

Media Disinformation: Washington's "Regime Change Hit List": Iran versus Honduras

Part 1

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It would be hard to find a better test of the integrity of the establishment U.S. media than in their comparative treatment of Iran and Honduras over the past couple of years (2009-2010).

Iran has been on the United States' regime-change hit list for many years. Since the first-half of 2003 (and overlapping its soon-to-be-discredited lies about Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction"), the United States has worked hard to inflate the alleged threat posed by Iran's nuclear program and to enlist allied governments as well as the International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN Security Council in the same cause. This U.S. and U.S.-allies' focus on Iran's nuclear program bore tremendous fruit throughout most of the past decade. A survey that we once published in MRzine[1] of wire-service and newspaper reports' focus on ten states' nuclear programs for the seven-year period from 2003 through 2009 found that the amount of media attention paid to Iran's dwarfed that of any of the other nine states (i.e., 36,778 print and wire-service items mentioning Iran's nuclear program, compared to 6,237 for second-place India's). More strikingly, the ratio of media attention paid to Iran's versus Israel's nuclear program was 114-to-1 (92-to-1 on the pages of the New York Times) — astounding ratios, as Iran's nuclear program has never been determined to be anything other than in accord with its Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations, while Israel steadfastly rejects joining the NPT, and remains the only state in the Middle East with nuclear weapons (perhaps 200-300) as well as the means of delivering them.[2] Thus by the spring of 2009, with Iran's June 12 presidential election fast approaching, Iran's nuclear program had been kept on the agenda of major U.S.-dominated multilateral bodies and media for six consecutive years, and a harsh Western media and intellectual focus on its incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had accompanied this U.S. agenda since the time he took office in the summer of 2005.

Honduras, on the other hand, had been out of U.S. media headlines for many years. But this changed suddenly on June 28, when in what sardonically came to be known as the "Pajama Coup," the country's democratically-elected President José Manuel Zelaya was overthrown and replaced in office by a member of his own Liberal Party, Roberto Micheletti. The coup regime accused Zelaya of "treason, abuse of authority, and usurpation of powers" for his proposal, first announced in November 2008, to add a "popular consultation" to the national elections scheduled for the following November: a referendum-type question that would have asked voters whether or not they favored convening a National Assembly to study amending the Honduran Constitution. Both the Honduran oligarchy and military bitterly opposed Zelaya's idea, and took extraordinary steps to have it declared unconstitutional

and to suspend all moves to carry it out. After months of conflicts between Zelaya and the judiciary, with Zelaya losing in court but gaining enormous support among the 60% or more of Honduran society who live below the poverty level, Zelaya issued an executive decree on June 25 announcing that a special vote, now referred to as a “public opinion survey,” would be held on June 28, that asked essentially the same question as before. Three days later, the Honduran military snatched Zelaya from his residence at five o’clock in the morning, drove him to the Mejía Air Base outside Tegucigalpa, and shipped him to Costa Rica.[3] Despite condemnations of the coup by the Organization of American States and the UN General Assembly,[4] and very loud support for Zelaya’s restoration from regional powers such as Brazil and Venezuela, Zelaya never again served another minute as the president of Honduras.

The Honduran military executed its coup d’état against President Zelaya only 16 days after the presidential election in Iran, in the middle of a tsunami of U.S. and Western media coverage of Iran’s election and its aftermath, which saw the opposition’s claims of vote fraud[5] spark massive public demonstrations against both the official results and Iran’s clerical regime itself, and also saw large and sustained expressions of solidarity with Iran’s “democratic movement” dominating the metropolitan centers of the West. Yet, when the coup in Honduras took place against its democratically-elected and populist president, nothing comparable was to be observed in U.S. and Western media interest in this event and its aftermath, much less in public displays of solidarity on behalf of Honduras’ ousted president and its anti-coup protestors. This kind of disparity in responses can hardly be explained by a greater violation of democratic principles in Iran’s presidential election than in the Honduras coup. Indeed, the coup terminated democracy altogether in Honduras, whereas the election in Iran was bitterly contested, even if allegedly “stolen” (a matter to which we return in Part 2). On the contrary, we believe that in the cases of Iran and Honduras 2009-2010, the establishment media once again focused their attention and channeled their benevolence and indignation on behalf of those who demonstrated against a U.S.-targeted regime, and once again ignored the victims — here the Hondurans — now subjected to a return to the familiar pattern of a U.S.-approved theft of democracy in the hemisphere.

