

The Conviction of Our Own Convictions
Remarks by Congressman Mark Kirk
November 4, 2009
U.S. Institute of Peace

Thank you for the warm welcome. I worked with the Institute for more than 20 years. Your efforts are critical to our foreign policy – and I thank you all for your commitment.

And to the protestors gathered in Tehran, I say this: the American people stand with you in your fight for democracy.

This is the 30th anniversary of the attack on our embassy in Iran. On November 4, 1979, Iranian militants raided the Embassy and took 53 Americans hostage – a siege that lasted 444 days and changed history.

As we gather here today, 30 years later, we see an Iran rotting from the inside out – a regime trying to silence a people crying out for freedom.

Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran looks much like other dictatorships of the 20th century. They wear a different uniform and speak a different language, but the repression rings familiar.

In Iran, the basic human freedoms we take for granted in America do not exist.

Men, women and children are rounded up in the middle of the night and sent to prisons, never to be heard from again. Some for their religion, others for their politics and others because they dare to stand for the human dignity of all mankind.

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According to *Freedom House's 2009 Report*, “freedom of expression is severely limited in Iran. The government directly controls all television and radio broadcasting. Satellite dishes are illegal...

“Press freedom remains extremely limited. The Ministry of Culture must approve publication of all books and inspect foreign books prior to domestic distribution...

“Journalists are subject to arbitrary detention and criminal penalties including the death sentence, and ethnic minority journalists appear to be particularly vulnerable...

“The government systematically censors internet content by forcing internet service providers to block access to a growing list of “immoral” or politically sensitive sites...

“Religious freedom is limited in Iran...The Special Court of the Clergy investigates religious figures for alleged crimes and has generally been used to persecute clerics who stray from the official interpretation of Islam...

“Academic freedom is limited. Scholars are frequently detained, threatened, and forced to retire for expressing political views, and students involved in organizing protests face suspension or expulsion...

“The 1979 constitution prohibits public demonstrations that “violate the principles of Islam,” a vague provision used to justify the police dispersal of assemblies and marches.

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This summary of human rights in Iran was published *before* the Iranian election in June.

At the time, Western news organizations hailed the coming democratic change in Tehran. Détente was at hand. Diplomatic rapprochement was only days away.

Regime-sympathizers like the National Iranian American Council (NIAC) came to Capitol Hill urging members of Congress to cut off U.S. funding for democracy programs in Iran. Democracy funding “taints” Iranian dissidents, they claimed, and only invites harsher crackdowns on the Iranian people.

Anha Eshte-bah Kardand. They were wrong.

Three days after the election, New York Times columnist Roger Cohen wrote: “I’ve also argued that, although repressive, the Islamic Republic offers significant margins of freedom by regional standards. I erred in underestimating the brutality and cynicism of a regime that understands the uses of ruthlessness.”

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A detailed examination of Iran’s presidential election results – available from the Iranian Ministry of Interior – show just how fraudulent the election was.

While only 63% of Iranian voters turned out in 2005, official election results claim 84% turned out in June 2009. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad received approximately 13 million more votes in the 2009 presidential election than the total number of votes cast for all conservative candidates in the 2005 election combined.

In June, Ahmadinejad faced three key opponents: Reformist Mir-Hossein Mousavi, reformist Mehdi Karrubi, and conservative Mohsen Rezai.

According to the official election tally, Ahmadinejad won 71% of the votes cast in Mehdi Karroubi’s home province of Lurestan.

Lurestan is where the ‘Lurs’ ethnic minority lives. Karrubi is the province’s most famous son. Amazingly, after receiving more than 440,000 votes (or 55%) in 2005, the province gave their hometown candidate just 44,000 votes – less than 5% -- in 2009. By contrast, Ahmadinejad jumped nearly 10 times to 678,000 in 2009, up from fewer than 70,000 votes in 2005.

Even politicians in Chicago do not stuff ballots so obviously.

Ahmadinejad won 56% of the vote in Eastern Azerbaijan – defeating the native hero, an ethnic Azeri, Mir-Hossain Mousavi. By some slight of hand, Ahmadinejad increased from less than 200,000 votes in 2005 to more than 1.1 million in 2009. By the official count, turnout in Eastern Azerbaijan rose from 51% to 82%.

In Khuzestan, Mohsen Rezai’s home province, Ahmadinejad won 65% of the vote.

In Mazdaran, Ahmadinejad won nearly 1.3 million votes in 2009 —compared to just over 159,000 in 2005.

In 2005, the ethnic Kurdish provinces of Kermanshah and Kordestan gave Ahmadinejad roughly 92,000 votes. In 2009, Ahmadinejad surged to more than 889,000.

In two conservative provinces—Mazdaran and Yazd—a turnout of more than 100% was reported.

