having the courage to know. Did you know that, according to the edicts of jurists such as Ayatollah Montazeri, during the absence of Imam Zaman, the twelfth imam of the Shiites, the people's opinion has priority, and that it is God's wish that governing be done by the people and with the people's vote? Did you know that the great Islamic thinkers such as Eghbal Lahouri [(1877–1938) a poet from Lahore] or Dr. Soroush are of the opinion that the fact that the Prophet of Islam was the last of the Prophets means that man has entered the age of reason and that in this age man must solve his problems with reason? Therefore, I ask that you to not use God and religion to justify the infringement of reason in the regime of the rule of the jurist.

At least study the reason-minded interpretations in the history of Islam, from Mu'tazilah [an early (eighth century) theological school of thought within Sunni Islam] until now and then you will realize that you can allow for an interpretation of religion that opens the door to modern reason—the essence of the modern world—and permits the beacon of this jewel to light the way ahead for humanity. The secret of the survival and the flourishing of Western civilization is in keeping the lamp of reason and intellectualism lit. This civilization criticizes not only the responsible authorities and those in power, but also, in its own most basic foundations, itself. Based on my own experiences, I can tell you that if any person, regime, or organization that in any way and under any pretense—be it religion, sect, or institution, or even the rule of the jurist—asks the people to abandon reason and hand their reins to someone else, there is a problem in his or their modus operandi and there is definitely something wrong. The first thing God created was reason, and he has not given man a more valuable gift than that. In the name of God and his religion, do not seek to abandon reason.

Democracy is nothing but a specific method of governing that is based upon respecting the people's reason and the

rule of civic wisdom. Its most important characteristic is that the majority of the people can freely choose their rulers. However small the minority may be, it has the right to speak and criticize and, whenever this minority becomes the majority, it can depose the rulers legally and without confrontation and bloodshed. The easier, the more open, and the more practical this mechanism for the people to criticize their rulers and depose them is, to the same degree the more democratic that regime is. In the United States, on a daily basis, this same Mr. Bush, whom you criticized relentlessly, is questioned and criticized ten times more than you did. However, these questions and criticisms are logical and precise, serious and specialized; they recite dozens of facts and figures and cover all matters, from the most detailed to the most general. What you said about the September 11 attacks and the ambiguity surrounding them has been dealt with much more deeply in a documentary whose director won the Oscar and which was shown in every movie theater. No matter what Western country you go to, journalists speak the mind of the nation and crucify the rulers on a daily basis—unlike Iran, where so far, more than one hundred newspapers and journals have been closed, journalists have been shackled, and some—like Zahra Kazemi—are tortured and raped in prison and then killed. In the United States, cheating by a president—such as Nixon—in the election was revealed by two journalists; when the matter went to court and this cheating was proved, the president resigned and went home. In Iran, when one of the election candidates—such as Mr. [Mehdi] Karroubi—objected and said that there had been cheating, or when dozens of candidates were rejected by the Council of Guardians—the organ that considers itself the guardian of the people and considers the people to be oppressed and downtrodden—no one cared.

Mr. Ahmadinezhad, while writing this, I constantly argued with myself over calling you “Mr. President.” I realized that I could not do so, because again and again I have heard those in the Ministry of Interior involved in the elections say that only 16 million people participated in the last presidential elections—that is, 25 percent of the total eligible voting population. Increasing that number to 27 million was done through cheating, and raising the number of votes for you from 8 million to 17 million was the result of cheating. This means that, through cheating, an absolute minority rules the people for life and the people have no way to object. The situation of Mr. Khamenei, the main ruler who has taken the seat of the country’s leadership for life, is even worse than this. Only 5 percent of the total eligible voting population in Tehran voted in the last elections of the Assembly of Experts, and Khamenei was confirmed by experts all of whom he handpicked himself. The people have no way to complain about the deeds of the supreme leader, criticize him, or depose him. They can only pray for his death or themselves revolt.

Come and be honest with yourself for a moment. If the vote of the people is truly important to you and Mr. Khamenei, and if you believe that your deeds will ultimately bring wellbeing, peace of mind, and justice to the people and will be validated by them, then allow yourself to be a part of a free election under neutral international oversight, compete with the people’s real candidates, and let the people vote. Or better yet, allow the people—again—to vote yes or no in a referendum on the Islamic Republic. Now, after twenty-seven years, it has become clear what is inside the Islamic Republic, and the people have the right to say yes or no to it. Specifically, ask Mr. Khamenei to allow people to vote freely about him and the Islamic Republic regime, because you too fall under the same chapter heading as he and a judgment about him will also make your fate clear. In my opinion, for Mr. Khamenei, the people’s free vote will result in a fate worse than that of Mr. Rafsanjani in the Sixth Majlis elections. Don’t you think that asking the public’s opinions and inviting the people to judge him is the supreme leader’s nightmare?

Mr. Ahmadinezhad:

Modern democracy is one of the most important discoveries of man in the new age. This method has helped man resist the temptations of the rule of infallible and superhuman persons and accept that ruling is the work of ordinary and fallible persons. Democracy is nothing but the preparation of suitable methods for the control of the rulers. Instead of threatening democracy, you should accept that governance is a matter of reason and that God has willed

that governance be by man himself with the help of his reason. Do not bring up God and the Prophet Muhammad in order to defend the authoritarian rule of the jurispudent in Iran.

These Western leaders, whoever and whatever they may be, whether they commit murder or do just deeds, at least fear the judgment of the people and respect public opinion. They are obligated to give in to the will of the people and work well for their own countries. In their countries, their citizens enjoy a decent standard of living and live with peace of mind; they do not live in fear of the government and the governors on a daily basis. Instead of writing prescriptions for others and acting as the advocate of the people of other countries, you should think of our own people. Keep the promises you have made to the people. Find a solution for inflation. Solve the problem of unemployment. Take away the access of thieves and smugglers from the Revolutionary Guards and the other organs to the oil industry and the country's other economic affairs. Find a solution for the problem of the trade in Iran's poor, innocent girls to the sheikhdoms. Find a way to solve the destructive problem of addiction among the country's youth. Think about solving the country's dozens of problems, great and small. No matter how you got there, now that you are the head of the country's executive branch, instead of making threats or giving advice to world leaders, think a little of our own people. Mind your own business and put aside this infantile behavior. Your image in the world has been reduced to something like that of Idi Amin. At least think about the country's honor.

There is no success but from God. ❖

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