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## THE PROSPECTS FOR REGIME CHANGE IN IRAN AND THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT U.S. POLICY

BY PATRICK CLAWSON

The protest movement following the 12 June 2009 Iranian presidential election raised the question of what should be the European and American policy towards democratic forces in Iran. Another way of framing the issue is: should the West support “regime change” in Iran as an objective? Serious arguments can be made that the West should instead concentrate on resolving the nuclear standoff, even if Iran has an odious government. But there are two serious complications to any effort to reassure Tehran that the West is prepared to accept the regime so long as it agrees to a nuclear deal: Iranian leaders would not believe such a U.S. statement no matter what actions the U.S. government takes, and the United States has a strong interest in the cause of democracy in Iran.

### IRANIAN PARANOIA ABOUT A “VELVET REVOLUTION”

Seen from the West, the phrase “regime change” brings to mind the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Iran’s leaders show little concern about such a possibility. President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad frequently dismisses out of hand the prospect that the United States would ever attempt any attack on Iran; while more cautious, other Iranian leaders largely concur. Their concern is not U.S. “hard power” but instead U.S. “soft power,” namely, the risk that ordinary Iranians will overthrow the Islamic Republic under the influence of American-encouraged concepts like social freedoms, human rights, and democracy.

Ever since he came to power in 1989, Leader Ali Khamenei—the main decision maker in Iran—has been greatly concerned about what he sees as Western cultural aggression or cultural invasion. Like many Iranian revolutionaries, he is repulsed by Western personal freedoms and cultural products, which he sees as seductive and subversive of Islam’s essential message. To that general concern, he has for the last decade another more particularly political concern, namely, the danger of a Western-inspired “velvet revolution.” That phrase refers to the 1989 Czechoslovak overthrow of communist rule, in which the seemingly isolated intellectual dissident Vaclav Havel was quickly propelled to power—for which Havel gives much credit to the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe, the same institution that now runs the Persian-language Radio Farda. At times, Khamenei adds to his polemics attacks on the “color” revolutions that led to the replacement of leaders in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan—countries close to Iran’s borders.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This theme is documented in detail in Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World’s View of Iran’s Most Powerful Leader*, Washington: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008, pp 17-19. The 2005 quote from Khamenei below in on page 18; the 2003 quote, on p 17.

Khamenei has set forward his theory about how Washington's "postmodern colonialism":

"For many years, the colonial countries oppressed other nations, brought dictators and military regimes to power and prevented national participation through whatever means possible. Today, they see that this method is no longer effective. Thus, they have found a new way of dominating other countries, i.e., dominating them by influencing their nations. This new method is what I recently referred to as postmodern colonialism... In the present postmodern colonial era, the arrogant powers are trying to influence other nations with the help of their agents, by spreading money and through propaganda tactics and colorful inducements."

Khamenei's views reflect his reading of what happened in Iran in 1997-99, in which a reform movement sprang up from nowhere to threaten the extremists' hold on power. Mohammed Khatami's surprise victory in the 1997 presidential election – when the hardliners' candidate seemed invincible – came from a massive rejection of the hardliners by young people, women, and intellectuals who voted in stunning numbers. That election unleashed a wave of criticism of the very foundations of the Islamic Republic – criticism which was taken up by seemingly the entire intellectual elite. Then came the summer 1999 student protests which mushroomed into a million-person demonstration on the streets of Tehran, where the very existence of the Islamic Republic seemed at stake. To Khamenei and the clerical hardliners, these events in 1997-99 showed the fragility of their hold on power and the willingness of the country's cultural elite and young people to jettison the Islamic Republic. In other words, Iran's experience in the last decade led them to conclude that Iran could go the same route as the former Eastern bloc, in which long-standing governments were unexpectedly quickly swept away.

