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## Politics of regime change

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THE rhetoric on Iran in Washington is getting shriller by the day. There is a pattern to the rhetoric which seems to suggest that it has a certain purpose. As with Iraq the goal appears to be regime change.

Since the beginning of May, Washington has been levelling a series of accusations at the present Government of Iran which it will be remembered was categorised by US President George W. Bush, as a member of the "Axis of Evil" in his State of the Union Address in January 2002.

Iran, it is alleged, is developing a clandestine nuclear weapons programme, harbouring al-Qaeda terrorists, providing material support to the Lebanese Hizbollah and certain militant Palestinian groups and was responsible for the 1983 bombing of a US marine barracks in Beirut that killed 241 troops.

On top of all this, the conservative religious elites in the Iranian Government have been accused of suppressing women's rights and curtailing the political and civil liberties of the people.

Iranian leaders have rejected the allegations.

They point out that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in its pre-liminary report had observed that Teheran's nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes.

The Iranian Government has been arresting al-Qaeda operatives. Besides, since the al-Qaeda is linked to the deposed Taliban regime it is highly unlikely that Teheran would have anything to do with it, given the huge ideological and political chasm that separates the two. In 1998, eight Iranian diplomats were murdered by agents of the Taliban in Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan.

And as for the allegations that Teheran is backing the Hizbollah and Palestinian militants and was behind the Beirut bombing in 1983, the Government has dismissed them as utterly baseless.

It has always insisted that the Hizbollah and the Palestinian groups are movements with deep roots in their own indigenous political struggles against Israeli occupation.

Even on the question of women's rights, the position of Iranian women is far better than that of their sisters in most other Middle Eastern States, including those that are closely allied to Washington. The majority of the almost two million students in institutions of higher learning in Iran are women.

Women are integral to the workplace and a number of them hold important positions in Government, industry and the arts.

One of Iran's vice-presidents is a woman and there are women parliamentarians.

In fact, even in those spheres that are intimately linked to theology, women play prominent roles. There are women judges in the Islamic judicial system just as there are female imams leading female prayer congregations.

Similarly, since the 1979 Revolution, Iran has given more attention to certain democratic practices and human rights principles than most of its neighbours.

It has held relatively fair presidential, parliamentary and local government elections on a regular basis, sometimes under the most trying circumstances since the early eighties.

There is a certain degree of dissent not only within the body politic but also within the religious hierarchy.

Of course, on both women's rights and human rights, there is tremendous scope for reform, which is why a powerful people's movement committed to enhancing political and social freedoms within the framework of Islamic democracy has emerged in the last decade helmed by President Mohamed Khatami himself.

The political, intellectual and theological struggle that has ensued between the reformists and the conservatives is, it must be emphasised, a struggle that is internal to Islam and Iran and any attempt by Washington to manipulate it in order to achieve a regime change will only weaken the position of the reformists.

It explains why the reformists have adopted a strong stance against Washington's rhetoric, as reflected in Khatami's recent speeches in Lebanon and Syria.

For the reformists know that if they are perceived as stooges of Washington they will lose all credibility with the people.

If Washington's targeting of Iran is detrimental to the genuine, indigenous democratic reform process in the country, why does the former persist with its allegations?

The reason is simple. Washington is not really concerned about freedom and democracy in Iran. It has its own agenda which has no place for independent-minded democratic reformists like Khatami and his friends.

Washington would like to install its own pliant regime in Teheran, a regime which would be totally subservient to its interests and the interests of Israel.

Even before its conquest of Iraq, Washington was apprehensive about Iran's allegedly growing influence in the region especially upon Syria and Lebanon.

However, since the conquest it has been faced with strong resistance to its rule from a significant segment of the Shia population including some Shia religious leaders who, though prepared to work with the US administration in Baghdad to pave the way for democratic elections in Iraq, are determined to see a quick end to the US presence in their country.

Exasperated by the continuing opposition to their presence, US officials, like Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, have accused Iranian leaders of encouraging their fellow Shias in Iraq to resist American rule.

While denying such spurious allegations, both the conservatives and reformists in Teheran have with one voice demanded that American occupation of Iraq be brought to an end immediately and the Iraqis themselves be allowed to form their own Government through the democratic process.

It is a stance which has annoyed the cabal in Washington, determined as it is to exercise total control over Iraq and the Middle East in the shortest possible time.

But the real push for the cabal to increase the pressure upon Teheran is coming from Tel Aviv and from those within the cabal with strong Zionist inclinations.

It is significant that in November 2002 itself, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon identified Iran as a centre of world terror and advocated a military strike against the country as soon as the US and Britain had completed their proposed attack on Iraq (The Guardian, Nov 5, 2002).

Why Sharon is so keen on action against Iran it is not difficult to fathom. He believes whatever the facts on the ground that it is Iran's alleged sponsorship of the Hizbollah and Palestinian militants that enables them to offer such spirited resistance to Israel's hegemonic designs in the Middle East.

For Tel Aviv and Washington then, a regime in Teheran that acquiesces

quietly with their hegemonic agenda is crucial.

This is why regime change is so important to those who want to exercise control and dominance. For political obedience is the necessary corollary of political hegemony.

Regime change has been a vital dimension of US foreign policy since 1945. It is sometimes forgotten that exactly 50 years ago, Washington engineered a regime change in Iran.

The CIA was instrumental in overthrowing a populist Prime Minister, Mohamed Mossadegh and his democratic Government in 1953 and helped to reinforce the position of the Shah, Reza Pahlavi, who then converted Iran into a client state of the US for the next 26 years until the revolution of 1979.

Of course, no continent on earth has seen as many regime changes through US manipulation and coercion as Latin America - one of the most infamous of which was the bloody ouster of the democratically-elected Salvador Allende on Sept 11, 1973.

Sometimes, Washington even helps to bring down its own clients and cronies when they become a liability. This is what happened to Ngo Dinh Diem of Vietnam in 1963; Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines in 1986 and Suharto of Indonesia in 1998.

Even in our own case, certain Washington elite and their functionaries sought to effect a regime change in 1998.

When Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, already looked askance at for his outspokenness on global injustices, imposed currency controls on Sept 1, 1998 in order to save the Malaysian economy, these individuals felt that such an impudent challenge to the Washington crafted international financial system should not go unpunished.

The dismissal of the then Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, from the Cabinet and Umno provided them with an opening especially since Anwar enjoyed close ties with some of the leading figures in this group.

They hoped that the severe financial crisis, coupled with the well-orchestrated street demonstrations in support of the sacked leader, would create a popular wave of anger against the regime ala Indonesia and force Dr Mahathir out of office.

It did not happen for at least two reasons.

One, since the financial crisis was overcome largely through the imposition of currency controls, public disaffection was effectively contained.

Two, the Umno hierarchy remained solidly united in the midst of the turmoil, thus averting the sort of political crisis that can sometimes lead to the collapse of a regime.

Nonetheless, it is true that we came within a hair's breadth of a regime change which unknown to many of us at that time was being shrewdly manipulated by both internal and external forces.

The 1998 episode should strengthen our resolve never to allow such a thing to happen again.

There is nothing more humiliating in this new imperial era than to be reduced to the level of a client state at the beck and call of the only hyper-power of the day.