



**Abdol-Karim Lahidji**

**President of FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights**

Dr. Abdol-Karim Lahidji was elected president of the International Federation of Human Rights at the organisation's May 2013 congress in Istanbul. He had already been elected to serve as FIDH vice-president for five three-year terms (1998-2013), in five consecutive FIDH congresses.

Born in 1940, Abdol-Karim Lahidji has been a human rights activist since attending Tehran University Law School in the late 1950s. Whilst at Law School, Mr. Lahidji was arrested and imprisoned twice for publicly defending the right to free expression and political dissent. He received his doctoral degree in Private Law from Tehran University and began to practice as a lawyer in 1965.

In the early 1970s, Mr. Lahidji travelled to Europe and established contact with Amnesty International, the International Association of Democratic Lawyers and the International Federation of for Human Rights (FIDH). Through these contacts he sought to expose the human rights abuses taking place in Iran and mobilise international support for the country's human rights activists. During the 1970s, Mr. Lahidji played a discrete but central role in persuading a number of international personalities to travel to Iran to raise questions about the treatment of political prisoners.

It was partly due to these efforts that in 1975 the Iranian government felt compelled to sign the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and permit the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit Iran's prisons. This development saw Iran's political prisoners permitted to choose their own counsel. Mr. Lahidji became defence counsel for a number of prominent political dissidents on trial before both military and civilian courts.

In 1977, Mr. Lahidji established the Iranian Association of Jurists (IAJ) in a bid to forge judicial independence in Iran. One hundred and fifty lawyers, judges and law professors joined the organisation, engaging in a series of lectures and seminars. Mr. Lahidji also co-founded a group called the Progressive Lawyers Group, which sought to attain the independence of lawyers from the State, particularly in their work on behalf of individuals or groups creating professional or civic associations.

In December 1977, Mr. Lahidji and 28 professors, writers, jurists and political leaders wrote a letter to the UN Secretary General announcing the establishment of the first ever human rights group in Iran: the Iranian Association for the Defence of Liberty and Human Rights. A primary goal of this initiative was to promote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the country at large and to educate the general public on the vital importance of protecting human rights in a modernising society. Mr. Lahidji was elected the Association's spokesperson.

In 1978, human rights activities in Iran grew more daring and vocal. This led to attacks on Mr. Lahidji himself, with a bomb blast at his office on 27 April 1978, and then a serious attack on his person by State security agents leaving Mr. Lahidji hospitalised. Mr. Lahidji was visited by Mr. William Butler, Secretary General of the International Commission of Jurists, during his time in hospital, who sought assurances from Iran's government regarding Mr. Lahidji's safety.

### **Post-1979 Revolution**

After the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy in 1979, Abdol-Karim Lahidji declined then Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan's offers of positions as justice minister and minister of education in his cabinet. Mr. Lahidji and three other top jurists were commissioned by the government to draft Iran's first Constitution. However, their democratic draft was substituted with a despotic law by an Assembly of largely pro-theocratic rulers. Mr. Lahidji boycotted the referendum on the new draft Constitution and the ensuing presidential election.

Mr. Lahidji and his colleagues at the IAJ were virtually the first Iranians to highlight the dangers of demonising critics of the revolution and using violent rhetoric to provoke the populace against them. They demanded open and fair trials for accused former officials and warned the authorities of the legal and political consequences of allowing vengefulness to dictate the treatment of former public officials.

At a risk to his own safety, Mr. Lahidji lost no time in condemning the executions that followed the 1979 show trials of the Islamic Revolution Courts. He even volunteered to defend two prominent individuals who had been accused of being involved in counter-revolutionary conspiracy.

In the early period of the revolutionary regime, Mr. Lahidji visited a number of jailed former officials and prepared a report about the circumstances of their incarceration for the Ministry of Justice.

During the same period, Mr. Lahidji continued his human rights advocacy through public

speaking and writing journalistic commentary. In May 1981, Mr. Lahidji was forced to go into hiding. Security forces attacked his home, confiscated his papers and arrested his fifteen-year old son. They also froze his bank account and prohibited him from selling his possessions, including his house.

In March 1982, Lahidji was smuggled out of Iran via Kurdistan and went to Paris, France, to begin a life of exile. Once settled in Paris, he invited a group of Iranian exiles in France to establish a new organisation, the League for the Defence of Human Rights in Iran (LDDHI), in 1983. Ever since, this group has been engaged in exposing the Islamic Republic of Iran's violation of human rights and publicising the danger facing Iran's dissidents at home. In 1986, LDDHI joined the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and took on initiatives to expand its activities.

Over the years, LDDHI has had a steady and influential presence in the international human rights community and Mr. Lahidji's name has become virtually synonymous with the League. He regularly participates in meetings of the Human Rights Council and other UN human rights bodies as well as a variety of non-governmental meetings and conferences to promote the cause of human rights in Iran and provide information and analysis. He also writes articles for a number of Persian-language publications in exile.

Mr. Lahidji has authored scores of articles and three books entitled, *Pluralism in the Islamic Republic*, *Judiciary in the Islamic Republic*, and *Democracy and Human Rights in Iran (Third Decade of the Islamic Republic)*.

Mr. Lahidji's books and essays address a variety of human rights issues, including the torture of political prisoners, gender and minority religious discrimination. In 1990, he was the recipient of Human Rights Watch's award for outstanding monitors of human rights in the world.