

Human Rights in Islam

Human Rights in Islam



Sayyid Ali Khamene'i

Al-Islam.org

Article

Authors(s):

[Sayyid Ali Khamene'i](#) [1]

Human Rights in Islam

By: Ayatollah al-Uzma Sayyid Ali Husaini Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Islamic Revolution

Delivered on the occasion of the 5th Islamic Thought Conference 29–31st January, 1997

The issue of human rights is one of the most fundamental human issues and also one of the most sensitive and controversial. During the recent decades, this problem was more political than either ethical or legal.

Although the influence of political motives, rivalries, and considerations have made difficult the correct formulation of this problem, but this should not prevent thinkers and genuine humanists from probing into this problem and ultimately obtaining a solution.

In the West, though the issue of human rights was raised by the thinkers of the post-Renaissance period, it is only since the last two hundred years or so that it became an issue of prominence among the political and social issues of the Western society and an issue of fundamental significance. Perhaps, when we examine the causes of many social changes and political upheavals, we will find the marks of its presence and its principal ideals.

During the last decades this emphasis reached its climax in the West. With the formation of the UNO after the Second World War and the subsequent drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a concrete model came into existence as a result of this emphasis that can serve as a criterion and basis of our judgement and analysis of the ideals voiced in this regard during the last two hundred years and especially in the last few decades.

We Muslims, of course, know it very well that if the Western world and the Western civilization have paid attention to this matter in the recent centuries, Islam has dealt with it from all the various aspects many centuries back. The idea of human rights as a fundamental principle can be seen to underlie throughout Islamic teachings. And this does not need any elaboration for a Muslim audience.

That the verses of the Quran and the traditions handed down from the Prophet (SA) and the Imams of his Household (AS), each one of them emphasizes the fundamental rights of man something which has caught the attention of men in recent years– is known to Muslims, and there is no need for the scholars to be reminded about this fact.

However, I would say, that today it is big responsibility on the shoulders of the Islamic society to make this reality known to the world, and not to allow those essential teachings of Islam to be lost in the storm of political clamor and ballyhoo. There were some questions which can be raised in this regard, and to answer them is my principal aim today.

Of course, in the course of the conference you scholars would carry on useful and profound discussions on various aspects of human rights, which will itself serve as a source of information for the Muslim world and enlighten them about the viewpoints of Islam in this regard. The first question is Whether the efforts made during the decades since the Second World War, in the name of human rights have been successful in their purpose or not. The addresses, the assemblies and the sessions held in the United Nations, and the claims made regarding human rights have they succeeded in bringing men closer to their genuine rights, or to at least the major section of the deprived humanity?

The answer to this question is not so difficult; for an observation of the present world conditions is enough to prove that these attempts have not been successful till now. A glance at the conditions of the underdeveloped societies of the world, who form the major part of the human population, is sufficient to reveal the fact that not only the major part of humanity could not achieve their true rights during the last fifty years, but the methods of encroaching upon the rights of the deprived nations have become more sophisticated and complex and more difficult of remedy.

We cannot accept the claims made by those who claim to be champions of human rights, while the bitter realities of the African and Asian nations and the hungry millions of the human race are before our eyes, and watch the constant spectacle of violation of the rights of several nations. Those who have been outspoken in advocating human rights during these last forty years, have themselves grabbed the most fundamental of human rights from the people of the Third-World countries.

It is with their connivance that certain governments and regimes that deny men their most primary rights have managed to survive. The dictators of today's world and also the despots of the last fifty years in Asia, Africa and Latin America- none of them could have established and preserved their dictatorships on their own without reliance upon the big powers. These big powers are exactly those who have coined most of the slogans concerning human rights; it is they who have brought into being the UNO, and even today the UN is at their service.

