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Obama Administration Must Speak Out Against Iran's Clenched Fist

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The massive popular protests that have convulsed Iran have not only shattered the already weak claim to legitimacy of the radical regime in Tehran, but they have also undermined the Obama Administration's strategy of diplomatically engaging that brutal dictatorship.

The regime has been vividly exposed as a ruthless tyranny willing to deceive, repress, and kill its own people—shattering any lingering doubts that some may have had as to its true nature. Consequently, the Obama Administration must recalibrate its Iran policy and take a tougher public stance in support of the Iranian opposition's campaign for greater freedom.

Engage the People, Not the Regime. The Administration undoubtedly hoped that bombastic President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would be voted out of power and that a successor government would be easier to negotiate with on thorny issues such as Iran's nuclear program, support for terrorism, and threats against Israel.

But Ahmadinejad's chief presidential rival, former Prime Minister Mir Hossain Mousavi, is a leading member of Iran's revolutionary establishment who shares many of Ahmadinejad's goals—although he would pursue them in a less confrontational manner. On foreign policy issues, Mousavi would adopt a calmer tone but would remain committed to Iran's nuclear program, which began during his term as prime minister.

President Barack Obama has wisely not taken a position on the internal power struggle between

Ahmadinejad and Mousavi, who may be Tweedledum and Tweedledee on many foreign policy issues that are a priority for the United States. But the President has not spoken out adequately in support of the Iranian people's struggle for freedom. Such advocacy is not meddling; it is an appropriate defense of basic human rights that are being trampled in Iran.

The election travesty should be a confirmation for the Administration that the only vote that counts today in Iran's Islamist system is the vote of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. While Iranian presidents come and go, the unelected Supreme Leader retains the final say on all important matters. The mass rejection of the official vote tally has destroyed the illusion, carefully nurtured by the regime, that Iran's government is a quasi-democracy.

In his inaugural speech, President Obama famously proclaimed, "To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."

Now that it is clear that the regime's fist remains tightly clenched around the throat of the Iranian

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people, the Obama Administration cannot simply take a business-as-usual approach to Iran's clerical dictatorship.

Time to Get off the Fence. President Obama should drop the guarded language that suggests he is triangulating between the regime and its opposition and come down off the fence and on to the side of those fighting for freedom and democracy in Iran. Oblique equivocations about the regime's strong-arm tactics and the killing of at least seven unarmed demonstrators represent a moral myopia that in the long run undermines U.S. interests by signaling to the regime that its repressive violence comes at little cost to its own interests.

As the President has bent over backwards to avoid "meddling" in Iran's affairs, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has stepped up to fill the vacuum of leadership, placing the blame for the current crisis squarely on Iran's ruling regime. Meanwhile, Tehran has accused Washington of meddling anyway.

Voicing support for Iranians struggling to reclaim their freedom promotes American ideals and universal human rights and advances American national interests. Ultimately, Tehran will cease to be a threat to its neighbors, Americans, and its own people when Iranians are free to pursue their own national interests rather than the narrowly defined interests of the radical regime.

President Obama must make it crystal clear that the United States stands with the Iranian people, not with the repressive regime of the ayatollahs. He should strongly denounce the violent suppression of the democratic opposition and the systematic human rights abuses perpetrated by the regime. Moreover, he should call on other world leaders to cooperate in pressuring Tehran to end its persecution of political reformers, human rights activists, and religious minorities.

American Leadership Needed. Rather than abdicating leadership on the human rights issue in an unseemly attempt to strike a deal with the outlaw regime, President Obama should seize the moral high ground and rally international support for effective economic and political sanctions on Tehran. He should call on European and other allies to impose the same level of economic sanctions that the United States has imposed on Iran since 1995. Depriving Tehran of a vital source of foreign investment, trade, and loans would maximize pressure on the regime, which is unlikely to make concessions on the nuclear program or its treatment of its own citizens unless it is convinced that its hold on power is threatened.

Only strong international pressures that impose excruciating economic pain—not soothing rhetoric or misconceived attempts at appeasement—are likely to have an effect on the callous Iranian regime. But so far, the Obama Administration has treated the Tehran regime with kid gloves and received nothing in return except for religious lectures, an accelerating uranium enrichment program, and continued Iranian support for insurgents killing Americans and U.S. allies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

President Obama should speak truth to power and put America on the right side of history. He should no longer mute his Administration's criticism of a despicable regime in a vain effort to diplomatically assuage it. Otherwise, future American Presidents may have to apologize to the Iranian people for leaving them in the clenched fist of Iran's clerical dictatorship.

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