

The Iranian Paradigm

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Articles & Testimony

Mass demonstrations in Iran protesting the election results have found a very receptive audience in Europe. European governments have said that the Iranian mullahs have stolen the elections, and voiced strong support for the demonstrators. In contrast, in the U.S, President Obama has been low key on Iran, only gradually increasing his support for the demonstrators. The demonstrations in Iran, the most significant political event in that country since the 1979 Islamist revolution, herald important repercussions for Mr. Obama's policies.

In Washington, two readings are emerging regarding Mr. Obama's Iran policy. The first is that the President has prioritized talks on Iran's nuclear weapons project. Accordingly, Obama does not want to antagonize the Iranian regime by voicing support for the demonstrators. Cold-hearted analysts would add that since the demonstrators will eventually lose out to the regime in Iran, Washington should not be betting on the wrong horse in Tehran by allying itself with the pro-democracy forces.

The second, more optimistic, reading is that Mr. Obama does not want to give the kiss of death to the demonstrations by supporting them from the get-go. Indeed, with a conspiratorial mindset prevalent in Iran, as in the rest of the Middle East, Mr. Obama's strong support of the demonstrations from day one would have allowed conspiracy theoreticians in Iran to suggest that the protests are crafted by the United States. Such a perception would have been the mortal blow to the democracy movement in Iran. Whatever is the outcome of the demonstrations and whichever way Washington's policy evolves, the Iranian demonstrations will have a seismic effect on Mr. Obama's Middle East policy. Following the 1979 Islamist revolution in Iran, Washington's assumption regarding the region has been that Islamists represent the 21st century in the Middle East. The political tsunami created by the Iranian revolution and the subsequent rise of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ihwan) and Salafists across the region, led analysts to conclude that the people of the region want Islamism. For realists, this conclusion meant that Washington was better served to work with the unstoppable and "natural" forces representing the ascendant polity of the Muslim Middle East. In due course, even liberals started to view the Islamists as the "natural" popular paradigm of the region to which one had to bow because it represented the people.

However, with their demonstrations the Iranians are illustrating that now the people do not want Islamism. The demonstrations are as much against the election results as they are a popular outburst against the Islamist regime. This is why demands by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the guardian of the Islamist regime, to stop the demonstrations have gone unheeded. Not only has the aura surrounding the regime been shattered, but the assumption that Islamism is the unchallengeable and popular political paradigm has come under fire. The message of the Iranian people is clear: Islamism belongs to the past and it is time to move on.

Accordingly, the Middle East is witnessing the birth of a new paradigm. Religion and modern political systems are like oil and water, and liberal democracy, not Islamism, represents the 21st century in the region. With their demonstrations, the Iranians are ending a trend they started exactly thirty years ago when they made Islamism into the dominant model of the region. Whether or not the demonstrators succeed this time, this paradigmatic shift will have an effect on Mr. Obama's Middle East policy.

Since the Islamists do not represent the future of the region, political movements rooted in Islamism can now be seen as things of the past. Washington will finally have a chance to look beyond these movements into liberal political forces. Furthermore, the events have repercussions for Turkey. For so long after the Iranian revolution and more importantly following the attacks of September 11, Turkey was seen as representing the future of the Middle East. With its democratic polity and the rise of Islamist parties and the AKP within this polity, Turkey was viewed as epitomizing the region's evolution. The Turkish experience showed that when and if other countries in the Muslim Middle East became democracies like Turkey, such countries would witness the natural rise of Islamist parties to power. The AKP, therefore, represented the established paradigm. Washington dealt with and, when needed, respected this paradigm.

The Iranians are challenging this old paradigm with their call for liberal democracy. If Iran evolves towards a democratic polity, shedding Islamist ideology, it will become the new popular, regional paradigm. The new Iran will represent the ascendant political forces in the region. Washington will deal with and, when necessary, respect and support this new paradigm. It is often said that Iran and Turkey are the two great rival political models of the Middle East. That is indeed the case, when one goes up; the other goes down.

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