

# Politics of the Nobel peace prize

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THE Norwegian Peace Prize Committee decided to award the Nobel Peace Prize for 2003 to Shirin Ebadi, a jurist and human rights activist from Iran. She thus became the first Muslim woman to have received the Nobel Prize, which has acquired high prestige for recognizing outstanding merit in select fields that include mainly the sciences and medicine, but also cover literature, economics and peace.

The names that were being most frequently mentioned for the Peace Prize were those of the Pope John Paul II, whose momentous reign of 25 years appears to be drawing to a close, and Vaclav Havel, Czech statesman who personified the struggle against communism and dauntless championing of democratic values.

The choice of a woman lawyer from a prominent Islamic country ruled by hardline clerics that was once America's surrogate in the region but is now included in the "axis of evil" by Washington carries a series of messages to Iran as well as the Muslim world. It also comprehensively conveys the assessment of Islamic culture and civilization in the dominant West. The biographical sketches presented of Shirin Ebadi describe her as the first Iranian woman in Iran to be appointed a judge by the Shah in 1974, a post from which the Ayatollahs removed her following the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

This decision by the Nobel Peace Committee has provided the media in the West, which dominate the field, with an invaluable opportunity to voice opinions about Iran, and Islam. Her dismissal by the Islamic Republic after its establishment in 1979 put the spotlight on its extremist and reactionary character.

Various Iranian emigres who were interviewed on western TV channels also underlined the fact that she had been imprisoned for a while on account of her role as a human rights activist, who sought in particular to defend the rights of women and children in Iran. This served to project the regime also as authoritarian and indifferent to public opinion in a world where human rights and specially women's rights are receiving growing attention.

With the US having included Iran in the "axis of evil", and now stirring up concern over its nuclear ambitions, the attention of the vast audiences listening to the western electronic media, and reading western newspapers is focused less on the lady honoured than on the country to

which she belongs. All reports and comments point out that Iran stands accused of supporting international terrorism, and is being subjected to scrutiny by the IAEA over its alleged ambitions to develop nuclear weapons. There are even reports that Israel, which has already launched a pre-emptive attack on Syria, may now target nuclear targets in Iran.

While providing ammunition to advocates of regime change in Tehran (including the neocons around President Bush) the move also has the effect of encouraging the softer option of reform, and indirectly supports the 70 per cent of the Iranian voters who have been voting for President Khatami. Analysts point out that the way the constitution of the Islamic Republic is framed, the orthodox religious clerics headed by the Rahbar, Ahmad Khamenei, have the decisive say

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in determining the country's internal and external direction.

The honour bestowed on Ms Shirin Ebadi is expected to boost the morale of the younger generation in Iran, that has participated in growing numbers in agitation against the conservative elements dominating the religious establishment. Though not against Islamic ideology, the youth of Iran has shown growing resentment over the dominance of the reactionary clergy many of whom they perceive as corrupt and an obstacle to the progress of their country, which could have been in the mainstream of contemporary trends.

By stressing that Ms. Ebadi is the first Muslim woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, the attention of public opinion all over the globe has also been drawn to the value system in the Islamic world, specially of its orthodox interpretations. These are seen to be discriminating against women and according them an "inferior" status.

Interviews on electronic media and write-ups in the printed word pointed out that Islamic Sharia

does not permit appointment of women to judicial posts, and that the testimony of a Muslim woman in court is supposed to have half the weight of the testimony of a male Muslim. The chairman of the Norwegian Peace Committee stated in his announcement that he hoped that the selection would lead to the improvement of the human rights situation, and particularly of the status of women, both in Iran, and the Muslim world.

The popular perception in the West, following this choice, is therefore of an Iran that is dominated by a reactionary clergy representing an extremist version of Islam that violates basic values of democracy and human rights and breeds terrorism. The award also reflects the self-image of the West as representing the vanguard of culture and humanistic values, which continues to have the "civilizing mission" that

was once used as a justification for colonizing the countries of Asia and Africa.

The current preoccupation with the threat of extremism and terrorism that resulted from the 9/11 events has resulted in a war being declared against terrorism, (perceived to be centred in the Islamic world), accompanied by a resolve to spread democracy and human rights to the benighted lands.

Thus the immediate political fall-out of this award is to strengthen opinion favouring a "regime change" in Iran, and to bring into the spotlight of the world media the "reactionary" and backward image of Islam. This has happened on the eve of the first Islamic summit to be held after the 9/11 events. There is already a strong undercurrent of resentment in the Islamic world against being targeted as the main source of religious extremism, and of terrorism, that has produced pre-emption by the sole superpower in Iraq and is being used to justify state terrorism in Palestine and Kashmir. How to react to this more subtle criticism that comes in the guise of an honour?

The Iranian government has cautiously welcomed the honour bestowed upon one of its citizens, who is not an emigre, but continues to live in her homeland and to pursue her agenda of reforms. Ms. Ebadi's own reactions, apart from those of personal gratification, have been to emphasize that in her view, Islam is perfectly compatible with modern concerns over women's right. She projects a gracious image of modesty, combined with good breeding and learning. If forces of reform in Iran feel encouraged, and their role grows in proportion to their popular support, that would be good both for Iran and its region, for that would promote stability and progress in this major country.