

Text of Akbar Ganji's Speech in the European Parliament

December 8, 2009

Honorable Parliamentarians, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Iranian people's discontent with the rulers of Iran is deep and broad. The presidential elections of June 12 of the present year was a moment when this mass discontent emerged and became apparent. The liberation struggles of the past hundred years provided us with a collection of instructive experiences. The Green Movement's aims and methods show how we have learned from the past. The unanimous slogan, "Where is my vote?" simply signifies a demand for free, competitive, and fair elections. The right to assembly, to freedom of expression, to organize, to an impartial judiciary (public trials in the presence of lawyers and a jury) are demands which do not even conflict with the Islamic Republic's Constitution. The freedom of all prisoners of conscience and political prisoners and the abolition of torture are other demands of the Green Movement. If all the Green Movement's demands are considered, the essence of this movement, which is nothing other than a movement for democracy in Iran would become clear.

The Green Movement uses non-violent means, and peaceful means alone, to achieve its ends. It is a movement which cannot utilize 'revolutionary' (violent) methods, which would neither lead to a democratic order of freedom and democracy nor be morally defensible. The struggles of these past few months have resulted in the moral victory of the Green Movement and the moral defeat of the ruling regime. The Green Movement wants Gandhian leaders, not people who generate and spread nothing but rage and fury and spite and vengeance.

The people, deprived of the right to organize and suffering from astonishing economic discrimination and inequality (a Gini coefficient of .43) are grappling with their bare hands with a regime enjoying a vast repressive apparatus (the Revolutionary Guards, the Basij, security forces, the Ministry of Intelligence) and a massive oil income (\$280 billion between 2005 and 2007). For the transition to democracy, there is no other way but to empower the people through organizing the many legitimate demands and interests of various groups in society. In the past years, students, women, workers (a third of the country's labor force), teachers, and other social strata have been organizing. The Green Movement is a coalition of all the social sub-movements. Iran has a youthful social structure. Seventy percent of the country's society (about fifty million people) is under the age of 35. The Islamic Republic's rulers have tried over the past three years, to impose their values system (a particular lifestyle) on the youth. But they have been defeated, and this generation is pursuing pluralistic and modern lifestyles. They are demanding civil liberties and democratic rights and consider the ruling fundamentalists to be an obstacle in achieving their rights.

Honorable Parliamentarians, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The international atmosphere and the relations between the Western world and the Iranian regime have a strong influence on the life and death of the Green Movement and its future. Creating an atmosphere of war will cause the Green Movement to be marginalized and is in the interests of the regime. The creation of a different atmosphere will result in the survival and growth of the Iranians' democratic movement.

Economic sanctions and their intensification punish the people of Iran and not the regime's rulers. The experience of the wide-ranging, 'crippling' sanctions against Iraq shows that these measures do not necessarily end in the collapse or overthrow of autocratic regimes. But they will make the people poorer and poorer and cause the death of thousands of humans (the elderly and children) and the undernourishment of millions.

On the other hand, the middle class forms the principle elements of democratic movements everywhere. According to the government's official figures, there are more than 14 million Iranians living under the poverty line. More severe economic sanctions would weaken the middle class and pauperize them. The limited economic resources of Iran's middle class have provided the means of social mobilization, sustaining social networks and circulating news and information in the cities. An economic blockade would paralyze the life-breath of this class and strengthen the military and security institutions which control the sources of oil revenues and cross-border smuggling instead. (The daily value of smuggling fuel is two to three million dollars.) For example, if sales of gasoline to Iran are boycotted, the price of oil will rise, as will the profits involved in smuggling this commodity to the forces ruling Iran. This boycott will have a directly negative impact on the lives of some hundred thousand families in Iran who secure all or part their income through shipping or working in travel agencies. According to various studies released by Iran's Central Bank, the Majlis and other centers in Iran, the inflation caused by freeing the price of fuel in Iran will be between 20 and 70 percent. A boycott of the sales of gasoline will have a still greater effect on inflation. Such inflation would double the number of those living below the poverty line to 28 million. And so, an economic boycott would not only punish the people of Iran, but punish the Iranians' democratic movement.

Even if we were to assume that George Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld had intended to democratize the Middle East (of which there are serious doubts), the military invasions against Iraq and Afghanistan have showed that one cannot establish a democratic system in another country through militaristic policies. The death of several thousand American soldiers, spending hundreds of billions of dollars on this war, killing hundreds of thousands of the people of Iraq, the disappearance of whatever social security available under a totalitarian system like that of Saddam Hussein and the uncertain future of Iraq and Afghanistan in the coming years are some of the results of the military assault on the Middle East. (If the over a trillion dollars, which has been the cost of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, had been spent on the cultural and educational development in the Middle East, where would we be now?) A military assault on Iran would destroy the economic and social infrastructure and the means of Iranian people's livelihood.

