

Headline Story

Obama Offers Tepid Support for Iran Protests

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As protests and riots involving hundreds of thousands of demonstrators flared in Tehran Monday, President Barack Obama found his Iran policy under siege.

Critics not only questioned the administration's much-ballyhooed outreach to the Islamic Republic, but also its reaction to what steadily turned into a democratic rebellion over the weekend.

The much disputed re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has clearly undermined Obama's fundamental argument -- touted in his controversial Cairo speech -- that outreach and an emphasis on promoting democracy can move Iran much closer to peace than confronting the regime over its secretive nuclear program.

Lawmakers, analysts and other critics found flaws in that thinking Monday. As more statistical analysis emerged that the election was rigged, it became clear that Iran's theocratic regime was setting up a second term for Ahmadinejad, a leader who has called for the extermination of Israel and routinely speaks in apocalyptic terms while pursuing what many experts clearly believe is a bomb building program. Moreover, he has made destabilizing forays into Latin America by trading military technology with Venezuela leader Hugo Chavez.

Former Bush administration official Elliott Abrams told Reuters that for now the United States should support the Iranian people rather than trying to reach out to its government.

"In the longer run, I think we take a lesson from Ronald Reagan who both engaged with the Soviets and said publicly that they would end up on the ash-heap of history," said Abrams, referring to former U.S. President Reagan.

"Obama assumes the legitimacy and the permanency of the current regime. He shouldn't, because, ultimately, our only hope in dealing with Iran is a change of regime," conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer said Monday on Fox News.

"And if this election and the stealing of it, if that's what's actually happening, if that occurs and it stirs unrest, we ought to be open to at least hands off and not supporting the dictatorship against whatever popular regime emerges as a result."

Krauthammer and other analysts feared that the Obama administration could be letting a pivotal moment -- like the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the uprising against Ferdinand Marcos -- slip away.

"Historically in dictatorships, for example, in the Philippines under Marcos, an obviously fraudulent election can stir unrest in the streets," Krauthammer said. "And I think that that's the real opening here. If there is unrest -- our only hope of changing the nuclear issue with Iran is not in the negotiations. It would be in the change of regime."

House Minority Whip Eric Cantor, R-Va., blasted the administration Monday for "silence in the face of Iran's brutal suppression of democratic rights represents a step backwards for homegrown democracy in the Middle East.

"President Obama must take a strong public position in the face of violence and human rights abuses," Cantor said in a statement. "We have a moral responsibility to lead the world in opposition to Iran's extreme response to

peaceful protests. "In addition, Iran's clerical regime has made clear that its nuclear program will move forward," he said. "The United States cannot trust the aspirations of a nation that is a state-sponsor of terrorism, and the Administration must work with Congress to do everything in its power to deny Iran nuclear weapons."

Indiana Representative Mike Pence said it is Mr. Obama's duty to make a strong statement regarding Iran.

"It is appropriate for the leader of the free world at this time to speak a word of encouragement to those dissidents in the street," Pence said, according to CBS News.

Pence also told CNN that he believes the president's foreign policy is not working.

"First and foremost, we need to take a half step back from this administration's olive branch-and-apology approach to enemies and countries that have been hostile to the United States of America and our allies," Pence said Sunday. "I'm hoping, before the end of the day today, the President of the United States will speak a word of support for Mr. Moussavi and for the dissidents and the reformers within Iran."

Sen. Joe Lieberman, an independent Democrat, also called on Obama to raise his voice in support of the protesters.

"I would hope that President Obama and members of both parties in Congress will speak out, loudly and clearly, about what is happening in Iran right now and unambiguously express their solidarity with the brave Iranians who went to the polls in the hope of change and who are now looking to the outside world for strength and support," Lieberman said.

Lieberman said on Fox News that Iran's refusal to admit international monitors and withholding of detailed election results raised red flags.

"There's every indication that this was not a legitimate election," Lieberman said, adding that the U.S. needed to be supporting the Iranian people demonstrating for democratic freedoms. He added on MSNBC that the U.S. should increase funding for Radio Farda, which broadcasts to Iranians in the same way that Radio Free Europe targeted residents behind the Iron Curtain.

Several analysts said on Monday the White House was in a no-win situation but the best option was to stand back rather inject U.S. views into the Iranian political debate.

The United States also wants to keep open the chance of talking to Iran's government about its nuclear program, which the West suspects is aimed at building a bomb and Tehran says is to generate electricity.

"The U.S. ability to do harm in Iranian politics is much greater than doing good," said Middle East expert Jon Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Obama told reporters on Monday he was "deeply troubled" by the post-election violence but made clear Washington did not want to become a "handy political football" in the election dispute.

"It is up to Iranians to make decisions about who Iran's leaders will be. We respect Iranian sovereignty and want to avoid the United States being the issue inside of Iran," he said, adding Washington wanted to pursue a "tough, direct" dialogue with Tehran.

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