

**Contradictions : A Night With Mehrangiz Kar At UCLA.**  
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On the evening of November 24, 2003, myself and a few friends from National Union for Democracy in Iran attended an event at UCLA, billed as "Mehrangiz Kar: The Nobel Peace Prize for Shirin Ebadi and the Struggle for Human and Women's Rights in Iran and The World." The event also included as Emcees and Respondents Nayereh Tohidi, Associate Professor of Women's Studies at California State University Northridge and Nikki Keddie, Professor of Iranian and Middle Eastern history at UCLA. The following is my personal recollection of the event.

I was initially excited about the presentation, because I felt it would provide myself, as well as many other young Iranians, an opportunity to listen to and ask questions of a distinguished Iranian advocate familiar with the current events in Iran. It was also somewhat encouraging to see an audience of perhaps 100 people, mostly Iranian and under age 30, attend the event at a public forum at an institution for higher learning, where thoughts and viewpoints could be shared openly in the spirit of knowledge and learning. Unfortunately, the magic faded less than 20 minutes into the event.

Ms. Kar began the event with a brief speech in Farsi regarding the status of the struggle to achieve democracy in Iran, her role as an activist and the significance of the Nobel award to Shirin Ebadi. This speech was followed by a valiant but short-of-the-mark effort in translation by Professor Tohedi for the English-only members of the audience. Suffice it to say that I understood the Farsi version better than the English version, although I speak both languages. I should note that Professor Keddie also participated with a few words of her own, during which time she made reference to the pre-revolution Pahlavi era of Iran when there were "lots of westernized people in Iran who were secularist," as if secularism is a virtue exclusive only to the West. In all fairness however, I was not there for the translation efforts of Professor Tohidi or Professor Keddie's in-my-own-bubble reflections on Iran. The question and answer session was my reason for attending the event.

Professor Tohidi began the Q and A session by pointing to members of the audience who had raised their hands to ask questions. I raised my hand from the outset and must admit that I was eager to ask my own question. I was disappointed at first when I was not called upon by Professor Tohidi. However, my disappointment turned to utter shock when I noticed that Professor Tohidi knew the first and last name of the first six or seven persons she selected. At first, I attempted to rationalize it when I saw that the event was being filmed, thinking perhaps those individuals were all members of the press and that Tohidi wanted to start with the local media and then move on to the general members of the audience. Then, I thought perhaps she had some of her students in the audience. Then I realized, that perhaps it was none of the above.

After about two hours of this selection process, the audience was reminded by Professor Tohidi that the event was running a tight schedule and there would be no time for remaining questions, since a reception was planned to occur immediately after the presentation. Those already asking questions were advised to speed up their questioning. I should note, however, that as Ms. Kar was walking to that reception room, she was surrounded by many individuals who thanked her for her time and asked her the many questions they were not allowed to ask so that the chips-and-dip reception could take place on time. Ms. Kar was gracious enough to answer as many questions as she could.

It is my personal opinion that perhaps Professor Tohidi was systematic in her exclusionary selection process during the Q and A portion of the event. I do recall that Tohidi was also the emcee in a similar event involving guest speaker Professor Abbas Milani at UCLA a month earlier. Some who attended the Milani event, in addition to myself, were also present in the audience and had asked "interesting" questions in that earlier event. Sometimes, it is preferable for some presenters not to call upon individuals known or suspected of asking the "juicy" questions, since that would prevent possible criticism of the guest speaker and would decrease the chance of the "smart" questions from exposing both the speaker and the event presenters. Sometimes, perhaps some presenters seek to advance their own personal political agendas with such events.

Every presentation requires some ground rules to begin with in order to prevent chaos. However, in such a scenario as described above, the entire purpose of the event is defeated when the presenter exercises his or her personal discretion based on suspected content and politics. In effect, the "interesting" or "dangerous" questions will never be asked, due to a pre-selection by the presenters of the type of questions asked of the guest speaker. A true academic, especially a professor who teaches young minds at a public institution and who invites the public to a public forum, must realize that nothing is taught and so much is lost when teachers limit the thought process of those who choose to think and learn. More importantly, what is the logic behind presenting a person's thoughts, inviting others to question and discuss them in public and simultaneously limiting the types of questions asked and the individuals who would ask them? These are not accusations, but points worth thinking about.

I am concerned that some first-time attendees may have been discouraged from ever attending or even raising their hands to ask a question at such presentations in the future. I also believe that many of those who attended this presentation were left frustrated for not being able to fully participate in the experience of critical thinking to which they thought they had been invited. Here, I am referring to the process of coming together under one roof and openly sharing and questioning differing thoughts and opinions, which I find to be so critical to the Iranian nation if we are to unite in pursuit of Iran's salvation. This is a process which will cultivate thinking, without which we shall be forever lost.

As for Ms. Kar's presentation itself, that too left more question marks and confusion than before the presentation. First, Kar indicated that there are two different groups seeking

reform in Iran. One, according to Ms. Kar, works within the framework of the Islamic regime and is allowed to organize. The second group, of which Kar claims to be a part, are secularists who do not work within the regime. This second group, says Kar, lacks organization, leadership and power. At the same time, Kar concedes that this latter group is not allowed by the Islamic regime to organize or hold any power in the first place. Kar then argued that in the near future, the so-called pseudo-reformers working within the regime will be the victors, while the secularists will eventually succeed in the long-term.

Second, Kar made reference to eventual reform over time. She then indicated that the so-called reformists working within the regime have been stifled by the conservatives, while the secularist are hampered legally from organizing to bring reform separate and apart from the regime. Hence, in a nutshell, one would conclude that we're not going anywhere and any reform under current conditions, regardless of passage of time, is a fantasy. Consequently, this circular-analysis by Ms. Kar, more than any other point she made, caused me to question why I had spent nearly three hours at the presentation when the guest speaker is going round and round in circles leaving us where we started.

Third, Ms. Kar stressed that she and many others, including Shirin Ebadi, have been working hard to bring about reform in Iran without bloodshed. However, Ms. Kar had attended the Berlin Conference in 2000 in Germany, where she sat with former revolutionary zealots like Akbar Ganji and other pseudo-reformers of the Khatami camp, in a circus show designed to preserve the Islamic regime under a disguise of "reform" and perpetuate its ongoing torture and murder of Iranians. Later in the event, in response to a question by a member of National Union for Democracy in Iran, Kar conceded bloodshed is a possibility if the so-called reformers in the Islamic regime fail to achieve anything.

Finally, in-person, on the way to the above-mentioned chips-and-dip reception which Professor Tohidi was so worried would start late, I asked Ms. Kar why she did not make any mention of the progress and modernity which Iran experienced before 1979, which was lost after the revolution. I emphasized that I was referring to the same era of progress and modernity during which Kar and Ebadi both acquired their education and status as legal advocates. I further asked how Iranians would learn from the tragedy of the revolution if they did not realize what they had lost. Ms. Kar's response was that unfortunately, Iranians are trapped in their thinking only with current events in Iran.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson learned from the presentation is that we as Iranians must establish and maintain logic and critical thinking on a greater level than that which we have exercised to date. Regardless of any acknowledgments we receive and any title we hold, we are fooling ourselves if we do not apply critical thinking and logic. Without it, everything else falls apart. It involves questioning and analysis of any and all information presented to us regardless of the source. It also involves allowing those questions and the analysis to occur for sake of truth and evolution. For newcomers, educated or not, this is called "thinking" and it is an essential first step in bringing an end to the Islamic regime and returning progress and modernity to Iran.

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