Interests and Standards at the New York Times

Double standards in attention, solidarity, benevolence, and indignation can be illustrated in the New York Times’ coverage of the two events for the first 30 days following each of them — June 13-July 12, 2009 for Iran’s election; and June 29-July 28, 2009, for the Honduran coup. During the first of these 30-day periods, the Times devoted at least 100 news reports to Iran, with at least 23 of these reports beginning on Section 1, page 1; in fact, the Times devoted page-one reports to Iran for the first 15 consecutive days after the election (June 13-27). Following the coup in Honduras, the Times devoted 26 reports to the coup and its aftermath, and placed only two of these reports on Section 1, page 1 (June 29-30). Whereas the attention devoted to Iran was sustained and the interest taken in the public demonstrations and charges of vote fraud fed off itself, the attention devoted to Honduras was short-lived, and though interest in the coup couldn’t be avoided for at least a couple of days, it quickly faded away. The ratio of news reports on the election in Iran to reports on the coup in Honduras thus was 100-to-26 on the pages of the New York Times. For page-one reports it was 23-to-2; and for op-eds plus editorials, it was 17-to-3.

But the Times’ real standards were revealed with even greater clarity by the fact that whereas the two op-ed columns and single editorial that it published on Honduras were both

anti-Zelaya and apologetic towards the coup, none of the 14 op-eds and three editorials it published on Iran was anything but hostile towards Iran's government while also highly critical of the official election results.

In its only editorial on Honduras in our 30-day sample, the Times repeated the coup-regime's false justification for the coup: That the "rich businessman turned left-wing populist and a close ally of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez" had sought to "change the Constitution so he can run for a second term." [6] Likewise with its two op-eds. Zelaya was "pushing the limits of democracy by trying to force a constitutional change that would permit his re-election," wrote Alvaro Vargas Llosa in a commentary filled with warnings about, not the threat that the coup posed to democracy in Honduras, but the threat that "Venezuela's caudillo" poses to the hemisphere. Roger Marin Neda mentioned the referendum that Zelaya had urged, but also turned it into his "laying the groundwork for an assembly to remake the Constitution to allow him to serve one more term," his "larger goal" being to change the "democratic system into a kind of 21st-century socialism," a "Hugo Chavez-type of government." No mention of the illegality of the coup or its inherent repressiveness. Hardly any mention of actual violence — Roger Marin Neda conceded that "At least one person is reported to have died," but added that "despite this, life for many Hondurans has continued as usual." [7]

Turning to the Times and Iran, everything reverses. "[T]he hard-line mullahs brazenly stole the election for the hard-line president," the third and last Times editorial in our sample stated (July 3). "Government authorities bulldozed the results of last week's presidential election — declaring the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the winner by a landslide before the votes could be credibly counted," the second editorial claimed. "If the authorities want to resolve this impasse peacefully . . . they should call a new election. . ." (June 18). "Neither Real Nor Free," the Times' first post-election editorial proclaimed (June 15).[8]

In what must have been a first in the Times' history, it published a commentary under the pseudonym "Shane M." According to the Times, "Shane M." is a "student in Iran who, for reasons of safety, did not want to be identified by his full name." "[I]n important sectors of the American press a disturbing counternarrative is emerging," S.M. wrote: "That perhaps this election wasn't a fraud after all . . . and that perhaps Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the president the Iranian people truly want. . . ." "Do not believe it," S.M. countered. "Those so-called experts warning Americans to be leery of claims of fraud by the opposition are basing their arguments on an outdated understanding of Iran that has little to do with the reality we here are experiencing during these singular days." [9]

