

Iranians Have to Find Their Own Course

Written by R.K. Ramazani

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R.K. RAMAZANI, JUN 28 2009

President Obama should not take sides in the political crisis in Iran. His critics are wrong in faulting him for not siding with the demonstrators and for not standing for the American value of freedom.

Freedom, after all, is not the only core value of the American Republic. Along with liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the American Declaration of Independence also embodies the value of life.

With more than a dozen Iranian protesters already dead, Obama is trying both to protect innocent lives and advance political freedom for Iranians. He realizes that siding with the demonstrators likely would provoke even greater bloodshed.

The tension between internal freedom and external independence in Iran's history has persisted because no balance between the two has yet been struck. The current movement protesting the results of the recent presidential election tries to resolve it.

Aspirations for freedom have ebbed and flowed in Iran's modern history four times:

First, they surged briefly in the 19th century, when Iran sought independence from British political and economic domination. The popular Tobacco Protest of 1891-92 forced the Qajar monarch to cancel his grant of a 50-year tobacco concession to a British company. But at the time, Iranians were unable to fight for independence from the British Empire.

Second, the desire for domestic freedom, linked with democracy, deepened as a result of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906-11), which gave Iran its first parliament, the Majlis. The parliament placed limits on the monarch's previously unfettered powers and hired Morgan Shuster, an American adviser, to reform Iran's financial system.

But in the end, the people's hope for freedom was dashed. Collusion by British and Russian powers forced Shuster out of the country and shut down reforms. In Shuster's words, the imperial powers "strangled" Persia.

Third, the movement for freedom widened with the Iranian nationalist uprising led by Mohammad Musaddiq (also known as Mossadegh), the first democratically elected leader in Iran's history. Musaddiq and other nationalist leaders tried to curtail the shah's unconstitutional rule and wrest control of Iran's oil industry from the British.

But the coup against the Musaddiq government, led by the CIA and backed by British intelligence, ended that effort in 1953.

Fourth, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 spoke to the political independence of Iran. It aimed to end American domination and the dictatorship of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the ruler revolutionaries called "the American shah." The credo of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the revolution, placed national independence above domestic political freedom. He denounced Western-style democracy, instead praising "Islamic democracy."

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The revolutionaries saw freedom not only as a value of the revolution, but also as Iran's historic goal. Subsequently, Mohammad Khatami, president from 1997 to 2005, tried to emphasize the rights of the people, but his reform efforts were blocked by religious leaders and the conservative opposition.

The current protest movement is trying to address this historical deficit of domestic freedom. Like Khatami, Hussein Moussavi, the Iranian reformist politician and presidential candidate, emphasizes the ideal of freedom through reform.

They acknowledge the revolution's unprecedented success in empowering Iran to control its external politics, but they believe that is not enough. They aim to achieve a broader freedom by an enlightened reading of Islam and the revolution that would result in achieving democracy and freedom with justice within the framework of Islamic spirituality and morality.

Obama has taken a wise stance that provides time for Iranians to decide the future direction of their country. The crisis is Iranian. The current government is Iranian. The protest movement is Iranian. The solution must be Iranian.

R.K. Ramazani, widely considered the dean of Iranian foreign policy experts in the United States, is Edward R. Stettinius professor emeritus of government and foreign affairs at the University of Virginia. He has published extensively on Iran since 1955. A shorter version of this article appeared in the Cincinnati Enquirer.