

Iranian human rights activist Shirin Ebadi wins 2003 Nobel Peace Prize

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Iranian lawyer and activist Shirin Ebadi in Paris, Friday. (AP/Francois Mori)
TEHRAN (CP) - Moments after learning Friday that Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the mother of the Iranian human rights lawyer prayed to Allah. Ebadi's husband, too, gave thanks for what may lie ahead.

"The reform movement is reborn," said Javad Tavassolian, the husband of Ebadi, the first Iranian and first Muslim woman to win the peace prize.

Ebadi - who also is Iran's first female judge - was hailed around the world as a courageous champion of political freedom after the Norwegian Nobel Committee honoured her for promoting peaceful and democratic solutions in the struggle for human rights.

The prize, announced Friday in Oslo, Norway, also gave hope to reformers challenging Iran's powerful clerics that the 56-year-old lawyer's newfound clout and international stature may breathe life into their ranks.

"This prize doesn't belong to me only. It belongs to all people who work for human rights and democracy in Iran," Ebadi said in Paris, where she was attending a conference.

Ebadi, who was jailed for three weeks in 2000, has been a forceful advocate for women, children and those on the margins of society.

"As a lawyer, judge, lecturer, writer and activist, she has spoken out clearly and strongly in her country, Iran, far beyond its borders," the Nobel committee said in its citation.

Reformers in Iran may now expect even more: a firebrand willing to directly battle the powerful theocracy in the model of other history-shaping Nobel laureates, such as Nelson Mandela and Lech Walesa.

"She is an international figure now," said Isa Saharqis, a prominent reformer and editor of the monthly political journal, Aftab, or Sun.

"The conservatives cannot close their eyes to this."

The Iranian ambassador to Canada, Dr. Mohammad Ali Mousavi, said in a telephone interview from Ottawa on Friday evening: "I would like to congratulate every Iranian, especially the women of Iran, for this great occasion."

Describing Iran as a "multivoiced society," Mousavi said Ebadi represents "the voice of a part of this society."

He said: "We are facing in Iran a reform challenge. A genuine indigenous reform process is taking place."

Iranian state media waited hours to report the Nobel committee's decision - and then only as the last item on the radio news update.

It was not until late Friday that Iran issued an official statement, with government spokesman Abdollah Ramezanzadeh congratulating Ebadi for her prize. Mousavi explained the delay by saying the announcement took everyone by surprise and came on Friday, which is a Muslim holy day.

"We hope more attention will be paid to the opinions of Mrs. Ebadi both inside and outside Iran more than before," Ramezanzadeh said.

"In the name of the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, I congratulate Mrs. Ebadi and all Iranian Muslim women," Ramezanzadeh told The Associated Press.

"We are happy that a Muslim Iranian woman has behaved, using the capabilities of the country in the fields of defending human rights, especially the rights of children and women, in a way that is appreciated by the peace-loving bodies around the world."

Mousavi spoke after a reception at his residence in Ottawa in honour of the award to Ebadi which he said was attended by "Muslim and ethnic leaders."

"Everyone was proud to see a Muslim lady had won, not only Iranians," Mousavi said.

Ramezanzadeh said the Iranian government is expected to send a top official to attend Ebadi's welcoming ceremony in Tehran on Tuesday.

At Ebadi's home, her family watched updates on international broadcasts via a satellite dish - technically illegal but recently tolerated as conservatives try to soften opposition.

Ebadi's 79-year-old mother, Minu Yamini, said the Nobel announcement was just the third time she cried for her daughter. The first was her university graduation; the second was when she was jailed.

Ebadi, who is often sharply criticized by Iran's hardliners and conservative clerics, was convicted in a closed trial three years ago of slandering government officials. She was given a suspended sentence following her three weeks in jail.

At her news conference in Paris, Ebadi said Iran's most pressing human rights crisis is the lack of free speech, and she urged the government to immediately release prisoners jailed for expressing their opinions.

"There is no difference between Islam and human rights," said Ebadi, who was not wearing the Islamic head covering required for women in Iran.

"Therefore, the religious ones should also welcome this award," she added. "The prize means you can be a Muslim and at the same time have human rights."

Iran's reformist president, Mohammad Khatami, has often said the same in his vision of "Islamic democracy." But Khatami has been discredited in the eyes of many mainstream reformers for his unwillingness to press for rapid change. More radical activists are also disheartened by the failure of street protests, including a violent but short-lived confrontation with authorities in June.

Now, reformers appear ready to look for direction and unity from Ebadi, who is scheduled to return to Iran on Tuesday. One of the first tests could be February parliamentary elections, which many reformers have suggested they would shun as a show of frustration.

"Today is a happy day in Iranian history," said Saeed Pourazizi, a close ally of Khatami. "I don't hide my deep feelings of happiness."

The National Council of Resistance of Iran, a Paris-based group opposing the clerical establishment, called the Nobel award "an act against the religious fascism ruling Iran."

Although Iranian women serve in parliament and have far fewer limits than in other Mideast countries such as Saudi Arabia, laws still impose some definite boundaries. An Iranian woman needs her husband's permission to work or travel abroad, and a man's court testimony is considered twice as important as that of a woman.

"The prize is an outcome of her relentless fight against inequality," said Azam Taleqani, leader of a women's rights group.

Ebadi served as Iran's first female judge in the waning years of the western-backed monarchy, which was toppled by the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when she was forced to resign.

She turned her law office into a base for rights crusades and assaults on the establishment on issues such as persecution of dissidents and now-rare punishments, such as stoning and flogging for social offences.

She has taken cases dealing with domestic abuse and the rights of street children. Her writings have touched on rights for refugees, women and child labourers.

In 2001, Ebadi wrote in an Iranian magazine about her experience in jail - the loneliness of her confinement and the agony of recurring back pain and other ailments.

"I hate myself for being so weak," she wrote in the Payam Emrooz Monthly Review. "I try not to complain. I would just press my teeth against each other and would flex my fingers hard - my nails have turned blue because of the intensity of the pressure - but never would I groan."

Last year's Nobel Peace Prize winner, former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, called Ebadi's work "an inspiration to people in Iran and around the world."

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said the award underscores "the importance of expanding human rights throughout the world."

This year's peace prize is worth about \$1.7 million Cdn. It will be presented in Oslo on Dec. 10. The other Nobel prizes will be given that day in the Swedish capital, Stockholm.