Khamenei's concerns translate into deep suspicions about NGOs promoting people-to-people exchange between Iranians and foreigners. As an example of Iranian paranoia about news organizations, consider the April 2009 warning from the Revolutionary Guards Corp about a Dutch "media overthrow" project: "One such country, which has supported the opposition movement financially in recent years, is the Netherlands [whose "Dutch Project" is part of the] long-term and strategic planning along the ideology of NATO (...) pursuing the agenda of global imperialism by absorbing vast capital, expert human resources and political networks, setting up a group of expert journalists from the domestic and foreign opposition with the help of the British, political and diplomatic support from the Dutch, and with planning and secret budgets from the United States." The statement went on to give a long list of NGOs and Internet sites it said are receiving Dutch assistance for the "soft overthrow" of Iran's regime. In 2007, the Iranian government has justified the arrests of Iranian-American journalists, peace activists, pro-democracy reformers, and organizers of people-to-people exchanges by charges of far-reaching conspiracy to overthrow the Islamic Republic. The two Iranian Americans – Kian Tajbakhsh of the George-Soros-supported Open Society Initiative in Iran and Haleh Esfandiari, the director of the Middle East program for the Woodrow Wilson Institute who was known for organizing visits to the United States by Iranian NGO activists– were imprisoned for months in 2007 on charges

of conspiring to cause a velvet revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Khamenei has long worried more about cultural invasion than military invasion. In a 2003 address on Iranian television, he warned, “A senior official in an important American political center said: ‘Instead of bombs, send them miniskirts.’ He is right. If they arouse sexual desire in any given country..., if they lead youth to behavior to which they are naturally inclined by instincts, there will no longer be any need for artillery and guns against that nation.”

For many years, Khamenei’s concern about a velvet revolution appeared to be quite exaggerated. But the events of mid-2009 showed that he had a more accurate reading of Iran’s mood than that of the many analysts who thought the reform movement was dead. In fact, just as Khamenei had feared, a massive pro-reform movement arose very quickly in the last few weeks before the 12 June election, and even more threatening in his eyes, that movement turned after the election to street protests demanding fundamental changes in the very character of the Islamic Republic. To Khamenei, the reason for such protests was clearly the agitation of foreign powers, as he explained in his 19 June sermon at the Tehran Friday prayers,

“In the past few weeks, I have observed the behavior of the American and some European officials... They started to remove their masks gradually and show their true faces.... Their agents were activated... They wanted to create chaos. Public security was violated. The violators are not the public or the supporters of the [presidential] candidates. They are the ill-wishers, mercenaries, and agents of the Western intelligence services and the Zionists... A Zionist-American millionaire claimed that he spent \$10 million to change the regime in Georgia through a velvet revolution. This claim was published in the papers. Those fools thought the Islamic Republic is like Georgia.”<sup>3</sup>

The charge that the protest movement was the product of a velvet revolution was the centerpiece of the 1 August show-trial of more than 100 prominent opposition figures.<sup>4</sup> *Newsweek’s* Iran correspondent, one of the defendants, delivered a chilling lecture on the media’s role in fomenting this velvet revolution. Former Vice President Muhammad Ali Abtahi, another defendant, gave a confession which the *New York Times* described as “disjointed and at time almost incoherent [in what] seemed to be a kind of compromise with what his interrogators wanted him to say,” including his statement, “I think there was a capacity for what the deputy prosecutor called a ‘velvet revolution,’ but I don’t know if the intention was there or not.”

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<sup>2</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, “Washington Denies Iran's Accusations Over U.S.-Based Scholar,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 23, 2007, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/05/2C9A631C-8E8B-4508-B42E-E3FF204F709C.html>)”

<sup>3</sup>

Khamenei sermon of 19 June 2009 as translated by *Iran Times* (Washington), 26 June 2009, p 6.

<sup>4</sup> As described in Robert Worth and Nazila Fathi, “100 Dissidents on Trial in Iran for Conspiracy,” *New York Times*, 2 August 2009, pp 1 and 8.