Not only a military assault, but a military-security discourse and language of military threats empowers the Iranian regime and harms the Green Movement. In a military atmosphere, the Iranian rulers will repress the opposition on a greater scale than ever on the excuse of the foreign threat, using the accusation that they are agents of the enemy. The defeat of the conservatives and the victory of Obama and the change in the discourse of military threat to one of diplomatic dialogue snatched the excuse of a “hard war” from the Iranian regime and forced the regime to face up to the test of managing the economy and addressing Iranian society’s real problems, i.e., poverty, rampant unemployment of the labor force, widespread administrative and social corruption, the vast spread of drug addiction and the galloping brain drain. The Khamenei-Ahmadinejad government has failed each and every one of these tests and has no solution to these problems. Their only way out is to toy with words about a ‘soft war’, a velvet revolution, ‘wiping Israel off the map’, denying the Holocaust, and the issue of enriching uranium. It is under these circumstances that the Iranian people’s widespread dissatisfaction has emerged in the form of the Green Movement. If the atmosphere should once again be militarized or securitized (i.e., there be a paradigm shift from dialogue to military or ‘crippling sanctions’ threat), the Green Movement will be sidelined.

Honorable Parliamentarians, Ladies and Gentlemen,

What those active in Iran’s Green Movement are asking you, the representatives of the people of Europe, is, “Will Iran, the Iranians, and their democratic movement be punished instead of the regime ruling Iran, i.e., by a military assault or a boycott?” As far as I know, Iran’s Greens are opposed to the punishment of Iran and the Iranians but are for the punishment of the oppressors ruling the country. How can the oppressors be punished?

The Green Movement’s most important demand is Iran’s peaceful transition to a democratic system based on civil and political liberties and human rights. Some companies in the Western world (like Nokia and Siemens) have sold repressive technology to the Iranian regime. The UN Security Council—or at least the Western governments—must prohibit the sale of repressive technology to the Islamic Republic. We are opposed to any boycott which would increase the pain and suffering of the Iranian people, but actively support any boycott which would pressure the repressors and weaken the institution of oppression. Those in the Western world who help the Iranian regime interfere with the use of the internet or telephones or satellites are morally bound to remove these obstacles facing the Iranian people. The regime has not only deprived the Green Movement of access to media, but has tried to block all access to information from independent and objective media. Just as the British launched the Persian-language service of the BBC, the European Union can launch an independent Persian television to serve the spread of information and dialogue in the service of democracy and human rights.

The Iranian state institutions’ access to satellite and international communication infrastructure could be made conditional upon the free circulation of information and the lifting of censorship from the independent media and press. Economic trade with Iran’s government institutions can

be made conditional upon the International Labor Organization's regulations on the right to organize independent labor unions. The presence of representatives of the Iranian government in international meetings, institutions connected to the UN and international economic organizations can be made conditional upon the observation of international agreements on civil and political rights, conventions for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, and international agreements related to the rights of children. Trade with Iranian government institutions could be made conditional upon the transparency of financial transfers and the removal of illegal ports of imports and exports of goods and the elimination of smuggling over borders in which Iran's security and military forces participate.

Honorable Parliamentarians, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the course of the last three decades, the Iranian rulers have severely and systematically repressed the Iranian people, executing thousands of political opponents and assassinating dozens of dissidents and nonconformists inside the country and abroad. They have deprived Bahais of all fundamental rights purely because they were Bahais, they have turned the centers of dervishes into ruins and imprisoned them. The government has imprisoned reformists after the presidential election for the crime of participating in elections and competing within the legal framework presented to them and condemned them to lengthy prison sentences, forcing the arrestees to speak against themselves and their friends on television and confess to crimes which they had never committed. They have killed some of the arrestees under torture. According to the leaders of the Green Movement, a number of the imprisoned youths were tortured and raped. The universities have been and are being systematically purged of dissident and non-conformist professors and students under the excuse of Islamization. They have closed and are closing independent newspapers and have imprisoned and are imprisoning journalists.

To pursue justice against these crimes, we (political activists and defenders of human rights) have launched the Campaign to Punish Crimes against Humanity. The rulers who govern Iran systematically committed and are committing six kinds of crimes against humanity. We are interested in opening a legal case against the rulers of Iran in the International Criminal Court charging them with crimes against humanity. If the Western world defends democracy and human rights and opposes repressive regimes, instead of punishing the people of Iran and their Green Movement, they must aid in the defense of human rights in Iran to open a legal case with the help of international lawyers and deliver it to the UN Security Council.

The autocrats who rule Iran might be able to accuse the Western governments of a policy of double standards and provoke the people's nationalist feelings and so get some of the Iranian people to follow them on the issue of enriching uranium, but they will absolutely not be able to get such a result over the issue of human rights violations. The Iranian leaders' slogan of the annihilation of Israel or the denial of the Holocaust has been a cynical ploy by the leaders to displace the real, fundamental, issue of Iran by diverting attention towards issues that have no relevance to the contemporary struggle of the Iranian people for democracy. They deny the

Holocaust so that, instead of focusing on the regime's crimes and the people who are being killed in front of the world's eyes, everyone would be focused on confirming the genocide against the Jewish people during World War II. If the issue of human rights becomes the principle issue in the dealings with the regime in Iran and the policy of positive inducements (selling modern technology, especially for the oil industry, and foreign investment) and punitive measures (opening a case of crimes against humanity in the UN Security Council and sending a case to the International Criminal Court) was conditioned on following the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the people of Iran and their Green Movement would have an atmosphere in which they could catch their breath and survive and strengthen their will for the transition to democracy.