

Why Iranian Elections Won't Matter This Time, Thanks to Obama

In his 2009 inaugural address, President Barack Obama declared, "To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."

Thus far, the toughest regimes "on the wrong side of history"—Syria and Iran—seem to be defying history rather well. They also have not unclenched their fists, except maybe to hold a gun.

In his speech to the Muslim world in Cairo on June 4, 2009, Obama made his conciliatory approach to Iran even more explicit: "For many years, Iran has defined itself ... by its opposition to my country, and there is indeed a tumultuous history between us. ... Rather than remain trapped in the past, I have made it clear to Iran's leaders and people that my country is prepared to move forward. ... It will be hard to overcome decades of mistrust, but we will proceed with courage, rectitude and resolve."

Obama also extolled democratic values, declaring that "[they are] not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere. ... [Y]ou must place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party. Without these ingredients, elections alone do not make true democracy."

When Iranian voters went to the polls on June 12, 2009, they were probably encouraged by Obama's overtures toward

normalization with their country and by his advocacy of democratic ideals. How much Obama's words spurred them to vote for reform may never be known, but—about a week after that speech—the Iranian regime flouted Obama's exhortations by manipulating vote tallies to favor their preferred candidate, incumbent Mahmoud Ahmedinejad. The mullahs gave the electoral challenger, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, of the reformist green movement, a mere 34 percent of the vote, despite his popularity.

On June 15, Mousavi and millions of his supporters—perhaps emboldened by Obama's rhetoric—rallied in Tehran, despite official warnings that such activity would be illegal. The voice of the people proved powerless against the truncheons, tear gas and guns of the Basij deployed to quell protesters fuming at electoral fraud.

The next day, Obama said it would be counterproductive for the United States “to be seen as meddling” in the disputed Iranian presidential election, despite calls from Republican leaders for forceful support of the Iranian opposition. As the violence against peaceful protesters continued for over a week, Obama remained silent. When he finally spoke out, he promised not to interfere in Iran's internal affairs and absurdly called for investigations (as if they could be any fairer than the elections necessitating them). Rather than side unequivocally with the voters he had inspired, Obama gave the regime a façade of legitimacy.

It took 30 years of theocratic repression to rouse the Iranian people into challenging their rulers. That rare tipping point was a golden opportunity Obama squandered in the Jimmy Carter-esque illusion that playing nice with tyrants might prompt reciprocity. Obama offered no logistical, diplomatic or even verbal support to a grassroots movement yearning for freedom and poised to overthrow the regime that seized power in Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979. Did the thugocracy Obama

effectively empowered for a second term offer any reciprocal concessions (like democratic reforms, decreasing support for terrorism, compromising on its nuclear weapons program, etc.)? No.

Since the 2009 election protests, Iran's reform movement has been pulverized, with its principal leaders (including Mousavi) still under house arrest. So the Iranian presidential elections scheduled for June 14 will be even more of a sham—with no meaningful choices from among eight carefully selected regime insiders. While all eight agree that rampant inflation is Iran's most pressing problem, commentators noted that none proposed real solutions in Iran's first televised debate. The leading candidate, Saeed Jalili, recently told a female audience, "Women's core identity lies in motherhood, and her role should be defined within that framework, not in an economic context." Jalili, who is also Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, has promised zero compromise with the West over Iran's nuclear program and involvement in Syria.

The lack of meaningful voter choice makes protesting any electoral outcome unnecessary. Nevertheless, activists might still regard election day as the symbolic moment to highlight how undemocratic Iran's political system actually is. But how likely are such protests, when they require the ultimate self-sacrifice?

Syrian protesters were brave enough to protest for democratic reform in March 2011 despite Obama's abandonment of Iranian protestors almost two years earlier; that makes their courage all the more remarkable. But given the exorbitant price those Syrians have paid—partly because of Obama's equal reluctance to help them—can anyone blame the Iranians if they choose not to protest the next election?

The only silver lining is that there will be no reformist candidate to serve as a fig leaf for Iranian nukes. Scholars

may debate whether Mir Mousavi could have ultimately effected any serious change on the Iranian nuclear issue, but no candidate running this time will leave an already timid West confused about Iran's nuclear intentions.

In game theory terminology, Obama offered Iran's despots cooperation, and they responded with competition—revealing Obama's much touted “soft power” to be very soft indeed.

Noah Beck is the author of *The Last Israelis*, a doomsday thriller about the Iranian nuclear threat and current geopolitical issues in the Middle East.