Khamenei's allegations about a U.S. role in promoting a velvet revolution included his charge in his sermon that Obama said "he expected the people of Iran to take to the streets." This was despite Obama's very cautious remarks after the election. His initial reaction on 15 June emphasized his continuing interest in dialogue with the Ahmadinejad government,

"I want to start off by being very clear that it is up to Iranians to make decisions about who Iran's leaders will be, that we respect Iran's sovereignty... Diplomacy with no illusions about Iran and the nature of the differences between our two countries is critical when it comes to pursuing a core set of our national security interests."

Faced with considerable criticism within the United States for not taking a clear stance in defense of the human rights of Iranian protestors, Obama issued his strongest statement about the Iranian developments on June 23, but even then, he emphasized that the United States is not out for "regime change": "The United States respects the sovereignty of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and is not interfering in Iran's affairs. But we must also bear witness to the courage and dignity of the Iranian people." In succeeding weeks, U.S. statements continued to emphasize respect for Iranian sovereignty and a desire for engagement with the Islamic Republic's government. But all that seemed to make little impression on Khamenei, who remained firmly convinced that the true U.S. intention was a velvet revolution.

#### A NUCLEAR DEAL TRADING AWAY SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC FORCES?

U.S. interests would not be advanced were Washington perceived to have abandoned Iran's beleaguered pro-democratic forces by making a deal with hardline autocrats to secure U.S. geostrategic interests. Iranian reformers fear just such a deal. For instance, in his 2006 "Letter to America," noted dissident Akbar Ganji wrote, "We believe the government in Tehran is seeking a secret deal with the United States. It is willing to make any concession, provided that the United States promises to remain silent about the regime's repressive measures at home. We don't want war; nor do we favor such a deal. We hope that the regime will not be allowed to suppress its people, foment a crisis in the regime or continue with its nuclear adventurism."<sup>5</sup>

Would the United States trade away its support for Iranian democratic and human rights forces in return for an Iranian geopolitical concession? Some read the 2003 agreement with Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi as exactly such a tradeoff, though it is not apparent that Libya has a vibrant popular reform movement which suffered in the aftermath of the deal.

In this regard, it was striking that President Barak Obama's March 2009 Nowruz (Iranian New Year) message made no mention of democracy and human rights as an aspiration of the Iranian people, and the only barriers to better relations which he cited were terrorism and arms (presumably a reference to the nuclear program):

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<sup>5</sup> Akbar Ganji, "Letter to America," *Washington Post*, 21 September 2006, p. A25. Much the same point was made by Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi and Muhammad Sahimi, "Link Human Rights to Iran's Nuclear Ambitions," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2006).

“ Within these celebrations lies the promise of a new day, the promise of opportunity for our children, security for our families, progress for our communities, and peace between nations. Those are shared hopes, those are common dreams...The United States wants the Islamic Republic of Iran to take its rightful place in the community of nations. You have that right -- but it comes with real responsibilities, and that place cannot be reached through terror or arms.”

Obama’s message had a very different tone from that of George Bush, who coupled his respect for the Iranian people with his support for their democratic aspiration. For instance, in his September 2006 address to the UN General Assembly, Bush said, “To the people of Iran, the United States respects you. We respect your country. We admire your rich history, your vibrant culture and your many contributions to civilization. You deserve an opportunity to determine your own future... The greatest obstacle to this future is that your rulers have chosen to deny you liberty and to use your nation’s resources to fund terrorism and fuel extremism and pursue nuclear weapons.”

It would be a mistake to read too much into any one speech, especially one as short at Obama’s Nowruz message. Still, the tone of that address suggests the Obama administration’s priorities with Iran do not include democracy and human rights. That may seem like a hard-headed realist decision to put the nuclear issue first. But it is worth bearing in minds the words of the 11 April 2006 *New York Times* editorial, “The best hope for avoiding a nuclear-armed Iran lies in encouraging political evolution there over the next decade.”

