

USADI Dispatch

A publication of the U.S. Alliance for Democratic Iran

Volume 1, No. 56

Thursday, December 9, 2004

USADI Commentary

Preserving a Faltering Tyranny

Last Monday, students at Tehran University gave the mullahs' embattled president Mohammad Khatami an angry and humiliating reception. He was bombarded with boos and angry slogans reflecting widespread frustration with his utter failure and the incompetence in office.

"Khatami, Khatami shame on you", "Khatami we detest you", "Khatami, our votes were wasted on you" and "Where are your promised freedoms?" students chanted.

"Just stop it. I will tell them to throw you out," a visibly shaken Khatami lashed out. But for most present, Khatami's words merely underlined the impotence of a man who many now view as part of a system, which is unwilling to accept real change.

Once seen by the West as a great hope for change in the Islamic Republic, Khatami asked the students to stop heckling and accused his critics of intolerance. "Unfortunately what Khatami sees as his tolerance was his extreme weakness towards the opponents of democracy," said a student.

In reaction to this outright expression of student outrage, Khatami presented his usual "Khatami act": a mix of playing victim, some doze of superficial talk about preference of freedom to despotism, and a lot of demagoguery. Students did not buy any of it, chanting, "Enough lies, enough lies," "Incompetent Khatami, may our vote not bless you!"

But what really spoke volumes were a few sentences Khatami uttered about the role he played in preserving the ruling religious dictatorship against the mounting demands of the Iran's democracy movement that seeks fundamental change and political freedoms.

The Associated Press wrote that Khatami in his speech admitted to his failure to fulfill the promise of implementing democratic reforms because "he had bowed to the will of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei" to "avoid riots and preserve the ruling Islamic establishment."

Khatami was acknowledging a fact known to Iran's democratic opposition forces for more than two decades: the realization of democratic change is impossible as long the theocratic regime rules Iran. Moreover, he conceded that only through a popular revolt and mass protests the democratic changes in Iran could be accomplished and if that were to happen, the ensuing uprising would result in the downfall of the clerical regime. Khatami admitted, "If I retreated, I retreated in the face of a regime that I believe in... I considered it necessary to save the ruling establishment."

The fantasy of "reform" in a totalitarian regime, structurally and intrinsically lacking any capacity to change or to cope with democratic aspirations of the Iranian people came to an end with the ouster of Khatami's faction from the parliament last February. For seven years, the mullahs' president deceived Iranians with his talk about the rule of law while his foremost goal was to preserve the regime. He told students that "I really believe in this system and the revolution and that this system can be changed from within."

Sadly, for seven long years the West bought into this and legitimized Khatami as vehicle of change and as such, it turned a blind eye to Iran's democracy movement and blacklisted the Iranian democratic opposition forces who sought to unseat the ruling regime.

Seven years later, the most extreme and belligerent factions of the mullahs' regime have gained control of all levers of power and are challenging regional peace and security by working relentlessly to advance their nuclear weapons program and through extensive meddling in Iraq to influence the upcoming elections.

Meanwhile, thousands of political dissidents and activist students, journalists, intellectuals, and writers have been killed or thrown in jail. Student uprisings in 1999 and the following years were brutally suppressed by the regime security forces, while the outside world, mesmerized by the fallacy of an "Ayatollah Gorbachev," continually ignored the students' cry for support and only offered lip service to the cause of democracy.

As the world is watching, the mullahs' regime is on the threshold of becoming a nuclear-armed power and a dominant force in Iraq after the January 30 election. The appeasers in the EU capitals and Washington bear a huge responsibility in giving a declining regime a second lease on life.

As Washington is working to formulate a comprehensive policy toward Tehran, the lesson to be learned from the seven years of futile experiment with the myth of "change from within the system" is that the true forces of change in Iran are those Iranian democratic opposition groups, which have been challenging this regime at great risk and cost for the past quarter century.

The US Alliance for Democratic Iran (USADI), is an independent, non-profit organization, which aims to advance a US policy on Iran that will benefit America's interests, through supporting Iranian people's aspirations for a democratic, secular, and peaceful government, free of tyranny, fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism. The USADI is not affiliated with any government agencies, political groups or parties.

