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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Let's Hear the Democracies

By **ABBAS MILANI** and **LARRY DIAMOND**

Notices of the demise of Iran's Green Revolution are premature. Without question, the tyrannical triumvirate — Ayotallah Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Revolutionary Guard — have dealt a crippling blow to the popular movement protesting their electoral coup of June 12.

Thousands of Iranians have been arrested and savagely tortured — from street protesters to election campaign organizers for Mir Hussein Moussavi, the likely victor in that contest. Many are now being forced to “confess” to having been agents of the United States or Britain.

We have seen this play before, not simply in Iran but in other tyrannies that suppressed mass movements for democratic change with massive violence and terror.

But Iran in 2009 is not China in 1989, Burma in 1990 or Belarus in 2006. The crisis in the Islamic Republic has exposed and widened massive cracks within the ruling elite. Such divisions are always a sign of an impending crackup of dictatorship.

Despite the rush to bury Iran's reformist movement as another lost cause, Iran remains at a possible political tipping point. Democracies around the world have a duty — not simply to themselves, but to their strategic interests — to weigh in. They must not be deterred by threats to shun talks over Iran's nuclear program.

President Obama has gotten it right by signaling America's support for peaceful protest, human rights and the rule of law. More explicit language, not to mention action, would only play into the hands of the most cynical and vicious conservative elements in Iran. Moreover, with no diplomatic ties and all but no trade with Iran, there is little more the U.S. could do right now to pressure the regime.

But there are over 100 other democracies in the world. It is time that their voices were heard and their actions felt in Tehran.

Britain shares with the U.S. the handicap of a past history of negative interference in Iran. But Britain has diplomatic and economic ties to the regime, and breaking or suspending those will weaken Ayatollah Khamenei and his reactionary allies.

Moreover, Britain can have a unique kind of impact in Iran: For more than a century, Iranians have believed in the omnipotence of the “British hand” in the affairs of their country. Any indication that Britain is no longer willing to do business with the Islamic regime will hearten the Iranian people and undermine the regime's aura of invincibility.

Germany, France and Italy are major trading partners with Iran. They have little history of colonial interference in Iranian affairs. Their decision to refuse to recognize the Ahmadinejad regime would have an immense effect. More compelling still would be a similar declaration from the entire Group of 8 at its impending summit.

The smaller and less powerful democracies can also have an impact. It would be preposterous for Iranian hardliners to attribute ulterior strategic motives to actions by the Scandinavian countries or the Netherlands, Ireland, Canada or Slovenia. If a coalition of such countries were to condemn the crackdown, call for a release of political prisoners and demand full respect for human rights — and back up these positions with a downgrading of diplomatic and trade ties — this would send a powerful message to both sides in Iran.

Many democracies around the world, including the above, have diplomatic ties with Iran. It is important that they maintain their embassies in Tehran. But they should now refuse to recognize the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's government.

The most powerful coalition of democracies in the world, the 27-member European Union, is now debating whether to withdraw their ambassadors from Tehran in protest over the detention of the British Embassy's Iranian personnel.

The withdrawal of E.U. ambassadors would send a stunning message to the Iranian hardliners that coups and bloody suppression of peaceful protests carry a heavy price in international standing.

With the simple diplomatic act of denying legitimacy — something nearly all democratic forces in Iran are now asking of the world — the democracies of the world can give a needed boost to the forces of democratic change in Iran and earn the lasting gratitude of a movement that will eventually triumph.

Abbas Milani is director of Iranian studies and Larry Diamond is director of the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law at Stanford University. They are both research fellows at the Hoover Institution.

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