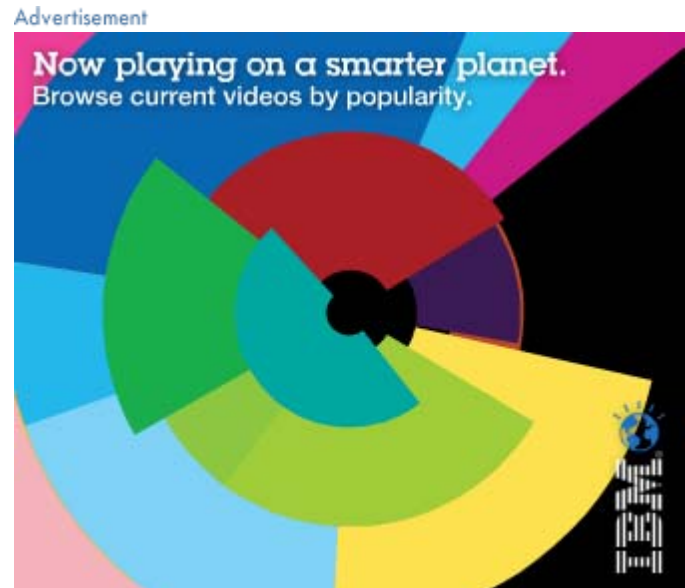


# The Washington Post

## The fantasy of an Iranian revolution

By Fareed Zakaria  
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As Barack Obama goes through one of his most difficult periods as president, you might wonder what it would have been like if the other guy had won. We will never know, of course, but in one area John McCain provides us with some clues. He would have tried to overthrow the government of Iran. In a [June 10 speech](#), later published as a cover [essay in the New Republic](#), McCain urged that we "unleash America's full moral power" to topple the Tehran regime. The speech highlights one of the crucial failings of McCain's worldview, one in which rhetoric replaces analysis and fantasy substitutes for foreign policy.



It has become something of a mantra among neoconservatives that we missed a chance to transform Iran a year ago. [Reuel Marc Gerecht, writing in the New York Times](#) last week, compares Iran's Green Movement to "what transpired behind the Iron Curtain in the 1980s" and accuses President Obama of being passive in the face of this historical moment. [Wall Street Journal columnist Bret Stephens](#) imagines that a more forceful Western response could have set off a revolution.

I have been deeply supportive of Iran's Green Movement. [I wrote about it](#), highlighted it on television and showcased its advocates. But I do not think it was likely to overthrow the Iranian regime. To believe that, one has to believe the government in Tehran is deeply unpopular with a majority of Iranians, holds onto power through military force alone and is thus vulnerable to a movement that could mobilize the vast majority in Iran who despise it. None of this is entirely true.

The Iranian regime has many, many opponents, but it also has millions of supporters. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may have actually lost the presidential election of 2009, but it was a close contest in which he got millions of votes. What little polling has been done in Iran, coupled with the observations of people who have been there, all suggest that the regime has considerable public support in rural areas, among the devout and in poorer communities. Newsweek's Maziar Bahari, who was jailed by the government for four months on trumped-up charges, believes that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei remains the most popular political figure in Iran.

McCain reveals a startling ignorance about the Iranian regime when he argues, as in his speech, that it "spends its people's precious resources not on roads, or schools, or hospitals, or jobs that benefit all Iranians -- but on funding violent groups of foreign extremists who murder the innocent." While Tehran does fund militant groups, one of the keys to Ahmadinejad's popularity has been his large-scale spending on social programs for the poor. The regime lays out far more money on those domestic programs than on anything abroad.

The comparison of Iran's Green Revolution to the velvet revolutions of Eastern Europe is mistaken. In

1989 dissidents had three forces on their side: nationalism (because communism had been imposed by force by a foreign power), religion (because communism repressed the church) and democracy. The Green Movement has only one: democracy. The regime has always used the religiosity of the people to its advantage, but it has also become skilled at manipulating nationalism.

In May, Akbar Ganji was awarded, by a selection committee in which I take part, the [Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty](#). Ganji, one of the bravest advocates of nonviolent agitation and secular democracy for Iran, was jailed for six years in Evin Prison, mostly in solitary confinement, for his writings against the government. In his acceptance speech, Ganji explained that U.S. foreign policy does have an impact on Iran's freedom movement but not quite in the sense that neoconservatives mean.

"Even entertaining the possibility of a military strike, especially when predicated on the nuclear issue," Ganji said, "is beneficial to the fundamentalists who rule Iran. As such, the idea itself is detrimental to the democratic movement in my country." The regime bends international issues to its favor and has become vocal about what Ganji calls the "gushing wound of Palestine . . . [which] worsens the infection of fundamentalism." He pointed out that Tehran continually reminds Iranians of America's "double standards" in opposing Iran's nuclear program while staying silent about Israel's arsenal of atomic weapons.

Ironically, those hoping to liberate Iranians are the same people urging punitive sanctions and even military force against Iran. Do they think that when the bombs hit, those who wear green will be spared?

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