

Don't Throw a Lifeline to a Failing Iran

Nov 11, 2001



Articles & Testimony

Secretary of State Colin Powell is planning to meet with Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi at the United Nations on Monday. This comes soon after six senators feted Iran's U.N. ambassador at the Capitol.

These overtures are a bad idea and could not come at a worse time. The Islamic republic founded by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979 is unraveling.

I lived for more than six months in Iran, both under former President Hashemi Rafsanjani and current President Mohammad Khatami. Like former Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev, Khatami is far more popular in the West than he is at home. Khatami made many promises and provided hope. The Iranian youth hoped for more democracy and less stringent social controls. Western journalists reported that Khatami would be able to extend control over Iran's many power centers -- the judiciary, the intelligence ministry, the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij militia.

Yet since Khatami's allies took charge of parliament in February 2000, hard-liners have closed more than 50 newspapers. The judiciary has increased public executions and harassment of religious minorities. The government has shut hundreds of Internet cafes and, in the wake of recent rioting, seized thousands of satellite dishes. Freedoms are declining.

People are frustrated. In 1999, students rioted after members of the vigilante group Ansar-e Hezbollah (Defenders of the Party of God) attacked a university, killing several students. Life was easier before Khatami because the hard-liners did not have their backs against the demographic wall.

The vigilantes cannot be separated from the government. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who succeeded Khomeini as supreme leader, holds paramount power in the Islamic republic. Khamenei's chief aide bankrolls Ansar-e Hezbollah. This group basically acts as Khamenei's "brownshirts," beating and intimidating all who do not agree with the most extreme elements. In the wake of the student riots, Iranian youth questioned whether Khatami was strong enough to contain the vigilantes. Now the students ask if Khatami even wants to.

Following Iran's loss to Bahrain in a World Cup soccer qualifier last month, rumors spread that the government had bribed players to lose. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the street across the country, chanting, "Death to Khamenei, death to Khatami, death to the Islamic republic."

The last thing the United States should do is talk to a government that is at the very least teetering and may actually have begun its fall (the drop of almost 33% in world oil prices further cripples the Islamic republic). First in 1953 and then in 1979, the United States intervened to prop up unpopular Iranian governments. The aftermath has been catastrophic for both American diplomacy and stability in the Middle East. Khamenei is desperate. He recently declared that any Iranian considering dialogue with the United States should face death.

The Iranian people are not just overwhelmingly pro-Western but are pro-American. The reason is not just "Baywatch." Iranian youth sport major league baseball caps, overwhelmingly wish to attend American universities and listen to American Top-40 music. In Internet cafes, parks and markets, they gush about how great America is. Even members of the government quietly ask visitors how to get scholarships to the States.

Iranians realize that when governments like France seek dialogue with Iran, they are just seeking business contracts with self-interested dictators. Most of the Iranian population came of age after the revolution, and they see the United States as having stood firm on principle in the face of Iran's dictators.

Rather than helping the reformist majority, doing business with Iran -- the end result of any talks -- helps preserve a regime that a recent State Department report called "the most active state sponsor of terrorism."

In the short term, the United States and Iran have overlapping interests in opposition to the Taliban. But this should not be reason for bailing out a failing regime. If the Iranian government fails, a theocracy will be replaced with a secular republic, helping to stabilize the Middle East.

The attacks of Sept. 11 showed we need more democracies in the Middle East. Let's not make the same mistake three times in Iran. ❖

Los Angeles Times

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