

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## Obama's caution regarding Iran treads fine line

U.S. President, who has staked so much on opening new dialogue with Muslims, trying to avoid appearance of meddling  
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As tumult engulfs Tehran in what may be a tipping point for America's arch foe, U.S. President Barack Obama has opted for caution, leaving others to champion democracy and denounce the ruling theocracy's brutality as it struggles with its biggest challenge since the 1979 revolution.

"It's not productive, given the history of U.S.-Iranian relations, to be seen as meddling," Mr. Obama said this week. Meanwhile, top White House officials were urging Twitter to forego scheduled maintenance because hordes of Iranian demonstrators were using the short-messaging service to organize mass protests.

Confronting his second, full-blown foreign-policy crisis (after North Korea's nuclear-warhead test last month) Mr. Obama's careful and deliberate departure from his predecessor's policy is suddenly facing twin challenges.

Mr. Obama has promised "engagement," an offer of direct talks with Tehran's Islamic theocracy. "Regime change," a familiar part of George W. Bush's foreign policy, isn't part of Mr. Obama's lexicon.

Mr. Obama is walking a very fine line. If he wholeheartedly throws his support behind the reformist opposition, who say the election was stolen, he hands the mullahs and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a chance to denounce the protesting throngs as America's stooges.

But to bet against the tide of history, if he stays on the sidelines as a popular uprising sweeps authoritarianism aside in Iran, would be a huge setback for a President who has staked so much on rebuilding relations with the world's millions of ordinary Muslims.

Hedging may irk many domestic critics but it may also be the perfect positioning response in these early days of uncertainty. "The situation is so fluid, no one can yet know whether we are entering the beginning or the end of the regime," said Suzanne Maloney, an Iran expert at the Brookings Institution.

Some angry critics decry his caution, dismissing it as timidity lacking in principle. "He should speak out that this is a corrupt, flawed sham of an election, and that the Iranian people have been deprived of their rights," said Senator John McCain, the President's defeated rival for the White House. He said Mr. Obama should back Iranians "in their struggle against a repressive, oppressive regime and they should not be subjected to four more years of Ahmadinejad and the radical Muslim clerics."

Certainly, Mr. Obama has been reserved almost to the point of deference, when compared to some

other world leaders, notably French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who slammed the elections as a fraud and an atrocity.

But Mr. Obama seems keenly cognizant of the long and sordid history of U.S. meddling in Iran, especially the pivotal CIA-run coup that installed the Shah in 1953.

Ever since the post-revolutionary 444-day hostage crisis destroyed Jimmy Carter's presidency and set the stage for the Ronald Reagan era of facing down "evil empires," Iran's role as America's arch foe has roughly matched the mullahs' depiction of America as the "Great Satan."

Mr. Obama isn't the first President to make Tehran a foreign-policy priority, but his promises of an extended hand, backed by a warm and personal offer of "new beginnings" was in stark contrast to Mr. Bush's branding of Iran as part of the "axis of evil."

Still, a willingness to deal directly with a known, albeit hostile, regime was simpler than grappling with a fast-unfolding political drama in a major regional power inconveniently located between both of America's ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Pragmatism seemingly trumps all for Mr. Obama. "It's important to understand that although there is some ferment taking place in Iran, that the difference between Ahmadinejad and [his reformist rival Mir-Hossein] Mousavi in terms of their actual policies may not be as great as has been advertised," Mr. Obama said. "Either way, we were going to be dealing with an Iranian regime that has historically been hostile to the United States, that has caused some problems in the neighbourhood and is pursuing nuclear weapons."

At least so far, Mr. Obama seems unwilling to promote – or even publicly countenance – the possibility that Iran may be on the cusp of change so radical that the ruling mullahs may be swept aside rather than a tussle over which pre-screened candidate for president won the vote.

Justin Logan, associate director of foreign policy studies at the conservative Cato Institute, suggests the less said by Mr. Obama, the better.

"If Iran's government has overreached, the right response is *schadenfreude*," he said. "The more America is irrelevant to Iran's domestic politics, the better. ... The more this turns into a debate about the U.S., the greater the opportunity for Ahmadinejad."

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