

Getting It Right in Iran and Ukraine

Lincoln A. Mitchell

February 19, 2010

The recent election in Ukraine seems, at first glance, to have little in common with the 2009 election in Iran. The former was a relatively orderly election which was [viewed as both free and fair](#) leading to a transition of power in Ukraine, while the second was a flawed election leading to widespread demonstrations, a violent crackdown and an Iranian regime relying more heavily on coercion to maintain its grip on power.

These two elections were, however, among the most important foreign elections which have occurred since President Obama came into office. In both cases the administration responded to these elections and their outcomes very well, revealing a thoughtful and effective, if low key and understated approach to some of the less visible, but still important, foreign policy challenges facing the U.S. In both cases, the approach was consistent with the overall Obama approach which, in a major reversal from the Bush administration, prioritizes outcomes over bluster. This is a frustrating way of doing foreign policy, but in both Ukraine and Iran, it was the right way.

During the demonstrations following the Iranian election, the administration [did not make any high profile statements](#), sufficiently low that, not surprisingly, [Obama was criticized](#) for failing to show enough solidarity with the courageous Iranian protestors or for being explicit enough in his comments about Iran. This kind of a gesture would have made many in the U.S. feel good, but probably would not have brought Iran any closer to democracy. By keeping a relatively low profile for the U.S. during this period, Obama allowed the focus to remain on Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Iranian election. In short, Obama's actions made sure the story was about Iran, not about the U.S. Ahmadinejad is, of course, still in power and his regime is growing more repressive, but it is also growing weaker. Throughout the Bush administration, Ahmadinejad was always able to deflect domestic criticism by getting in a high profile fight with the U.S. Obama is making this more difficult, which will likely make it harder of Ahmadinejad to hold onto power over the next few years.

The U.S. approach to the Ukrainian election, through the whole election period was the right one and demonstrated a commitment to process with regards to election and a concrete rebuttal to those who believe that the U.S. only supports democracy when it means electing pro-American governments. The new Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, is far closer to Russia and far less enthusiastic about further integrating Ukraine into the west than either his predecessor or the woman he defeated in the runoff. The administration could have worked harder to help defeat Yanukovich and elect Yulia Timoschenko, sought to present the inevitable election problems in Ukraine as evidence that the elections were not free and fair, threatened policy consequences for Ukraine if Yanukovich won, or supported [Timoschenko's claim](#) that Yanukovich's victory is illegitimate. However, any of these actions would have been ineffective,

further undermined U.S. credibility and made it more difficult for the U.S. to work with the new Ukrainian government.

President Obama has certainly made foreign policy mistakes, but he has also set a different tone that, in the disparate cases of Iran and Ukraine, has been the right one. The administration has understood that one of the lessons of the last ten years is that democracy is about processes not electing leaders and that a fairly elected leader who is not enthusiastically pro-American is still a leader with whom we can and should work. Another lesson has been that from Iran to Venezuela, one of the best ways to shore up domestic support for an unpopular leader is to rhetorically attack that leader in Washington. By avoiding this very tempting pitfall, Obama has weakened Ahmadinejad more than any inspiring speeches about freedom ever could have. In Iran, Obama made a tough but right decision. In Ukraine the decision was a little easier, but in either case it should be recognized that the administration got it right.