

## "Obama's Very Limited Options"

For the past few weeks, the world's attention has been fixed on Iran, where there has been much public unrest about the contested presidential elections. It now seems fairly clear that Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad will be sworn in as the next president of Iran with the full backing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. President Barack Obama has been under considerable pressure, primarily from conservative forces within the United States, to take a "tougher" position on the Iranian election.

He has at the same time, it seems, been getting contrary advice from Beijing. M.K. Bhadrakumar has reported that Beijing warned about "letting the genie of popular unrest out of the bottle in a highly volatile region that is waiting to explode." Beijing's bad example is Thailand, a country that is not on the top of the radar screen for most American commentators and politicians.

In any case, it is not really clear what it means to take a "tougher" position, but it does seem clear that Obama has insisted on being cautious about his public statements. Notice what has been going on in this very same period. On June 24, the White House announced that it plans to return an ambassador to Syria, undoing a decision of President Bush four years ago. And on June 25, President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela announced that Venezuela and the United States would restore their ambassadors, the very same ones who had been declared *persona non grata* in the last days of the Bush administration.

One wonders what Obama felt when he read the tapes of President Nixon that were released on June 23. Among other things, these tapes reveal a conversation Nixon had with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on January 20, 1973, about a settlement into which the United States was about to enter with the government of North Vietnam. Nixon and Kissinger saw this as a face-saving agreement that would allow the United States to withdraw "with honor" from the war, knowing that after a "decent interval," the agreement would result in a military victory for the Viet Minh.

They had one small problem. The agreement was being resisted, for obvious reasons, by President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam. The Nixon-Kissinger discussion was about how to handle this. Kissinger said the problem was whether Thieu "will concur in letting us initial" the agreement. Nixon said "Letting us...Ha ha." Nixon proceeded to say that Kissinger was to let Thieu know that the U.S. "would cut off assistance" if he refused to go along. He continued: "I don't know if the threat goes too far or not, but I'd do any damn thing...[I'd] cut off his head if necessary."

The one thing Obama knows is that it is no longer really possible for the President of the United States to cut off the heads of anyone, enemies or allies, who defy it. Obama showed his understanding of this new reality already in July of 2007, when he answered a video questioner during the presidential campaign. The question was "Would you be willing to meet separately, without precondition, during the first year of your administration, in Washington or anywhere else, with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba and North Korea?" Answer: "I would." He was immediately attacked by his Democratic rival in the primaries, Hillary Clinton, as "naive." Now Hillary Clinton, as Obama's Secretary of State, is carrying out his pledge.

The reality is that Obama doesn't have much choice. There seems no practical way he could "cut off the head" of Ahmadi-Nejad, Chavez, Assad, Castro, or Kim Jong-Il. Nor are these the only heads he cannot cut off. He cannot remove Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel from office. He also cannot make Hamas disappear from Gaza. Sarkozy, Merkel, Putin, and Hu Yaobang all seem pretty secure in their positions. Indeed, he will soon find, if he doesn't already know it, that there's not much he can do about Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki of Iraq, even though al-Maliki is likely to take greater and greater distance from U.S. policy.

So what's a poor president to do? He will take refuge in the famous quotation of President John F. Kennedy, a quotation Obama has cited more than once: "We should never negotiate out of fear, but we should never fear to negotiate." That doesn't mean that the president of the United States is powerless. It simply means that the *best* he can do is negotiate, while ducking the brickbats at home.

In the end, Obama shares the concern of Beijing - not to let the genie of popular unrest out of the bottle, for the world today is indeed highly "volatile" - and no government is sure what will happen. Governments, of all stripes, may make concessions to popular unrest. But governments, of all stripes, are not really ready to submit their policies and their power to popular demands.

by Immanuel Wallerstein