



Is President Obama cosyng up to dictators?

By Tara McKelvey

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US President Barack Obama is more conciliatory with Iranian leaders than his predecessor was. Some believe his approach towards Tehran - and democracy promotion - is too low-key.

Mr Obama has been trying to negotiate a nuclear deal with President Hassan Rouhani - hoping to slow, if not halt, his country's alleged nuclear weapons programme.

A senior US official said: "We are getting close to a first step that would stop the Iranian nuclear programme." Officials from P5+1 countries, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (US, UK, France, Russia and China plus Germany), and Iran are meeting this week in Geneva.

Icy relations between the US and Iran are beginning to thaw - and the talks mark a new openness between the two countries. And regardless of their outcome, one thing is clear. Obama is taking a different approach to his predecessor.

More than a decade ago President George W Bush said Iran was part of an "axis of evil". In 2006 he expanded US support for activists in Iran in the hope they would overthrow their government.

It was "democracy promotion on steroids", said Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment in Washington. In contrast, he said, Mr Obama "believes the US should not be too pushy".

For that reason Mr Obama has overseen the US negotiations with Mr Rouhani - and soft-pedalled American support for democracy.

Many people, both inside and outside of Iran, have praised Mr Obama's efforts. "This is not to say the regime there is a nice one, but it does make sense to prioritise," said Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington. "Dropping bombs on Iran is an awful alternative."

Alireza Nader, an analyst with the Rand Corporation, said: "Most Iranians who are involved with democratisation think this is an effort that is best carried out by the Iranian people rather than by a foreign power."

But not everyone likes Mr Obama's strategy. John Bolton wrote in a Wall Street Journal [article](#) that "Rouhani is playing Obama."

The days of glasnost

Differences between the two presidents were discussed at a recent event at the US National Archives in Washington. Guests were celebrating the 30th anniversary of National Endowment for Democracy, a private organisation that receives financing from the US Congress.

Despite contrasting styles, as Bill Sweeney, head of an organisation called International Foundation for Electoral Systems, said, the two presidents share common goals: "Both have been very strong in supporting democracy promotion."

The room hosting the event was decorated with battery-operated candles. Nearby the US Constitution was displayed under glass, lit by bulbs that cast a greenish light. For nations, as well as for those who care about democracy promotion, symbols are important.

So is taking stock. "Thirty years and a couple of billion dollars - it's worth looking back," said Mr Carothers.

Back in the mid-1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev was overseeing glasnost, a policy of openness that would transform Soviet society. Poles held free elections in 1989, and Hungarians opened their border to the West.

There were 69 electoral democracies - out of a total of 167 countries - that year, according to the US-based Freedom House, a pro-democracy organisation. The Soviet empire has since crumbled. Today there are 195 countries, according to [a Freedom House report](#), and 118 democracies.

Still transitions are hard. And no-one really knows why they happen or what makes an authoritarian nation turn into a democracy. Meanwhile the US has been a bundle of contradictions.

Autocrats as allies

In fiscal year 2012 the US government spent \$2.82bn (£1.75bn) on democracy promotion, according to Freedom House. The money falls under a category that includes rule-of-law and other democracy-related programmes.

The amount has fluctuated over the years, but it is now higher than it was under Mr Bush. In fiscal year 2006, the government spent \$1.758bn.

In this way Mr Obama has promoted democracy abroad. Yet at the same time he has remained close to authoritarian leaders in order to further US interests. His administration has offered only limited support to dissidents in Bahrain, a US ally that has been accused in the past of widespread human rights abuses.

Under President Hosni Mubarak, civil-society activists in Egypt received US support. It was "decent work - and well-intentioned", said Mr Carothers. Yet as he pointed out: "The overall US policy supported Mubarak."

Tampering with votes

Mr Sweeney tried to help Egyptians during their post-Arab Spring elections. Ballots were stored in glass boxes - and sometimes broke. Corrupt officials would reach into the boxes - and change the outcome.

"The votes weren't safe," Mr Sweeney said. His staffers managed to convince officials to use boxes made of sturdy plastic - with "multiple seals and locks", he said.

Today the country is lurching into a new phase. Meanwhile guests at the reception said they were trying to help people in other countries work towards free societies. They sounded hopeful about the future - in Egypt, Iran and elsewhere.

Some believe Mr Rouhani represents a new form of openness - and wonder if an "Iranian-style glasnost", as a Radio Free Europe journalist [wrote](#), could emerge.

The road to democracy is long, Mr Sweeney said, but it has important milestones: "Thirty years ago, the [Berlin] Wall was still up."