

Iran reprimands Canadian envoy amid fears of Tiananmen-style tragedy

BY MIKE BLANCHFIELD, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JUNE 17, 2009



With tens of thousands of protesters again returning to Tehran's streets, Iran's Islamic rulers accused foreign governments of inciting the protest on Wednesday.

Photograph by: Getty Images, Getty Images

Canada's envoy to Iran was formally called on the carpet Wednesday, as fears grew that the stage is being set for a Tiananmen Square-style tragedy on Tehran's streets after days of unprecedented, post-election protest.

With tens of thousands of protesters again returning to Tehran's streets, Iran's Islamic rulers — facing the most significant challenge in three decades to their theocratic grip on power — accused foreign governments of inciting the protest.

Iranian officials summoned Canada's top diplomat and the Swiss envoy — who represents U.S. interests — over concern the North American countries are helping destabilize Iran by supporting such social networking sites as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, which the Islamic regime has tried to ban.

"We have been outspoken for a very long time in the councils of the United Nations and elsewhere about the unacceptable ideology, democratic practices and human-rights record of the government of Iran," Prime Minister Stephen Harper told the House of Commons on Wednesday in his first remarks on the Iran turmoil.

"We are obviously strongly displeased by the reaction that has taken place by authorities to events this

week. We encourage those authorities to respect people's basic human rights, and to move forward on democratic progress . . . We find the behaviour of that regime unacceptable in so many ways, that I cannot even begin to name them."

Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon called Iran's top envoy on the carpet earlier in the week. Cannon's office confirmed that charge d'affaires Michel De Salaberry was called in by the Iranian foreign ministry, as were numerous western diplomats, but added in a statement that Canada "will continue to call for a fully transparent investigation into electoral discrepancies. The Iranian people deserve to have their voices heard. The violent crackdowns by Iranian security forces, including the use of lethal force, is wholly unacceptable."

In a message aimed at Washington, which has not had diplomatic relations with Tehran for three decades, the Swiss ambassador received an official protest over what Iran called the "interfering remarks" of U.S. officials. Even though he tried to softpedal his criticism a day earlier, U.S. President Barack Obama said he had "deep concerns" about Iran's recent presidential election and the subsequent crackdown on protests.

Defeated presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi called for a major demonstration Thursday after his loss in last Friday's vote, which he says was rigged. But Iran's Revolutionary Guard, which until Wednesday had remained silent after four days of protest, drew a line in the sand warning reformers to stand down.

The Guard threatened legal action against websites it accused of fomenting dissent, while Reuters reported that prosecutors threatened protesters with the death penalty in the central province of Isfahan.

"You might call it a game of chicken," Mehrdad Khonsari, a Tehran-born Arab and Iranian studies expert at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, told Canwest News Service from London.

"I think that it is quite possible that we'll see . . . a smaller version of what took place in Tiananmen Square."

Earlier this month, the world marked the 20th anniversary of the massacre of thousands of student protesters by the Chinese military in Beijing.

"They (the regime) are not going to back down. If they back down, they lose everything. It's just like the communists in China, in many ways. They don't want to lose everything," said Khonsari. "The regime has taken a major body blow. Dictatorships always overplay their hand and whether these people might do the same, it's quite possible."

Iran's clampdown on foreign journalists continued Wednesday, with images posted — in many cases anonymously — on YouTube that showed what appeared to be massive destruction to the residences of Tehran University.

Though impossible to independently verify, the images gave some credence to reports of crackdowns on students in Tehran and other cities.

Most foreign journalists, who came to cover last Friday's victory by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have since left after being expelled or after their work visas expired, while members of Tehran-based international news organizations have been ordered by the government not to leave their offices to cover the unrest.

Khonsari said the media crackdown, the blocking of the Internet, and the jamming of mobile telephone messaging is all a sign of a paranoid regime that believes the postelection unrest is foreign-driven.

"Irrespective of people who might have objected to President Obama for being too soft, the regime does not see it that way; they see it completely the opposite," said Khonsari. "That adds to the regime's already existing paranoia."

Justin Logan, a senior Iran analyst with the Washington-based Cato Institute, said it was important for the U.S. "not to insert ourselves into the situation," for the good of the protesters.

"We want to avoid another Hungary 1956, or an instance where we send ambiguous signals, protesters press forward, and we watch them get crushed," Logan told Canwest News.

"Given that we aren't prepared to physically back them up, and given the likely nationalist backlash against U.S. intervention in any case, the best policy is to leave this to the Iranian people — while quietly hoping and praying for a positive outcome for them."

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