

# Hope Instead of Despair in the Age of Democratic Backsliding: The Enduring Legacy of Dr. A. R. Ghassemlou

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## Introduction

Dr. A. R. Ghassemlou, one of the most prominent leaders of the Kurdish nation and former Secretary-General of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dedicated his life to the struggle for Kurdish rights and the pursuit of democracy in Iran. Born in 1930, Ghassemlou became a symbol of the quest for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue. As leader of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, he promoted a vision of a democratic Iran where Kurds and other national minorities could enjoy self-determination. Dr. Ghassemlou's life was tragically cut short on July 13, 1989, in Vienna, where he was assassinated by Iranian terrorist-cum-diplomats during peace negotiations. The assassination of this great Kurdish leader left a profound impact on the Kurdish movement and the global struggle for human rights.

Ghassemlou's unwavering belief in democracy, dialogue, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts remains deeply relevant today. As we commemorate the 35th anniversary of his assassination, it is important to reflect on the current state of democracy worldwide - a cause he passionately believed in and fought for.

As accounted for below, the current state of democracy worldwide and in particular trends of democratic backsliding are causes of concern. The same applies to the prospects for the respect of human rights and democracy in Iran. However, while the current state of affairs and the available data pertaining to democracy globally and developments in Iran might not be encouraging, if approached in the spirit of Ghassemlou, there is reason to be cautiously optimistic. Instead of despair, democratic actors around the world, both state and non-state, can reverse the trend by being realistic in the face of the challenges, yet at the same time allow themselves to be animated by hope.

The essence of Ghassemlou's political philosophy might be termed *hopeful realism*. He described himself as a political realist. He was a "realist" in the sense that he advocated coming to terms with existing realities rather than wishing them away, yet at the same time allowed oneself to be animated by hope for a better future. "Realism" for Ghassemlou did not entail surrendering to the status quo. Instead, it meant a persistent quest for transcending the status quo through a careful analysis of existing constraints and opportunities, as well as through the mobilization of the power of democratic collective action to bringing about opportunities for change and a brighter future (Krulich-Ghassemlou 1989).

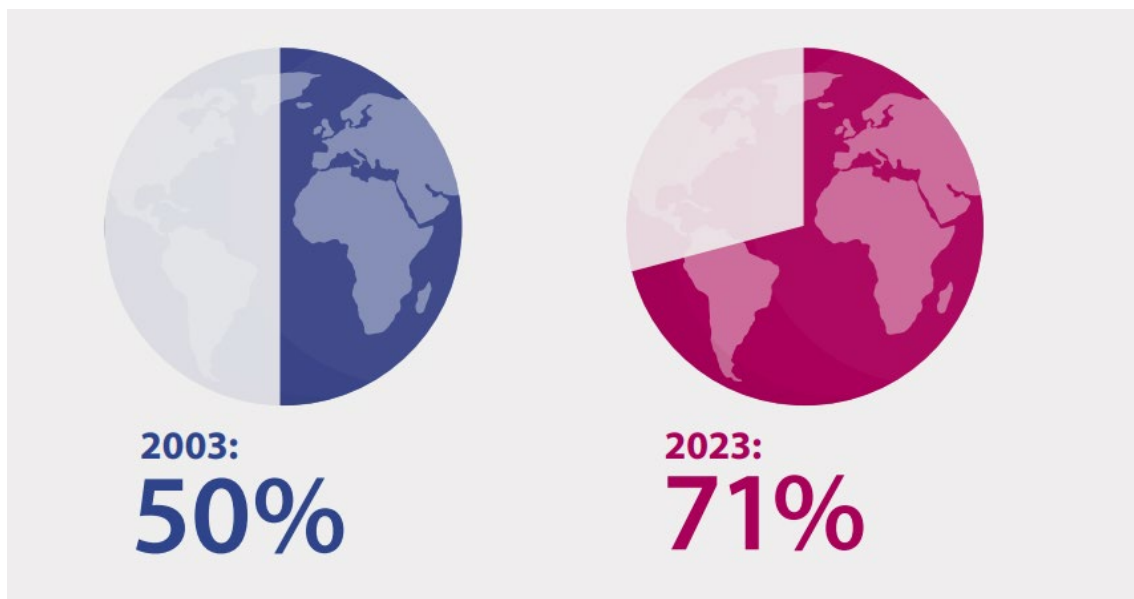
The following analysis of the current state of democracy and political developments in Iran is thus conducted in the spirit of the hopeful realism of Ghassemlou, both as an academic effort and as a tribute to one of the great leaders of the Kurdish nation as well as an exceptional leader in the Middle East.

