

Testimony Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives

February 3, 2010

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am extremely honored to have this opportunity to discuss the opposition movement in Iran and the policy approaches the United States could take in order to encourage proponents of democratic reform. My perspective is based upon my first-hand experience with Iran's leaders and civil society when I worked in Tehran as the correspondent for the *Guardian* newspaper, from 1998—2001, and the last decade of research and writing about Iran.

The fragmentation within the corridors of power in Iran—even staunch conservatives and hard-line clerics have now joined the opponents of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—is unprecedented in the country's post-revolutionary history. Even political elites who helped establish the Islamic republic have joined the Green Movement and now stand in opposition to the state. The opposition protests have become an ever-present force in Iranian politics. It is apparent from the recent demonstrations in December that the protestors have become more determined, more violent, and willing to risk their lives for change. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the protest movement is that the sanctity around Supreme Leader Khamenei has been shattered. He is no longer respected as a powerful political authority, nor is he considered a religious leader with divine attributes. Moreover, the concept of supreme clerical rule, *velayat faqih*, is viewed by many as a form of government that inevitably leads to despotism and should be abolished. It is clear now that a country which once aspired to be an Islamic state and a republic cannot withstand all power concentrated in the hands of one ayatollah. As a result, in the eyes of many Iranians, the Islamic Republic of Iran is no longer an Islamic state or a republic.

Iran is one of the few modern states to have undergone two revolutions over the span of less than a century. For reasons historians might identify in the future, a rigged election set in motion unprecedented unrest on the streets and fragmentation within the regime, all of which lends great optimism to the potential for significant political reform. The persistent street demonstrations and the expanding demands of the opposition movement can be neither crushed nor ignored. What began as a predominantly urban, middle class movement with a central grievance of a rigged election has evolved into a movement of diverse social classes and numerous generations, even though young people comprise most of the movement. While many in the opposition do not advocate regime change, many do want to change the political system.

The intensive rivalry for power among competing factions inside Iran's government cannot be overestimated. The hard-liners around President Ahmadinejad and Supreme

Leader Khamenei believe that they are in a fight not only for their own survival, but for the preservation of the principle of *velayat faqih*. On the other side of the political spectrum, the opposition and its leadership also are divided. Increasingly, the symbolic leaders of the Green Movement, including former President Mohammad Khatami, Mir Hossein Moussavi, and Mehdi Karroubi, are distancing themselves from the portion of the movement that is becoming radicalized.

Seven months after the presidential election, it is impossible to determine the outcome of these conflicts. However, in the short term it is safe to assume that the state will prevail through the use of excessive force and violence. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the militias they control are loyal to President Ahmadinejad and Leader Khamenei, and it is unlikely this loyalty will end in the near future. With the IRGC's control over politics and the economy, Iran appears headed for becoming a military dictatorship. Therefore, the strength of the opposition movement could have a significant impact on the degree of change, if any, to the political system. A strong opposition movement also provides the West with leverage against the regime. For these reasons and many others, it is important for the United States to assist those risking their lives for a more democratic Iran, even if this reformed state remains a theocracy.

The Opposition Movement

The leaders of the opposition are not President Mohammad Khatami, Mir Hossein Moussavi, or Mehdi Karroubi; rather, they are women, students, human rights activists, and clerics. The movement also is not restricted only to street protestors, which in June numbered three million, according to Tehran's conservative mayor Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf. Increasingly, the opposition is gaining the support of religious and traditional Iranians who historically have supported Supreme Leader Khamenei and hard-liners, such as President Ahmadinejad. According to a groundbreaking survey, parts of which were published on the website www.insideiran.org, large percentages of Iranians living in villages in Fars and Isfahan provinces, once popular bases of support for Ahmadinejad, say that they wish they had not voted for him. The series of polls were conducted by scholars in Iran from August 2009 to December 2009. It is important to emphasize that, in such provinces, Iranians have benefited from President Ahmadinejad's economic policy of doling out stipends to the underprivileged and allocating funding to the provinces where they live precisely to keep his political base intact.

The diversity of the opposition is a stark contrast to the movement of ten years ago, when Mohammad Khatami was president. During those years, the fleeting opposition was comprised mostly of young journalists and university students. Despite their attempts to broaden the movement, they failed. At the peak of protests in the summer of 1999, estimates of the turnout were in the tens of thousands, which is miniscule compared to the three million demonstrators in the summer of 2009.

Another important feature of the opposition today is that it has abandoned the ideological underpinnings of the Islamic Revolution. When I attended demonstrations ten years ago in Iran, as the correspondent for the *Guardian* newspaper, I often asked the students if

they wished to reform the existing state or dismantle the Islamic system. They always chose the former. Today, however, perhaps not the majority, but certainly some within the opposition would like to dissolve the Islamic system. This objective is what prompts them to condemn Ayatollah Khamenei publicly and stomp their feet over portraits of him, as they did for the first time in November, during a state-sponsored rally to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran. In addition, the opposition does not direct their ire at the United States; the familiar chants of “Down with America” have vanished from public discourse, at least within the opposition. In this way, the opposition effectively is depriving the regime of its revolutionary ideology, which has served to preserve what little legitimacy the state has left in the eyes of the people. And finally, the opposition is not a champion of either the rights of Palestinians or Muslims in general. The Islamic republic’s ideological ambition to defend the oppressed in the region against Western supremacy has no relevance for the opposition, which is narrowly focused on Iran’s domestic politics.

