

“She Is Very Brave”

Shirin Ebadi stands up to Iran's rulers but insists Islam is capable of reforming itself

By **SCOTT MACLEOD**/TEHRAN

WHEN SHIRIN EBADI WAS IN PRISON IN TEHRAN a few years ago for accusing officials of plotting attacks on reformers, her husband petitioned a court to visit her behind bars. “You are a free man now!” was the male-chauvinistic wisecrack of an Islamic judge. “Why don’t you take advantage of your freedom?”

Any public official would think twice today about poking fun at Ebadi, whose struggle for human rights in Iran has earned her the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize. In naming Ebadi, Norway’s Nobel Committee handed a platform to a formidable Iranian voice of conscience, breathed life into the country’s dying reform movement and put the Islamic regime on notice. Ebadi has never believed that Islam and reform are doomed to be at odds. “There is absolutely nothing incompatible or contradictory about Islam, democracy and political freedom,” she told *TIME* in Paris, where she learned of the award. “There is much to be gained by demonstrating that freedom and democracy can be fought for and attained in a country of devout Muslims.”

Notwithstanding such olive branches, Ebadi’s unflinching advocacy has earned her the wrath of hard-liners, including death threats from vigilantes. Ebadi, 56, is a longtime defender of the rights of children and women; in recent years she has taken up the cause of persecuted activists. She was one of the 134 signatories of the 1994 Declaration of Iranian Writers, an early turning point in the pro-democracy struggle. “Her character is that of a fighter,” says Shahla Lahiji, a prominent Iranian publisher and close friend for 20 years.

Ebadi is the first Iranian and first Muslim woman to be awarded the Peace Prize. The news was greeted with jeers, cheers and some conspicuous

silence in Iran. After ignoring the story all day, Iran’s state television made the prize the final item on its evening news program, following the sports report and a story about an emergency aircraft landing in New Zealand. Mohsen Kadivar, a prominent dissident cleric, once imprisoned for his pro-democracy statements, told *TIME* that the prize was “an honor for Iran, for Iranian women and for reformists.” But conservatives mocked the award as another Western way of pressuring the Islamic regime, though Ebadi is careful to distance herself from some of the Bush Administration’s more notorious comments on her country. “The American government includes Iran in the ‘axis of evil’ and is so busy demanding that Iran embrace democracy that it shouts over the heads of millions of Iranians who demand democracy and freedom—often at great peril,” she told *TIME*. “Every nation needs to select what’s best for itself on its own—whether

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—Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi

that’s Iran, Iraq or in Europe.” Ebadi said that her respect for the Pope—heavily favored to win the award this year—“only increased when he came out in opposition to the war in Iraq.”

Ebadi’s career began after she attended Tehran University law school, when she became one of Iran’s first female judges. She supported the 1979 Iranian revolution, but was removed from her post by the new government. She eventually established a nongovernmental organization for child welfare and authored a seminal book on children’s rights. Ebadi took on high-profile political cases that other lawyers were too timid to handle. In 2000 she helped document allegations that conservative clerics and politicians were behind vigilante attacks on reformers. The revelations embarrassed prosecutors, and Ebadi was jailed for 23 days on defamation charges. “She was worried, but she didn’t let that stop her,” her husband Javad Tavassolian, 60, told *TIME*. “She is very brave.” ■

Questions

1. What distinguishes Ebadi from other winners of the Nobel Peace Prize?
2. How did Iran respond to news of Ebadi’s award?



The Prize for Peace

The Nobel Peace Prize, established in the will of Alfred Bernhard Nobel (1833–1896) and first awarded in 1901, is bestowed annually by the Norwegian Nobel Committee to the individual or group that has “done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses.” This year’s winner, Iranian human rights activist Shirin Ebadi—profiled in “She is Very Brave” on page 17—won “for her efforts for democracy and human rights.” Learn more about the history of the Nobel Peace Prize by researching a previous recipient of this award. Start your investigation by visiting the Nobel Prize website at <http://www.nobelprize.org> and scanning the lists of winners. Then select one recipient for further research and answer the questions below.

Name of the Nobel Peace Prize winner whose life and work you are researching:

Year of award:

1. What achievement or course of action by the group or individual was the basis for receiving the award? Was the award given in response to a lifelong achievement or for a specific course of action?

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2. What message was the Nobel Committee trying to send to the world community by naming this particular recipient?

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3. What was the response to the Committee’s choice around the world? In the locality concerned?

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4. Has there been a discernible outcome or effect as a result of the awarding of the prize? Has the honored group or individual benefited from receiving the prize?

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5. Draw conclusions based upon your research.

- In your own words, state the rationale of the Nobel Committee for awarding the peace prize.
- In the year you investigated, did the Nobel Committee make a good choice? Why or why not?

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