## The Current State of Democracy Worldwide

As we stand in 2024, democracy around the globe faces a turbulent era. The latest V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) report highlights a disturbing trend of democratic backsliding in many regions. According to the report, the world has seen a significant decline in liberal democracy, with autocratization affecting more than one-third of the world's population. Countries that were once considered stable democracies are experiencing increasing polarization, erosion of judicial independence, restrictions on media freedom, and attacks on civil liberties. The V-Dem report emphasizes that while electoral democracy remains prevalent, the substantive aspects of democracy, such as checks and balances, freedom of expression, and protection of minority rights, are increasingly under threat (Nord et. al., 2024).

The report also highlights that the global landscape is almost evenly divided between 91 democracies and 88 autocracies. Alarming, 71% of the world's population, or 5.7 billion people, now live in autocracies, a significant increase from 48% a decade ago (see Figure 1). Electoral autocracies account for the largest share of this population, hosting 44% (3.5 billion people). In contrast, liberal and electoral democracies are home to only 29% of the world's population (2.3 billion people).

Figure 1. SHARE OF WORLD POPULATION LIVING IN AUTOCRACIES



Source: V-dem, 2024.

Currently, 42 countries are experiencing autocratization. Of the 28 countries that were democracies at the start of their autocratization episodes, only 15 remain democracies in 2023. In 23 countries, autocratization is occurring as a "stand-alone" process, while 19 countries are experiencing "bell-turn" autocratization, where initial democratization efforts have failed.

Freedom House's 2024 Freedom in the World report echoes these findings, showing that global freedom has been on the decline for nearly two decades. Authoritarian regimes have become more repressive, and even in democracies, populist leaders have eroded

democratic norms and institutions. Civil society, journalists, and human rights defenders are under pressure in many parts of the world, facing increased threats and violence (Freedom House, 2024).

### **Situation in Kurdistan and Iran**

Free, fair, and transparent elections are crucial to the legitimacy of any democratic system, ensuring that the government accurately represents the will of the people and maintaining public confidence in democratic institutions. In contrast, Iran's political system operates as an *electoral autocracy*, where elections are held but systematically manipulated to maintain the dominance of the theocratic regime. Presidential, parliamentary, and local elections are tightly controlled to reflect the interests of the ruling clerics and institutions rather than the true will of the people. This system is rooted in Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of the "Guardianship of the Jurist" (*velayat-e faqih*), which asserts that governance should be administered by a jurist or council of jurists acting as representatives of the Twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi, until his reappearance. Thus, the key institutions in the Islamic Republic are the "Supreme Leader" and the Guardian Council, not the Iranian parliament. The "President" in Iran is subordinate to the "Supreme Leader" and is in essence a manager rather than a decision-maker. The "Supreme Leader," who has ultimate authority, is a senior cleric chosen by the Assembly of Experts, another body of clerics. The Guardian Council, which has the power to disqualify candidates, ensures that all electoral candidates adhere to Islamic principles as interpreted by the theocratic establishment. This control mechanism effectively rules out political competition and maintains the dominance of the clerics over the political system (Ahmedi & Abdelzadeh, 2022).

