



IRANIAN PRESIDENT BOOED IN NEW YORK

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Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to New York City for the United Nations General Assembly last month stirred controversy after he sought to visit the site of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and spoke to a chorus of criticism at Columbia University.

Ahmadinejad was one of dozens of world leaders who spoke before the United Nations meeting. He was also invited to speak at Columbia University, where he was berated by the university's president and booed by the audience.

The Iranian president has drawn heavy criticism for saying that the Holocaust was a myth and that Israel should be destroyed.

Facing off with President Bush

Although Ahmadinejad's controversial statements (among the comments in his Columbia appearance, he said there were no homosexuals in Iran) made for good television and earned coverage on almost every major news program, it's Iran's policy decisions that have set him against the Bush administration.

Iran's quest for nuclear technology and allegations that its government helps support fighters in Iraq has made it one of America's foremost enemies.

In the past, White House officials have said a military strike against Iran was possible, but Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice last week said diplomacy is still the first choice.

"We still believe that the diplomatic track has legs and can still resolve this if we remain very tough on that track," she told CBS News, adding that military action is still an option under consideration.

History of bad relations

The United States and Iran have had tense relations for decades. In 1979, radical students invaded the U.S. Embassy in the Iranian capital of Tehran and held approximately seventy American hostages for more than a year.

That year, Islamic fundamentalists took over the country, turning it into an Islamic theocracy, a period the country's history known as the Islamic revolution.

According to Iran's constitution, its religious supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and his Supreme Guardian Council holds the majority of the power and elected leaders, including President Ahmadinejad and members of parliament, hold much less.

The religious government is also known for throwing political dissidents in jail and for limiting the rights of women. Women are not allowed to run for political office and can be stoned to death for committing crimes including adultery.

Diversion tactics?

Analysts say Ahmadinejad purposefully sparks controversy to get media attention —perhaps to divert Iranians from problems at home, especially deteriorating economic conditions.

"He ran on this platform of being a simple man, a man of the people, but he's actually someone who's quite narcissistic. And he does put a great deal of emphasis on what people think of him," explained Iranian-American Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on the Sept. 25 NewsHour.

"His mandate was very clear when he was elected; that was to, quote, unquote, 'put the oil money on people's dinner tables.' But since he's come into office, he's really neglected the economy," he added.

Ultimately, Ahmadinejad may be speaking for the most powerful person in Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, but he is not calling the shots.

And if he continues to put on a show for the West, Khamenei may lose interest and support a different candidate when Ahmadinejad comes up for reelection in March 2009.

-- Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra

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