

The United States and “Regime Change” in Iran

Though the Bush administration has repeatedly emphasized its desire for democratization and regime change in Iran, there are serious questions regarding how it might try to bring this about. There is, however, little question about the goal of toppling the Islamist government, with the Bush administration threatening war, arming ethnic minorities, and funding opposition groups.

These efforts come in spite of the 1981 Algiers Accords, which led to the release of American hostages seized from the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, in which the United States pledged to never again attempt to overthrow the Iranian government. The failure of the United States to honor this signed bilateral agreement has contributed to the Iranians’ lack of trust in the U.S. government and overall anti-American sentiment in that country.

Despite claims by the Bush administration that the United States has always supported “liberty” and “democracy” in Iran, the history of U.S.-Iranian relations during both Republican and Democratic administrations has demonstrated very little support for a democratic Iran. In the early 1950s, the last time Iran had a democratic constitutional government, the United States joined Britain and other countries in imposing economic sanctions against Iran in response to the nationalization of the country’s oil resources, which until then had been under foreign control. Taking advantage of the economic collapse and political turmoil that followed, the CIA helped engineer a coup against Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, and returned Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi from exile to rule with an iron fist.

Over the next 25 years, the United States armed and trained the Shah’s dreaded SAVAK (Organization for National Security and Intelligence) secret police, which emerged as one of the most repressive internal security organizations of the era. Despite claims to the contrary by right-wing critics of the Carter administration, the United States strongly supported the Shah until his final days in power, providing valuable assistance to the regime even as it was massacring protestors in the streets. It comes as no surprise, in light of this, that the revolution that finally ousted the monarchy in February 1979 was stridently anti-American. Furthermore, since the Shah’s repressive apparatus had largely succeeded in wiping out the democratic and secular opposition to the regime, it was religious opponents—who survived as a result of the greater cohesion made possible through the mosques—who spearheaded the revolutionary movement. Thus, the radical Islamic orientation of the revolution was greatly influenced by the Shah’s U.S.-backed efforts to maintain control through repression.

As a result of this history, most members of the democratic opposition in Iran do not take very seriously Washington’s claims that it supports freedom for the Iranian people.

The possibility of U.S.-sponsored regime change in Iran through invasion and occupation, as took place in Iraq in 2003, is not even being considered anymore in Washington. The U.S. armed forces are already too overstretched for another major land war. There is no way feasible for U.S. forces to invade and occupy a country that is more than three times larger in both size and population than Iraq and with a far more mountainous terrain. In addition, unlike the Iraqi armed forces, which were crippled by more than a dozen years of strict military sanctions, the Iranian armed forces have been able to continually modernize and upgrade. In addition, the Iraqi experience has largely discredited the already dubious notion among some Washington policy-makers that a Western power can bring a stable democracy to a Middle Eastern country through sanctions, warfare, invasion, and occupation.

Some American neoconservative leaders argue that sustained air and missile strikes against Iranian government, nuclear, and military facilities—a far more realistic scenario for a U.S. war against Iran—would cripple the regime to a point that it would empower opponents to rise up against the government. In reality, Iranian opposition leaders emphasize that war and threat of war by the U.S. government would certainly unify the population around the regime and would be used to justify further repression.

The widely reported clandestine U.S. support for Kurdish, Baluchi, and other Iranian national minorities runs the risk of igniting violent ethnic conflict and increased political repression in parts of the country, but these efforts are not likely to pose much of a threat to the survival of the regime.

In addition, the United States cannot realistically hope for a coup, given that pro-U.S. elements in the military were thoroughly purged soon after the revolution. The leadership of Iran's military and security forces, while not necessarily unified in support of the more hardline elements in government, cannot be realistically expected to collaborate with any U.S. efforts for regime change in their oil-rich country.