The economic poverty, hunger and loss of life in several countries of the world are of course the result of intervention, repression, usurpation on the part of the big powers. Who has caused Africa, the land of plenteous resources to see this day? Who has kept the people of Bangladesh and India for years and years under exploitation, and, despite their natural resources and great potentialities, has brought them to the point that today we hear people die of hunger in those countries? Who has plundered the wealth and resources of the Third-World countries, and has brought about hunger, poverty and misfortune for these nations, procuring sophisticated technologies and immense wealth for themselves?

We see that the organizers of the United Nations Organization and the principal drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and those who even today shamelessly claim to be the supporters of this declaration are the real authors of those misfortunes. Otherwise there is no reason as to why Africa, the land of exuberance and bounties, Latin America with its natural wealth, and the great India, and many other Third- world countries should have lagged behind and remained backward in spite of sufficient man-power and natural resources.

Today, the system of political domination of capital and power prevails in the world, and there is no doubt in it that this system of dominance of capital and power is controlled and steered by the same people who the fathers of the Declaration of Human Rights. Under their wheel of capital, power and machine we see the nations of the world being crushed and struggling helplessly. The UN is the most outstanding product of the efforts made for human rights, yet what has it done in the past for the nations of the world, and what is it doing today?

What active role could the UN play in solving the basic problems of nations and in relieving them of the calamities that befell them? In what instance did the UN emerge as a deliverer of the oppressed from the oppressor? At what point could the UN persuade the big tyrannical powers to refrain from making unjust demands? The UN has even lagged behind most of the nations in this regard.

Today, despite all those claims, we are witnesses to the Apartheid regime in South Africa and to many instances of racism and racial discrimination in the advanced countries themselves. Therefore, it is clear that the UN despite its being the most outstanding example of the endeavor for human rights, has not done anything in this regard. It has intervened in international problems in the role of a preacher or priest. The Security Council is one of the principal organs of the UN, and functions as the main decision-making body; in it the big powers have the right of veto.

That is, every decision that is taken in the UN and in the Security Council against the real agents who handicap the nations, the same agents themselves, the big powers, are able to veto it. The United Nations and its organs, agencies and organizations, whether they are cultural, economic or technical, all of them are under the influence and domination of the big powers. The US pressures over its cultural agency like the UNESCO and others are known to everyone. Since a Muslim was the chief of the UNESCO who desired to maintain his own independence as well as that of the agency, you witnessed how the US subjected the UNESCO to pressures during these last two years.

Consequently, we feel that the UN as the most significant outcome of the endeavor for human rights has proved to be an ineffectual and impotent element, which has been created as a consolation for nation that has no practical benefit. On account of the interference on the part of big powers, in cases it functions as their feudatory. We do not of course reject the UN; we believe that this organization ought to exist, and it must be reformed. We ourselves are its member.

However, what I mean to say is that after all that effort, after all that clamor and the hopes that were

attached to this organization, you can see how inadequate and ineffectual this organization has remained in securing human rights in the world today. Hence, the answer to the first question has become clear. We can say that the efforts made for procuring human rights and the claims made in the name of human rights through the last several centuries and especially during the last few decades did not bear any fruit; they have failed to secure human rights.

The second question is whether, basically, these efforts had any sincerity? This question is of course historical in nature and may not have much practical value. Hence, I do not intend to discuss it at length. It suffices to mention here that, in our view, these efforts were not sincere. It is true that there were philosophers, thinkers and social reformers among the exponents of human rights, but the arena was dominated by politicians.

Even the efforts of those thinkers and reformers were taken into the service of the politicians. If, in the annals of history thinkers, sages, apostles of God, mystics and men are seen to raise the cry for rights of man, today when we behold politicians and statesmen to raise this cry vociferously, we are justified in serious doubting their sincerity. Look around and see as to who are those who plead the case of human rights. The ex-president of the US projected himself as the defender of human rights during his election campaign, and won the election on account of it.