According to Ali Akbar Mohtashami, a former interior minister on the Mousavi campaign’s election monitoring committee, the number of counted votes in 70 municipalities exceeded the total population of eligible voters in those regions. In all those cities, Ahmadinejad won by 80 to 90%.

Ladies and gentleman, you don’t have to be from Cook County to know this just doesn’t add up.

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In the wake of the election and the street protests that followed, human rights in Iran have deteriorated.

We saw the face of Neda Agha Soltan, the innocent young woman murdered by the Iranian regime.

We know the names of the political prisoners:

- Kian Tajbakhsh, an Iranian-American scholar recently sentenced to 15 years in prison;

- Abdollah Momeni, a reformist supporter arrested after the election and beaten in detention;
- Mohammed Maleki, the former chancellor of Tehran University;
- Seyyed Mohammad Ali Abtahi, an Iranian theologian, scholar, pro-democracy activist and chairman of the Institute for Inter-religious Dialogue;
- Mohammad Atrianfar, an Iranian journalist and reformist;
- Behzad Nabavi, a reformist politician;
- Seyyed Mostafa Tajzadeh, an Iranian reformist;
- Mohsen Safaei Farahani, an reformist politician;
- Dr. Abdollah Ramezanzadeh, an academic, writer and politician; and
- Mohammad Ghouchani, an Iranian journalist.

And the prisoners of conscience:

- Mansour Ossanlu, a labor leader fighting for workers' rights, imprisoned without proper medical attention;
- Shi'a cleric Ayatollah Boroujerdi, imprisoned because of his views on the relations between religion and state;
- Sadiq Kabudvand, an ethnic Kurdish journalist;
- Ronak Safarzadeh, imprisoned because of her activism on behalf of women's rights; and
- Kamiar and Arash Ala'ei, two internationally-recognized AIDS researchers imprisoned because they attended international HIV conferences.

We know the names of the leaders of the innocent Baha'i minority who were imprisoned solely on the basis of their religion:

- Raha Sabet;
- Sasan Taqva;
- Haleh Roohi;
- Fariba Kamalabadi;
- Jamaloddin Khanjani;
- Afif Naeimi;
- Saeid Rezaie;

- Behrouz Tavakkoli;
- Mahvash Sabet; and
- Vahid Tizfahm.

I say their names out loud today because no matter how hard the Iranian regime tries to silence these voices, the dictators cannot succeed as long as freedom-loving people around the world plead their case.

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In the wake of the brutal crackdown against election protestors, most Americans expected outrage from world leaders. In capitals across Europe, condemnations were loud and clear. But here in Washington, the nation that delivered victory in World War II and the Cold War gave a surprising response.

In the days after the election, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said: “Like the rest of the world, we are waiting and watching to see what the Iranian people decide.”

“We hope that the outcome reflects the genuine will and desire of the Iranian people,” she said in another statement.

The President of the United States – the leader of the free world –announced that while he deplored violence, how Iran goes about electing its leaders and establishing freer debate and democratic principles “is something ultimately for the Iranian people to decide.”

In August, the White House press secretary went so far as to call Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the “elected leader” of Iran – a statement he later had to “walk back” with the press.

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The money trail tells a similar story.

Under previous congresses, appropriations for Iran democracy programs increased from \$1.5 million in Fiscal Year 2004 to \$60 million in Fiscal Year 2008.

For Fiscal Year 2009, the Bush Administration requested \$65 million for Iran democracy programs.

But with a Democratic White House and Congress, the final FY 2009 omnibus appropriations bill came to the House floor with no line item for Iran democracy. Instead, the majority invented a new account – the Near East Regional Democracy Fund – and gave it only \$25 million.

While no official document exists stating the purpose of this fund (appropriately nicknamed the NERD), State Department officials claim it will be used for Iran

democracy programs. But to date, none of the funds have been obligated – and Fiscal Year 2009 ended on September 30th.

On October 6th, the *Boston Globe* reported that at least four groups that previously received funding for Iran democracy programs had been cut off by the Obama Administration. Most notable were the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, which received word its State Department grant was terminated just as it was ramping up investigations into the post-election crackdown -- and Freedom House Iran, a leader in exposing the regime's violence via cell phone images, photographs and eye witness testimony.

As Americans, how can we justify this apparent retreat from human rights?

Are discredited arguments by regime sympathizers like NIAC swaying policy decisions by our State Department – even after June 12th?

Is the President afraid that public discussions of human rights abuses in Iran will offend the regime and breakdown talks over the Iranian nuclear program?

If that's the case, this Administration has lost its way when it comes to our most basic American values.

In my view, negotiations with Iran on any issue will not succeed unless the U.S. Government recovers the essence of what makes our country great.

I agree with the President – we should never be afraid to talk to our enemies. But if talking requires us to sacrifice our most sacred principles, then talking has given our enemies a major victory.

In any meeting, in any negotiation, in any public speech – the policy of the United States should be clear – we condemn Iran's continued abuse of human rights.