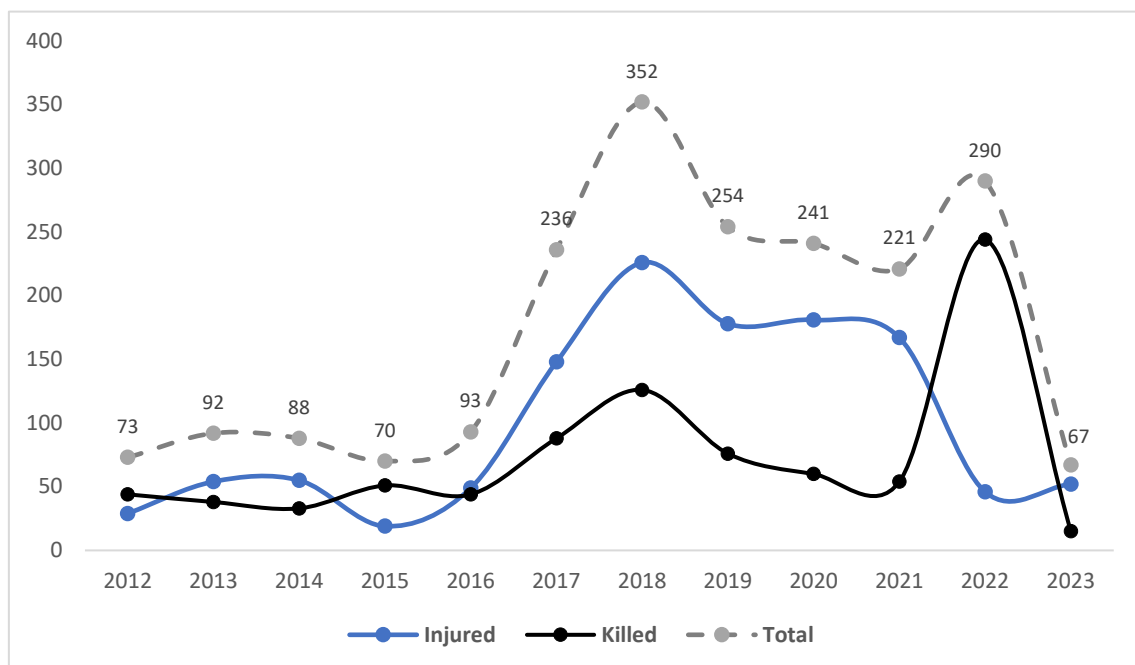
Organizing elections was a necessary evil for an elite that came to power after a broad popular revolution against an authoritarian regime in 1979, but also to claim popular legitimacy for the Islamic Republic. Since then, the Islamic regime has recognized the value of organizing sham elections to assert its legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Despite these electoral processes, however, Iran's core nature remains one of autocratic rule, characterized by systemic human rights violations and centralized control. This reality has consistently led international assessments, such as those by Freedom House, to classify Iran as "not free," "autocracy," and similar classifications.

In addition to free and fair elections, essential elements of democracy include respect for the rights of national minorities and the observance of human rights. The Iranian regime, which sees itself as the earthly embodiment of God's government, believes that it has a superior position both domestically and internationally. Domestically, this belief significantly shapes the Iranian regime's policies toward national minorities such as Kurds, Baluch, Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, and Turkmens. Scholars are increasingly describing the systematic nature of the Islamic Republic's oppressive policies imposed on the Kurds in terms of internal colonialism, drawing parallels with classic colonial practices

and strategies used by colonial powers to dominate and exploit their subject populations (Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019, 2020; Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2021).

For the past 45 years, the Islamist regime has systematically denied the national identity and rights of these national minorities. In Eastern Kurdistan, for example, the regime has enforced policies of securitization and assimilation, including forced migration and demographic changes, to weaken the Kurdish nation. In addition, since the 1979 revolution, the Kurdistan region has suffered from deliberate economic underdevelopment and relentless exploitation of its natural resources. Underdevelopment and economic exploitation in Kurdistan have been described as part of the Iranian regime's broader policy of internal colonialism against Kurdistan and the Kurdish people (see Mohammadpour, 2024). As a result, many Kurds, including young and highly educated youth, have been forced into "kolberi" (portage) as a means of survival. Kolbers (porters), i.e., individuals who carry goods on their backs across the border regions between Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, face a grim reality every year, as they are killed and injured by indiscriminate gunfire from Iranian paramilitary forces and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). As illustrated in Figure 2, between 2012 and 2013, a total of at least 2,077 kolbers were either killed or injured (1,204 injured and 873 killed) by Iranian paramilitary forces and the terrorist Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In 2022 alone, the number of kolbers killed was 244 (Mohammadpour, 2024).