In the beginning, from some of the speeches he made and steps that he took, it appeared as if he was serious in his intention; but we have seen that ultimately he stood by the cruelest, the most barbaric and tyrannical of rulers, and the most adamant opponents of human rights in this region. He supported the Shah and the tyrants of occupied Palestine and other infamous dictatorships of our days. Even now those who plead the case of human rights, the statesmen and politicians who vociferously voice their support for human rights in conferences and international forums are not more sincere than their former counterparts.

We do not find any signs of sincerity in their efforts. Those who drafted the Declaration of Human Rights, and at their fore the USA, their aim was to extend their domination and hegemony over the world of that time. Their problem was not to safeguard the rights of men, the kind of rights that they had violated during the war, They are the same people who have wiped out tens of thousands of human beings by an atom bomb. They were the same persons who in order to fight a war which had nothing to do with the Asian and African nations had recruited the majority of soldiers from India, Algeria and other African and non-European countries.

We do not believe that Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin and their like had the smallest consideration for human rights in the true sense of the word and were sincere in forming the United Nations and drafting the Universal Declaration of human Rights. Accordingly, the answer to the second question is also clear: No! We do not believe that the efforts made by the politicians and the most vocal advocates of human rights were sincere at all. The third question, which is the most basic of them all, is, what was the reason for the failure of these attempts?

This is the point to which more attention should be paid, and I shall discuss it briefly here. I believe it is the most basic point, because whatever has presented in the name of human rights is done within the framework of a defective and crooked system, a system of dominance which is repressive and tyrannical. Those who have created the UN and have drafted the Universal Declaration of human rights, and those who most vehemently and vociferously plead for it today, regrettably the majority of them are statesmen and politicians who believe in the system of dominance and have accepted it. The system of dominance means that a group of men dominates and should dominate another group of men.

The system of dominance is backed by the culture of dominance. Today the world is divided into two groups: one is the group of those who dominate and the other is the group of the dominated. Both the groups have accepted the system of dominance, and the big powers believe that this system should be maintained. Even those who are dominated have accepted the system of dominance and have consented to its continuity.

This is the biggest flaw in the existing world situation. Those who do not accept the system of dominance are those individuals or groups who are not satisfied with the social order in their countries or with the social and political state of world affairs, and rise in revolt against this system. The revolutionary groups who revolt against the global status quo or revolutionary governments are very few in number and are constantly subjected to pressures and victimized.

The most illustrative example of it is the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has rejected domination in all its forms, and has not accepted anybody's domination. The East as well as the West are the same for it in this respect. It does not give any priority to the powerful of the world or to its rich, while making decisions. The whole world is witness to the kind of pressures it had to face during the period of the last eight years since the Islamic Republic of Iran was established.

It was subjected to political as well as military and economic pressures, and the pressures of world-wide propaganda launched against it. The cause of such pressures is clear. It was all done for the reason that the Islamic Republic has taken a clear and independent stand against the system of dominance. If some progressive governments have resisted Western and US domination, in majority of cases, there were observable signs of acceptance of and surrender to Eastern domination.

Of course, all of them are not the same in this regard. Some of them have completely surrendered themselves to the Eastern bloc and the USSR while some others show signs of independence in some cases. But if there is a government and a society that has never yielded to any pressures, it is the Islamic Republic, which has totally rejected the system of dominance.

Wherever in the world there is any pressure, high-handedness and unjust demands made upon a certain nation by a big power in the world, we have made clear our stand and have openly and bluntly expressed our definite views without any reservations. But the majority of the world's nations have accepted this system.

You can see that unfortunately the governments of the same countries which are subject to domination do not have the moral courage and guts to resist and oppose the domination of the big powers and fight them, while in our view it is quite possible. We believe that if the poor countries, the countries that have been under domination and in spite of their resources have been forced to fulfil the unjust demands made by the big powers— had they wished to stand against them, they could do so. No miracle is needed; it is sufficient that the governments should rely upon their own people.

