



Dealing with Iran: Not just about feelings good

By KISHORE MAHBUBANI

WHEN the ongoing turmoil surrounding the Iranian elections finally ends, the West is likely to walk away with a simple black and white judgment: The "bad guys" won. Of course, the West did the right thing by supporting the "good guys", the street demonstrators. Hence, the West need not bear any responsibility for the outcome.

The tragedy of such thinking is that it does not allow for any moral and political complexity or nuance. Yet that is exactly what will be needed if the many problems surrounding Iran are to be resolved. Moreover, with Mr Mahmoud Ahmadijanejad remaining as Iran's President, the West will once again resort to its usual method of dealing with unfriendly regimes: impose more sanctions. But this would lead to an even greater tragedy.

The only clear lesson to emerge from Iran's disputed presidential election is that the country has a vibrant and indeed dynamic civil society. Many brave Iranians were prepared to risk their lives to defend their beliefs. Their ability to

do so confirms that Iran is not a closed totalitarian state like North Korea. Despite many years of rule by a theocratic establishment - or perhaps because of it - Iranian minds remain open and engaged.

So there is real hope that Iran can change, modernise and open up as the rest of Asia has. Indeed, the only viable long-term strategy to adopt, therefore, is to stop trying to isolate Iran and instead nudge Iranians into engaging more with modern Asia.

In the Iranian world view, there are three great ancient Asian civilisations: Chinese, Indian and Persian - with the last being the greatest. Iranians expect to perform on par with China and India. So, while Western hectoring of Iran will not work, when Iranians see their society falling far behind China and India, they may become motivated to reconsider their path. The more Iranians visit China and India, the more likely Iran will change.

Similarly, the West should find ways to re-engage with Iranian society, a major obstacle to which is the absence of diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran. American foreign policy assumes that diplomatic relations with

Iran are somehow an act of approval. In fact, the exact opposite is true. Diplomacy was invented precisely in order to enable relations between adversaries, not friends. No one needs diplomatic immunity to talk to their friends. They need it to talk to their adversaries. Unfortunately, no US politician appears willing to explain this bit of common sense to the American public.

The US might also learn from other examples. Many Americans applauded then-Egyptian President Anwar Sadat for his political courage in visiting Jerusalem three decades ago - a decision for which he ultimately paid with his life - even though the vast majority of Egyptians strongly disapproved.

It is useful to recall then-US President Richard Nixon's words when, prior to restoring diplomatic relations China, he visited Beijing: "We have at times in the past been enemies. We have great differences today. What brings us together is that we have common interests which transcend those differences. As we discuss our differences, neither of us will compromise our principles. But while we cannot close the gulf between us, we can try to bridge it so that we may be able to talk across it."

In engaging Iran, the West should ignore the nature of its regime. It is almost impossible for any outsider to understand Iran's internal political dynamics. Just when the world reached a consensus that Mr Ahmadijanejad was merely an instrument of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Mr Ahmadijanejad appointed a vice-president against Ayatollah Khamenei's wishes (though he later retracted the appointment). What we do know with certainty is that the regime is divided.

These divisions will allow new forces to emerge in Iranian society. So all means should be found to reach out to Iranian society at all levels. Iranian students should be encouraged to visit and study in Asian universities, where they would discover how confident young Chinese and Indian students are about the future - which might well cause them to reflect on why young Iranians do not share that optimism.

A final reason for the West to change course is that Western sanctions are proving increasingly useless. Only 12 per cent of the world's population lives in the West, and power is slipping steadily away from it. The July 2009 decision by the Non-Aligned Movement (comprising 118 member states) to hold its next meeting in Teheran provides a powerful demonstration of non-Western perceptions about Iran. If the West persists with its sanctions, it will not do any good. It will only make Western leaders feel good.

But what is ultimately more important: Doing good or feeling good?

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