#### PRACTICAL STEPS FOR SUPPORTING REFORM FORCES

The measures available to the U.S. government for supporting democracy and the rule of law in Iran are limited. Three measures which outsiders can take to promote reform in Iran are supporting civil society, defending human rights, and broadcasting information to Iranians.

*NOTE TO EDITOR: IF YOU NEED TO SAVE SPACE, I SUGGEST CUTTING THE NEXT SECTION, ON SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY, AND REWORDING THE PREVIOUS SENTENCE TO READ, “TWO measures which outsiders can take to promote reform in Iran are defending human rights and broadcasting information to Iranians.”*

*Supporting Civil Society.* U.S.-government support for civil society groups in Iran has received much criticism by those claiming that U.S. support would taint the civil-society groups.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the U.S. government does not release information about which groups it supports because of concern that the Iranian government would harass such groups. Possibly so. There is simply no evidence, however, to suggest that ceasing such funding would appreciably affect the Iranian hardliners’ belief that the United States is dedicated to regime change. In their view, civil society groups and universities are instruments of government policy, and so their efforts are part of a regime change plot. The intelligence ministry’s counterespionage director expressed why such contacts are suspicious: “Any foreigner who establishes relations is not trustworthy. Through their approaches, they first establish an academic relationship but this soon changes into an

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Akbar Ganji, “Why Iran’s Democrats Shun Aid,” *Washington Post*, 26 October 2007.

intelligence relationship.”<sup>7</sup> And these are not just empty words; university professors are being dismissed because of their contacts with foreigners, and two prominent doctors treating AIDS patients have been sentenced to jail for promoting “soft overthrow” of the Islamic Republic through their contacts with foreigners. In other words, for the Iranian leaders, the velvet revolution threat is from the West as a civilization, not just from the Bush administration.

The United States is not the only foreign power funding civil society efforts in Iran. The European Commission web page lists activities in Iran funded by the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights. Among other European intellectuals, Timothy Garton Ash has spoken out about the need for more European support of democracy in Iran: “Rather than sitting on the sidelines carping at whatever Washington does, we Europeans should do something better ourselves.” Ash proposes a whole series of initiatives, such as European universities inviting Iranian academics and students, European newspapers bringing over Iranian journalists, European trade unions linking up with Iranian trade unionists, European artists traveling to Iran, and European theologians engaging in dialogue with Iranian Islamic jurists.<sup>8</sup>

*Defense of Human Rights.* The United States has a long tradition of speaking out about what human rights violations and in support of those aspiring for a more open society. The U.S. government has been prepared to vigorously criticize its allies about human rights issues, as seen in the long-running and acrimonious U.S.-German difference about scientology. There is simply no prospect that the U.S. government will cease evaluating the state of human rights in Iran in its annual *Human Rights Report* or in various other reports, such as that on international religious freedom. And the U.S. government has hardly been alone in its condemnations of human rights violations in Iran. For instance, the Canadian government has been the most active at criticizing Iran’s human rights record ever since the 2004 death of a Canadian-Iranian journalist. Ban Ki-moon’s 1 October 2008 “Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran” makes depressing reading. The United Nations General Assembly has adopted many resolutions about the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the most recent being the 24 February 2009 resolution.

*Bringing Information to the Iranian People.* Most Iranians get their news from television, which is state-run and tightly controlled by hardliners. Whereas Iran’s print press had a brief moment of relative freedom in 1997-99, the repression has been fierce for years, with strict limits on what can be written and frequent jailings of journalists. Additionally, the regime is making it harder for Iranians to get news from sources the government does not control, shutting down hundreds of newspapers and placing increasing restrictions on satellite TV and the internet. The Iranian government has stopped pretending that Iran has a free press. In July 2007, Ali-Akbar Javanfekr,