Why S.M. was so concerned about "what our friends in the United States are saying about us" was only vaguely addressed. But since this commentary appeared on June 19, S.M.'s fears were unfounded. In Western metropolitan centers, the belief that Iran's Interior Ministry and clerical regime had stolen the election was not weakening — in fact, it kept strengthening, and the U.K.-based Chatham House's attempt to discredit Iran's official results (entirely by misrepresenting how Iran's election was conducted) wouldn't be published until June 21.[10] "Let's also forget the polls, carried out in May by Terror Free Tomorrow," [11] S.M. counseled. As we describe in Part 2, all other credible public opinion polls in Iran, both before and after the election, produced results contrary to S.M.'s claims, but were suppressed by the New York Times, including a major assessment of 12 different opinion polls by the Program on International Policy Attitudes in February 2010.[12] Moreover, of the 14 op-eds the Times published on Iran during our sample period, no fewer than 9 of them characterized Iran's June 12 presidential election variously as

rigged, fraudulent, or stolen, with the “self-discrediting thuggery by Iran’s clerical leadership” (Ross Douthat, June 16) and the thwarting of democracy being the most commonly repeated themes. [13]

Overall, the Times’ editorials, opinion columns, and news reports on Iran and Honduras coordinated nicely with each other in the months of June and July 2009 to articulate the U.S. government’s and Times’ political position that whereas democracy allegedly thwarted in Iran constituted a major human rights violation and was of urgent interest to the world, an actual coup d’état in Honduras was a relatively minor affair.

Neda versus Isis (and 23 Other Hondurans)

Beyond the New York Times, the establishment U.S. media’s biases can also be shown in their treatment of public demonstrations in the two countries: For post-election protesters in Iran, we find intensive and sympathetic media treatment; but for the anti-coup protestors in Honduras, coverage was minimal and quickly declined towards nothing.

A dramatic illustration of the scale and intensity of this bias can be seen in the treatment of protesters killed by the security forces of their own states. On June 20, 27-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan was shot to death while participating in a peaceful demonstration on one of the streets of Tehran. Her death became “a galvanizing symbol, both within Iran and increasingly around the world,” Rachel Maddow said on her MSNBC cable television program in the United States. “As people near her tried desperately to staunch her bleeding and try to keep her alive, two different witnesses on the scene captured her last moments on video. Those images have now rocketed around the world.” Maddow then telecast a portion of one of the videos — “not to be gratuitously graphic,” she explained, “but because this has become one of the most, if not the single most iconic moment of this uprising.” “Martyrdom is a powerful force in Shia Islam,” Roger Cohen wrote in the New York Times, recounting his attendance at a memorial for Neda at Nilofar Square in Tehran. “The cause is the annulment of Iran’s fraudulent election and, beyond that, freedom.”[14]

But not all youthful and innocent victims of their own states’ security forces became galvanizing symbols of dissent in 2009. In near identical circumstances just 15 days after images of Neda’s shooting death went viral, 19-year-old Isis Obed Murillo was shot dead by the Honduran military when it opened fire on a peaceful demonstration at the Toncontín airport in Tegucigalpa, and a bullet struck him in his head. Like Neda’s death, video images of Isis’s death were recorded in his dying moments at the scene, and like Neda’s, image sets of Isis’s death were placed on the Internet and made available to the global media. But whereas Neda’s death received massive coverage, and images of her dying moments “rocketed around the world,” Isis’s death passed almost unmentioned in the dominant English-language media and created no global martyrdom out of it.

Table 1 captures the different level of interest the media showed in each death. Whereas Isis’s murder by his state’s security forces was reported once on CNN (July 7), Neda’s was reported by ABC, NBC, CBS, PBS, CNN, Fox, MSNBC, NPR, and by other TV and radio programs in the States as well as abroad; eventually, it even received Frontline documentary treatment on PBS.[15]

Overall, Neda’s death was mentioned by a large sample of English-language media, 107 times as frequently as was Isis’s — and this discrepancy doesn’t begin to convey the kind of

passionate indignation expressed over Neda’s death and the complete lack of anything remotely similar over the death of Isis.

