

Tehran's winning streak

By Lincoln P. Bloomfield, Jr. - 07/23/13 10:03 PM EDT

As the Middle East teems with masses yearning for relief from authoritarian rule, economic hardship and censored communications, Iran should be a prime candidate for popular unrest. The economy is hurting from sanctions, the people live under harsh restrictions and most Iranians are too young to remember the widespread support Ayatollah Khomeini and the fundamentalist clerics rode to power when the 1979 revolution drove the ailing Shah into exile.

Yet the Arab spring has not produced a Persian spring, and in Washington talk of war and regime change have quieted.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his aides must be marveling at their recent run of good luck. The June 14 presidential elections could have triggered internal dissent as in 2009, when fraud was widely suspected in the vote reelecting President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. At that time, the world witnessed street protests brutally put down by the police. Not wanting to repeat that spectacle, the regime announced in January of this year its intent to “engineer” the results of this year’s election.

Defiance of the supreme leader’s wishes was on display as powerful former President Hashemi Rafsanjani registered his candidacy 10 minutes before the deadline and the term-limited Ahmadinejad accompanied his own preferred successor, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, into the registration office. Iran’s Guardian Council disqualified Rafsanjani and Mashaei along with 676 other registered presidential candidates. Only eight were permitted to run, prompting expectations of a low popular turnout and possible protests.

Yet at the eleventh hour a groundswell of support arose for Hassan Rouhani — the only cleric among those allowed to run — characterized by Western journalists as a “moderate” and potential reformer. The polls opened, and no less than 70 percent of Iran’s eligible voters were said to have turned out. Just over 50 percent of their votes, the threshold to avoid a runoff round, were said to have been cast for Rouhani, making him the outright winner.

The Obama administration, having said little before the election, congratulated Iranians on their vote. The Western press reported a moderate reformer had been elected by a majority with a heavy popular turnout. The smiling faces of election revelers adorned newspapers and broadcasts worldwide. Unlike 2009, this time there were no reported protests, no police, no blood and no serious international criticism.

At the same time, the regime managed to strike a blow against exiled Iranians advocating popular sovereignty in Iran. Within hours of the election, an Iranian-supported militia called Iraqi Hezbollah fired rockets into Baghdad’s Camp Liberty, a small trailer park under tight Iraqi military control, killing two

and wounding several other defenseless residents awaiting refugee processing by the U.N. It was the second deadly attack on Camp Liberty residents this year. The story barely made the press.

These 3,100 men and women, promised protection by the U.S. in 2004, are being denied concrete barriers and personal protective gear by Iraqi authorities. The ability to attack political adversaries with impunity and trample on an American promise with no significant reaction from the U.S. government and press, invites further attacks.

Washington's indifference here encourages Iran's efforts to prop up Syria's regime with special forces and weaponry, foment sectarian violence in Yemen with arms and cash, and target Israel's population with a growing arsenal of rockets and missiles supplied to Hezbollah and Hamas.

Three decades of fundamentalist rule in Iran defying norms of state behavior have spawned an array of dangers afflicting the American ideal of a stable and secure Middle East. The administration has no easy options and other priorities. But time is not on its side; once Rouhani takes office, the U.S. must have a clear notion of how to pursue security in the region even while the focus of defense planning pivots to Asia. Issue one is the nuclear negotiation with Tehran.

What will induce Tehran to accept a verifiable arrangement that forestalls an unstoppable Persian-Arab-Israeli nuclear arms race? Lifting sanctions is the obvious quid pro quo, and a clean sanctions-for-nuclear deal — assuming a weapons program could be reliably averted — would be a good outcome for both sides. But what if Iran's leaders want more than a lifting of sanctions? Over the years what they have coveted above all is American acceptance of the 1979 revolution, meaning an explicit renunciation of regime change as a policy goal.

And why should they not seek a formal assurance? It is clear that the U.S. is not seriously objecting either to Iran's current destabilizing regional activities or its internal abuse of dissident citizens. Perhaps the administration would be prepared to let bygones be bygones, forgoing any accountability for the 1979 seizure of the U.S. Embassy and hostage-holding; the bombings of 241 U.S. Marines, 58 French forces and two U.S. Embassy facilities in Lebanon in the 1980s; the deadly bombings in the 1990s of the Israeli embassy and the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires and the Khobar Towers facility in Saudi Arabia, where 19 U.S. airmen died; and other major crimes that for many years now have made Iran the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism.

President Obama's problem is that he is negotiating with a party that sees no reason to halt its nuclear program, can manage the impact of economic sanctions that hurt the poor more than the elites, and faces no adverse consequences for undermining pro-Western allies in the region while brutalizing citizens who oppose the clerics' permanent claim to power.

While the regime's judges, jailers, gunrunners, media censors, intelligence agents, paramilitary forces and nuclear engineers march on with their projects, all variously aimed at keeping the regional contagion of political change away from their doorstep, Washington appears to be resting its hopes on ever-tighter sanctions and a moderate new Iranian president to resolve these threats to regional peace and U.S. security. We will know soon whether these hopes are justified.

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