

UNITED STATES-IRAN - Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Speaks at Columbia University Amid Protests, Univ. President Excoriates Iran Leader from Podium

Amy Goodman, Democracy Now!

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Tuesday, September 25th, 2007 - [Democracy Now! News Program](#) - Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad spoke at Columbia University on Monday, ahead of his address before the United Nations. Hundreds gathered to protest for and against the visit. Meanwhile, Columbia University President Lee Bollinger excoriated Ahmadinejad in his introductory remarks.

AMY GOODMAN: World leaders are gathering in New York this week for the annual opening session of the UN General Assembly. With the ongoing speculation of a possible US military strike on Iran, no guests are attracting as much attention as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He opened his visit a public forum at Columbia University. A mixed crowd of protesters turned out to greet him. One sign read "We refuse to choose between Bush and Ahmadinejad."

Democracy Now! spoke to some of the hundreds gathered outside the lecture hall, both those protesting the Iranian president's visit and those curious to hear him for themselves.

— [inaudible] side of the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at Columbia University, we will play in a minute. He was invited to speak as part of Columbia's World Leaders series. Before Ahmadinejad took the podium, Columbia University President Lee Bollinger used his introductory remarks to make clear the Iranian president was not a welcome guest.

LEE BOLLINGER: Frankly — I close with this comment — frankly and in all candor, Mr. President, I doubt that you will have the intellectual courage to answer these questions. But your avoiding them will, in itself, be meaningful to us. I do expect you to exhibit the fanatical mindset that characterizes so much of what you say and do.

Fortunately, I am told by experts on your country that this only further undermines your position in Iran, with all the many goodhearted intelligent citizens there. A year ago, I am reliably told, your preposterous and belligerent statements in this country — was at one of the meetings of the Council on Foreign Relations — so embarrassed sensible Iranian citizens that this led to your party's defeat in the December mayoral elections. May this do that and more.

I am only a professor — I am only a professor who is also a university president. And today I feel all the weight of the modern civilized world yearning to express the revulsion at what you stand for. I only wish I could do better. Thank you.

AMY GOODMAN: Bollinger challenged Ahmadinejad on his support for Iraqi insurgents targeting US

troops, his government's nuclear ambitions and his inflammatory statements on Israel. He also chided Ahmadinejad for his comments questioning whether the Nazi Holocaust occurred.

LEE BOLLINGER: — the failures of our own government to live by our values, and we won't be shy about criticizing yours. Let's then be clear at the beginning. Mr. President, you exhibit all the signs of a petty and cruel dictator. And so, I ask you — and so, I ask you, why have women, members of the Baha'i Faith, homosexuals, and so many of our academic colleagues become targets of persecution in your country? Why, in a letter last week to the Secretary General of the UN, did Akbar Ganji, Iran's leading political dissident, and over 300 public intellectuals, writers and Nobel laureates express such grave concern that your inflamed dispute with the West is distracting the world's attention from the intolerable conditions in your regime within Iran — in particular, the use of the press law to ban writers for criticizing the ruling system? Why are you so afraid of Iranian citizens expressing their opinions for change?

AMY GOODMAN: Columbia President Lee Bollinger. After Bollinger spoke, it was the Iranian president's turn. He began by accusing the Columbia president of insulting him and the audience. Later, he partly addressed some of the Columbia president's questions.

MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD: [translated] Why don't we encourage more research on a historical event that has become the root, the cause, of many heavy catastrophes in the region in this time and age? Why shouldn't there be more research about the root causes? That was my first question.

And my second question: well, given this historical event, if it is a reality, we need to still question whether the Palestinian people should be paying for it or not. After all, it happened in Europe. The Palestinian people had no role to play in it. So why is it that the Palestinian people are paying the price of an event they had nothing to do with?

The Palestinian people didn't commit any crime. They had no role to play in the World War II. They were living with the Jewish communities and the Christian communities in peace at the time. They didn't have any problems. And today, too, Jews, Christians and Muslims live in brotherhood all over the world in many parts of the world. They don't have any serious problems.

But why is it that the Palestinians should pay a price, innocent Palestinians, for five million people to remain displaced or refugees abroad for sixty years? Or is this not a crime? Is asking about these crimes a crime in and by itself? Why should an academic, myself, face insults when asking questions like this? Is this what you call freedom and upholding the freedom of thought?

And as for the second topic, Iran's nuclear issue, I know there's time limits, but I need time. I mean, a lot of time was taken from me. We are a country. We are a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency. For over thirty-three years we have been member state of the agency. The bylaw of the agency explicitly states that all member states have the right to the peaceful nuclear fuel technology. This is an explicit statement made in the bylaw. And the bylaw says that there is no pretext or excuse, even the inspections carried by the IAEA itself, that can prevent member states' right to have that right.

Of course, the IAEA is responsible to carry out inspections. We are one of the countries that's carried out the most amount of level of cooperation with the IAEA. They've had hours and weeks and days of inspections in our country. And over and over again, the agency's reports indicate that Iran's activities are peaceful, that they have not detected a deviation, and that Iran — they have received positive cooperation from Iran. But regretfully, two or three monopolistic powers, selfish powers, want to force their word on the Iranian people and deny them their right.

AMY GOODMAN: President Ahmadinejad went on to defend his government on human rights, nuclear activities, alleged involvement in backing Iraqi insurgents. He also appeared to question whether al-Qaeda was, in fact, responsible for the 9/11 attacks and suggested a hidden motive. And in a statement that drew wide ridicule, Ahmadinejad replied to a question on suppression of homosexuals by claiming there were no homosexuals in Iran.

For more on Ahmadinejad's visit, we will be joined by two guests. Ervand Abrahamian, Iran expert at CUNY, City University of New York, and Trita Parsi. *Treacherous Alliance* is his new book. But first, we will go to break. This is *Democracy Now!* Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: We go to people outside of the Columbia University lecture hall. Hundreds gathered, both protesting the Iranian President Ahmadinejad's visit and those curious to hear for themselves.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN 1: I'm proud to be an American, and I'm here because I wish to witness history.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN 2: I'm here because I don't think a college campus is the place for a bigot and a terrorist to come speak to people.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN 3: Inviting him here to their private institution is a way of honoring a dictator who wants to build a nuclear weapon to use against Israel, to use against the United States.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN 4: My diploma is for sale at this price because its value is diminished by the actions of the university.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN 5: To say that he is a terrorist is just — just doesn't make any sense. He's a free elected leader. He has his own aims. He has his own principles, which, just because the US don't agree with him, doesn't mean that they can just shut him off completely.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN 6: Absolutely, I would like to hear what he has to say. I would like to hear if what he has to say is the same as what has been reported in the press.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN 7: Ahmadinejad is bad, but Bush is much worse, and humanity needs a third way. We need to stop the attack, the war in Iraq, and we need to prevent a war against Iran. Nothing that is going on in Iran justifies an attack against Iran. And the US is using all this hullabaloo about Ahmadinejad to whip up public opinion for an attack against Iran.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN 8: This is making hate more than it's doing good. I think people need to open their eyes and their minds, and don't put a whole country in the toilet because of what one man says. You know, Bush has a 20% approval rating in America. Ahmadinejad has less than that in Iran. So don't say "Let's kill all Iranians" and "Iranians are bad," when it's not fair to say that about America.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: It's not a question of siding with either Islamic fundamentalism — that is, the Islamic Republic of Iran — or US imperialism. But rather, we have to stand with the people of the world who are fighting against oppression and repression and against US efforts to dominate the world.

AMY GOODMAN: People who were protesting for and against the visit of the Iranian president at Columbia University yesterday.

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