

Targeting Human Rights Abuse in Iran: A Postelection Strategy

Jul 14, 2009



Brief Analysis

On July 8, G8 summit participants issued a statement expressing "serious concern" about the Iranian government's postelection actions; U.S. president Barack Obama characterized the situation as "appalling." Further, both Obama and French president Nicolas Sarkozy emphasized that Tehran will face serious consequences if Iran has not begun to cooperate on its nuclear program by September. The United States and Europe, meanwhile, should focus on the regime's latest human rights abuses, signaling to Iranian dissidents that they are not alone and that current or future sanctions are not intended to punish them for a regime that they neither elected nor support. Sanctions are a statement to Iran's leadership that failure to compromise on outstanding issues -- particularly the nuclear program -- could erode the regime's shaky internal legitimacy.

Measures That Governments Can Take

Governments must demonstrate to Iran's repressive leaders that although dialogue may continue, "business as usual" will not. It is critical that Iranian dissidents know they are not alone in their struggle.

Iran, where national honor and pride are highly valued, will not be indifferent to regular displays of public contempt for its leaders. The regime replaced its ambassador to Rome, for example, immediately after the latter's failure to secure any meetings between Italian officials and Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad during the 2008 Food and Agriculture Organization Summit, which Italy hosted. The regime's loss of face as a result of such events should not be underestimated or dismissed as "gesture politics."

When visits to Western countries by top Iranian officials are unavoidable -- such as the upcoming UN General Assembly in New York -- cities themselves can take high-profile actions, such as paying tribute to prominent Iranian dissidents by renaming sections of streets in front of Iranian embassies, consulates, or interest sections. (During the Reagan administration, the city of Washington, D.C., designated the block of 16th Street in front of the Soviet embassy as "Andrei Sakharov Way" in honor of the jailed dissident.) Similarly, local media campaigns can give a human face to the suffering in Iran.

Here are some other examples of effective actions that governments can take in support of Iranian human rights:

- Western governments should severely limit the number and scope of visits by Iranian dignitaries. The red carpet should stay rolled up, and high-level meetings should be the exception rather than the rule. Accompanying business delegations should be denied visas.
- The United States and EU should coordinate travel bans and bank account freezes of Iranian officials, much as they did for Serbian officials guilty of human rights abuses. These steps would augment the existing restrictions mandated by UN Security Council Resolutions 1737, 1747, and 1803 against Iranians involved in nuclear or missile programs.
- Governments should make every effort to close international offices and bureaus used by the Iranian regime to promote its agenda. As such, particular scrutiny should be given to Press TV, the Iranian government's London-based

English-language satellite channel.

If Iranian human rights abuses intensify, additional measures are worth contemplating:

- Declare the principal figures responsible for Iran's internal repression *personae non gratae*. Deny them visas or transit rights for nonofficial travel in Western countries.
- Reduce high-level official interaction, and suspend ministry-level visits to Iran by EU and other Western leaders. Parliamentary delegations from Western democracies would defer their frequent visits to Iran until human rights conditions improve, while invitations issued to Iranian parliamentarians are shelved -- or at the very least conditioned upon strong actions taken by the Iranian government on human rights issues. In response to particularly egregious Iranian provocation, Western countries with representation in Iran could recall their top diplomats.
- Raise the issue of human rights as the first agenda item at any bilateral meeting, ideally in a joint statement that details specific abuses and requests for action. Western diplomats, for instance, should arm themselves with the specifics of unjust arrests or censured publications, rather than relying on generic demands for more political and press freedoms. Diplomats should also point out to their Iranian counterparts that failure to act on these issues by a given date will provoke a response, such as condemnatory statements at international meetings or the suspension of planned trips.

Beyond Statecraft

Supporting human rights activism in Iran is a mandate that should extend beyond official initiatives. The involvement of a country's citizenry through civil-society organizations communicates to Iranian dissidents that the world is aware of their plight and is ready to take concrete action. Nongovernmental organizations and other associations could initiate, sponsor, or promote:

- Person-to-person outreach. Professional societies (e.g., media, medical) should engage in dialogue with their Iranian counterparts in a joint effort to improve human rights in Iran.
- Expressions of support. National unions and international federations of unions should support labor rights in Iran by embracing the plight of individual Iranian dissident union members. International women's rights groups should celebrate the leading role that Iranian women have played in the recent postelection protests and garner support for Iranian women's movements such as the "One Million Signatures" campaign.
- Organization of conferences and workshops. High-profile international assemblies can do more to raise public awareness of Iran's human rights record, such as the regime's brutal suppression of homosexuals.
- Media campaigns in support of individual dissidents. Feature stories and op-eds can also highlight human rights abuses against minority groups such as the active persecution of Iran's Bahais.

These kinds of nongovernmental initiatives would engage Western civil society as a whole in the struggle for Iranian human rights and would expand the Western arsenal of pressure considerably.

Conclusion

Despite recent events, engaging Iran may still be a worthwhile policy goal. Engagement gives the United States time to convince potential allies that all venues for compromise have been sufficiently tried. It affords the regime an opportunity to change its behavior. It communicates to Iran that the West is ready to engage the regime before it inflicts economic pain on the people, and, perhaps most important, it places the burden of failure squarely on the regime. Nevertheless, governments exercising diplomatic engagement should not be tempted to pretend that all is well in Tehran: pretense has no place in the face of repression.

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