



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Acceptance Speech

Emadeddin Baghi

2004

Acceptance Speech by Professor Heibatollah Baghi on behalf of Emadeddin Baghi:

Thank you, Mr. Train and the trustees of the Northcote Parkinson Fund, for inviting me to be here tonight. And, thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for coming to support the work of the 2004 Civil Courage honorees — heroes of conscience — who put their lives on the line to further democratic ideals.

Instead of standing here, I should be sitting with you. I was eager to see my nephew, Emad Baghi, receive the Civil Courage Prize. But I'm here because he is not. Iranian authorities detained him and his family last week as they boarded their flight from Tehran. On behalf of Emad, his wife Fatemeh and their three lovely daughters, I extend a heartfelt thank you to the Northcote Parkinson Fund for recognizing his work to promote a democratic society in Iran. He was highly honored to be receiving this year's award along with Dr. Madhuku.

I was happy to learn that both the State Department and Amnesty International have formally condemned Emad's detention and treatment, and that the Northcote Parkinson Fund, with Emad's consent, has alerted the international media to his situation. With so much talk and fear about Iran's nuclear proliferation, it's good to know that there is also concern about the human rights violations that are taking place.

My nephew Emadeddin Baghi is an Iranian journalist, contemporary historian and prolific author who has continually risked his life during the past twenty years campaigning against evil in high places in his country.

He exposed the involvement of the Iranian government in the assassination of Iranian intellectuals and anti-government activists. He has written 20 books, six of which are banned in Iran, as well as many bylined articles in the independent reformist press exposing violations of free expression. He also founded the Defense of Prisoners' Rights Committee to provide legal assistance to intellectuals imprisoned for promoting pro-democracy ideas and opinions.

A former seminary student, Emad came to reject the rule of the theocracy in the 1980's and allied himself with a movement by younger intellectuals and political scientists seeking reform. In his first book, *A Study About the Clerics*, he argued strongly in favor of an Islam open to individual understanding rather than clerical interpretation. Not surprisingly, the book was immediately banned.

At great personal risk, Emad became the voice for many political dissidents in Iran. He argued on behalf of Ayatollah Montazeri, a former colleague of Ayatollah Khomeini who began to question the execution

of many of Khomeini's political opponents in the early 1980's. In 1999, he and Akbar Ganji, another reformist journalist, wrote about the murders of 80 secular writers, intellectuals and political activists which took place in the late 1990's, pointing out the government's overt involvement. These articles galvanized the public.

Emad was arrested, put on trial and imprisoned in solitary confinement for apostasy and endangering the security of the Islamic state in 2000. Released in the spring of 2003, he was repeatedly hailed to appear in court and received a one-year suspended sentence.

One of his most recent attempts to promote democratic reform was the founding of Jomhooriyat newspaper early this year. This newspaper contained some special pages on human rights, trade unions and civil institutions, subjects that are not normally covered even in the reformist papers. As a result of this bold attempt to educate the public about democratic ideals, the judiciary of the ruling clerics temporarily banned publication of Jomhooriyat this summer, and Emad was dismissed as chief editor.

Yet, Emad remains hopeful for societal reform in Iran. In a recent editorial, Emad said he perceives deep transformations taking place in Iran. He believes that Iran is inching toward democracy.

The Iranian government has extended the length of higher education to help young people receive the education and training they need to improve the country's economy. He believes that this alone has hastened the transformation of thought in the country.

He has also cited a move toward gender equality, with more and more women demanding equal rights. There is a significant rise in women's participation in virtually every aspect of society. More than 60% of university students are women. Many of the 8,000 non-governmental organizations operating in Iran are either led by women or are primarily for women.

Even in religious thought, Emad sees democratic evolution. According to at least one of the most prominent religious leaders, everyone is entitled to civil rights.

Emad believes that these are signs of a social movement that no power can stop. He believes that the state of Iran is facing powerful, irreversible social pressure for reforms and changes. And he expects that the momentum will continue to build until the people of Iran achieve a free and independent society.

Here is what he says. "I am more committed than ever to what I call a millimeter or inch-by-inch revolution. We have no choice — I have no choice — but to persevere and do what I can do to educate and inform the Iranian people about a more fair and just way of life. I cannot stop."

Emad's evolution from Islamist revolutionary to tempered democratizer suggests an alternative way forward in the Middle East. Just as the Iranian revolution was a beacon for radical Islamists throughout the 1980's and 1990's, reformers like Emad believe that their patient struggle for religious and political reform offers a new beacon for the region — one that may have a more lasting and progressive impact on the Islamic world than the West's war on Islamic terrorism.

Emad says that hope and courage are the main motives for change. People like him, Dr. Madhuku and others like them change their countries and change the world. Even if it takes place one millimeter at a time.

Thank you very much.