Expectations Regarding the United States

It is difficult to explain fully the overpowering presence the United States maintains in Iranian psychology, not only because the United States is the historical adversary of the Islamic republic, but also because it is considered the promised land for some of the Iranian people. For Iranians, the United States holds an omnipresent place in Iran’s history and is a major determinant of its fate. During less-tense times, when Iranians visited the United States, they often were confused as to why articles about Iran did not dominate the print media and television news, since so many stories in Iran focus on the United States. They believed Iran’s obsession with the United States was at least on par with Americans’ preoccupation with Iran. This psychology leads the oppositionists to believe that the United States—the world’s superpower that has been so intricately involved in Iran’s modern history—could aid them in significant ways.

At the same time, however, many dissidents are adamantly opposed to direct assistance from the United States and public endorsements of the opposition’s reform efforts, both of which would undoubtedly taint their cause and reaffirm the regime’s accusations. The regime continues to blame Western powers, particularly the United States, Great Britain, and Germany, for instigating the unrest and directing the opposition movement from abroad. While it can be assumed that a large part of the Iranian population does not believe the government’s propaganda, segments of society with access only to state-run media and no access to international media likely believe the regime’s explanations. The regime has used various intimidation strategies to discourage Iranians from accepting funding from the U.S. government or even foundations and think tanks in the United States. The Intelligence Ministry in January published a list of sixty foundations and research institutions that Iran claims are backed by Israel and the United States to foment a popular rebellion. Iranians are forbidden from having any association with these organizations, which include the Open Society Institute, the Ford Foundation, the National Endowment of Democracy, and the Woodrow Wilson Center. This threat already is having an effect; scholars in Tehran are now refusing invitations to attend conferences that are organized or funded by institutions on the government’s blacklist.

Despite disagreements within the opposition over the type of U.S. assistance, most agree that some form of support is vital to send a signal to the regime that the United States has not abandoned its basic foreign policy agenda favoring a more democratic Iran. This support could place the opposition in a position of eventually extracting compromises from the regime, particularly given the fact that the most likely scenario in the near future is neither another revolution nor an opposition movement in retreat. The most logical way forward for both sides is compromise, although at this point it is difficult to anticipate what that agreement might entail.

Even before the presidential election, talks were under way among reformists and pragmatic conservatives about establishing a national unity government. This idea resurfaced again in August, when former President Hashemi Rafsanjani proposed a unity plan. Now, we are hearing from reliable sources in Iran that leaders in the opposition and some in the regime are once again advancing this plan as a way out of the crisis.

In detailing the kind of assistance that the opposition would appreciate, I want to emphasize that my recommendations are based upon what opposition figures have said, either to me directly or in their statements published in Persian sources. I feel a profound responsibility not to misrepresent their goals and desires, and not to project my own opinions onto their movement.

Recommendations:

- The United States should pressure Iran's regime on its dismal human rights record, if not directly then through the United Nations. Some have suggested that a U.N. tribunal investigate the torture and killings of demonstrators and other dissidents. Such an investigation would discredit the regime, not only in the eyes of the international community, but inside Iran. As has been widely reported, dissidents are being tortured and killed. In some cases, the bodies of demonstrators are never returned to their families. Oppositionists want the United States to make human rights part of any future negotiations with Iran. In the words of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi, in an interview with Radio Farda on January 12, 2010: "Issues such as human rights, support for civil societies, and the establishment of a lawful government in Iran must be added to negotiations with Iran," Oppositionists fear that the United States cares more about regional security in the Middle East than human rights and will not risk alienating the regime from the nuclear negotiations by making human rights a condition of any future talks.
- The opposition movement is dependent upon the Internet and social networking in order to communicate with Iranians inside and outside the country, and to organize protests and other activities. Oppositionists want the United States to provide technical assistance to run and maintain anti-government websites and also enable them to communicate when the regime blocks Internet sites and social

- networks. They want, for example, anti-filtering software that would be immune to government interference.
- The United States also should pressure foreign telecommunications firms, such as Nokia and Siemens, not to sell telecommunications technology to Iran and to refuse to ship technology that already has been purchased.
 - The United States should investigate how blogger and micro-blogging services, such as Twitter, can be “hardened” against regime interference, particularly during demonstrations.
 - The opposition also believes that the United States should signal to Tehran that Washington does not recognize the legitimacy of President Ahmadinejad’s administration due to the rigged election. Although many realize that this is not probable as long as Washington maintains an ongoing diplomatic dialogue with Iran, the opposition believes that such a gesture would empower their movement.
 - Activists in NGOs, such as women in the Million Signature Campaign, whose members have been arrested and interrogated, believe that they would benefit from the opportunity to network with other NGOs from the region or from the United States. They believe that workshops and training sessions could help them develop strategies for continuing their efforts of political reform in the face of great obstacles. It is important to keep in mind that civil society organizations in Iran have become fully active only recently, and many lack experience.

The Green Movement is not searching for grand gestures from the United States. However, modest steps, particularly those that would address the lack of human rights and the absence of political liberalization would give the opposition more legitimacy in Iranian society. In turn, the hardliners might be more inclined to reach a historic compromise, which would be far more beneficial to Iranian society and the world than a military dictatorship under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.