

Reading the Popular Mood in Iran

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Brief Analysis

July 9 is the fourth anniversary of the student-sparked mass protests that erupted in Iran in 1999. New protests this July could test Washington no less than Tehran. Will the U.S. government side openly and publicly with the freedom-minded students against not only the unelected hardliners, but also the ineffectual elected leadership of President Muhammad Khatami?

Background: Polarization

On June 22, 2003, the Iranian newspaper Yas-e Now published a remarkable poll that had originally appeared on the "Feedback" web page of the Expediency Discernment Council, run by former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Those polled were given the question, "What are the actual demands of the Iranian people?" and a choice of four answers. They responded as follows:

13 percent chose the answer "solutions to the problems of people's livelihood, and the continuation of the present political policy" -- in other words, the current hardline stance.

16 percent chose "political reforms and increases in the powers of the reformists."

26 percent chose "fundamental changes in management and in the performance of the system for an efficient growth" -- a position often identified with Rafsanjani.

45 percent chose "change in the political system, even with foreign intervention."

The fact that 45 percent of respondents endorsed foreign intervention if necessary is all the more surprising considering two factors: first, the continued imprisonment of pollsters who last year found that 75 percent of Iranians want open negotiations with the United States; and second, the ominous rumors circulating in Iran that the United States is considering an invasion -- rumors with no basis in fact.

Against this background, student protests are becoming more common. One wave of protests occurred in December 2002. Then, on June 10, 2003, protests began in the Amirabad dormitory complex of Tehran University. Thousands of nonstudents eventually joined these demonstrations, encouraged by Los Angeles-based Persian-language satellite television channels. As the Tehran protests wound down over the course of ten days, demonstrations, some of them violent, erupted in several other cities. In Khatami's home city of Yazd, for example, six banks were reportedly

attacked with Molotov cocktails and 230 protestors were arrested.

Protests This Week?

The July 9, 1999, demonstrations, which had been sparked by attacks on students, filled the streets of Tehran with over 100,000 people demanding basic change. Every major Iranian city saw demonstrations on succeeding days. These protests, the largest ever under the Islamic Republic, represented a turning point for the reformist movement led by Khatami, largely because he refused to support the demonstrations or to use them as a means of pressing hardliners into approving reforms. For months, the expectation has been that July 9, 2003, would occasion a new test of wills between protestors and the hardliners who control the police, judiciary, Basij militia, and Ansar-e Hizballah vigilantes.

In fact, it would be impressive if large-scale demonstrations do occur on July 9. The authorities have gone to extraordinary lengths to prevent new protests. Besides the obvious measure of banning all public demonstrations, they have gone so far as to close the Tehran University dorms for the week in order to disperse students. Perhaps most important, as Prosecutor-General Abdolnabi Namazi explained, 4,000 people were detained after the June protests, of whom 2,000 remain in prison.

Nevertheless, student leaders remain defiant. On July 3, 106 such leaders -- many of them mainstream figures long opposed to violent protest -- released a letter warning Khatami, "We ask you to prevent an uprising before it is too late to find a clear path forward. . . . Mr. President, if you are incapable of protecting our rights, if you cannot put an end to illegal arrests and the kidnapping of students, please resign so that the student movement can confront the regime on its own. Then everyone will know what the end result of such confrontation will be."

Implications for U.S. Policy

There is broad agreement within the Bush administration and Congress that the United States should support political change in Iran, and equally broad agreement that neither military force nor covert operations should be used toward that end. Yet, disagreement abounds regarding exactly what to do, with three broad policy options in play. The first is President George W. Bush's approach of publicly supporting democratic forces against the unelected leaders who hold power -- a strategy of ignoring the ineffective elected leaders who remain committed to perpetuating undemocratic clerical rule. Bush has used strong language to support demonstrators; for example, on June 18, 2003, he stated, "I appreciate those courageous souls who speak out for freedom in Iran. They need to know America stands squarely by their side." The Bush administration's harsher rhetoric has been accompanied by increasing boldness among Iranian demonstrators, suggesting that a more activist U.S. approach does not undermine the democratic cause.

The second option was perhaps best captured in a July 3, 2003, statement by Secretary of State Colin Powell: "The U.S. can support the protests by Iranian youth but it should remember that the Iranian president has been elected freely and we must not meddle in a family fight." This statement, which has been well received by Iranian hardline media, emphasizes the limitations of U.S. power and the positive aspects of Iranian political life -- rather than how Iran's elected representatives have steadily lost power and have rarely stepped forward to fight for reform.

The third, more active approach, is best represented by Republican Senator Sam Brownback's proposed Iran Democracy Act, cosponsored by several other Republicans and Democrats. The act would provide the State Department with \$58 million to increase broadcasting and promote an internationally monitored referendum in Iran. Some critics characterize this approach as aggressive regime change, though it is by no means clear that the State Department would use the funds toward that end.

Which approach the United States adopts will surely be influenced by the policy that Iran adopts on key issues such as financing Palestinian rejectionists and apprehending al-Qaeda activists hiding in Iran. Two other issues stand

out: nuclear proliferation and Iraq. Regarding the former, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director-general Mohamed ElBaradei is due to arrive in Tehran on July 9 for yet another round of discussions about Iranian activities that belie Tehran's claim that its nuclear program is purely peaceful in nature. He will also press Iran to sign and quickly implement the Additional Protocol, adopted by the IAEA in 1995 in order to allow more inspections. Time is running out for Iran to address these concerns before the September 8-10 IAEA Board of Governors meeting, at which the United States will press the agency to refer the problem of Iran's noncompliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty to the UN Security Council.

Regarding Iraq, although Iran has had little impact in fomenting attacks against the postwar U.S. presence, Iranian hardliners are calling on Tehran to do more. For example, on June 26, the powerful hardline Keyhan newspaper published an editorial by director-in-charge Hossein Shariatmadari stating the following: "American and British troops [are now] within the reach of the Muslim and revolutionary nations. And obviously killing them and taking revenge on them for the blood of the innocent slaughtered by them is easier than ever. . . . Today there is no need for Muslim revolutionaries to take the trouble of carrying bombs and explosives to distant bases in order to punish the American and British forces, and their punishment is easily possible by throwing grenades and firebombs and even by sticks and stones. This is a divine blessing and golden opportunity for the Muslim nations to take revenge on the invaders."

It seems that some Iranian hardliners have decided to redouble their hard line: doing little about IAEA concerns, repressing popular demands for reform, and stirring up trouble for the United States wherever they can, including Iraq. They are acting as if they have decided that confrontation with the United States is inevitable, and that their best defense is a strong offense. If that is their approach, it may well become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Patrick Clawson is deputy director of The Washington Institute.

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