What recent history has repeatedly shown is that the most effective means for democratic change comes from broadly based nonviolent movements, such as those that have toppled dictatorships in such diverse countries as the Philippines, Bolivia, Madagascar, Czechoslovakia, Indonesia, Serbia, Mali, and elsewhere. Even the relatively conservative Washington-based Freedom House has produced a study that, after examining the 67 transitions from authoritarian regimes to varying degrees of democratic governments over the past few decades, concluded that the changes were catalyzed not through foreign invasion, and only rarely through armed revolt or voluntary elite-driven reforms, but overwhelmingly by democratic civil society organizations utilizing nonviolent action and other forms of civil resistance, such as strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, and mass protests.

In apparent recognition of this trend, Congress last year approved \$75 million in funding for an administration request to support various Iranian opposition groups. However, most of these groups are led by exiles who have virtually no following within Iran or any experience with the kinds of grassroots mobilization necessary to build a popular movement that could threaten the regime's survival. By contrast, most of the credible opposition within Iran has renounced this U.S. initiative and has asserted that it has simply made it easier for the regime to claim that all pro-democracy groups and activists are paid agents of the United States.

Despite the increased repression of recent years, Iran has witnessed a growing civil society movement and increasing calls for greater freedom. Indeed, those in the Iranian regime correctly recognize that the biggest threat to their grip on power comes not from the United States, but from their own people. Civilian-based insurrections have played a critical role over the past century in challenging Iranian rulers, such as during the Constitutional Revolution of 1907 and the overthrow of the Shah in 1979. Iran's clerical leaders, faced with growing dissent—particularly among youth, the middle class, and urban dwellers—realize that they may be next.

In an effort to head off such a popular uprising and discredit pro-democracy leaders and their supporters, Iran's reactionary leadership has been making false claims, aired in detail in a series of television broadcasts during the third week of July, that certain Western nongovernmental organizations that have given workshops and offered seminars for Iranian pro-democracy activists on the theory and history of strategic nonviolent struggle are actually plotting with the Bush administration in offering specific instructions on how to overthrow the regime. On several occasions, Iranian authorities have arrested and tortured these activists, forcing them to sign phony confessions allegedly confirming these allegations.

Some Western bloggers and other writers, understandably skeptical of U.S. intervention in oil-producing nations in the name of “democracy,” have actually bought into these claims by Iran’s hardline clerics that prominent nonviolent activists from Europe and the United States—most of whom happen to be highly critical of U.S. policy toward Iran—are somehow working as agents of the Bush administration. These conspiracy theories have in turn been picked up by some progressive websites and periodicals, which repeat them as fact. The result has been to strengthen the hand of Iran’s repressive regime, weaken democratic forces in Iran, and strengthen the argument of U.S. neoconservatives that only military force from the outside—and not nonviolent struggle by the Iranian people themselves—is capable of freeing Iran from repressive clerical rule.

Historically, individuals and groups with experience in effective mass nonviolent mobilization tend to come from the left and carry a skeptical view of government power, particularly governments with a history of militarism and conquest. Conversely, large bureaucratic governments used to projecting political power through military force or elite diplomatic channels have little understanding or appreciation of mass popular struggles.

As a result, the dilemma for U.S. policy-makers is this: the most realistic way to overthrow the Iranian regime is through a process the United States cannot control.

The U.S. government has historically promoted regime change through military invasions, coups d’etat and other kinds of violent seizures of power by an undemocratic minority. Nonviolent “people power” movements, by contrast, promote regime change through empowering pro-democratic majorities. Unlike fomenting a military coup or supporting a military occupation, which are based upon control over the population and repression of potential political opponents, nonviolent civil insurrections—as a result of being based upon a broad coalition of popular movements—are impossible for an outside power to control.

As a result, the best hope for Iran comes from Iranian civil society, which, despite the repression from its government and the negative consequences of sanctions and threats against its country from Washington, is quite capable of eventually bringing down the regime and establishing a more just and democratic society. Freedom will some day come to Iran. When it does, however, it will be in spite of—rather than because of—the policies of the United States.