

Waterloo, Friday, January 30, 1987

Dear colleague:

Greetings. I hope you are doing well. I wish you complete health, along with success in your academic and other endeavors. As I write this letter, it has been 10.5 months since I left Iran with my wife Vida and sons Sepehr & Sepand, and 9 months since I began working at University of Waterloo as Visiting Professor. The first month after my departure was spent in Brussels for obtaining our Canadian visas and, then, a couple of weeks were lost to finding housing and getting settled here. Time really flies!

The purpose of this letter is to explain my decision to resign from Sharif University of Technology (SUT) and not return to Iran. I hope that by offering my reasons, I can repay a portion of my debt to colleagues and fellow-Iranians. In truth, even though I had decided to resign some time ago, it was still difficult to actually do it and to write this letter. Most of you know that SUT wasn't just a workplace for me. I felt a sense of belonging to the university which I had helped build up. The memory of my university colleagues, with all the friendships, disagreements, and the usual ups & downs in personal and professional relationships, will always be with me.

Let me begin with the story of getting permission to depart the country for my year-long sabbatical leave, that is starting on July 18, 1984, when I submitted the required documents for my passport application. On August 12, 1984, when my passport was supposed to have been ready, I learned that, because I belonged to a religious minority, my passport wasn't ready and I should wait for authorization from a special agency at the Prime Minister's office. Months came and went, awaiting any news from the said agency. In parallel with this long wait, I began my preparation for the sabbatical leave in late 1984, culminating in higher-education authorities' August 1985 approval of my leave request for the 1985-1986 academic year. Then, events began unfolding at a quicker pace, becoming more unpleasant and even torturous. Several hours of waiting at Prime Minister's special agency, while standing with at least 30 other people, like cattle, in a 200-square-foot room, led to an "interview" by a 20-something young man, whose reproachful gaze seemed to question my entire career and service to the country. Frequent visits to the passport office, and intervention by a few of my students who had connections in the Prime Minister's office and disapproved of the blatant injustice, eventually led to the issuance of my passport on November 5, 1985. There was just one problem: The name of my first-born son was not included in the passport! As I worked on solving this problem, my wife approached the delivery date for our second son, so I had to postpone our departure. Finally, after the birth of my second son, obtaining an identity card for him, and several other visits to various offices, my family's passport materialized on February 13, 1986!

Unfortunately, this wasn't the end of the passport story. While most Iranians leaving the country on pleasure trips and colleagues who had previously gone on sabbatical leaves were issued green (multi-use) exit visas in their passports, our exit-visa stamp was red, meaning that it was valid only for a single exit. Believe me when I say that despite all previous discriminatory actions, hardships, and insults, the thought of not returning to Iran crossed my mind only after seeing the red stamp. If I didn't intend to return to Iran, green or red stamp would have made no difference. The red stamp was tantamount to forcing me, despite my true preference, to leave for good. At the time, I saw myself and my family as prisoners allowed by the warden to leave detention just once, without a guard in tow. I did not understand the warden's logic: Isn't a single release enough for fleeing? I liked the prison environment and friends & acquaintances who were fellow inmates and did not want to abandon them. However, prison is prison, and no matter how interesting and likable its environment, it's not comparable to freedom.

Actually, my wife and I wanted freedom for our sons, rather than for ourselves. For me, Iran, with all the biases and hardships, was still tolerable. My love for Iran was shaken by what had happened, but it was too strong to be dealt a fatal blow. The positive role I had played in Iran's scientific and academic scenes, and the resulting personal satisfaction, were quite important to me. Presence of hundreds of thankful students & graduates, encouragement from thousands of readers of my scientific and other writings, doing research that was of value to the country (computer-printing of the Persian script and development of standards), and limping along the path of keeping in touch with the international community and publishing original research were much more satisfying to me than higher-level research results that I may contribute in the West. Still, I could not close my eyes to the future awaiting my children in an environment tainted by religious discrimination. If there was a place for me in the religion-stricken Iran, it was because of selfless support from my parents and other family members, allowing me to pursue an advanced degree abroad, my social & academic standing in light of previous contributions, and my lack of interest in high-level administrative positions that were closed to me because of religious screening.

But the situation was different for Sepehr & Sepand, who had to live in this toxic environment from birth. Assuming that they could finish primary school and high school without any problems, there was no guarantee that they could gain university admission, given the current faith-based screenings or that, by the time they reached college age, there would be any universities in Iran worth the investment of four years of their lives. Just like other religious minorities and many fellow-Muslims, earning tertiary or advanced degrees abroad would be a stretch for them. Paying their educational expenses would be a near impossibility with an academic salary, even assuming that they could get exit visas. It is quite possible that they wouldn't have educated or enlightened colleagues or that their work environment wouldn't be like the relatively principled academic setting. These concerns are by no means exhaustive and were listed merely as examples of our worries.

I doubt that anyone will be surprised by my decision to resign from SUT and not return to Iran or to blame me for these decisions (at least among those who know me and those whose opinions I value). I am nonetheless apprehensive and feel guilt for abandoning my fellow-countrymen in one of the most-critical periods of Iran's history. Perhaps putting these words on paper stems from this feeling of guilt. I am indebted to Iran and its people and feel sorry that conditions beyond my control deprived me of the opportunity to serve my homeland. Perhaps, if there were hope, even a slight one, that with changes in the current conditions, I'd be able to return home, my decision and the imposed distance would have been easier to bear. But I doubt than 10 years hence, say, I'll be capable of starting my life from scratch for the third time or that I can bear separation from my children, who, having grown up in the West and developed attachments and friendships here, will likely not return home with me.

I sincerely hope that my colleagues understand my decision and accept my apologies for the damage done to academic programs during the second semester by my not returning to Iran. It is of utmost importance to me that friends and colleagues within and outside the university be aware of my reasons for not returning. To this end, I would appreciate it if the handful of colleagues who receive this letter share it with others.

I end my letter with best wishes for your health and happiness. I sincerely hope that after Iran's victory in the ongoing war with Iraq, better conditions prevail for the country's reconstruction, in particular, mending its weakened and unhealthy university environment, free from prejudices and narrow-minded divisions. I do hope that colleagues who have remained in Iran, serving the country selflessly and under difficult conditions, will be able to live with brotherly love in a free, prosperous, and socially-just Iran. Wishing you a charmed and successful life.

Regards.

... Behrooz Parhami