

Iran- Struggle for Liberty Continues

The opposition movement that spontaneously rose up against Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the spiritual leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei is continuing even in the aftermath of the regime's brutal crackdown on popular protests over the disputed results of the presidential election. Faced with intensifying violence from the regime's security forces, the opposition has been forced to abandon mass rallies and is preparing for a protracted campaign of popular struggle.

The Obama administration should make it clear that it stands with Iran's democratic, secular opposition and lead an International Coalition to pressure Tehran to unclench its fist from around the throats of its own people.

The massive peaceful protests that convulsed Iran in the days after the June 12 presidential election have petered out in the face of unrelenting repression. Thousands of people have been arrested including reformist Politicians and Journalists. Although the official death totals stand at 20 protestors there are unconfirmed reports that 300 protestors were killed since June 12.

Iran's ruling regime has flooded the streets of Tehran with uniformed police, riot police, secret police, and the paramilitary thugs of the Basij militia. These forces have used guns, tear gas, pepper gas and clubs to brutalize and intimidate Iran's opposition forces. But dwindling crowds of protestors do not signal the end of the opposition but merely a new stage in Civil-Disobedience and popular struggle. The opposition movement currently is debating a change of tactics, such as moving from mass rallies to smaller symbolic protests or considering Civil-Disobedience actions such as labour strikes or boycotts. It is using methods such as Social Non-Cooperation and Economic Non-Cooperation Action. The opposition's prospects for success may depend on mobilizing support in key economic sectors, such as Bazaris, labour unions and the oil industry. Oil workers played a crucial role in bringing down the Monarchy, in the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Iran's ruling regime has shown itself to be out of touch with and cruelly indifferent to the popular opinion of its own people. By resorting to brute force the regime has lost whatever legitimacy it had in the eyes of many Iranians. But as long as the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, retains the undivided loyalty of the security forces, particularly the Islamic

Revolutionary Guard Corps, the regime will not be toppled by protest rallies.

Foreign elements also play a major role for the survival of the regime. Russia has, almost single-handedly but with some auction, brought Iran into its strategic sphere, a process which has gained considerable momentum in the past year because of the almost complete removal of the US from influence in the Black Sea/Caucasus/Central Asian sphere as a result of the US supported color revolutions in Central Asia, only one of which was successful: the removal of Kyrgyz Republic President Akaev in March 2005. Iran's close relationship with Beijing and the Beijing/Moscow dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has put Beijing as well as Moscow into the front rank of Tehran's alliances. The Islamic Republic of Iran has made it clear that it is increasingly interested in joining the SCO and form a powerful axis with its twin pillars, as a counterweight to a US power. Russia and the PRC have already signed military cooperation agreements with Iran and are the main suppliers of advanced weaponry to Iran.

There are cracks at the top of the regime, as well as in its foundation. Powerful members of the old guard revolutionary leadership, such as Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, have sided with the opposition against Ahmadinejad. What began as a spontaneous test of willpower on Iran's street has now evolved into a protracted test of staying power. The outcome of the power struggle will ultimately depend on factional politics within the regime, the loyalty of the internal security Forces, the fortitude of opposition leaders in the face of extreme pressure and their ability to inspire key groups to join a broad coalition of Iranians in risking their lives to bring major changes in Iran. There is a deep rift within VEVAK the intelligent service of the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as rifts within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and serious disputes between the Military and the IRGC. Even signs of disagreements can be observed within both the so-called pragmatic and also radical camps of the Islamic Republic. The Regime has never been so vulnerable as it is today.

The spontaneous outpouring of protests reflects a deep popular dissatisfaction with the regime. What was surprising was not that the election was fraudulent but that Iranian people reacted so strongly to the regime's deceit. Popular support for Mousavi, who lacks good credentials and personal charisma mushroomed because of a backlash against Ahmadinejad, not specific support for Mousavi's program of limited reform.

President Barack Obama's gradually evolving message on Iran belatedly included criticism of the regime's repression and human rights abuses. His administration, however continues to cling to wishful thinking about the possibility of negotiating a sustainable rapprochement with Iran's ruling regime.

Unfortunately, this effort is doomed to fail because hostility to the United States, which the regime considers to be the "Great Satan", is an ideological cornerstone of this fundamentalist regime. If the Islamic Republic and the ruling clergy stays in power they will use the deception tactic, buy time and continue supporting , harbouring International Terrorism and continue their nuclear ambitions which will destabilize the Persian Gulf and the Middle East region. Iran's missile Programs has focused on the Shahab- 3 missile, which was first tested in July 1998, when it successfully travelled 850 kilometers. Since then Iran has tested the Shahab 3 on four more occasions. The Shahab 3 is likely to provide the basis for longer range versions , potentially including a true intercontinental missile that could even strike the US. If the Shahab 3 can reliably reach targets within a range of 1,300 kilometers, Iran will be able to strike Israel, Turkey, Persian Gulf states and parts of Europe.

In the long run a free, secular Iran is the best hope for peace and security in the volatile Middle East. The Obama administration should therefore not turn its back on the Iranian people in a vain effort to strike a deal with the Islamic regime. US-Iran negotiations will not change the behaviour of the Iranian clerics. The US foreign policy establishment looks at this as an issue between two nation states with differing agendas and so they look for common agendas. However , the clerical leadership particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as mentioned before have deep ideological differences with the west, and particularly with the United States.

The Iranian Society has indicated its belief that if the US government is serious in its declared intention to solve the issue of the Iranian nuclear intentions and destabilization of the Middle East, it should back the Iranian people in their struggle for Freedom and Democracy. Iran will be a major power later in the century. An Iran without the fundamentalist Clerics who rule it at the present could see a moderate, free market, secular Iran as one of the emerging great powers, given its geopolitical position, its resources and its historical identity.

It is important to add that the Iranian Society is hierarchal/Vertical, and has always been leader oriented. Throughout Iranian history, ancient and modern, in times of crisis and general malaise, as soon as a national leader

emerged, particularly when supported by the International Community, the people would almost instantly congregate around the new Leader and bring about change.

Dr. Fariborz Saremi majored in International Relations specializing in Political-Military Strategy, and International Terrorism. He has been active in restoring Freedom ,Democracy and Secularism in Iran. He is the author of numerous articles on Iran and the Middle East and a commentator on TV and Radio in Europe and the US. Dr Saremi is a member of Azadegan Foundation since 1994 and currently also a member of International Strategic Studies Association (ISSA) based in Washington, DC.