

The Wonk Room

Ganji: Please Don't Talk About 'Regime Change' In Iran

By [Matt Duss](#) on May 13th, 2010 at 3:05 pm

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Yesterday I had the opportunity to attend a discussion at the Cato Institute with Iranian dissident journalist [Akbar Ganji](#), who tonight will receive Cato's [Milton Friedman Liberty Prize](#). Ganji shared his views and answered questions on the current state of affairs inside Iran, the prospects for Iranian political reform, and the impact that U.S. policy has had on those prospects.

“The democracy movement in Iran is broad-based and strong,” Ganji said, speaking through a translator, “but what we lack right now is the ability — the tools to get our message to the Iranian people.”

Asked about the impact of President Obama's approach to Iran, Ganji praised the change in rhetoric, and suggested that it helped create a favorable environment for the Iranian democracy movement. “Obama offered a dialog with the Iran,” Ganji said, “and this change in discourse immediately gave rise to that outpouring of sentiment against the Islamic Republic last year.”

On the impact of recent U.S. policy in the region, Ganji said “Unfortunately, the policies of the United States have fanned the flames of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East, particularly during the [George W.] Bush administration,” Ganji said. “The belligerent rhetoric of Bush didn't help us [the Iranian democracy movement], it actually harmed us during that period.” And by taking out the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iran, Ganji said “the U.S. inadvertently increased Iranian power and reach in the Middle East.”

Ganji also suggested that fear of U.S. invasion, of Iran turning into another Iraq, had caused Iranian democracy activists to scale back some of their rhetoric. “Since Iranians, in particular opposition groups, do not want to see a repeat of Afghanistan or Iraq in Iran,” Ganji said, “they've actually had to scale back their opposition to the government in order not to encourage an invasion [by the U.S.]”

Ganji was adamant that talk of a U.S. military option was harmful to the cause of Iranian democracy. “If you do not have the threat of foreign invasion and you do not use the dialog of invasion and military intervention, the society itself has a huge potential to oppose and potentially topple the theocratic system,” Ganji said. “What I'm trying to get to is that jingoistic, militaristic language used by any foreign power would actually be

detrimental to this natural evolution of Iranian society.”

Ganji also said that too much attention was paid to the wild statements of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who he called a “master at playing the media,” and that the focus on the nuclear issue actually played to Ahmadinejad’s domestic political advantage. Many Westerners fail to understand that Iran’s right to nuclear power is a consensus issue among Iranians, and thus attacking the government over the nuclear issue is not likely to cultivate divisions among the Iranian leadership nor strengthen the democracy movement. It would be far better, Ganji suggested, for critics to focus on the human rights issue. “The struggle for human rights in democracy, that is the real weak point of this government,” Ganji said. He noted that, at Ahmadinejad’s recent press conference in New York, “all the media wanted to ask about was denial of the Holocaust, nuclear weapons, and [Iranian] support for terrorism.”

“When it comes to human rights,” Ganji said, “Ahmadinejad does not have as strong a point as when he talks about the nuclear issue.”

Ganji disagreed with the description of Iran as a military dictatorship that has been offered by a number of U.S. officials, including [Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in February](#). “Iran is not a military dictatorship, like those we’ve seen in Latin America,” Ganji said, nor was it a fascist or totalitarian state. “There’s no all-encompassing ideology” that infiltrates every aspect of society, he said. While many aspects of life are proscribed, Ganji said there is a “lively debate about the nature of Islam.”

Discussing the nature of the Iranian regime, Ganji said “I use the model that Weber used for the ‘sultan state,’” which Ganji described in detail in a 2008 [Foreign Affairs article](#). While some have pointed to the growing power of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps as evidence that Iran has become a military dictatorship, Ganji said he believed “that you can reconcile the rise of the Revolutionary Guard within that ‘sultanist’ state.” While the government of such a state has a number of power centers, it is focused primarily on the figure of the Sultan — in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei — who retains the ability to intervene in any aspect of the government.

As to the rise of the Revolutionary Guards as a political power in their own right, Ganji said “The Revolutionary Guards are not monolithic. Many of them are from the poor strata of Iranian society.” Ganji suggested that there was growing dissatisfaction in the Guards, saying that “Some high ranking leaders of Revolutionary Guards might have gotten rich in recent years, but sizable portions of the guards are actually opponents of current administration.”

Interestingly, though President Jimmy Carter was widely disliked by Iranian revolutionaries because of his administration’s perceived support for the Shah regime, Ganji said that feelings among some Iranians about Carter had changed because of his subsequent human rights work. “President Carter himself can actually have a following in Iran for his promoting of human rights,” Ganji said. “But I don’t believe that anybody in the democracy movement in Iran is going to be a supporter of president Bush.”

As for U.S. policy toward Iranian democracy going forward, Ganji was clear on what the Obama administration should not do: “Do not talk about military intervention. Do not talk about regime change and funds allocated to regime change in Iran,” he said. “But please do support human rights in Iran. I believe that this is not too much to ask.”

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1. [James Salsman](#) Says:

Curle, A. (1997) “Public mental health. III: Hatred and reconciliation.” *Med Confl Surviv* 13(1):37-47. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9080785>

Jentleson, B.W. (1996) “Preventive Diplomacy and Ethnic Conflict: Possible, Difficult, Necessary” UC Berkeley Policy Paper 27, Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation
<http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/2tp1m760>

[May 13th, 2010 at 4:46 pm](#)

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