

It is not important for them what system or which individuals are in power. Let us suppose this description of the social situation in Iran is accurate, what conclusion are we to deduce from it? Is the duty of the intellectual, the dissident and the political activist to be a follower of the people on the street? Wouldn't such an approach turn them into mere populists (those who follow the observations, beliefs, assumptions, suspicions, illusions and imaginations of the masses)? What argument has been forwarded that all thoughts and actions of the populace are correct? Aren't all men full of faults? Then why are we to suppose that masses are completely innocent and infallible? Instead their modes of behavior must be challenged and criticized the same way that political systems are criticized. Not all the problems come from the political system. One must criticize and judge the people (an intellectual is also one of the people). We must not look for what people like or dislike, but must defend freedom, democracy and justice for the sake of the people. In this sense one must be an idealist instead of a populist. If populism is condemned, as it indeed is, then the flag of political activism can't be left in the hands of the masses who, in times of crisis, have no goal other than to destroy or take vengeance, and who only think of punishing former rulers instead of establishing and consolidating a democratic system. If there is some just demand, it must be shared with the people. If the struggle against totalitarianism in order to establish an open society and a democratic system is just, then even if all the people of a country happen to be in favor of a tyrannical system or indifferent to its existence, a freedom-loving democrat still has the right (nay, the duty) to stand against such a system, alone and by himself. The struggle for freedom is always initiated by a few people. Others will eventually join them. A political player cannot give up with the excuse that people aren't politically motivated or do not support the fight for justice and freedom. The dissidents in the second half of the 20th century constituted a small minority in all non-democratic societies. But that small minority opened up the difficult road to democracy by their steadfastness and bravery in the face of suffering...

a conversation with

Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics

# Akbar Ganji

Iranian political dissident

and

# Martha Nussbaum

Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics

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