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Iran: We Want A Religious Democracy!

Leading Iranian Reformist Abdolkarim Soroush defends former President against a Danish rebellion

By Pernille Bramming

Washington---The thinking of the controversial philosopher Dr Abdolkarim Soroush is at the center of the reform movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and there are those who would like to proclaim him the Martin Luther of the Islamic world. There are also those who—on the occasion of the award to him of the Erasmus Prize in 2004—said that he is a Muslim Erasmus. Meanwhile, he himself points to 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza as his ideal and his greatest source of inspiration. Spinoza laid the groundwork for the 18th century Enlightenment and modern biblical criticism, which led to his excommunication by the Jewish community in Holland.

"I visited Spinoza's tomb in the cemetery at the Nieuwe Kerk several times while I lived in Leiden. Spinoza had to leave his community and live alone and suffer isolation," Dr Soroush explains, without any note of complaint in his voice, more as if making an admission, forcing himself to reveal something. But who would not hold on to Spinoza's mantle when their wife and five children stay behind in Tehran while they are forced away on what has so far been a nine-year-long academic odyssey, from Harvard to Yale to Princeton, then on to the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, to Leiden University, and back to the US, to Georgetown University and—for now—the Thomas Kluge Center in the Library of Congress? And who would not need such an exemplary anchor if they had an office in the Thomas Jefferson Building, which is so huge that even the friendly woman at the information desk cannot explain the way but has to take a map of the building in her hand when she accompanies your *Weekendavisen* correspondent on the first part of her way?

Dr Soroush has agreed to give a rare interview to the Western press, not because of Spinoza or the protest movement in Iran, but because of a minor rebellion in Denmark, a rebellion against the decision to award the prestigious Global Dialogue Prize to the former Iranian president, Mohammad Khatami, to be shared with the Iranian philosopher Daryush Shayegan. The \$100,000 award is a part of The Global Dialogue Project at Denmark's University of Aarhus, and Dr Soroush is a member of the prize committee which approved the recommendation committee's choice of Mohammad Khatami (members of the recommendation committee are anonymous). The award of the prize to Khatami unleashed a storm of criticism in Denmark, led by *Jyllands-Posten*, the high-circulation daily best known outside Denmark for publishing cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. The high point of the Danish rebellion so far has been an official request to the Danish police to arrest Khatami for crimes against humanity if he sets foot on Danish soil to receive the prize, made by a Member of the European Parliament for the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party, sometimes described—and not without justification—as Denmark's most important political party. To date the Danish police have refused to comment on how they are handling the request.

But how come an academic research prize is awarded to a person who has been President of the Islamic Republic of Iran in a period when the number of serious human rights violations was legion, as the complaint to the Danish police correctly stated?

"Mohammad Khatami deserves the prize, and it is unfair to accuse him of having blood on his hands," Dr Soroush says vehemently. "Khatami was elected by the people and not appointed by the evil regime. They voted for him to carry out reforms. He was, so to speak, sent into the regime in order to improve it," Dr Soroush says, designating by the term "regime" the "Supreme Leader," Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the persons he has appointed to serve him.

"The regime hated Khatami. He became president to serve the people, not the regime, and he was reelected to his second term with 70 percent of the vote. It is an honor that people do not bestow on someone they dislike. Khatami and the reformers failed in a number of ways, and one can

criticize him for many things, as I myself have done, but we must recognize that there were significant changes during his terms in office."

First and foremost, Mohammad Khatami changed the political discourse, Dr Soroush points out. From 1979 until 1997, Iranian politicians always spoke in the name of the "condemned here on Earth," and talked about the underprivileged and the necessity of martyrdom, of duties, conflict and war, and the threat of westernization.

"Mohammad Khatami spoke of the creation of a state ruled by law, of freedom and civil liberties. These were completely new words, and Iranian society became much more open. The censorship was loosened and it became possible to publish a new series of reform newspapers and journals. One of these, *Jamea*, had a completely unprecedented success and reached a circulation of 400,000. The regime closed it, and then its successor, *Khordad*, began to appear, and it had an even bigger success and a circulation of one million. It was a great step forward, even if Khatami did not have the power to save them from being closed by the regime. Reform newspapers were able to publish many important articles and to let readers experience a completely different standard and form of journalism than hitherto."