Table 1. Differential media interest in two young victims murdered by the security forces of their own governments[16]

Newspaper coverage

TV, Radio, and other coverage

TOTALS

Neda Agha-Soltan, aged 27, shot dead while participating in a peaceful street demonstration in Tehran on June 20[17]

736

231

967

Isis Obed Murillo, aged 19, shot dead while participating in a peaceful demonstration at the Toncontín airport in Tegucigalpa on July 5[18]

8

1

9

We also compared newspaper coverage of Neda’s death with the deaths of 24 Hondurans over a 12-month period (see Table 2). Here we found a similar discrepancy: By a ratio of 35-to-1, newspapers showed more interest in the death of this single young woman than they did in the deaths of all 24 Honduran protestors, journalists, social organizers and human rights advocates taken together.

Table 2. Differential media interest in one Iranian victim killed by the security forces of her own government and 24 Honduran victims murdered by the security forces of their own government or by death squad assassinations[19]

Newspaper coverage

Neda Agha-Soltan, aged 27, shot dead while participating in a peaceful street demonstration in Tehran on June 20[20]

1,359

Twenty-four Honduran deaths, including 7 protestors, 7 journalists, and 10 social organizers or human rights advocates[21]

39

Conclusion

This evidence on the interest in and treatment of protests and protestors in two different countries is a testimonial to a beautifully working propaganda system, where attention and indignation are focused on evils in the country whose government is being delegitimized, while similar evils are downplayed or entirely ignored in the country whose rulers are being protected.

In Part 2 we will describe how the government-media nexus worked to delegitimize the June 12, 2009 presidential election in Iran as “stolen,” based on a serious misrepresentation of evidence, while the same government-media nexus legitimized the November 29, 2009 elections in Honduras, even though carried out in a coup- and state-terror environment and without a popular electoral option on the ballot, and therefore truly fraudulent.

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Notes

1. See Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, [“The Iran Threat in the Age of Real-Axis-of-Evil Expansion,”](#) MRZine, March 16, 2010, Table 1, “Differential Media Focus on Ten Nuclear Programs for the Seven-Year Period, January 1, 2003 – December 31, 2009.”
2. See Avner Cohen, [Israel and the Bomb](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and [“Israel Crosses the Threshold,”](#) National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 189, April 28, 2006.
3. See [Honduras: Human Rights and the Coup d’État](#), Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, December 30, 2009, “The ‘fourth ballot box’,” para. 82-87.
4. On June 28, the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States “condemn[ed] vehemently the coup d’état staged this morning against the constitutionally-established Government of Honduras . . . which has produced an unconstitutional alteration of the democratic order,” demanded Manuel Zelaya’s return to office, and declared that “no government arising from this unconstitutional interruption will be recognized” (“[Current Situation in Honduras](#),” June 28, 2009, para. 1-3). Two days later, the U.N. General Assembly condemned the coup and made the same demands as the OAS, but also called upon all “States to recognize no Government other than that of the Constitutional President. . .” (“Situation in Honduras: Democracy Breakdown,” [A/RES/63/301](#), June 30, 2009, para. 3).
5. The allegation that Iran’s June 12, 2009 presidential election was “stolen,” and that the official results were “rigged” (those results were reported as 24,525,209 (63%) for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and 13,225,330 (34%) for Mir Hossein Mousavi), has never been

substantiated by evidence, and we regard it as disinformation spread by the Mousavi campaign and by a foreign destabilization campaign, and uncritically repeated by the establishment U.S. and Western media. See the analysis of vote-fraud allegations by Eric A. Brill, [“Did Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Steal the 2009 Iran Election?”](#) (Self-published), August 29, 2010. For additional analysis of Iran’s 2009 election, also see Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, [“Riding the ‘Green Wave’ at the Campaign for Peace and Democracy and Beyond,”](#) MRZine, July 24, 2009; and see Herman and Peterson, “Iran and Honduras in the Propaganda System — Part 2” (forthcoming).

