

Meeting thuggery with coolness

The president is playing a cautious game with rogue regimes.



AFP

As Iran is rocked by the largest street protests since the revolution of 1979, Barack Obama is pursuing a policy of "wait and see". His priority is to prevent the Iranian regime from acquiring a nuclear bomb. His preferred method is to negotiate directly with Iran's leaders. Since it is not clear who will end up in charge in Tehran, he is biding his time.

On June 12th, Iran held a presidential election. Before there was time to count the votes, the Iranian government announced that the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had won by an astonishing margin. At this point, many Americans would have liked their president to have spoken out. Most take a dim view of Mr Ahmadinejad, who denies that the Holocaust happened but makes veiled threats to unleash another one on Israel. Many Americans believe that he or his allies rigged the poll, and that Mr Obama should say so in clear and searing language. Senator John McCain, Mr Obama's former rival, called the Iranian election an obvious sham and called for action of some kind.

But Mr Obama is playing it cool. He waited until June 15th to offer a few scrupulously measured words. He said he was "deeply troubled" by the violence he had seen on television. He noted that the Iranian government had said it would investigate "irregularities" with the vote. He cautioned that since there were no international observers on the ground, he could "not state definitively" what had happened. He stressed that "it is up to Iranians to make decisions about who Iran's leaders will be". This cautious policy, though, could easily be upended if events in Iran were to turn bloodier still.

He pointedly refrained from offering even verbal support to Mir Hosein Mousavi, the reformist leader whose supporters are thronging the streets crying foul—though he did go so far as to say that "we do believe that the Iranian people and their voices should be heard and respected." Even his vice-president, Joe Biden, who on the campaign trail called Mr Ahmadinejad a "madman", "that wacko guy" and "the crazy president", kept his mouth uncharacteristically shut. Pressed by a television interviewer, he said only that he had "doubts" about the Iranian election.

Mr Obama's critics accused him of failing to support democrats and oppose theocrats with sufficient vigour. "The administration's silence in the face of Iran's brutal suppression of democratic rights represents a step backwards for home-grown democracy in the [Middle East]," growled Eric Cantor, the House Republican whip. "It's very clear that the president's policies of going around the world and apologising for America aren't working," said Mitt Romney, a once and perhaps future Republican presidential candidate.

Mr Obama seems unruffled. Given the history of American-Iranian relations, (which include a CIA-sponsored coup in 1953), it would not be productive to be seen to be meddling in an Iranian election, he said. He would rather let Iranians decide who will rule them. The decision may not be made democratically, but there is little America can do about this, he calculates.

He could offer full-throated or even material support to the opposition, but this would probably backfire: the regime would then be able to portray its opponents as stooges of the Great Satan. So Mr Obama will wait and then deal with whoever emerges on top, predicts Brian Katulis, an analyst at the Centre for American Progress, a think-tank with close links to the White House.

Meanwhile, assuming the current Iranian regime remains in power, Mr Obama will enter negotiations with low expectations, says Mr Katulis. Iran's leaders seem determined to acquire a nuclear capability that would enable them to make a bomb in short order and to find the means to deliver it. Gentle persuasion is unlikely to sway them. But if Mr Obama is seen to give diplomacy a chance, he may find it easier to build international support for sanctions. Currently, the Treasury makes life hard for banks that do business with Iran, but other countries, particularly Russia, resist the imposition of anything tougher.

Mr Obama is gambling that he can reshape global opinion. A first step is to persuade Muslims that America is not their enemy. In a speech in Cairo this month he quoted the Koran, praised Islamic culture and promised a "new beginning" based on "mutual interest and mutual respect". In a speech to mark the Iranian new year back in March, he praised Iran's "great civilisation", saying he wants it "to take its rightful place in the community of nations".

If he makes it harder to caricature Americans as bloodthirsty imperialists, he figures, he will deny hardliners in Iran and elsewhere one of their most potent rhetorical tools. And that could make it slightly less difficult for him to resolve the Middle Eastern problems that have frustrated every previous American president, he hopes. He sees many of the region's ills as interconnected; but he has not yet hit on a grand strategy for addressing them.

Instead, he is feeling his way, trying to keep as many people on his side as possible. When Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, announced on June 14th that he could accept a Palestinian state but only under conditions most Palestinians deplore (see article), Mr Obama tactfully stressed the positive. "What we're seeing is at least the possibility that we can restart serious talks," he ventured.

Meanwhile, he has upset pro-Israeli hawks by demanding an end to the expansion of Jewish settlements on Palestinian land. He is also pressing Israel not to try to destroy Iran's nuclear programme by bombing it. But as much as people like to suggest that Israel is an American puppet, it is not, says Michael Rubin, an Iran expert at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank.

Also troubling Mr Obama this week was the other surviving member of George Bush's axis of evil. Last week, the UN Security Council tightened sanctions on North Korea for its illegal nuclear weapons. On June 16th, the New York Times reported that the American navy will try to search North Korean ships suspected of smuggling arms or nuclear technology. The paper said American sailors would not board North Korean ships without permission. But they would follow them into ports and insist that the countries where they dock refuse to let them refuel unless they submit to inspections.

At a joint press conference with the president of South Korea Mr Obama confirmed the main thrust of the report, but stressed that the details are still being discussed with China, Russia, Japan and South Korea. "There's been a pattern in the past where North Korea behaves in a

belligerent fashion, and if it waits long enough [it] is then rewarded," said Mr Obama. "We are going to break that pattern."

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