

# U.S. grants support Iranian dissidents

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Global Research, June 26, 2009

USA TODAY 26 June 2009

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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## Global Research Editor's Note

*This report published in USA Today confirms unequivocally that Washington has directly financed dissident groups in Iran.*

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration is moving forward with plans to fund groups that support Iranian dissidents, records and interviews show, continuing a program that became controversial when it was expanded by President Bush.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which reports to the secretary of state, has for the last year been soliciting applications for \$20 million in grants to “promote democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in Iran,” according to documents on the agency’s website. The final deadline for grant applications is June 30.

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U.S. efforts to support Iranian opposition groups have been criticized in recent years as veiled attempts to promote “regime change,” said Trita Parsi, president of the National Iranian American Council, the largest Iranian-American advocacy group. The grants enable Iran’s rulers to paint opponents as tools of the United States, he said.

Although the Obama administration has not sought to continue the Iran-specific grants in its 2010 budget, it wants a \$15 million boost for the Near Eastern Regional Democracy Initiative, which has similar aims but does not specify the nations involved. Some of that money will be targeted at Iran, said David Carle, a spokesman for the appropriations subcommittee that oversees foreign affairs.

“Part of it is to expand access to information and communications through the Internet for Iranians,” Carle said in an e-mail.

President Obama said this week the United States “is not at all interfering in Iran’s affairs,” rejecting charges of meddling that were renewed Thursday by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Asked how the democracy promotion initiatives square with the president’s statement, White House spokesman Tommy Vietor said, “Let’s be clear: The United States does not fund any movement, faction or political party in Iran. We support ... universal principles of human rights, freedom of speech, and rule of law.”

State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said, “Respecting Iran’s sovereignty does not mean our silence on issues of fundamental rights and freedoms, such as the right to peacefully protest.”

The Bush program “was a horrible idea,” Parsi said. “It made human rights activists and non-governmental organizations targets.”

Not so, said David Denehy, the former Republican political consultant and State Department official who used to oversee the spending. “To say that we were the cause of repression in Iran is laughable ... Our programs sent a message to the people of Iran that we supported their requests for personal freedom,” he said.

The State Department and USAID decline to name Iran-related grant recipients for security reasons.

After Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced a major expansion of the program in 2006 — Congress eventually approved \$66 million — the Iranian government arrested activists and closed down their organizations. Several Iranian dissidents, including former political prisoner Akbar Ganji, denounced the U.S. funding as counterproductive.

Some in Congress are happy the program is continuing.

“As the Iranian regime cracks down on its people, I strongly believe that we should be prepared to extend our hand in help and support to any Iranian civil society group that reaches out for it,” Sen. Joseph Lieberman, wrote in an e-mail to USA TODAY.

Most of the money likely hasn’t reached Iran but went instead to Washington-based groups, said Suzanne Maloney, an Iran expert who reviewed applications for the democracy program before leaving the State Department for the Brookings Institution. The United States lacks the insight to influence Iran’s internal politics, she said.

“We have such limited penetration of Iranian politics,” she said. “We are so poorly positioned to add any value.”

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