

Soccer diplomacy: Cultural exchange with Iran

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Iran is a young country: the median age is about 26. Young Iranians, who are connected to the outside world through the Internet and satellite TV, made their presence known in the streets as they protested the outcome of Iran's presidential election. Their campaign against what they view as a rigged election is perhaps the first protest movement driven by cell phones and the electronic messaging system known as Twitter.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that the protests rallied only the young. They attracted a broad cross-section of the population, including professionals, especially in urban areas. It would also be a mistake to interpret the protests as a sign of pro-Western or pro-American sentiment. The uprising represents a renewal of the hopes and dreams for freedom and openness that fueled the Islamic revolution of 1979—a revolution that was manipulated by the Ayatollah Khomeini and turned out badly for most Iranians, except for the conservatives who now run the country.

Since Iran has a justifiable suspicion of intervention by outsiders, especially by the U.S., and since Iran's supreme leader, the Ayatollah Khamenei, and reelected president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would like nothing better than to blame internal dissent on outside meddling, President Obama had to speak carefully about events, while voicing concerns about the violent repression of the protesters. It would be unwise for the U.S. to squander the current opportunity to engage Iran, as President Obama has signaled he intends to do—and to some extent has already done. Some analysts think the time is especially ripe for such engagement. The drawdown of U.S. military presence in Iraq, the electoral victory of pro-Western forces in Lebanon, and the U.S. move to engage with Syria all put pressure on Iran to be more receptive to diplomatic overtures.

What is needed, in addition to political diplomacy, is something like the “ping-pong diplomacy,” or cultural exchanges, that the Nixon administration used to engage

China in the 1970s. (Given that Iranians are fervent about soccer, perhaps the approach should be called soccer diplomacy.) Already a number of nongovernmental organizations are sponsoring learning tours to Iran. Some 3,000 Iranian students study in the U.S. each year. Particularly noteworthy is an exchange program in engineering between the University of Tehran and Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis. Despite the chilly relations between the two countries, and difficulties in obtaining visas, the program enables Iranian engineering students to spend time at both institutions and get degrees from both.

Through deeper political and cultural exchanges, Americans and Iranians may cultivate what theologian Miroslav Volf calls the necessary capacity for “double vision”: the ability not only to see others from our own perspective but also to see the others as they see themselves—and to see ourselves as the others see us.