

Demonising Iran conveniently hides uncomfortable truths for the West

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THE MAINSTREAM media narrative of events unfolding in Iran has been set out for us as clear as a fairytale: an evil dictatorship has rigged elections and now violently suppresses its country's democrats, hysterically blaming foreign saboteurs the while. But the Twitter generation is on the right side of history (in Obama's words), and could bring Iran back within the regional circle of moderation. If only Iran becomes moderate, a whole set of regional conflicts will be solved.

I don't mean to minimise the importance of the Iranian protests or the brutality of their suppression, but I take issue with the West's selective blindness when it gazes at the Middle East. The "Iran narrative" contains a dangerous set of simplicities which bode ill for Obama's promised engagement, and which will be recognised beyond the West as rotten with hypocrisy.

Iran's claims of Western incitement for the protests are roundly scorned in our media, and of course Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's scapegoating of foreigners and "terrorist groups" demonstrates an unhealthy denial of the very real polarisation within Iranian society.

Yet Iranians still have good reason to fear outside interference. It was, after all, British and American-orchestrated riots that brought down the elected Mossadeq government in 1953. And in 2007, Bush administration neocon John Bolton told the Telegraph that a US attack on Iran would be "a last option after economic sanctions and attempts to foment a popular revolution had failed".

According to veteran journalist Seymour Hersh, ongoing US special operations in Iran include funding ethnic-separatist terrorist groups such as the al-Qaeda-linked Jundallah in Baluchistan. With some honourable exceptions, this dimension has not been touched by the mainstream media.

And Mir Hossein Mousavi's vote-rigging allegations are accepted without scrutiny, despite there not yet being any hard evidence of organised cheating. The official result is similar to that in the second round of the 2005 elections, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad received 61.7 % to former president Rafsanjani's 35.9%.

A few weeks before the latest elections, a poll commissioned by the BBC and ABC News predicted a nationwide advantage of two-to-one for Ahmadinejad over Mousavi. Even Israel's Mossad chief Meir Dagan reported that there were no more irregularities in the Iranian vote than in elections in liberal democracies.

I visited Iran in 2006, with a backpack and guidebook-standard Farsi. I noticed two things. First, Iran is far freer, fairer, less littered, and more literate than any of its neighbours. Second, very many Iranians are unhappy with their corrupt rulers and, unlike people in nearby Arab states, they are not afraid to say so openly. To an extent, the revolution has been a victim of its own success, having transformed a largely feudal land into a highly educated urban society, creating along the way a swollen middle class and an idealistic youth which chafes against the petty oppression of dress codes and state-enforced morality. But everyone I spoke to favoured evolution of the existing system over counter-revolution.

The Islamic Republic has been a great – if seriously flawed – experiment in economic and strategic independence, its engines oiled by class consciousness and national pride as much as by religion. Iran is at least a semi-democracy, and has held 10 presidential elections in 30 years. Iranian women are obliged to cover their hair, true, but women in US-client Saudi Arabia are obliged to cover their faces. In Saudi Arabia of course there are never any elections to dispute – but there are US military bases, so we don't dwell on the issue.

Here's the nub of it. Iran opposes the US military presence in the region, and vigorously supports resistance to Israeli expansionism. On these two points, the Iranian regime is closer than any other to the true sentiments of Middle Easterners.

And this, fundamentally, is why Iran is imagined to be such a problem in the West: because it's a Venezuela or a Cuba of a country. Iran is troublesome not because it's any more obscurantist or dictatorial than its neighbours, but because it is less submissive.

The world worries about Iran's nuclear energy programme while keeping quiet about Israel's 200 nuclear weapons. Israel occupies Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian territory. Iran has not attacked another country in its modern history.

Iran is accused of backing terrorism because it helps to arm Hizbullah and Hamas, grassroots anti-occupation groups with a legitimate, even legal, cause. Both groups have targeted civilians (rarely, in Hizbullah's case) but not on as grand a scale as Israel, which is armed and funded by the United States. And Iran doesn't export Wahhabi-nihilist terrorists of the Taliban or al-Qaeda-in-Iraq variety. Again, that would be our ally Saudi Arabia.

President Obama recently chose to address the Muslim world from Cairo, seat of a client regime which has "pre-emptively" arrested hundreds of democrats in recent months, fearing they may demonstrate.

Commenting on Iran, Obama called the "democratic process" a "universal value". But obviously not quite universal enough to cover Egypt, or the elected Hamas government, what remains of it, in besieged Palestine.

Silences can be more significant than words. Is Obama also "deeply troubled" when Israel shoots unarmed protesters or arrests children as young as 12? Does he mourn "each and every innocent life that is lost" in Gaza as well as in the plush streets of Tehran? If so, he still hasn't told us.

At present our opinion-formers are blithely simplifying and demonising a complex culture, allowing illusions and half-truths to become shining certainties in our minds. This is how we arrived in Iraq.

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