

Originally published Monday, January 18, 2010 at 4:00 PM

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Guest columnist

The struggle for genuine democracy in Iran

The slogan "Where is my vote?" is really about building an Iranian democracy based on just laws, writes guest columnist Khodadad Kaviani. Democracies around the world can support this civil-rights movement by withholding diplomatic recognition from the Ahmadinejad government.

By Khodadad Kaviani
Special to The Times

NO reasonable person really believes that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won last summer's contested Iranian Presidential election fairly.

In his victory speech to his supporters, Ahmadinejad showed arrogance and disrespect to those who voted for his rival, Mir Hossein Mousavi, by calling them "a handful of insignificant debris" or *Khas-o-khaashaak*. He missed the opportunity to be the president of all Iranians. His insulting words motivated Iranians to take to the streets for spontaneous peaceful and silent marches in Tehran and other major cities. They were unified by green color and their signs read, "Where is my vote?" This massive show of citizen power caught the theocrats by surprise and scared them.

Instead of investigating voting fraud, the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, sided with Ahmadinejad and threatened the people that questioned their illegitimate rule. In the Iranian theocracy, the supreme leader is the head of *Velayat-e Faghih*, which allows him to act as a guardian over the people. In essence, this implies that the public is not capable of making rational decisions and the supreme leader knows what's best for them.

Once again, Iranians defied the government by coming into the streets and chanting: "Liar. Liar. Where is your 63 percent?" "Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon. My life for Iran!" "Obama, Obama, Are you with them or with us?"

This time, the forces loyal to the supreme leader attacked people and many were arrested and put on show trials. This was the second time the regime had misread the will of the Iranian people and used violence and intimidation to silence them. By this time, silent marches were replaced by loud shouts that challenged the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's government and the supreme leader.

Additionally, similar to 30 years ago when people were protesting against the shah, Iranians went to their rooftops and shouted slogans in support of Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi. Nightly shouts of "God is Great!" and "Death to the Dictator!" have shown people's resolve and have broken socio-political taboos.

By avoiding transparency and accountability, the theocrats have limited their options to address people's legitimate grievances. They have reached the limits of propaganda, threats and violence. They have lost their legitimacy in the eyes of most Iranians. The international image the Islamic republic wanted to project, as an Islamic and democratic state that defended disfranchised people, has lost its appeal. This theocracy has lost its facade of Islamic justice at home as the random and deliberate killing of protesters continue, notably Neda Agha-Soltan's death, which was seen by millions around the world on YouTube.

In addition, the raping and killing of people arrested by security forces, the brutal treatment of protesters in the streets and nightly arrests of people in their homes eliminated any doubts about incompatibility of Iranian theocracy with democracy. Thanks to citizen reporting via YouTube and digital cameras, the government no longer can spin the news in its favor.

"Where is my vote?" is really about building an Iranian democracy based on just laws. Democracies around the world can support this civil rights movement by withholding diplomatic recognition from Ahmadinejad's government. Imposing economic sanctions on Iran will hurt the ordinary Iranians while empowering the theocrats to blame the foreign powers for their incompetence.

The struggle for genuine democracy in Iran is far from over. Democracies around the world need to ask themselves, "Where is our courage to support democratic movements?"

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