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<sup>7</sup> The official, whose identity was not disclosed, is quoted in Robert Tait, “Talk to Foreigners and We Will View You as a Spy, Iran Warns Academics,” *The Guardian* (London), 31 May 2007, p. 15, which also quotes a professor fired for relations with foreigners. On visa cancellations, see Robin Wright, “Tehran Detains 4th Iranian American before Talks,” *Washington Post*, 23 May 2007, p. A17.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, “We Need a European Approach to Supporting Democracy in Iran,” *Guardian*, 9 March 2006. Available online ([www.guardian.co.uk/print/329430126-111322.00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/329430126-111322.00.html)).

an aide to President Ahmadinezhad, explained, “Why should we guarantee the free flow of information so some may exploit this freedom for their own goals?”, while Culture Minister Mohammad-Hossain Saffar-Harandi (responsible for press censorship) complained that criticism of the government in the press constituted “a creeping coup.”<sup>9</sup> In this environment, getting information to the Iranian people about developments in their own country and the world becomes all the more important. The United States has substantially increased its funding for such information activities, including expansion of Voice of America’s satellite television broadcasts to twenty-four hours (six hours of original material, rebroadcast four times).<sup>10</sup> The Dutch government has allocated €15 million for outreach to Iranians—most of which went to Radio Zamaneh and Shahrzad News. On a per capita basis, an equivalent sum from the United States would be \$340 million. In January 2009, the BBC launched satellite television broadcasts in Persian, the rationale for which was laid out in a major address at the International Institute of Strategic Studies on 13 March 2006 by British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw,

“We in Europe need to communicate better with the Iranian people... We in the United Kingdom and throughout Europe need to think about whether there is more we can do to ensure that reliable and trusted news services are able to broadcast in all media, in Persian, to Iranians... We and the rest of the international community should not look the other way when the regime fails to abide by international standards in the way it treats its own people.... And we should help Iranians to make informed choices for themselves by helping to improve the flow of information into the country.”

The impact of the foreign broadcasts, especially those of the BBC, were repeatedly highlighted by Iranian officials after the 12 June 2009 elections. Khamenei’s complaint that “the most evil of them [Western governments] is the British government” was widely seen as being directed at the BBC.<sup>11</sup> The semi-official *Keyhan* newspaper blamed Britain’s MI-6, along with the CIA, for having directed the protest movements, using broadcasts as their organizing tool. Indeed, the Iranian government went to considerable lengths, and great expense, to block reception of satellite broadcasts in Tehran.

## PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

The scale and duration of demonstrations since the 12 June elections came as a great surprise to the Iranian regime, to reformers in Iran, and to outside observers. So far the regime’s grip looks solid because it appears to retain a core of supporters willing to kill to stay in power. Nonetheless, the regime faces both a profound split among the Iranian elite and deep anger

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<sup>9</sup> “Regime: No Intention of Allowing Free Flow of Information,” *Iran Times* (Washington), 20 July 2007, p 2.

<sup>10</sup> A detailed description is in Department of State Office of Inspector General, “Voice of America’s Persian News Network,” March 2009, <http://oig.state.gov/documents/organization/121748.pdf>.”

<sup>11</sup> Khamenei sermon of 19 June 2009 as translated by *Iran Times* (Washington), 26 June 2009, p 6. The *Keyhan* attack was on June 21.

among layers of the population, as witnessed by demonstrators ready to show up repeatedly despite massive mobilization of security forces who violently attack protestors. It is hard to forecast how this situation will develop. Analysts have a poor record of predicting when regimes will fall. Recall that when President Ronald Reagan called on 12 June 1987 for the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, he was widely derided as out of touch with reality, but in less than four years, not only that wall but the entire Soviet empire were gone. In contrast, many analysts in the mid-1990s expected the North Korean regime to disappear but that regime looks as solid as ever. The lesson is that the collapse of regimes is very difficult to foretell.

Both the United States and Europe should design policies to live with a hostile Iranian regime, while working to lay the groundwork for change and preparing to take advantage of such an opportunity if it occurs. So long as the present Iranian regime is in power, U.S. and European policy should not give such priority to the nuclear file that it seems as if they do not care about the promotion of democracy. The West collectively should be doing more to advance both policy objectives at the same time.

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