

# To be, or not to be, in Tehran for World Philosophy Day event

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IT IS hard to know what possessed Unesco (the UN Educational and Scientific Organisation) to decide to hold the 2010 World Philosophy Day conference in Tehran, Iran. After all, this event is intended to provide "an opportunity to make philosophical reflection accessible to all..."

The Islamic Republic of Iran is not known, either, for critical thinking or for allowing free debate. Instead, it is a highly repressive regime. It should be well known that peaceful protests against the suspicious results of the 2009 presidential elections in that country were brutally squashed and, in one infamous case, a philosophy student, Neda Agha-Soltan, was shot dead.

Less well known is the persecu-

tion of philosophers and other scholars in the humanities. Professor Katajun Amirpur has been quoted as saying that there "are probably more philosophers to be found in Evin Prison than will be taking the podium set up by the regime in November". There have been many reports of torture (including rape) in Iranian prisons.

After China, Iran is the country that executes the most people each year. It leads in the execution of children! Capital crimes include apostasy, homosexuality and adultery, and stoning is among the methods of execution. The regime also peddles conspiracy theories, holocaust denialism and various other self-serving untruths.

The Unesco decision to hold World Philosophy Day in Tehran

was met with stiff opposition from critics of Iran. One of those who called for a boycott of the Tehran conference was exiled Iranian philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo, now based at the University of Toronto. Dr Jahanbegloo had, before his escape from Iran, been imprisoned after being charged with bringing Western philosophers to Iran in order to provoke a "velvet revolution". Dr Otfried Höffe, a German philosopher who had been scheduled to give a keynote address at the conference, subsequently withdrew.

In response to this and other pressure, Unesco first arranged other World Philosophy Day events for 2010, including activities at its headquarters in Paris. It then withdrew entirely from the Tehran conference and designated the Paris

gathering as the main event.

However, it is unlikely that the Iranians will cancel their conference as a result. Those scheduled to participate thus still face the question whether they should boycott the conference.

Advocates of a boycott feared that the Unesco conference would be used by the Iranian regime as a propaganda opportunity, and there should be similar concerns even after Unesco's withdrawal.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had removed Gholamreza Aavani from the directorship of the Iranian Institute of Philosophy and replaced him with Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, who is an in-law of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran. And Mohammad-Javad Larijani, an

advocate of stoning, was put on the conference programme. President Ahmadinejad himself was expected to make an opening speech.

Notwithstanding these shenanigans, there are some philosophers who have thought that a boycott is inappropriate. In their view, attending the conference would show solidarity with beleaguered Iranian philosophers who oppose the regime, and would facilitate an exchange of ideas.

It is obviously hard to know what dissident Iranian philosophers think about the boycott because they are not at liberty to speak their minds if their views diverge from those of the clerics.

However, one Iranian philosopher who has communicated anonymously suggests that they feel

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ambivalent. They would prefer not to be isolated by a complete academic boycott, but they are also wary of the political uses to which the state will put the conference.

What should be done? The answer, I think, is clear: The tone and content of the conference is being dictated by the Iranian regime, and thus it should be boycotted unless the opportunity could

be used to shake up, or at least expose, the hegemonic views in Iran.

The current conference programme appears anodyne. There do not appear to be any presentations that would pose a challenge to Iranian orthodoxy. For example, there are no critiques of capital punishment or theocracy, no defence of homosexuality, no arguments for an extensive and robust right to freedom of expression, and no arguments against the existence of God.

Unless one were using the conference as an opportunity to inject "dangerous" ideas, participation in the conference will only further the goals of the Iranian state.

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