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I believe the threat we face in Iran parallels the threat we faced in the Soviet Union: a repressive dictatorship that denies its citizens basic human rights while bullying its neighbors, racing toward nuclear weapons and threatening doom and destruction on America and her allies.

History teaches us how to win this conflict.

In the 1980s, President Reagan did not ignore Soviet human rights abuses – instead he made them the basis of discussions and negotiations with his Soviet counterparts.

When President Reagan visited Russia – he made sure to meet with Soviet dissidents at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

“I came here to give you strength, but it is you who have strengthened me,” the President told a group of dissidents in Moscow in May of 1987. “While we press for human lives through diplomatic channels, you press with your very lives day, day in and day out, risking your homes, your jobs, your all.”

An individual Soviet citizen, President Reagan said, must sense that the government “respects him enough to grant him all his human rights.”

Soviet leaders condemned President Reagan for that meeting. They called it an unprecedented interference in Soviet internal affairs.

President Reagan knew better. The American people knew better.

And because the United States stood firm in its demand for human rights and democracy, freedom-fighters like Natan Sharansky, Yuri Orlov and Andrei Sakharov lived in freedom. Communism did not kill them; they killed Communism.

What if America silenced its human rights agenda for fear of accusations it was “meddling” with internal Soviet matters? The Soviets accused America everyday of trying to foment revolution – but we never stopped our support for human rights. Listen to some of these quotes – they might sound familiar:

- Communist Party Official Georgiy Arbatov, June 1983: “The organizers of the campaign defending dissidents are simply trying to create the impression that the Soviet Union is some kind of police state, and sow new seeds of hostility in the West against the USSR. In our opinion this activity is directed by Western secret services and by immigrant and other private organizations.”
- Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, July 1985: "Our country has not allowed and will not allow anyone to interfere in its internal affairs. All kinds of aspersions on our system and on socialist democracy will continue to be duly rebuffed."
- Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev, December 1987: “You are not the prosecutor and I am not the accused... What moral right does (the United States) have to assume the role of teacher of the world communities... I don't find it interesting to have to face up to the same questions over and over again.”

Today we hear the same rhetoric from the Iranian dictators – and now hear the argument echoed in the halls of Congress, the State Department and even the White House.

As someone who stood on the frontline of freedom in the 1980s, I pray we do not believe the propaganda of dictators.

In the 80s, I worked for my predecessor Congressman John Porter and helped run the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. The plight of Soviet Jewry was at the top of our agenda. I remember the rallies, the legislation, the speeches.

And I remember the statements from Soviet leaders, accusing us of fomenting violence in the Soviet Union and funding dissidents as a ploy to bring down their government.

We knew better than to kowtow to such propaganda.

As Americans, we knew right from wrong – we knew the soft power of the human spirit could defeat the hard power of oppression.

In the end, we won the Cold War because we never lost our moral compass.

We never lost the conviction of our own convictions. And that made all the difference.

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It's time for a new American strategy to promote human rights and democracy in Iran.

To start, this Administration should make human rights and democracy a central tenant of future negotiations with Iran. No meeting should go by with Iranian diplomats without an American diplomat raising the issue of human rights, specifically including the names of prisoners of conscience.

The President should speak directly and publicly to the dissidents of Iran – name their names from the White House podium – make them heroes in homes across America.

He should invite members of the Green Movement to meet with him at the White House – and if any U.S. Government official is invited to visit Iran, they should not accept the invitation unless they are secured meetings with Iranian dissidents.

Funding for groups like the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center and Freedom House Iran should be reinstated.

Overall funding for Iran democracy promotion should be increased with an appropriations line item dedicated to Iran – with control transferred from the State Department to the National Endowment for Democracy.

The United States should take the lead to facilitate Green Movement conferences outside of Iran – whether in the United States or Europe.

We need an injection of creativity and originality in our international broadcasting programs. While Radio Farda continues the mission of Radio Free Europe, we should work to establish new public/private partnerships to fund independent Iranian filmmakers and producers —a new way to foster more original content. VOA Persian and Radio

Farda should set up a “Green Hour” for their broadcasts and expand their interaction with Iranian dissidents.

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These are just a few ideas that could go a long way toward advancing human rights and democracy in Iran.

It is time for this Administration to review the lessons of the Cold War and apply them to this 21st century threat.

A dictatorship that murders its own people in the streets on television will not be an honest broker in international affairs. A country that denies its citizens their basic freedoms will not be at peace with its neighbors.

We need to believe in the America that liberated the camps, defeated Communism and brought liberty to millions.

For diplomacy with Iran to succeed, we must be that Shining City Upon a Hill. We must speak directly into the hearts of the Iranian people, and let them know we will never stop fighting for *them* – no matter what their dictators do or say.

We must have the conviction of our own convictions.

Thank you.