



How to make '07 Ahmadinejad's last year in power

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In Iran, demonstrations are an art form. First, the government buses in state workers. Next, officials distribute banners with revolutionary slogans. Finally, state television reports a spontaneous rally in support of the Islamic Republic.

Stage-managed demonstrations, though, mask weakness. On Dec. 11, a group of students interrupted a speech by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad with chants of "Death to the Dictator." On Jan. 2, a demonstrator in Ahvaz waved a placard condemning inflation, unemployment and crime. Recent elections rebuked hardliners.

And unfortunately, rather than find a way to capitalize on such weakness, up to now, a desire for diplomacy has blinded the West. Between 2000 and 2005, European diplomats

preaching engagement tripled trade with Iran. Tehran pumped 70% of the resulting hard currency windfall into its nuclear and military programs. After Secretary of State Rice offered dialogue with Iran, the regime announced it would redouble its nuclear efforts. Ahmadinejad said yesterday he would "humiliate" the United States.

European diplomats declare their strategy to be working, but privately say a nuclear Iran is inevitable. Last month's partial UN sanctions are only symbolic. Effectiveness requires comprehensive sanctions - which diplomats could lift in response to compliance.

But the UN is feckless. If President Bush is sincere when he says the U.S. "will not tolerate" a nuclear-armed Iran, Washington may have

to act alone. This need not mean military action, but rather willingness to exploit Iranian weakness.

The Islamic Republic is under tremendous pressure. A recent Johns Hopkins University report predicts Iran's oil industry could collapse within a decade because of poor management and disintegrating infrastructure. Already, the Islamic Republic must import 40% of its fuel needs. The Iranian economy is unable to provide jobs for 700,000 young people entering the market annually. The World Bank estimates that Iran's GDP is 30% below its 1970s levels. Experts estimate 5 million Iranians are addicted to drugs. Prostitution has skyrocketed as poverty spreads.

The White House should exploit the growing cracks in Iranian society. Just as Ronald Reagan championed striking shipyard workers in Poland in 1981, so too should Bush support independent Iranian trade unions. Forcing the regime to be accountable to its people both betters the lives of ordinary Iranians and undercuts Ahmadinejad's Dr. Strange-

love fantasies. In Iran, wildcat strikes helped launch the Islamic Revolution; so too might they end it.

It is wrongheaded to criticize Bush's Axis of Evil rhetoric. Not only does straight talk dampen European willingness to invest in Iranian industry, but the willingness of Iranian democrats to speak out has grown in proportion to all the White House talk about freedom. Peace activists should applaud such effective, non-military action.

Finally, U.S. public diplomacy should prioritize information over pop music. The Iranian regime would be hard-pressed to dismiss as propaganda stories of unrest and corruption originating in local Iranian papers and amplified by the Voice of America into national news.

Military action against Iran would be a tragedy, but need only occur if U.S. policy remains a muddle. Here the White House and new Congress are fortunate. If they play their cards well, this year could be Ahmadinejad's last.

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