

Should Obama Speak Out on Iran?

Jun 18, 2009



Articles & Testimony

The New York Times convened an online panel of four Middle East experts to discuss the Obama administration's response to the landslide victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the June 12 Iranian presidential elections. The following is a contribution by Washington Institute senior fellow Mehdi Khalaji, who focuses on Iranian politics and the politics of Shiite groups in the Middle East. [Read \(http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/should-obama-speak-out-on-iran/?scp=1&sq=khalaji&st=cse\)](http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/should-obama-speak-out-on-iran/?scp=1&sq=khalaji&st=cse) the entire discussion on the Times's website.

Let Protesters Know the U.S. Cares

Only before the June 12 elections could I have agreed with President Obama's statement on Tuesday that "the difference between Ahmadinejad and Moussavi in terms of their actual policies may not be as great as has been advertised."

What is happening these days in Iran has little to do with Mir Hussein Moussavi's policies or background. What matters now for the Iranians participating in the daily demonstrations, even those who did not vote or voted for the other reformist candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, is not Mr. Moussavi's agenda as he expressed during his campaign but rather what he represents: the Iranian people's resentment of the militarization of the government, the humiliation and isolation of the nation on the world stage.

Despite Ayatollah Ali Khamenei being the one who has the final say on the Islamic Republic's foreign, nuclear and military policies, Mr. Moussavi, in his televised debates before the election, criticized the government's economic agenda and political and cultural suppression. He also challenged Iran's foreign policies and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's inflammatory statements about the decline of the U.S. and the annihilation of Israel.

Close

The Obama administration's caution in passing judgment about the legitimacy of the election is wise. It will do best if it watches and waits for the final decision of the Iranian supreme leader. But President Obama should make it clear in his public statements that there is a big difference between a President Ahmadinejad and a President Moussavi because two things cannot be ignored by the U.S. administration.

First, if we assume that Ayatollah Khamenei is the real power in Iran, there should be an explanation for his persistent support of Mr. Ahmadinejad in the last four years despite strong criticism of the president's policies from a wide spectrum of reformist and conservative Iranian politicians. There are many reasons to believe that Ayatollah Khamenei sees a fundamental difference between Mr. Moussavi and Mr. Ahmadinejad.

Second, had Mr. Moussavi won the election in the same way that Mohammad Khatami did 12 years ago, the supreme leader could have used all the same tools to weaken him. But in the current situation, if Mr. Moussavi comes to power out of the mass mobilization of Iranian society, it would mean the defeat of not only Ayatollah Khamenei but the institution of the "ruling jurist" and the agenda of the militarization of the government. Mr. Moussavi would be the first president in the history of the Islamic Republic who comes to power by defeating "the real power" in Iran.

What President Obama should do now is focus more on the people in the streets rather than the election itself. He should condemn the Iranian government for using violence against the peaceful demonstrators no matter who would come to office as a president. According to several sources in Iran, more than 30 demonstrators have been killed and at least 150 leaders of the reform movement have been arrested in the last few days. President Obama's strong statement in favor of human rights can have a significant impact on preventing further arrests and bloodshed. ❖

NYTimes.com

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