One of the many dark chapters in the Islamic Republic's history came to light under Mohammad Khatami: the so-called "chain murders." During the 1990s, more than eighty writers, translators, intellectuals, political activists and ordinary citizens were murdered as part of the regime's attempt to stifle the nascent reform movement. But it was the coverage in the new reform newspapers of five murders in November and December 1998 that brought the atrocities to the attention of the broader public, and in early January 1999 the Ministry of Information felt compelled to publish an admission that it was a group of their own "irresponsible and misguided" officials who were responsible for the "despicable and abhorrent recent murders in Tehran." "All Iranians were shocked when they heard the admission being read out on the radio," says Dr Soroush. "It was unprecedented, and subsequently a number of people in the Information Ministry were sacked. It also meant that the parliament began to dare to question the Minister of Information. Until then he had been a much too terrifying person; now he became a

human being. The way Mohammad Khatami handled this whole problem was very brave and it was one of the reasons why he was reelected.”

Another criticism against Mohammad Khatami in the Danish press is that he did not put an end to executions by stoning.

“Mohammad Khatami knew well that there would be many limitations on his efforts, but he tried to do something anyway. You could not ask of him to rectify all things in Iran. There are some changes that will take a long, long, long time. Even if the parliament had banned stoning, one would have to convince the scholars in Qom, the Council of Guardians and the population before it could take effect in practice. Apart from that, Mohammad Khatami is progressive, and I am sure that he is against stoning.”

Regarding the litmus test of reformist Muslims often used by some in Europe—their attitude towards homosexuality—Abdolkarim Soroush explains: "It is a sin if two men have sex with each other. It is the belief of all Muslims, and Khatami is no exception. Many Christians share this belief. Homosexuals have been created as such and they are not doomed because of that. In the religious democracy which is our political goal, it will be possible to leave the question of punishment to God, so long as homosexuality is practiced in secret. According to Islam, it is a kind of moral corruption, and therefore one should not encourage others by practicing it in the open. It is possible that in future there will be interpretations allowing homosexual practices, but at present I know of no Muslim scholars who think along those lines.”

Dr Soroush also stresses that Mohammad Khatami is seen as a cultural figure rather than a politician by Iranians. “People of culture are the hosts of history; politicians are the guests of history. Politics is a product of culture. A tyrannical culture leads to tyrannical politics; a liberal culture implies liberal politics. That is why we insist that the culture must change so that politics can be changed as well. Our historical experience tells us so. We carried out a revolution and replaced the Shah's despotism with a theocracy, but the theocracy was yet another sort of despotism, because the culture was not changed.”

“Of course, there are also political decisions needed in order to change the culture. That is why the reform movement is working for both cultural and political openness, but the reform movement began long before Khatami came to power. Khatami is one of its children, and as president he was able to empower it so that it grew and struck roots. The current Green Movement is a continuation of the reform movement.”

In this perspective, the prize is also seen as support for the Green Movement. “It’s been mentioned on the websites, and they are proud of it. They perceive the prize as a support from international civil society confirming that the reform movement is being taken seriously in the West. But the prize is very important for the entire Muslim world. Everyone knows Khatami and his idea of dialogue among civilizations, and it is important that his work is recognized in this way. Also, in the West, it is important to highlight those Muslims who advocate dialogue.”

In the West today the words “dialogue between civilizations” might sound a little stale, but in the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1998 it was neither easy nor unimportant to come forward with such a proposal. “Mohammad Khatami had two things in mind. One was that the starting point for dialogue is equality, and that implies that Westerners do not look down on people from the Third World, but set aside their arrogance. We must honor and listen to everyone. The second thing was to address a current in Iran itself, where anyone who did not curse the West was stigmatized and accused of being westernized. This is a very dangerous discourse because it leads to denying that we can learn something from the West. Then we look down on the West because the West looks down on us. Khatami wanted to take the air out of all this thinking by insisting that we need not fear westernization. The regime opposed Khatami's idea. They did not want any peace with the West, and they tried to obstruct his efforts.”

In the international context, not least in the UN, the proposal of dialogue between civilizations resonated since Samuel Huntington's “Clash of civilizations,” published in 1993, had been taken very seriously, Dr Soroush points out. For example, he was invited to a conference in Berlin which was about how German foreign policy should deal with the clash of civilizations.

