

PADMAZ Speech in the event of 17 March 2018

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to extend my warmest greetings to all of those who are in attendance today; thank you for joining us.

Furthermore, on behalf of the *Patriotic Arab Democratic Movement in Ahwaz (PADMAZ)*, I would like to thank members of the *Democratic Solidarity Party of Ahwaz* for their kind invitation to this event, held to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the death of the late Mansur Al-Ahwazi, who passed away in March 2008 under mysterious circumstances.

At the same time, we cannot fail to mention all other Ahwazi martyrs such as Ahmad Mola, Adnan Salman, and especially Muhamad Sharif Al-Nawaseri; one of the founders of PADMAZ and the party's first Head of Political Bureau, who passed away in March 2007 in equally mysterious circumstances.

I am honoured to represent PADMAZ at this event; celebrating the 10th anniversary of the death of a man who defended the rights of the Ahwazi people and – in so doing – ended up giving his life for his nation and his people.

Our close working relationship with Mansur extends back to the early 2000's, when PADMAZ was founded. The benefits of this alliance can still be felt in the Ahwazi political arena today.

Collaboration between PADMAZ and Mansur occurred in the form of continuous exchange of news, information, and Human Rights Violation Reports.

But perhaps the best example of cooperation between us can be seen in the uprising of April 15th, 2005 – later known as the *Intifada* – in which PADMAZ played a key role in both planning and implementation.

In April 2005, a political uprising – known as *The April Intifada* - occurred in Ahwaz in response to the publication of a leaked document written by the Head Office of then Iranian president, Mohammad Khatami.

The document expressed a clear intention to carry out demographic changes in Ahwaz to the detriment of Arab populations living in that region.

The distribution of this document led to large-scale demonstrations and protests all over Ahwaz, and triggered mass arrests, followed by torture and execution by Iran's security forces.

PADMAZ came to be in possession of the *Abtahi* Letter. A decision was reached by our Party to disclose the letter at a time when it would have most impact.

Due to the close relationship we had already built with Mansur, he was chosen to be the person to receive the leaked secret document.

It is worth mentioning that there were mutual sympathies between Mansur and the founders of PADMAZ which resulted in his being selected for such a role in the disclosure of classified information.

We greatly appreciated his political approach for its rationality and objectivity, and felt that we spoke a common language, which enabled us to cooperate on many issues.

Of course, there were differences of opinion at times, but these never got in the way of our collaboration.

Like us, Mansur was always keen to make the liberation and advancement of the Ahwazi Arab his priority, and he had no time for petty infighting which might prove an obstacle to taking action.

We, in PADMAZ, believe that Mansur lost his life as a direct result of his tireless attempts to bring word of Iranian abuses and discrimination to the world's attention.

Mansur's involvement in the April 15th Intifada most probably sealed his fate. An activist of such intelligence, skill, and commitment could not help but antagonise an already-insecure government, looking to rid itself of critics.

One cannot ignore the fact that Mansur met his death *exactly one year* after the martyrdom of Muhammad Nawaseri.

It seems too strange a coincidence. For this reason, we firmly believe that the Iranian regime had a major hand to play in both men's martyrdom.

In these two untimely deaths, we lost two of our finest and most-respected activists.

Nevertheless, we believe that the examples they set have inspired a younger generation to want to join us in the struggle against Iranian persecution and injustice.

Historically, PADMAZ was formed in 2002 by a group of young Ahwazi who were already involved in political and cultural activities, but who were looking for a new way of expressing their political disaffection.

2002 was – if you remember – a time of reform in Iran.

Most non-Persian activists, including the Ahwazi activists operating inside of Iran, were anticipating that they would soon be granted their full rights by a liberalising government.

The PADMAZ activists, however, were sceptical of these reforms, suspecting that they would not translate into reality.

Based on detailed research into the nature of totalitarian regimes, the group felt that wide-reaching reform was an impossibility.

They saw little difference between the current regime and the monarchical one which preceded it in terms of attitudes towards Ahwazi Arabs and other non-Persian nations.

The group's suspicions were confirmed on receipt of the leaked document from Khatami's office.

The establishment of PADMAZ at that critical moment in the development of Iranian politics brought a flame of hope to the hearts of the Ahwazi activists who had been searching for a new form of political expression; one that was distinct from the Reformist and Conservative alternatives being proposed at that time.

The knowledge and experience of the domestic and Iranian political arenas that we in PADMAZ have gained places us in a position where we are able to provide a detailed and realistic overview of the political situation in Iran, and therefore to be well-placed to predict any changes which are likely to occur in the future.

