

Solidarity With Iran

Don't believe it when people say Iran's democracy activists don't want U.S. help.

BY AKBAR ATRI

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As I write this, close friends of mine are sitting in cells of Evin prison in Iran. They are suffering from torture, solitary confinement and denial of medical care. Despite their suffering, they write and smuggle out of prison essays about the brutality of Iran's government and about how the democracy movement can stay resilient despite mounting repression.

Here in America, where I have been living since 2005 as an exiled activist, a controversy has emerged over the Bush administration's pledge to provide \$75 million in democracy and human-rights assistance to Iranians. Critics of the funding, among them some Iranian-Americans, say the money endangers the lives of activists and gives pretext for the Iranian regime to crack down on their activities. Supposedly speaking on behalf of the Iranian people, these critics claim Iranians do not want and do not need America's help in their fight against oppression.

But it is not just among Americans that this debate is taking place. Even during this highly repressive time, Iranian democracy activists are debating the merits of accepting foreign support. Last month, in an open letter to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, my friend and fellow activist, Akbar Ganji, who spent six years in Evin prison, condemned the "intolerable" human-rights violations in Iran. But he also argued that funds from the U.S. to promote democracy in Iran had "made it easy for the Iranian regime to describe its opponents as mercenaries of the U.S. and to crush them with impunity."

I respectfully disagree. There are many sides to this debate, but one thing is clear: Those in Iran who favor receiving foreign assistance and consider international solidarity essential to the success of Iran's homegrown civic movements cannot speak freely. If they do, they will be subject to immediate retaliation by the regime. The lack of robust, transparent appeals for outside help by civic leaders should not be confused with a lack of need or desire for such help.

Prominent activists in Iran, and even activists recently exiled, fear the repercussions of open appeals for outside support, so they color their statements about American democracy funding in order to protect themselves and their families. This is understandable as a strategy and self-preservation tactic by otherwise brave activists against a regime that prohibits free and open interaction with the outside world.

Criticism of American support for Iran's democracy movement is not defensible when made by those who have barely seen Iran, much less been a part of its struggle for freedom. Despite being an elected leader of the Iranian student movement and an active participant

in university politics for 10 years, I do not purport to represent Iranians or even the Iranian student movement. I speak for myself. Yet when Iranian-Americans who have no standing in Iran, and who have received no backing from Iranians, claim to represent the will of *all* Iranians, I feel I need to speak up.

Those so righteously opposed to funding might have us believe that if it were not for American support, Iranian activists would not be facing intimidation, imprisonment and torture. But since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iranian regime has been systematically imprisoning, killing and otherwise silencing civic actors--particularly secular, liberal democrats--under bogus charges of espionage and collusion with foreign agents. Just this year, Iranian authorities have executed without due process over 100 people, yet none were said to be connected to U.S. democracy funds. There is not much new in the Iranian government's strategy of repression, but what is promising and hopeful to Iran's democrats--and threatening to the Iranian leadership--is that there is finally real support from the outside.

For Iranian activists like me, it does not matter if support for democracy comes from a Republican or Democratic administration, or if it comes from the U.S. or another democracy. I was elated when the Dutch Foreign Ministry allocated 15 million euros for training Iranian journalists and for fostering independent Iranian media outlets.

It is easy to dismiss America's long-standing commitment to help oppressed peoples fight for democracy and human rights. It may be tempting to think that what worked for Poland or South Africa should not be tried in Iran.

Sadly, it seems the Iranian regime's recent crackdowns on civil society may succeed in delegitimizing the morally sound and practical attempts of Americans to help their democratic allies in Iran. This would be foreign policy run on fear, not principle. This fear is also patronizing. It ought to be up to the people of Iran--who daily take tremendous risks for their freedom--to decide how they wish to wage their struggle.

Iranians have already benefited immeasurably from democracy funding, especially from the Persian-language broadcasts by Voice of America television and Radio Farda ("Tomorrow"), for which a majority of the \$75 million at issue now is allocated. These broadcasts offer news and perspectives to the Iranian public that they would not otherwise have, including news regarding developments inside their own country. The broadcasts are popular with millions of diverse Iranians and have successfully broken the Islamic Republic's attempt to isolate the country from external sources of information. The Iranian regime could not be happier to see its popular nemeses--VOA television and Radio Farda--exterminated by Iranian Americans and others purporting to do good.

America's best civil-society organizations have also been developing successful links and activities--independent of the U.S. government and in collaboration with international partners--to support democratic awareness and civil society inside Iran. To cut Iranians off from the transfer of lessons and experiences gleaned from civic movements globally only strengthens the Iranian government.

American lawmakers and Iranian-Americans who would eliminate financial support for Iran's democrats need to understand the following: Supporting Iranian civil society and the nonviolent struggle toward democracy and human rights is likely the most cost-effective means to prevent a future conflict with Iran or an armed struggle within its borders. Democracy is difficult to achieve. But with its remarkably young, educated population, and a

long-stifled yearning for the fruits of modernity and liberalism, Iran has many of the key ingredients for success.

With some help from their American allies, Iranian democrats are brave enough and capable enough to achieve for their country what the likes of Mahatma Gandhi and Vaclav Havel achieved for theirs.

Mr. Atri served in the leadership of Tahkim Vahdat, Iran's most prominent student organization. In 2005 he left Iran and currently resides in Washington.