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Some Iranians Seek to Renew an Old Chant

By THOMAS ERDBRINK

TEHRAN — Born during the hostage crisis days after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the chant “Death to America” has enjoyed a long run on the Iranian stage. But it has been getting a little threadbare in recent times, and has even come under threat, with no less a person than the newly elected president, Hassan Rouhani, suggesting that the country no longer needed slogans.

While for some this may be a refreshing sign of political maturity, others are determined to inject new life into the old chant. Toward this end, several hard-line groups have announced plans for a “Down With U.S.A.” conference next month, highlighted by “The First Major International Award of ‘Down With America’ ” for the best photograph, poster, video, song or caricature.

The contest winners will be announced in December, and will receive cash awards of as much as \$4,000.

While the slogan in Persian, “Marg bar Amrika,” means “Death to America” and has always been translated that way in the West, the official translation from the 1979 Islamic Revolution is “Down With America.”

The organizers, including the conservative Tasmin news agency, have been critical of Mr. Rouhani’s call for better relations with the rest of the world, not to speak of the United States. One of three jury members vetting the contest is Maziar Bijani, a Holocaust-denying cartoonist.

While Iranian hard-liners were defeated in June elections, they are given freedom to speak out and protest on the streets, while supporters of Mr. Rouhani are mainly active on blocked social media networks and are therefore less visible and less organized.

Supported by Iran’s security forces and protected by the judiciary, Iranian hard-liners are insisting that the “Death to America” slogan be shouted at all public gatherings. On Sunday, Parliament members used the slogan during one of their sessions.

On Nov. 4, the anniversary of the takeover of the United States Embassy in 1979 by Islamic students, an event that led to the severing of relations between the countries, hard-liners are planning a “Grand Day of Death to America,” Revolutionary Guards commanders have told local news media. Usually the anniversary is attended by a couple of thousand people, but commanders have promised the slogan will “echo across the nation.”