

Remember When Iran Won?

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Articles & Testimony

This is an eventful week for Iran. On June 9, the country was hit with a fourth sanctions resolution by the U.N. Security Council. June 12 will mark the first anniversary of a disputed presidential election that plunged Iran into turmoil and galvanized the opposition "Green Movement."

But the event that Iranians may feel most keenly this week is one from which their country is excluded -- the World Cup. The Iranian team failed to make the cut, finishing fourth in its qualifying group and losing along the way to archrival Saudi Arabia.

Despite its no-show in South Africa this year, the Iranian team has enjoyed some success in World Cups past. Its first World Cup victory came in dramatic fashion, in a much-hyped and politically charged match against the United States in 1998.

Iran's 2-1 victory was sealed when Mehdi Mahdavia, the country's most accomplished international player, streaked down the field for a stunning breakaway goal. The jubilation in the streets of Tehran coincided with an atmosphere of political hope, personified by the recently-elected reformist President Mohammad Khatami.

Twelve years later, those hopes have not been realized, and Mahdavia has been red-carded by the regime. Shortly after the June 2009 election, he and several teammates wore green wristbands in a match against South Korea in solidarity with the protestors. Soon after, Mahdavia and other players announced their retirement from international play amid reports that they had been forced out for their act of dissent.

Mahdavia is just one of many talented Iranians who have been targeted by the regime in its sweeping efforts to quash any possible act of defiance.

The head of the Revolutionary Guards, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, recently stated that the opposition was more dangerous to Iran even than archenemy Saddam Hussein had been. Such threats have not squelched the opposition or the passions which fuel it, but they have forced reform-minded Iranians to exercise great care, and often to flee their own country.

In the face of such unrelenting oppression, the Iranian people have received little in the way of international support.

While official expressions of concern in Western capitals have gradually mounted, international action has largely been confined to human-rights forums, while the focus of high-level diplomacy has remained squarely on Iran's nuclear program.

This is not to say that the emphasis by Western governments on preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear arms has been inappropriate. Rather, it is the bifurcation of policy itself -- with nuclear weapons as the strategic issue, and human rights as the moral concern -- that is misguided.

Support for the Iranian opposition should not be a matter of altruism. In the effort to press the Iranian regime to change its course and moderate its relations with the world, we have in our hands no instrument -- whether

sanctions or military action -- which troubles the regime as greatly as the discontent and activism of the Iranian people, or which holds as significant the potential for bringing positive change to Iran.

The international community cannot, and should not presume to try, to control or even influence Iran's dissidents. This is no great feat. The Green Movement's objectives, which include restoring the civil rights of the Iranian people and repairing Iran's relations with the outside world, comport with the desire in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere that Iran comply with its international obligations and end its campaign to destabilize the Middle East.

The actors behind the repression of the Iranian opposition -- chief among them General Jafari's Revolutionary Guards -- are also prime movers in Iran's nuclear program and its support for terrorist groups.

Some of these actors are rightly targeted in the latest U.N. resolution, which is a good first step toward supporting the Iranian people. But much more can be done, whether to provide concrete support to dissidents or simply elevate the rights of the Iranian people on the world stage.

The majority of Iranians are not old enough to remember the events of 1979, and grew up instead amidst the depredations of the Iran-Iraq war and the stultifying repression of the authorities in Tehran.

But they also remember a moment of jubilation, when Mehdi Mahdavia sprinted down the field and scored a historic goal.

With determined action, the international community can ensure that the hopes of another generation of Iranians do not go unfulfilled, and that their joyful memories do not come only on the soccer pitch.

Michael Singh, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, served as the senior director for the Middle East on the U.S. National Security Council in 2007 and 2008. ❖

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