Unfortunately, the weakness of will to resist, and more than weakness the treachery on the part of heads of some states in some cases, did not allow them to rise against the system of dominance. This system of dominance prevails over the world economy, culture, international relations and international rights. Naturally the issue of human rights has been posed within the framework of this system of dominance and developed in the background of this system and its outlook.

As a result the very persons who strive to secure freedoms, opportunities and means of welfare for their citizens in European countries in the name of human rights, they bomb and kill human beings in other countries by thousands. What does it mean? Does it mean anything other than this that in the view of the culture of domination which prevails over the world, human beings are divided into two categories: the human beings whose rights are to be defended, and the human beings who have to rights whatsoever and it is permissible to kill, destroy, enslave and subjugate them and to seize their belongings. This system is prevalent all over the world and the conception of human rights is also the product of such a culture.

This is the framework of the system of rights in the world of today. Within this cultural and legal framework the superpowers constantly widen the gap between the weaker nations and themselves, and exert more and more pressure on them. The greater the rate of advancement in technology and its speed accelerates, the more are the weaker countries and nations threatened and subjected to mounting pressures. No one asks the big powers today as to what right they have to put greater pressure on other countries and nations than ever before with their greater advancement in technology and industrialization. Today the satellites launched into the space by the big powers are moving in their orbits around the globe, and gathering minutest details and probing into the secrets of other countries. Why? What gives them right to do that?

Today, most of the communications between people on the global level, especially those between statesmen and heads of states, and political and scientific communications are accessible to those who possess sophisticated technology. Why? Does anyone ask them? Does anyone raise any objection? Since the US has launched those satellites and possesses the means of gathering and benefiting from intelligence, it is given the right by all to obtain that information.

Doesn't the eavesdropping on the communications between the world's people amount to a violation of their rights? Does anyone put this question to the US, USSR, UK, France and Germany? When this question is raised, will anyone affirm that such a question should be raised? No, everyone says to

himself: they are strong so they can do it ; they are capable of doing it, so they must use the opportunity. Today, the problem of atom bomb and the use of nuclear weapons is an issue all over the world.

The superpowers themselves raise it because they are afraid of each other. They wrangle over it and each tries to dupe the other by limiting the nuclear arsenals of its rival while equipping itself with more and more. But, have the smaller countries ever thought of opposing the makers of nuclear bombs, by declaring that unless these bombs are destroyed and defused and unless peace of mind is restored to humanity, which is exposed to the nuclear danger every moment, they shall not have any relations with them, nor any trade nor any cooperation in any matter?

Have the Third-World countries, the non-aligned nations and other countries of the world- have they ever thought of making use of some kind of leverage against the race for nuclear arms? No. If you suggest this idea to them, they will say that it is an advanced technology, they possess it; they can, and so must produce such weapons.

It means that they have accepted the logic of dominance. The absence of balance in the present world conditions has equally been accepted by the oppressor as well as the oppressed nations. The culture of dominance has been imposed on the minds. When we denounce the East and the West in international fora on account of their acts, we clearly perceive the astonishment of heads of the states and representatives of countries.

They consider it something odd and rash, whereas it is a natural stand by an independent nation. All the nations and states should behave in a like manner, but they don't. The conclusion that we draw is that today the prevalence of the culture of dominance has become the biggest evil. It is something which has been greatly detrimental for the weaker nations, and encouraged the big powers to violate human rights.

Whether it is the US's aggression against Grenada, or the massacre of defenseless Lebanese civilians by the US supported Israel, or the ruthless suppression of the black population- who are the real masters of the land- by the government of South Africa, which is backed by the US and some European governments- all these violations of human rights are easily tolerated.

But when a frustrated individual infuriated by this state of affairs in some corner of the world does something, if an explosion takes place or something happens, it is deplored as an act of terrorism. But the US's aggression against Libya, the bombardment of the residence of the president of a country and the violation upon its territory, is not condemned by the world.

