

[Stephen Zunes: U.S. policy weakens pro-democracy movement in Iran](#)

While it may be hard to predict the outcome of the upcoming Iranian elections, it will make little difference as long as power remains firmly in the hands of Ayatollah Khamenei and other hardline clerics. Indeed, while there are contending factions vying for the country's relatively weak presidency, the narrow ideological spectrum within which candidates are allowed to run for public office offers little hope for change—at least through the electoral system.

Following the 2009 election, in which the incumbent right-wing president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner despite his apparent loss to the popular reformist Mir-Hossein Moussavi, the people of Iran rose up in a popular civil insurrection, which was brutally crushed.

While it is hard to guess how soon democracy will come to Iran, the government's theft of the election and subsequent crackdown—in shattering the illusion many Iranians still held that they could work within a rigged political system—may have brought that day closer. The repression, corruption, economic injustice, imposition of ultra-conservative social policies, and poor treatment of women and minorities has led to so much dissent that the regime has barred many of the Iranian Revolution's own leadership from running for office and even jailed some of them.

Iran today is like Eastern Europe in the 1970s. The people are not yet at a point where they can bring down the regime, but the ideological hegemony that kept the system intact is gone. Just as Eastern European workers recognized that the system under which they were suffering bore little resemblance to its professed socialist ideology, Iranian Muslims — even those who supported the Islamic Revolution in principle — are recognizing that the "Islamic Republic" is actually neither.

While overt protests are rare, many thousands of tiny acts of resistance occur every day by Iranians who no longer recognize the legitimacy of the regime. It is only a matter of time before the people will again rise up and demand their freedom.

Unfortunately, U.S. policy is making things difficult for democratic forces in Iran. Modern Iranian history has shown that a reduction in outside pressure increases the prospects for change, while an increase in foreign threats strengthens autocratic elements.

U.S.-led international sanctions have had an economic impact, but they have not had a political impact. Regardless of most Iranians' feelings about the regime, nationalist passions are inevitably stirred up as their country is placed under crippling economic sanctions over a nuclear program which has thus far been entirely peaceful. Even government critics note how nearby regional powers Israel, Pakistan and India — which, like Iran, are in defiance of U.N. Security Council resolutions regarding their nuclear programs but have actually developed sizable arsenals of nuclear weapons — are not being sanctioned and maintain close military and economic relations with United States.

Indeed, the sanctions have allowed the regime to blame the country's economic problems on foreigners rather than their own misguided policies.

The threat of an attack by Israel or the United States has strengthened the regime and weakened the opposition even more so. History has shown repeatedly that people — regardless of their ideological orientation — tend to rally around the flag if their country is under threat of attack.

The big mistake by the United States in Vietnam was failing to recognize that the power of the Vietnamese revolutionaries came through their ability to rally the nationalist sentiments of their people. Like the Communist leadership of Vietnam, the Islamist leaders of Iran have been quite successful in appealing to nationalism when they feel their country is unfairly targeted. Indeed, Iranians are among the most stridently nationalistic people in the world.

Though the Obama administration has taken a tough but cautious approach towards Iran, a bipartisan coalition in Congress — including both of California's senators and area House members Rep. Anna Eshoo and Rep. Sam Farr — have supported legislation toughening sanctions and threatening war. Such policies, unfortunately, only serve to strengthen the grip of Iran's autocratic rulers and weaken the ability of the opposition to mobilize for democratic change.

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