

# Celebrating Philosophy in Tehran?

BY EVAN R. GOLDSTEIN

ON APRIL 27, 2006, the Iranian-Canadian philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo was arrested in Tehran on a charge of fomenting a "velvet revolution" against the Islamic Republic. Mr. Jahanbegloo was placed in a 6-by-10-foot cell in Evin Prison. To keep his mind active while in solitary confinement, he scribbled nearly 2,000 aphorisms on the back of tissue boxes.

Four months later, he was released on bail and fled into exile. He surfaced late in 2007 in Istanbul at World Philosophy Day, an annual gathering of intellectuals sponsored by Unesco to celebrate philosophy's contributions to the "principles and values on which world peace depends: democracy, human rights, justice and equality." Mr. Jahanbegloo, now a professor at the University of Toronto, describes World Philosophy Day as "a great initiative," which is why he is dismayed by Unesco's decision to hold this year's main event in Tehran, a city where, he says, "no free debate or critical thinking is possible."

Mr. Jahanbegloo is not alone in his

outrage. In January, he joined with a group of intellectuals associated with the Italian cultural journal *Reset*, including the renowned social theorist Jürgen Habermas, and came out in opposition to the choice of venue for the November event. In an open letter to the Unesco director general, which drew more than 50 signatures, they wrote that philosophical exchange is impossible in a country where "one can be imprisoned and risk one's life...because of one's ideas."

Opposition intensified when the government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad selected Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, an in-law of Ayatollah Khamenei and a former speaker of the Iranian parliament, to chair the organizing committee. German philosopher Otfried Höffe, who was scheduled to deliver a keynote address in Tehran, backed out. Katajun Amirpur, a professor at the University of Zurich, put it starkly in an article for the German newspaper *Die Tageszeitung*: "There are probably more philosophers to be found in Evin Prison than will be taking the podium set up by the regime in November."

Unesco hasn't budged, and some are



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now calling for a boycott. "We are asking philosophers not to go because if they do it's going to politically, morally and culturally legitimize an illegitimate regime," Mr. Jahanbegloo says. There are also plans for an alternative confer-

ence that will be held online, titled *Philosophy4Freedom*. The theme will be philosophy's role in promoting freedom and human rights.

"We're listening and we're trying to respond," says Sue Williams, a spokeswoman for Unesco. The gathering in Tehran is an "important event," she says, but there are also related events being held in Mexico City; Dakar, Senegal; Tunis and at Unesco headquarters in Paris. Asked if Unesco believes that Iranian philosophers will be able to speak freely in Tehran, Ms. Williams says, "We haven't had any feedback suggesting that this will not be the case."

Not everyone is on board with the boycott. Eric Thomas Weber, a professor at the University of Mississippi, says in an e-mail: "If you want to fight injustice, you have to speak truth to power. That is impossible if you refuse to speak to power." He adds: "Ignoring and disengaging injustice only strengthens its hold."

Avishai Margalit, a professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, says that he is not opposed to World Philosophy Day being held in Tehran as long as Iran guarantees visas

to all foreigners who wish to participate, including Israelis. He does not believe Iran will allow Israelis to attend, he says, but wants to give the country an opportunity to prove itself a good host. (Unesco says that no one has been denied access.)

Opponents say that their calls for a boycott must be viewed within the context of the intensifying crackdown on intellectual life in Iran. In the last few years, at least a dozen scholars have been put on trial; many more have been detained without charges. Just last week the trailblazing Iranian blogger Hossein Derakhshan was sentenced to 19½ years in prison for "cooperation with hostile states" and "insulting sanctities," among other charges.

"This is not just about saving the honor of philosophy," says Yale professor Seyla Benhabib, one of the organizers of the *Philosophy4Freedom* conference. "We want to make it clear to the people of Iran that we haven't forgotten them and that the world is paying attention to this regime of thugs."

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