Whenever there is a mention of terrorism, mostly that which comes to the minds of people is some desperate act of a youth, a victim of oppression fed up with life, from Palestine, or Lebanon, or some African or Latin American country, rather than the acts of such big powers as the US, the UK, and others. This is nothing but the result of the culture of dominance, the culture that unfortunately dominates human mentality all over the world.

In the culture of dominance, words also acquire peculiar connotations that suit the suit the system of dominance. For instance, 'terrorism' is defined in a way so that the US's aggression against Libya, or its intimidation of Nicaragua or the invasion of Grenada, etc. does not come under the definition of 'terrorism'. This is a big flaw in the present state of affairs.

Therefore, the failure of the attempts made in the name of human right– even on behalf of those who are sincere and earnest– is on account of the nature of the framework within which they want to lay down and declare the rights of the human beings– something which is not possible. This framework is to be broken and the system of dominance to be condemned. States, nations and countries should resolutely reject the unfair and unjust domination of the big powers so that human rights may be understood, pursued and restored.

Lastly, the fourth question: what is the remedy? In our view, the answer is return to Islam, and recourse to Divine revelation. This is a prescription equally valid for Muslims as well as for non–Muslims. For this, the Islamic societies do not have to wait for anything. Return to Islam, revival of the Quran and of Islamic mode of thinking in society, recourse to Islamic sources (the Quran and the Sunnah) in legal matters – these are the things and that will enable us to understand the meaning of human rights and help us to identify the those rights and guide us in our struggle to secure them.

For the purpose of securing human rights, it is necessary once and for all to give up giving advice and lecturing, since they are of no use. The Quran says:

“Take by force that which we have given you.” (2:63).

God Almighty has granted these rights to mankind, and they should secure these rights by force. The Islamic nations should resist the unjust demands and dominance of the big powers by relying upon the Islamic ideology.

These are not the words of an idealist who speaks about Islamic issues and Islamic ideals from the corner of a theological seminary. These are the utterances of a revolution which has gone through experiences and has felt the actualities.

Our revolution is an experience that is available for study to all the nations. I do not say that we have solved all our problems. We haven't. There is no doubt that a great many problems have been created for us on account of the Revolution and on account of its Islamic character. But we have solved the problem of dominance. Today the Iranian nation and the Islamic Republic can claim that they have rid themselves of all domination and powers and that they can decide for themselves.

Of course, when a nation tries to do away with all the forms of dependence, it has a long path to tread. And dependence if not accompanied with domination, pushing around, and unjust demands is something natural and tolerable. It is quite obvious that our revolution and the Islamic Republic inherited the legacy of a decadent society, a shattered economy, and a degenerate culture.

What was handed down to the Revolution by the rulers of the past centuries, especially of the last fifty or sixty years, was an Iran beleaguered from all sides. It is not to be expected that the Revolution will be able to lead this dissipated heritage in a short time to the heights of cultural, ethical and economic achievement and scientific and industrial advancement.

We do not make such claims, but, of course, we do anticipate a good future. We believe that it is possible for a nation to reach a high level of material advancement only through independence, self-reliance and by using its manpower and material resources. But what we positively claim today is that the Islamic Republic is not under any political pressure or domination of any power whatsoever.

Political pressures do not influence it to change its course or alter its decisions; it does not change its path or its momentum on account of any consideration for some superpower. It means that we have freed ourselves and our people from the domination of the big powers.

This is an experience, which, we believe, underlines the significance of the most basic and precious of human rights in Islam: the right to live, the right to be free, the right to benefit from justice, the right to welfare, and so on.

These and other such fundamental rights can be secured in an Islamic society. They can be derived from the Islamic sources and Islam has incorporated them in its commands to Muslims and drawn man's attention towards them, much before Western thinkers gave thought to these rights and values. It is essential to return to Islam.

