

The United States and the Green Movement in Iran: A Study on Public Diplomacy-based Direct and Indirect Engagement

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ABSTRACT: *The foreign policy of George W. Bush towards Iran and its connection with the 2009 Green Movement in the country is not a broadly studied area in international relations. Different scholars have emphasized various aspects of his policy, hence there is no consensus on its exact nature. Though some of them have made references to the policy of regime change, various aspects related to it including the manner and details of implementation are not fully explored. Apart from that, public diplomacy played a crucial role in the Green Movement as part of the United States' (U.S.) policy. In the context of public diplomacy, direct and indirect engagement was used to influence public opinion in Iran. This paper explores the policy of regime change taken by the US towards Iran which resulted in the green movement, and the role that direct and indirect engagement played to facilitate it as part of public diplomacy.*

KEYWORDS: *Regime change, Public Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy 2.0, Social Media, Public Diplomacy 2.0, United States, Iran, Green Movement*

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2009 post-election protests in Iran are a landmark event in its history as it witnessed the biggest mass protests since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Called the Green Movement, it is regarded variously as a civil rights movement that is nonviolent in character, to demand and secure various civil liberties such as the freedom to select a democratic government (Dabashi, 2011, pp. 69-70). In the movement, the internet, Web 2.0 technologies including social media was used in a significant way to highlight public dissent, protests, and to communicate with the outside world. Due to these functions, the green movement is also called 'a cyberspace rebellion' [Dabashi, 2010, p. 108], as well as a Twitter revolution (Pew Research Centre, 2009, para. 1), for the role played by the networking sites in the protests for various purposes.

Iran also faced various internal problems due to political dynamics related to the mismatch between theocratic and democratic values, and due to the effect of U.S. economic sanctions which caused hardship among the people. So, the movement was also a platform to address

the disparities between the Iranian citizens' constitutional rights, political realities, and worsening economic crisis which was blamed on the incumbent government's policies (Sundquist, 2013, p. 39). Others regard it as a U.S.-guided colour revolution (Meysan, 2009, para. 1) based on hybrid wars (Korybko, 2015, p. 105). Given this wide interpretation attributed to the movement, it is necessary to understand its true nature in relation to U.S. policy as it is the main factor behind it.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Democracy promotion is one of the stated aims of U.S. foreign policy, and the assistance provided under it varied upon administrations, security concerns, and objectives. Since the Second World War, it started supporting democratic transitions in Germany and Japan, as well as overthrew the governments of Iran and Guatemala which were democratically elected, as the concerns of stability took priority over values and stopping the spread of communism over democracy promotion. Supporting dictators in certain countries were then considered the best way to promote U.S.' interests than democratic transitions, which may make it vulnerable to communism (Congressional Research Service, 2019, p. 4). The reference to Iran means the involvement by the U.S. in the 1953 coup which strengthened the system of monarchy in the country.

Various statutes and organizations were made by the U.S. government to promote democracy around the world. The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and the National Endowment for Democracy Act 1983, which authorized the activities of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) are some of the principal statutes which regulate the functions and financial assistance for promoting democracy. Such a policy of democracy promotion was carried out by Bush by using a hard power strategy of war in Iraq in 2003, though there were other ways of achieving the same objective. Regarding Iran, the administration stated its policy to support a transition to democracy in various statutes such as the specific 2006 Iran Freedom Support Act and the general 2007 ADVANCE Democracy Act.

The Iran Freedom Support Act passed on September 30, 2006, specifically states that the policy of the U.S. government is to support the opposition groups in the country to help them determine a government of their choice (Iran Freedom Support Act, 2006, p. 1347). Here funding is provided to various individuals and organizations which supports human rights, democratic values, and a democratic form of government in Iran (p. 1348). They include civil society activists; advocates promoting labour rights, rule of law, human rights, political and economic freedom, freedom of speech, etc. Diaspora Iranians are made use of by the U.S. government as they can help promote political reform (The President's Budget for Foreign Affairs, 2006). Here civil society activists can act as a link between their counterparts and the general people of Iran, and it is for this reason that they are contacted by the U.S. government.

