

# WebMemo



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## Support for Iran's Green Revolution Gains Traction in the Senate

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Whether Iran's "Green Revolution" will ever have a chance of spearheading the societal change that will finally free Iran from its oppressive theocracy could depend on whether the fledgling movement receives support from abroad. In the case of other recent "color revolutions," such as Ukraine's Orange Revolution and Lebanon's Cedar Revolution, action by the United States and its allies was critical in ensuring open elections. Last summer, the United States government again had the opportunity to support a freedom and democracy movement counting millions of Iranians, but it failed to materially back those who rejected the rigged re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Today, Iranian demonstrators continue to defy the regime at their peril. The Green Movement, which spontaneously coalesced around two challengers in the Iranian presidential election (Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi), estimates that more than 70 of its supporters have been killed since June. Thousands more have been rounded up by the Iranian authorities and jailed. Some have been subjected to show trials and two political prisoners were recently executed. Given the heavy-handed tactics of the regime, which include using police, Revolutionary Guards, and Basij militia thugs to attack opposition demonstrations, the Green Movement has shifted its strategy: It now focuses its non-violent anti-government efforts on the days when the regime holds its official demonstrations, such as the November anniversary of the U.S. embassy takeover, National Student Day in

December, and the anniversary of Iran's 1979 revolution on February 11. This has allowed the movement to hijack some pro-government demonstrations not only in Tehran but in other major Iranian cities. But the regime has responded by escalating its crackdown and intimidating opposition forces.

**Filling the Executive Void.** Thus far, the Obama Administration has failed to provide meaningful support for the Green Movement. In order to make up for the White House's lack of initiative, Senators John Cornyn (R-TX) and Sam Brownback (R-KS) have introduced the Iran Democratic Transition Act of 2010, a bill that builds on the Support for Democracy in Iran Act of 2003 (S.1082). Yet in order to succeed, such congressional initiatives require the executive branch to take the lead in calling for regime change—which neither the Bush Administration did nor the Obama Administration has done.

However, Congress can provide the necessary pressure and funding and mandate accountability for failed policies, such as the spurned engagement policy of the current Administration. Specifically, the Iran Democratic Transition Act of 2010 details

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the current Iranian regime's human rights abuses—such as hanging political dissidents in the aftermath of the June 12 election—and the efforts to rig the election itself. Following the State Department, the bill cites Iran as the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism. And it details Iran's troublesome pursuit of nuclear weapons, a goal that prompted Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to declare Iran a "nuclear power."

According to the bill, it should be U.S. policy to support the Iranian people in their efforts to oppose and remove the current regime and replace it with a freely elected, open, and democratic government in Iran. The legislation's ultimate aim is to deny the current regime the ability to oppress its own people and interfere with the internal affairs of its neighbors (including Iraq and Afghanistan), finance or support terrorist organizations, and develop weapons of mass destruction and the associated delivery systems.

The act would pursue these policy goals by:

- Establishing U.S. assistance for democratic opposition groups by providing them non-military assistance, as well as humanitarian assistance to victims of the current regime;
- Creating a Special Envoy for Democracy and Human Rights in Iran with the rank of ambassador to coordinate the U.S. government's efforts (which should be right up the White House's alley, as the Administration has already created a record number of special envoys);
- Exploring the concept of a regional framework on human rights, modeled on the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Helsinki process; and
- Requiring the White House to submit two reports to Congress: a clear plan for implementation of this act and a comprehensive plan for U.S. support of the Iranian people as they move

toward democracy once a transitional government is in place.

Another lesson from both the Orange and the Cedar revolutions that should be taken to heart is that while support from abroad might open the doors to a freer and fairer election process, it cannot make up for good governance once the new political players have been installed. That is one important reason why thinking ahead to the day when the Iranian protests will hopefully bear fruit is so important, not just for Iran but for Middle East stability as a whole.

**Recommendations.** In order to help realize the promises of Iran's Green Revolution, Congress and the Administration should:

- Focus on public diplomacy. Iranians desperately need independent, trustworthy sources of news outside Iran's state-controlled media. Funding for U.S. broadcasting into Iran should be generously increased. Internet access is clearly sensitive to government control and interference, as is cell phone service, which makes these mediums vulnerable. Yet total control remains extremely hard to maintain, and the U.S. government should discreetly work with Iranians abroad to set up pro-democracy Web sites.
- Funnel funding for democratic Iranian opposition groups through third-party organizations.
- Announce that regime change is official U.S. policy, which will certainly lend moral support to Iranians under severe pressure at home. Accommodation is not going to result in anything more than the same threatening Iranian behavior.

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