Figure 2. Number of killed and injured kolbers between 2012 -2013.



Source: Mohammadpour, 2024 (The data comes from Hengaw Organization for Human Rights).

Furthermore, an additional consequence of the Iranian state's deliberate and systematic policy of economic underdevelopment in Kurdistan is that many Kurds have been forced to migrate to central Iran in search of employment opportunities. This migration has had a profound impact on both the demographic dynamics and the socio-economic landscape of the affected parts of Kurdistan.

In addition, since 1979, the Kurdistan region of Iran has been subjected to extensive exploitation of its natural resources. For example, as part of its water policy, the Iranian regime has expanded the construction of dams in Kurdistan, not with the aim of boosting agriculture and tourism in the region, but rather to divert Kurdistan's water resources to central Iran. This policy promotes economic development in central Iran at the expense of Kurdistan's natural resources. At the same time, this systematic exploitation of water has not only affected Kurdistan's economic development but has also led to environmental degradation (see Figure 3). As a result, scholars have analyzed the ecological and socio-economic damage suffered in Kurdistan and other regions using the theoretical framework of *environmental racism* (see Hassaniyan, 2024). This theoretical perspective examines, among other things, how environmental policies, practices, or directives disproportionately affect individuals, groups, or communities based on race or ethnicity, highlighting systemic injustices and their broader implications for environmental and social justice (cf. Bullard, 1993; Hassaniyan, 2024).

Figure 3. shows the landscape before and before the construction of the Darian Dam on the Sirwan River.



Source: Hassaniyan, 2024.

Iran is also notorious for its high rate of executions, consistently ranking among the top countries in the world for the number of people put to death. The Iranian regime uses the death penalty extensively as a tool of political repression and control. Many of those executed are charged with vague offenses such as "enmity against God" or "corruption on earth," which are often used to silence dissent and target national minorities, political activists, and human rights defenders.

Following the “Women, Life, Freedom” uprising in 2022, the number of executions in 2023 spiked to its highest level since 2015, a 48 percent increase from 2022 and a staggering 172 percent increase from 2021, according to an Amnesty International report (2024). Previous reports have shown that Kurds face higher rates of arrest, torture, and execution by the regime.

The self-proclaimed superiority of the Iranian regime is also reflected in its hegemonic policies outside Iran, the export of the Islamic revolution, nuclear ambitions, and other destructive policies. Driven by its ideological ambitions and worldview, the Iranian regime's actions have destabilized the region through various means. Iran's support for militant groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and various Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria has exacerbated conflicts and fueled sectarian violence. By providing financial, military, and logistical support to these groups, Iran is expanding its influence, undermining the sovereignty of neighboring states, and destabilizing the region (Jones, 2019).

In addition, Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program has raised significant global concerns. Despite international agreements aimed at curbing its nuclear ambitions, Iran's activities suggest a continued intent to develop nuclear capabilities that could trigger a regional arms race and increase the risk of conflict. The regime's ballistic missile program, combined with its nuclear ambitions, poses a direct threat to regional security and global peace (Elleman, 2024).

In conclusion, the Iranian regime poses a grave threat both to the population of Iran and to global security and peace. Internally, it perpetuates systematic human rights abuses, obliterates political dissent, oppresses national minorities, and suppresses basic freedoms. Externally, Iran's support for militant groups and pursuit of nuclear capabilities destabilizes the region and undermines international efforts for peace and security.