Muslim thinkers are charged with the responsibility of thoroughly examining and studying the subject of human rights or rather the general structure of the Islamic legal system. This is also the mission of the present conference, which, I hope, will be a new step taken in this direction, and, God willing, this work would continue.

The nations of the world can benefit from the sublime outlook of Islam in this regard in coming closer to securing these rights. The Islamic governments may of course help their peoples in securing their rights, but on condition that they should have no reservations in regard to the big powers. Unfortunately, today we do not see such a state of affairs. Most of the regimes governing Islamic countries are under the influence of the big powers. The majority of them are dominated by the West and under US influence. Therefore, their actions and decisions comply neither with the Islamic principles, nor with the needs of Muslim nations.

A ready example in this regard is the conference held recently in Kuwait. You have seen that in this conference, instead of considering the basic problems of Muslims, what kinds of problems were discussed and what kind of resolution was passed. It was by no means compatible with an Islamic approach to the problem.

Instead of rejecting over Iraq's aggression against a Muslim country and its waging of a war against an

Islamic revolution, they should have denounced it and expelled it from the Conference. Instead of revealing the part played by the imperialist powers in igniting the flames of this imposed war, they came out with a hollow and insipid demand for peace, and even expressed their satisfaction for Iraq's positive response to the call for peace.

They did it without going into the core of the problem, without appreciating the fact that a nation's resolve to defend its own rights is something commendable, and without recognizing that the willingness of a government and a regime to be influenced by the pressure of imperialist powers in creating obstacles in the path of a revolution is something condemnable.

Of course, these resolutions, decisions and opinions are much invalid and weightless as they are remote from Islamic principles and values.

Accordingly, there is no nation or country in the world which looks forward to knowing what step the Islamic Conference takes in Kuwait so as to welcome it or be disappointed with it. It means that these decisions and resolution are so much so removed from reality, alien to the basic Islamic criteria, and the aspirations of nations that they remain completely indifferent to these.

You will not find a single country in the world whose people should be waiting eagerly to know as to what the Islamic Conference has to say, so that its resolution promises a sense of obligation or the pleasure of receiving some good news. What is the reason? Why should a gathering of forty-six Islamic states organized on the highest level of heads of states and leaders be so ineffectual and so much devoid of consequence and content?

It is on account of the unfortunate fact that most of these regimes are under the influence of the big powers. As long as this domination of the big powers and their awe and fear remain in their hearts, the affairs of the Muslim nations will be in disarray. If we wish to deliver the Muslim word from its present-day disarray and confusion, the first thing that is to be done is to drive this fear and awe from the hearts, as God Almighty has said:

"...So fear not mankind, but fear Me..." (5:44)

They should not be afraid of anyone except God. If this happens, the condition of the Islamic nations will move towards betterment.

I conclude my speech with the hope that, God willing, this Islamic Thought Conference, during the few days that it will hold its sessions, will be able to make a significant contribution towards the understanding of the Islamic verities regarding human rights.

Besides, the exchange of opinions between the Iranian and non-Iranian brothers will help the communication of the experience of the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic and their better understanding by the non-Iranian brothers.

It will provide them the opportunity to study that experience, so that other nations may view the revolution brought about by their brethren in Iran as a model and as a new path that can be possibly trodden.

Wassalam 'alaykum wa rahmatullah wa barakatuh

[Get PDF](#) [2] [Get EPUB](#) [3] [Get MOBI](#) [4]

Topic Tags:

[Human Rights](#) [5]

Source URL: <https://www.al-islam.org/articles/human-rights-islam-sayyid-ali-khamenei#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://www.al-islam.org/person/ayatullah-sayyid-ali-khamenei>

[2] <https://www.al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/34412>

[3] <https://www.al-islam.org/printepub/book/export/html/34412>

[4] <https://www.al-islam.org/printmobi/book/export/html/34412>

[5] <https://www.al-islam.org/tags/human-rights>