Such forms of statutes are passed by the U.S. with respect to other countries when it wants to promote democracy in a country, which often results in regime change. In the case of Iraq, it

was the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998. Later, the ADVANCE Democracy Act was passed in 2007, which is a general act that describes the steps to be taken to transition a non-democratic country into a democratic one. Under this act, funding is provided through the State Department, NED, and the United States Agency for International Development (ADVANCE Democracy Act, 2007, p. 271). The funding allocated to NED is channelled through its four-affiliate sector-specific organizations so that it reaches appropriate sections of the civil society both in the target country as well as those working outside the country especially in the U.S.

Along with these statutes, the U.S. government also authorized the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to lead the mission through a presidential finding made in early 2007, using non-lethal covert methods including the use of propaganda among others (Ross & Esposito, 2007, para. 1). Usually, the CIA is given such authority to coordinate pro-democracy protests in foreign countries, and its role in the 1953 coup in Iran is well known. During the green movement, President Barack Obama took a wait and watch approach and even asked the CIA to break the contacts it has made with the movement's supporters (Solomon, 2016, 181-182). It is not known whether the CIA during this time was acting on the basis of the permission given by Bush, or whether Obama issued a separate finding for the same purpose.

3. THE STRATEGY OF NONVIOLENT CONFLICT

The methods and tactics of using nonviolence for strategic purposes were developed by Gene Sharp and described in his various books. His tactics which are based on the application of nonviolent action have been used in various colour revolutions around the world and have resulted in regime change. It is from the use of colours as one of the symbolic public acts that the world colour revolution is derived from, although the term colour revolutions is also a media coined term to describe revolutions that uses such kind of tactics. He distinguishes three phases in nonviolent action where civilians use various tactics to defeat the target government. The three phases are: one, nonviolent protest and persuasion; two, social, economic, and political noncooperation; and three, nonviolent intervention (Sharp, 2010, pp. 79-86).

Robert L. Helvey is one of the many others who have contributed further in the direction of nonviolent conflict. To him such nonviolent resistance can be used as an alternative to armed conflict as it caused lesser numbers of deaths and destruction of property, hence it is an appropriate way to fight oppressive regimes. To him, it is a nonviolent war, and it requires strong and disciplined leadership. Such a kind of war is not spontaneous but rather a well planned and executed policy to finish a dictatorship (Helvey, 2004, p. 137). The use of civilians as a nonviolent fighting force is a remarkable contribution to implement foreign policy. This helps countries that implement it to hide their role and credit such as revolutions and mass protests to the local people. And due to the covert nature of this kind of activity, it is sometimes difficult to figure out the state which implements it and how.

4. IMPLEMENTING THE REGIME CHANGE POLICY

Sharp established a nonprofit organization named the Albert Einstein Institution (AEI) in 1983 which is the same year in which the NED was founded, to further research on nonviolent tactics and to teach it to individuals promoting democracy apart from other purposes. Between 1993 to 1999, it gave assistance to democracy activists in Iran for conducting strategic nonviolent struggle. He also met with pro-democracy leaders and the members of the Foundation for Democracy in Iran (FDI) to analyse the situation and to understand the mistakes done in the past to spread democracy in the country (The Albert Einstein Institution, 2000, p. 20). Helvey, who is a consultant with AEI also conducted a week-long class on the nonviolent struggle for diaspora Iranians settled in the U.S. and Canada during March 2003. These young expats would later on function as spokesperson of various democracy groups (The Albert Einstein Institution, 2004, p. 24). These activities of training provided by the AEI shows that the use of nonviolent tactics in the green movement did not happen without any form of outside help.