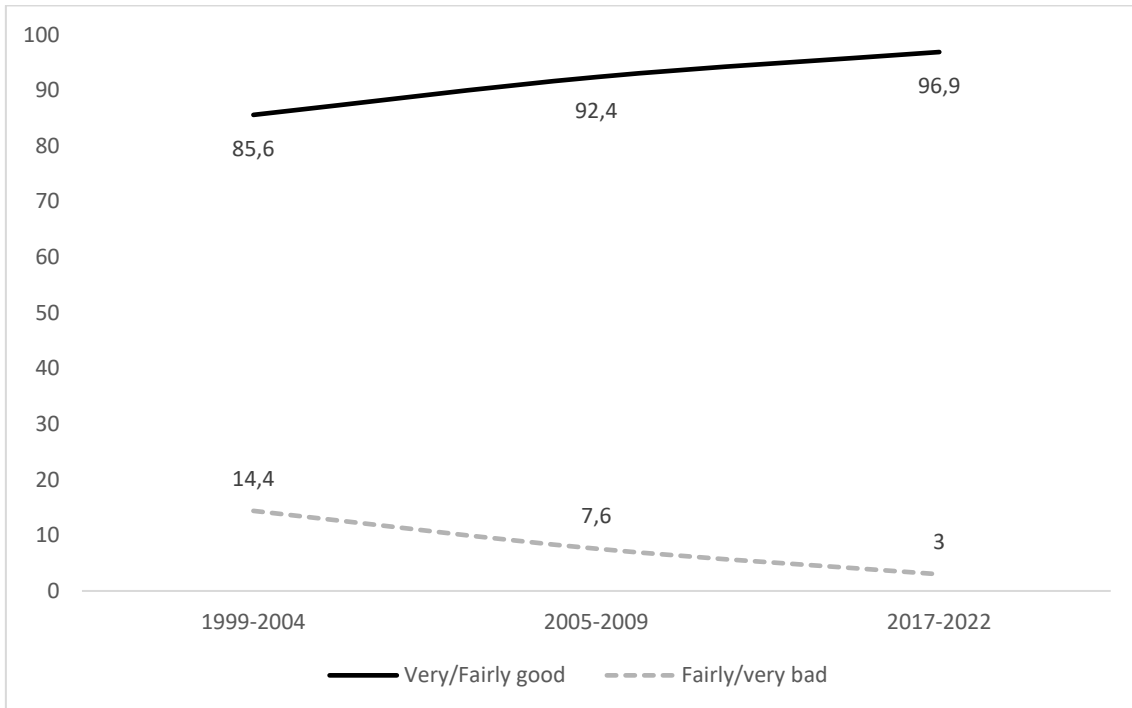
### **Support for Democracy in Iran**

Despite the Iranian regime's continued repression, the population of Iran demonstrates strong and growing support for democracy. Over the past several decades, the peoples of Iran have increasingly expressed a desire for democratic governance, despite facing significant repression. This trend is evidenced by data from the World Values Survey, which shows a steady increase in support for democracy.

As shown in the chart, support for democracy in Iran hovered around 86% from 1999 to 2004. In the subsequent period from 2005 to 2009, this support increased to about 92%. The trend continued, reaching approximately 97% in the period from 2017 to 2022. Overall, the data suggest a growing consensus in favor of democratic governance in Iran over the past decades, underscoring the resilience and aspirations of the people of Iran for a democratic and representative political system (see Figure 4).

The peoples of Iran's unwavering commitment to democratic ideals, even under oppressive conditions, is a testament to their resilience and enduring hope for a better future. This growing support for democracy not only challenges the current regime but also serves as a powerful reminder of the universal yearning for freedom and self-determination, especially among the Kurds and other nations that face systematic oppression on a daily basis.

Figure 4. Having a democratic political system



Source: World Values Survey (Inglehart et. al., 2014)

## Conclusion

In this repressive climate described above, the enduring legacy of Dr. Ghassemlou's struggle for Kurdish rights and democracy remains influential. His vision of an Iran characterized by democracy and respect for human rights continues to inspire Kurds and others who steadfastly pursue these aspirations despite the daunting obstacles they face. This commitment was evident during the "Women, Life, Freedom" uprising, when people in eastern Kurdistan chanted slogans such as "Ghassemlou, Ghassemlou, we will continue your path," "Freedom for Kurdistan," and "Long live Kurdistan.

The 35th anniversary of Dr. Ghassemlou's assassination is not only a moment to remember his contributions and sacrifices but also an opportunity to reflect on the ongoing challenges and progress in the Kurdish quest for autonomy and democracy. It serves as a reminder of the importance of unity, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to human rights and democratic values.

As we honor the legacy of Dr. Ghassemlou, we reaffirm our commitment to the principles he stood for and continue to strive for a future where the rights and freedoms of all peoples are respected and upheld.

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