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The Wall Street Journal (Editorial)

December 8, 2004

Democracy for Iran

We keep reading that there are "no good options" for diminishing the threat of Iran's nuclear program. And certainly preemptive military strikes are an imperfect solution at best, though the option has to be kept on the table. But that still doesn't explain why the Bush Administration has been so reluctant to support Iranians who want to overthrow the bomb-building mullahs.

Opposition to the Islamic Republic remains alive and well in Iran, despite the best efforts of Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini and his loyal ayatollahs to kill it. On Monday the ineffectual Mohammed Khatami, the outgoing "reformist" president, was heckled repeatedly while speaking at Tehran University. "What happened to your promised freedoms," the students asked, accusing him of "extreme weakness toward the opponents of democracy."

For readers unfamiliar with the current Iranian system, all the real power lies with the Supreme Leader and an unelected body called the Council of Guardians, who must approve all candidates for office. Mr. Khatami was the more liberal of the two major candidates the mullahs approved to succeed former President Hashemi Rafsanjani in 1997, and he won in a landslide. But in office he refused to stand up for reform as the clerics vetoed laws curbing the power of the Guardian Council, thus earning the contempt on display Monday.

In parliamentary elections in February, the Khomeini crew abandoned all pretense of running a real democracy by disqualifying scores of sitting deputies allied with Mr. Khatami. About 100 newspapers have been closed in recent years. And in the presidential vote set for next year the hardliners look set to recapture the office. Rumor has it that Mr. Rafsanjani -- once hailed by Foggy Bottom and the Council on Foreign Relations as a "pragmatist," but who has said openly that Iran must have the atomic bomb to threaten Israel -- is interested in having his old job back...

One of the most frustrating arguments against supporting Iran's democratic opposition is that the nuclear program is a matter of Persian national pride, and that any government would seek the bomb. But it should be obvious that a democratic Iran would be much less of a threat than the current regime, which is the prime sponsor of Hezbollah and perhaps now al Qaeda as well.

The national pride argument probably isn't true in any case. The New York Times reported on Monday on an Iranian analyst who has survey data to suggest many Iranians see the nuclear program for what it is -- a means to help the current regime consolidate its power. "The clerics want to get hold of the bomb to rule for another 50 years," a man named Reza is quoted as saying.

It is becoming increasingly notable that a Bush Administration committed to democracy everywhere else in the Middle East, and now in Ukraine, has little to say about the subject regarding Iran. This is not just a matter of consistency but of national security, and time is not on our side...

Knight Ridder Newspapers

December 7, 2004

U.S. Planning to Increase Pressure on Iran

WASHINGTON -- As 150,000 U.S. troops battle to stabilize Iraq, some officials in the Bush administration are already planning to turn up the heat on another member of the president's axis of evil.

Officials in the White House and the Defense Department are developing plans to increase public criticism of Iran's human rights record, offer stronger backing to exiles and other opponents of Tehran's repressive theocratic government and collect better intelligence on Iran, according to U.S. officials, congressional aides and others.

Iran has embarked on a nuclear program that some specialists fear cannot be prevented from producing an atom bomb; is trying to extend its influence in Iraq and remains a prime sponsor of Hezbollah and other international terrorist groups. U.S. intelligence officials also believe some top lieutenants of Osama bin Laden have sought refuge in Iran.

However, with the U.S. military now stretched thin by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the new campaign may be intended not to build support for military action against Iran, but to pressure Iran to change its behavior so military action isn't necessary.

It's far from clear, however, whether a more aggressive U.S. campaign to condemn the Iranian regime and court pro-Western forces would have any effect. The major Iranian opposition group, the Iraq-based Mujahedeen Khalq (MEK), remains on the State Department's list of foreign terrorist groups, but it's provided much of the intelligence about Iran's weapons programs.

The new, more aggressive tack is said to have the backing of secretary of state-designate Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security adviser.

Among the steps under consideration, the officials said, are stronger public condemnations of Iran's human rights practices and treatment of women; increased U.S. broadcasting into the country; and financial backing for pro-Western groups. ...