

Iran commentary

By Sean Penn, Ross Mirkarimi and Reese Erlich

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During our travels to Iran in 2005, Penn and Erlich interviewed numerous ordinary Iranians. People were very friendly towards us as Americans but very hostile to U.S. policy against their country. We visited Friday prayers where 10,000 people chanted "Death to America." Afterwards those same people invited us home for lunch.

That contradiction continues today as Iran goes through its most significant upheaval since the 1979 revolution. Iranians are rising up against an authoritarian system but don't want U.S. intervention.

Many Iranians believe that they have experienced a coup d'état, in which the military and intelligence services have hijacked the presidential election. Through vote buying and manipulation of the count, Ahmadinejad had guaranteed himself another four years in office.

In June over a million Iranians marched in the streets of major cities across the country. The spontaneous demonstrations included well-to-do supporters of opposition candidates, but also large numbers of workers, farmers, small business people and the devoutly religious. They were fed up with 30 years of a system that used Islam as an excuse for union labor strike breaking, lack of women's rights and repression.

The Iranian government responded to these peaceful protests with savagery, killing dozens of people. Some human rights groups put the number at over 100. The government admits arresting 2500 people nationwide and continues to hold at least 500. Most are being held without charges or have simply disappeared.

The repression hasn't killed the movement. On July 17, over 10,000 people came to Friday prayers in support of the opposition. Instead of chanting "Death to America," they chanted "Death to the Dictator," a reference to supreme leader Khamenei. Police attacked them with clubs and teargas.

Meanwhile in Washington, some politicians tried to use the crisis for their own ends. Senator John McCain criticized President Obama for not taking a stronger position against the Iranian government. It's ironic to hear McCain and other conservatives proclaim their support for the people of Iran when a few months ago they wanted to bomb them.

That doesn't exactly build credibility among Iranians.

President Obama faces tough choices on Iran. If he speaks out loudly against Ahmadinejad, he is accused of meddling in Iran's internal affairs. If he says too little, then right-wingers in the U.S. accuse him of being soft on Ahmadinejad.

In reality, the U.S. has very little ability to impact what has become a massive, spontaneous movement for change. And it shouldn't. The CIA overthrew the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953, bringing the dictatorial Shah back to power. The Bush Administration attempted to overthrow the Iranian government by funding and arming ethnic minority groups opposed to Tehran.

The U.S. government has no moral or political authority to tell Iranians what they should do. Iranians are perfectly capable of deciding for themselves.

That's why citizen diplomacy is so important. Iranian demonstrators welcome the support of ordinary Americans. Joan Baez recorded a Farsi language version of "We Shall Overcome" that has shot around the world on You Tube.

Iranian activists are holding a hunger strike in front of the UN in New York from July 22-4 demanding that Secretary General Ban Ki-moon send a special commission to Iran.

We urge you to participate in the July 25 demonstrations around the U.S. and in Europe. Stand in solidarity with Iranians and against U.S. intervention in Iran (www.norcal4iran.org)

Sean Penn is an actor, director and writer who visited Iran in 2005. Ross Mirkarimi is a San Francisco supervisor, the first elected Iranian-American to hold that office. Reese Erlich is a freelance journalist and author of *The Iran Agenda: The Real Story of US Policy and the Middle East Crisis*.