The Open Society Foundations (OSF) is one of the largest private organizations founded by George Soros working to promote democracy and freedom in the world. It admitted to working in Iran in 2003 during the Bam earthquake (Open Society Foundations, 2007, para. 1). In the same year, student protests took place and President Bush showed his support by describing it as the start of Iranian citizens expressing themselves to establish a free country. The country's Foreign Ministry lodged a complaint at the Swiss embassy against US interference in its internal affairs (Naji, 2003, paras. 1-4), The role of OSF in fomenting revolutions in Eastern Europe is well known and based on this it cannot be expected to perform something different in Iran, given the latter's strategic value in terms of resources. In an interview given in 2011, Soros opined that oil-producing countries must share their profits with their citizens, while at the same time predicted the theocratic regime of Iran will be overthrown in the "bloodiest of the revolutions" (BBC News, 2011, paras. 1-4).

The International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC) is another private educational organization co-founded by Peter Ackerman, whose functions are similar to AEI. In 2004, Ackerman spoke in the U.S. State Department's Secretary's Open Forum. He talked about civilian-based power which can be used when hard and soft power is not found effective. The use of this method can be an attractive option: one, it can reduce violence and can avoid using terrorist groups; two, assistance in various forms can be given to a dissident organization which make them independent, along with it non-governmental organizations and foreign governments can bring pressure on oppressive governments; and three, it expands the choice available for governments which usually uses hard or soft power (U.S. Department of State, 2004, paras. 24-26).

With regard to Iran, he found that it is ready for civilian-based resistance, and which when applied across the country can see the surprising turn of events (U.S. Department of State, 2004, para. 15). Soon after, in the next year, ICNC conducted a training session in Dubai along with the Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre (Dinmore, 2006, paras. 3-4). These

workshops were held in April (Lake, 2006, paras. 2-4) and were conducted by trainers who were participants in the Otpor movement, and one of them being Ivan Marovic. The participants in the workshops were taught nonviolent strategies to help mobilize people to overthrow governments based on the model used in Otpor – a Serbian youth movement that overthrew Slobodan Milosevic (paras. 18-20).

The Foundation for Democracy in Iran is another organization set up to promote democracy and human rights in Iran. It was founded by Kenneth R. Timmerman along with others in 1995. In January 2007 he came out with a game plan to topple the Iranian regime, in which the first step is to organize a meeting of opposition leaders (Timmerman, 2007, paras. 16-20). This represents the practical aspects of conducting regime change. And from June 15-17, 2007, such a meeting was held in Paris which called itself Solidarity Iran and consisted of people from various sections of Iranian society (Newsmax, 2007, paras. 1-6). The purpose of this coming together was to “organize an independent, homegrown, grassroots civil-disobedience movement and reach a critical mass to force change in Iran” (Dayanim, 2007, para. 6).

In 2007, various protests were seen in Iran and several expat scholars were arrested by the Iranian government. Two such scholars were Dr. Kian Tajbakhsh of the OSF and Dr. Haleh Esfandiari, an academic with the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, who were accused of planning a Velvet Revolution in the country (Hafezi, 2007, para. 2). What the 2007 protests show is that they could be the initial trial run for the 2009 green movement. Timmerman, later on, the eve of the June 12 presidential election hinted about a Green Revolution in the country (Timmerman, 2009, para. 21) and found that NED funding went to non-governmental organizations outside the country which have ties to pro-Mousavi groups (paras. 22-23). Mir-Hossein Mousavi was one of the principal figures in the green movement.

5. U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY-BASED DIRECT AND INDIRECT ENGAGEMENT

Public Diplomacy includes those activities used to understand, engage, inform, and influence foreign publics to achieve national interests of the U.S. (The Future of US Public Diplomacy, 2010). It is variously defined as the “direct or indirect engagement of foreign publics to support national security objectives” (Matt Armstrong cited in Glassman, 2008). Various methods were used for the above activities like international outreach, international broadcasting, advocacy, exchange programs, etc. These activities can be done directly or indirectly either by the U.S. government directly through its representatives, offices or by using traditional and new media funded and sponsored by it, private organizations, etc.

