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Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi in exile: 'I can't sit and say nothing as Iran suffers'

Crown Prince of Iran tells Simon Heffer he is ready to help bring change to his country but says the West needs to increase pressure on the Tehran regime.



By Simon Heffer

Reza Pahlavi, Crown Prince of Iran, and to his most devoted followers His Imperial Majesty the Shah, has been following the turbulent events of his country closer than perhaps any exile in the past five or six months.

I met him this week in a hotel room in Washington DC, near where he lives. While we talked over mineral water and fish and chips he pulled out his BlackBerry to see the latest news of the street protests in Tehran.

Ayatollah criticised by student The repression of his fellow Iranians by the Ahmadinejad regime, still in place after the rigged elections of the summer, angers him profoundly.

"When I think that today we Iranians have to be represented by these people, warmongering, terrorist-sponsoring, Holocaust denying - can I possibly sit here and say nothing? I don't want anything in return. I do it because it is my duty," he says.

In exile since his father was deposed in 1979, the Prince, 49, remains the figurehead for the three or four million strong Iranian diaspora. Since the elections he has stepped up calls for civil disobedience by

Iranians, and for external support for that. His many conduits of information from Iran tell him the regime is fragmenting, and he eagerly awaits a tipping point.

"The end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, of military juntas in South America, of the former Soviet Union - all of it came at the hands of the people of those nations themselves," he says. "None of this could have happened without foreign support - but that is not the same as an occupying army that comes in and changes a regime - I don't see how that can ever be legitimate."

The unhappy experience of foreign intervention in Iraq has further convinced him of the importance of avoiding it in Iran.

"Change must come to Iran by civil disobedience and non-violence. I stress that. We can't have change at any cost. It is ultimately a question of the sovereignty of that nation, and what happens must be the will of the people. But how do we determine that? There is an absence of public debate. There is an absence of the ballot box."

Helped by the internet, which he says has become "the most valuable tool" in co-ordinating support for the pro-democracy, pro-human rights Green Movement, he can monitor events at home almost as they happen. This immediacy seems to have energised him, and made him more impatient for change. "As we speak, the Iranian people are on the streets again, being clubbed by the militia, saying that they are disassociating themselves from the regime," he tells me.

Yet while he wants no armed intervention, he wants the Western powers, notably America, which has sought dialogue with the regime in Tehran, to be more directly supportive of the resurgent Iranian people and the opposition they are showing to Ahmadinejad.

"Today on the streets of Iran you hear cries of 'Obama, Obama, you're either with them or with us'. That is the people's message to the outside world. We are saying to Obama and other leaders 'We need your help'.

"If you want to have a dialogue with our regime, that's up to you, but isn't it time, after 30 years, that you opened up a dialogue with us? The Green Movement is saying, 'We want out'. It has a commitment to pluralism. They are people who say we have to respect and defend everyone's opinion.

"That is today's Iranian youth, very different to those 30 years ago who wanted a grand leader within a grand ideology. These are people who also see human rights as the cornerstone of everything they want to do, who want a democratic system of justice, and not a guy who says, 'As the only representative of God on Earth, I interpret the laws'."

The Prince interprets the demonstrations of the past few months - often made violent by the Revolutionary Guard - as enormously significant. "The ingredients for change have reached almost boiling point, despite the attempts of the regime to crack down. What the outside world needs to understand is the more the feet of the regime are put to the fire, the weaker it becomes. The threat from their own people is the only

leverage that will matter, on the nuclear issue especially, much more so than endless rounds of failing diplomacy."

He is far from sure that the West, notably America, is taking notice. "If they are holding up signs in English on the streets of Tehran it is not to practise their language skills, it is obviously meant for the outside world." The West should see, too, that the regime is factionalised and all camps "realise that this situation is no longer tenable. You can't keep clubbing people on the head and hope to get away with it".

He adds that the main players in Tehran "all know the legitimacy of the regime is under question. Hardliners are angry about the way the nuclear negotiations are going - but these things are all out in the open because they can no longer contain their differences".

The protests are, he feels, having a significant effect on the nuclear debate. "Why is the Holocaust denier Ahmadinejad showing more flexibility in the talks in Vienna? Because he's facing the music on the streets as head of the executive. Because the Revolutionary Guard are telling him they are the tail that wags the dog." He says that if the West is not prepared to give more support to the protesters and help undermine the regime, then "we may as well run up the white flag on the nuclear threat. We have a window of opportunity. And to the people sitting in Tel Aviv right now, this is a matter of life and death".

He feels the West has more to gain from regime change than just the ending of the nuclear threat. "What about trying to deal with Iran's state-sponsored terrorism? What about trying to end this stranglehold that Russia has on oil and gas supplies to Europe? You're still dilly-dallying. Soon it will be too late."

Ideally, the Prince wants UN-backed sanctions, but Russia and China are obstacles, not least because of Russia's strategic and commercial interests. "In Tehran now the placards read 'Death to Russia, death to China'. The nest of spies is not the US embassy, it's the Russian embassy. They're sitting pretty in Iran today for the first time since Peter the Great, with access to warm water ports. This regime is so dependent on Russian support - that is why they stand up to Europe and America. Without that they are nothing, and they and their supporters know that."

Even if the UN can't agree sanctions, he says that "we still have the option of multilateral sanctions, and agreements that could be reached between the US and its European allies. We need smart sanctions to weaken the regime and its apparatus. I can't support anything, though, that would harm the people.

"For example, they should be targeting the personal wealth and assets of the top leaders of the country, the assets of the Revolutionary Guard, and applying restrictions on their foreign travel by refusing visas."

He cannot understand Western foot-dragging, especially when so much is at stake on the development of a nuclear weapon.

"They fought a fascist regime in Germany, opposed a racist regime in

South Africa and a totalitarian one in the Soviet bloc, and yet we have a regime today in Iran that is a combination of all three - and yet they are doing nothing about it."

Another sign, he says, that people serving the regime feel it is running out of time is that they "are now wondering what future they have when the regime collapses. That is why I advocate non-violence, and a truth and reconciliation process like we saw in South Africa. We need these people to be part of the solution".

He continues: "I have had contact with members of the Revolutionary Guard since the Iran-Iraq war. I know they know things are no longer tenable. The revolutionaries are my age - they were young kids running around with Kalashnikovs, now they are in their late 40s and 50s and they have children of their own, and they are disillusioned.

"They say, this is not what we were fighting for. You have to assume many of them want out, but they worry about surviving a change of regime: but the solution has to be based on amnesty and reconciliation. You have to abolish capital punishment. There has to be an end to the cycle of violence."

He firmly believes that theocracy has been discredited and says that "religion is no longer a taboo subject for debate. The very same people who thought 40 years ago their salvation was with Khomeini now say they were mistaken. Iran has come full circle." He echoes Ronald Reagan's advice to Mikhail Gorbachev more than 20 years ago: "Mr Khamenei, tear down that wall."

After 30 years he still finds exile painful. "I remember my childhood, I remember my country's scenery, wherever I am in the world I am reminded of it. I live and breathe my country. I want to do something for that piece of real estate I call home. That is my duty."

Is he ready to be Shah? "I've never been concerned about what role I play in the future. I have a unique mission today: I volunteer to lead my compatriots to the point where they can go to the polls and decide for themselves. That day is my finish line. After that, if you want me to be part of it, you tell me. If you don't, so be it."

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