Dr Soroush, who first studied chemistry and then philosophy of science in London, is one of the world's leading specialists on Persian Sufi poetry, and comparative philosophy is one of his main fields of interests. He himself also considers dialogue between civilizations to be an absolute necessity. "Shakespeare and also the Persian poet Jallaludin Rumi have said that 'music is the food of love.' I would say that 'dialogue is the food of peace.' We must do everything to ensure peace and avoid confrontation, and above all we must acquire a much better knowledge about each other. Too many people live in a fog and know too little about other religions and civilizations, and that is causing many misunderstandings. Therefore, we must create forums where we sit and talk and get acquainted. Knowledge precedes action, and false knowledge leads to erroneous acts," Dr Soroush declares.

Dialogue and, not least, its precondition in the form of recognition of diversity are also an imperative among Muslims in order to develop the kind of religious democracy that Dr Soroush and his supporters seek. The cornerstone is freedom of interpretation. "To open for freedom of interpretation is the first step toward freedom in our society. Religion is one thing; understanding of religion is another thing. There cannot and should not be any official interpretation of a religion. All interpretation is the result of human efforts and therefore fallible. Any scholarly interpretation represents one possible interpretation out of many possible," Soroush says.

His own way of interpreting the Koran and the Islamic tradition is moral-historical. His starting point is to consider the Koran to be the words of the Prophet Mohammed, the words of a human being, but inspired by God. This is heresy in relation to the accepted tradition that the Koran is the word of God. But as Dr Soroush says, "the Prophet was no parrot." Furthermore, Dr Soroush believes that the text should not be taken literally, but rather be understood within its historical context. For example, all orders, laws and regulations mentioned in the Koran, according to Soroush, are provisional, not eternally valid, and can therefore be interpreted so that the practice can be changed.

Soroush's speeches are available in some 1,000 different tapes, and his latest can be seen on YouTube. His books and articles are widely read and discussed, and have been translated into Turkish, Arabic, Indonesian and several other languages. His opponents in Iran publish one book

after another in which they refute his ideas and arguments. In September he wrote an open letter to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in which he criticized his regime in the strongest terms and defined the objective of the reform movement as the creation of a “post-theocratic regime.” “I wrote, deliberately, not that we want a secular government, because what I think of is an ethical/moral rule. That is what we want. Ethics are more important than religion. Ethics are the aim of all religions,” Dr Soroush explains. “In any political system, there are some fundamental ethical values that must be protected. In liberal democracy it is the freedom of the individual, in the socialist system it is social justice, and in a religious democracy it is a backbone of religious morality.”

In his letter, Dr Soroush also refers to his own past as a supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini and a member of a commission that from 1980-83 zealously purged the staff in Iran’s universities—misdeeds that in his letter he asks God to forgive. Not at least in that light, he shares *Weekendavisen*’s skepticism about what kind of institutions might be responsible for defining such a “backbone of religious morality,” and to protect it while maintaining freedom of interpretation. “It may be a form of the Council of Guardians. If we use the same wording as in the Iraqi constitution, namely that the law must not be anti-Islamic, it will give a breathing space that is much larger than if it was stipulated that the law must be in accordance with Islam. At the same time it must also be assured that the judiciary is completely independent of the executive. The judiciary is the heart of democracy: the stronger the legal system, the stronger the democracy. Therefore I propose that the chief justice shall be elected by referendum.”

Currently, Dr Soroush is more optimistic than he has been for a long time. The Green Movement's importance is growing and putting heavy pressure on the regime. In the eyes of the people the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has lost his legitimacy as a religious authority, and appears instead as a squalid politician. Meanwhile Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has lost most of the support he enjoyed before the June elections. It is the theocracy itself that is now being questioned, and not just which political group should be in power. "The goal is step by step, through reform after reform, to limit the power of the unelected in favor of increasing the power of elected representatives. We do not want another revolution," Dr Soroush says. “The regime is considering negotiations in that direction now. The senior leaders of the Revolutionary Guards

have realized that you cannot resolve the current conflict by force. They have to engage in dialogue. Initially the requirement is for all prisoners to be released and rehabilitated and those responsible prosecuted. That is the absolute minimum needed in order to create some sort of justice. Next step is a re-election. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad must be removed, and he will be if there is a fair re-run. But if there will be a re-run, the Council of Guardians in its current form cannot guarantee that it will be fair. Therefore the power of the Council must be restricted, and that will imply limiting the power of the Supreme Leader. Thus, step by step, we reach to the point where the constitution will be amended, and that is the central demand of the green movement.”