Such ways of influencing the public of foreign countries are a crucial function of U.S. public diplomacy. This helps to build goodwill among foreign governments and citizens, to build support for its policies among its people, and more importantly to influence the behaviour and actions of a certain segment of populations by organizing them and leading them to take part in anti-government protests. While these activities may be considered as legitimate by

the state which is doing it, it will be seen as a violation of sovereignty by the victim state. Instances of such direct and indirect engagement were seen before and during the Green Movement in Iran.

The following are some examples of direct engagement. One, the State Department announced to organize a summit of youth movements at the Columbia University Law School from 3-5 December, called the Alliance of Youth Movement. The purpose of the summit is to organize various youth organizations into a foundation called the Alliance of Youth Movements, to build an online hub and a manual that is available online and in the print manual (Glassman, 2008). The online hub can help coordinate various youth movements around the world, and the manual will teach young democracy activists how to use social media and other technologies to help create social movements, which can be used to overthrow governments based on the example of how Facebook was used by Oscar Morales in Columbia to organize protests against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

Such practices are a way to communicate with the people of other countries and such support to youth groups is what is implemented under public diplomacy by the U.S. (Glassman, 2008). And what links this summit with the Green Movement is that Iranian activists took part in it through Facebook and were engaged in trying to find out new methods to destabilize Iran's government using the internet (Ritter, 2009 as cited in Gilley, 2013, p. 670). From this, it can be inferred that some of the Iranian networks within the Alliance of Youth Movements could have played some role in the Green Movement.

The second instance of direct engagement is the president of the U.S., Barack Obama, who wished Iranians around the world and the people of Iran in particular, on the occasion of New Year or Nowroz (Obama, 2009). This gesture, though it happened two months before the Green Movement, gave the impression to Iranian's that this administration is different from the previous one, while in terms of policy it continued the same, especially during its first year. The third instance is the use of Radio Farda, and Voice of America's Persian News Network which provided radio and television broadcasts to Iranians during the Green Movement. Funds were provided to these government organizations under the Victims of Iranian Censorship Act (National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010, p. 2553, p. 2555). Although to explore the contents of these radio and television broadcasts is beyond the scope of this paper, nevertheless, the influence they could have had on the Iranian public cannot be ignored.

Coming to indirect engagement, in which the US government though its agents proposed to influence Iranian public opinion, the following is an example. The Iran Freedom Support Act provided grants to various foreign and domestic individuals and entities involved in radio and television broadcasting in Iran (Iran Freedom Support Act, 2006). Such funding to expatriate Iranians and organizations are given to promote human rights, freedom of speech, democratic values, a democratic government in Iran, etc. While this statute was made in 2006 it is highly likely to have influenced the Green Movement in Iran. Such broadcasting of information is

done using Iranian diaspora based in the U.S. and other foreign countries, in order to influence domestic public opinion in the country. As a result, the people of Iran get a negative image of its regime, and as a result, are persuaded to participate in protests against their government.

6. CONCLUSION

The Bush administration opted for a policy of regime change through the Iran Freedom Support Act, the ADVANCE Democracy Act, and the presidential finding for the CIA. This is based on the tried and tested strategy of nonviolent conflict which involves protests by civilians against their government. And to implement this policy, networks of institutions and organizations were used. The 2007 protests in the country were a direct consequence of these actions, but they manifested more clearly in the 2009 Green Movement in the country. To support these activities public diplomacy played a significant role based on direct and indirect engagement, to influence the behaviour and public opinion of Iranians. Such means of influencing the population of Iran complements the indirect form of regime change by using various individuals and organizations. It is also a reminder to foreign populations to be cautious when they turn to broadcasts by state organizations and independent agencies, to avoid becoming victims of public diplomacy based information assault.

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