Back in the early 2000's, popular slogans promoting democratic reforms and the development of civil society convinced many non-Persian activists, *including many Ahwazi*, to support the reformists. Some even agreed to shelve demands for their civil- and human rights, to give the government time to establish a democracy. The assumption being that: once democracy had been achieved, minority groups would receive their rights automatically!

Alarmingly, we're hearing the same argument repeated today, only this time it is the Iranian opposition parties asking that the non-Persian activists put their demands on hold until the establishment of democratic rule!

We must raise our voices to counter this unjust suggestion, and to bring attention to the kind of assumptions which need to be challenged and debated at the present time.

Firstly, what do the Iranian Opposition mean by 'democracy'? Are they clear that true democracy implies *not* simply another form of regime, based on the hegemonic rule of powerful elites over the rest of the nation, but *equality* of rights across the social spectrum?

When they talk about establishing democracy in Iran, what exactly are they envisioning? Democracy is a relative term, and no country in the world can claim to be fully democratic, not even the democracies of the Western countries such as US and UK...

But what exactly is the 'democracy' the Opposition have in mind? Do they mean a democratic order which guarantees the rights of all, in equal degree, *including the non-Persian nations and other minorities*?

We must interrogate their definition of democracy to be sure that we are all talking about a democracy which encompasses Persian and non-Persian alike.

This question leads us to the second important topic, which is: in order to encourage the development of democracy, there are going to have to be some radical changes in ways of thinking and behaving across the social spectrum, but most especially among political and intellectual elites. The more radical the changes, the more successful the implementation of democratic reforms.

Regretfully, however, we are forced to conclude from long experience that the 'Iranian Mind' shows little sign of having changed its attitude towards the non-Persian nations, and to the Ahwazi Arabs least of all. Clinging to Reza Shah's model of the nation state, with its preferential treatment given to the Persians to the detriment of all other nations, the Opposition Parties display a deep-seated racism towards the Ahwazi Arab, Turk, Kurds, Baluch, Turkman and Lorr.

A very simple example of this refusal to regard members of other non-Persian nations as their equal can be found in the fact that the Iranian centralist parties still don't recognise the basic right of indigenous peoples to name their own villages, towns and cities. They won't use AL-Mohamara, al-Khafajia, Al-bsitin, Al-Ahwaz, Arabistan... in spite of the fact that these are the name which are used historically by the indigenous Ahwazi Arab up to the current time.

Our conclusion must therefore be that if the Iranian Opposition are not ready to recognise so simple a right as the indigenous naming of a place, it is unlikely that they will concede to other rights based on the UN Declaration of Indigenous Rights.

Do they even recognise international conventions and the role of the UN?

This is something we must seek to clarify.

Our second question, then, is: **“Are Iranian elites and politicians ready to change their attitudes towards the non-Persian nations?”**

Are they willing to recognise our own distinct national identities and to express our sense of who we are in a way that they take completely for granted, yet – up until now – have denied us the right to do?

The third issue we would like to focus on – one that points to the falsity of the slogans of democracy – is that of the oppositions’ double standards in dealing with internal affairs.

It is the Iranian Opposition to whom government reforms are directed, while the non-Persian nations are repeatedly left out in the cold.

This is a government failing, and not the direct fault of the Opposition. However, where they *are* culpable is in their failure to campaign on *our* behalf and their turning of a blind eye to government discrimination against minorities.

We cannot fail to notice the absence of the Iranian anti-regime activists when events happen in non-Persian localities, or when non-Iranians are involved in anti-government protests.

Where were the Opposition when the uprising of 2005 happened?

What part did they take, if any, in the demonstrations of 2011? Haven’t they heard the voice of Ahwazi people and their demands? Why do they keep silent with regard to the policy of making demographic change in Ahwaz which is followed by the current Islamic regime and its predecessor?

Did they not hear our raised voices? Did they not feel the call to join with us in solidarity?

So our third question would be: **Do the Centralist Parties even recognise the right of self-determination??**

These questions and many others relating to the non-Persian nations need urgent answers, and those who plan for the future of Iran *must* take them into account.

Now that there is a consensus among the International Community about government abuses of power with regards to minority groups, we can feel doubly-confident in voicing our rights in the international arena.

We are in a stronger position now and can no longer be excluded from the political equation.

The Iranian Opposition would be well-advised to interrogate its own prejudices in relation to non-Persian peoples, and to recognise that there is much to be gained from joining with us in solidarity.

In fact, it is the only morally correct stance to take, especially by those who speak of establishing a democracy in Iran.

We clearly need more time to go deeply into these topics and so we invite you to attend the event at the end of April to discuss them further.

Please come and see me at the end of the event to find out more information about the event.

Thank you