

What Now? Lessons on How to Engage Iran

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For nearly a month Iranians have disputed the results of the June 12th elections. Undeterred by intimidation, Iranian women and men have voiced dissent and given rise to the most significant public uprising in the country since 1979. Now that the initial phase of protests in Iran has ended, ordinary Iranians have hardly put their disenchantment behind them. How can they? Journalists disappear without warning or just cause. Others are detained and taken to the notorious Evin prison for questioning and possibly much worse. Supporters of the status quo may slowly be getting their way now that the green movement is quietly fizzling out. What role – if any – should the US play? History can offer Americans a few signposts.

As the United States marks the anniversary of its independence, Americans may be surprised to learn that their fight for freedom was a source of inspiration for Iranians more than a hundred years ago. Well before the arrival of Barack Obama, another American president had already won Persian hearts. In 1905, a year before Iran's tumultuous constitutional revolution, a popular Persian newspaper serialized a biography of George Washington. Described as a brave "nationalist" who had strived for his country's freedom, George Washington became a political paragon for Iranian revolutionaries.

Iran's first experiment with parliamentary politics unfortunately ended abruptly. At the turn of the century Iranians watched with dismay as their struggle for democracy came to a screeching halt. Back then – as today – Americans sympathized with ordinary Iranians hoping to secure their country's independence. In fact, the American man hired to become Iran's treasurer-general, Morgan Shuster, eventually wrote a book aptly titled "THE STRANGLING OF PERSIA" about his experiences and about the harms of foreign intervention in Iran's affairs.

As Shuster quickly learned, the best way to express solidarity with Iranians was through a public embrace of Persian democracy. Writing about this struggle in 1911, Shuster remarked that the "Persian people gave to the world an exhibition of temperance, of moderation, of stern self-restraint the like of which probably no other civilized country could show under similar trying circumstances." Shuster's words could not hold more true today.

Americans – and especially President Obama himself -- should heed Shuster's example and continue supporting Iranian dissenters in conventional ways. Rather than calling for covert action or military intervention, Americans can best champion Iranian self-determination by recognizing that freedom and justice are not just American values, but universal ideals, to which people of different stripes ascribe: turbaned or hatless; male or female; Muslim or Christian. Iran's freedom fighters may look markedly different from American revolutionaries, but some of the causes they espouse are refreshingly similar.

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