6. The allegation that Honduran President Manuel Zelaya sought to use the referendum (whether to be held on June 28 or November 29 or any other date) to subvert the Constitution of Honduras and thereby extend his presidency to a second term has never been substantiated by evidence, and we regard it as disinformation spread by the coup regime to justify Zelaya’s arrest and exile, and uncritically repeated by the establishment U.S. media. See Joe Emersberger, [“Criminalizing Democracy in Honduras,”](#) ZNet, July 21, 2009. Emersberger provides an English translation of the final “public opinion survey” that Zelaya tried to call for June 28. That question would have read: “Do you agree that in the general election of November 2009 a fourth ballot box should be installed to decide whether to convene a National Constituent Assembly that would approve a political Constitution?” Not only was there “nothing in this question about presidential term limits,” as Emersberger points out, and not only was it strictly non-binding. But as Zelaya’s term in office was set to expire in January 2010, there clearly was no possibility of the Constitution being amended in time to permit him to run for a second term in office.

7. [“Mr. Arias Steps In,”](#) Editorial, New York Times, July 10, 2009; Alvaro Vargas Llosa, [“The Winner in Honduras: Chávez,”](#) New York Times, June 30, 2009; Roger Marin Neda, [“Who Cares About Zelaya?”](#) New York Times, July 7, 2009.

8. [“Neither Real Nor Free,”](#) Editorial, New York Times, June 15, 2009; [“Iran’s Nonrepublic,”](#) Editorial, New York Times, June 18, 2009; [“After the Crackdown,”](#) Editorial, New York Times, July 3, 2009.

9. Shane M., [“A Different Iranian Revolution,”](#) New York Times, June 19, 2009.

10. See Ali Ansari et al., [Preliminary Analysis of the Voting Figures in Iran’s 2009 Presidential Election](#), Chatham House (U.K.), June 21, 2009.

11. See [Results of a New Nationwide Public Opinion Survey of Iran before the June 12, 2009 Presidential Elections](#), (May 11 – 20), Terror Free Tomorrow, Center for Public Opinion, and New America Foundation, June, 2009. Also see Ken Ballen and Patrick Doherty, [“The Iranian People Speak,”](#) Washington Post, June 15, 2009.

12. See Steven Kull et al., [An Analysis of Multiple Polls of the Iranian Public](#), PIPA – WPO.org, February 3, 2010; Steven Kull et al., [Iranian Public on Current Issues: Questionnaires](#), PIPA – WPO.org, February 3, 2010; and the accompanying [Press Release](#).

13. Thomas L. Friedman, [“Winds of Change,”](#) New York Times, June 14, 2009; Ross Douthat, [“Recession and Revolution,”](#) New York Times, June 16, 2009; Danielle Pletka and Ali Alfoneh, [“Iran’s Hidden Revolution,”](#) New York Times, June 17, 2009; Thomas L. Friedman, [“The Virtual Mosque,”](#) New York Times, June 17, 2009; Nicholas D. Kristof, [“Tear Down This Cyberwall!”](#) New York Times, June 18, 2009; John Kerry, [“With Iran, Think Before](#)

[You Speak,](#)” New York Times, June 18, 2009; Shane M., [“A Different Iranian Revolution,”](#) New York Times, June 19, 2009; David Brooks, [“Fragile at the Core,”](#) New York Times, June 19, 2009; Reuel Marc Gerecht, [“The Koran and the Ballot Box,”](#) New York Times, June 21, 2009; Roger Cohen, [“A Supreme Leader Loses His Aura as Iranian’s Flock to the Streets,”](#) New York Times, June 21, 2009; Thomas L. Friedman, [“Bullets and Barrels,”](#) New York Times, June 21, 2009; Roger Cohen, [“Life and Death in Tehran,”](#) New York Times, June 23, 2009; Thomas L. Friedman, [“The Green Revolution\(s\),”](#) New York Times, June 24, 2009; Roger Cohen, [“Iran’s Second Sex,”](#) New York Times, June 27, 2009.

14. [The Rachel Maddow Show](#), MSNBC, [June 22, 2009](#); Roger Cohen, [“Life and Death in Tehran,”](#) New York Times, June 23, 2009.

15. See Monica Garnsey et al., [“A Death in Tehran,”](#) Frontline, PBS, November 17, 2009.

16. Factiva database searches carried out under the “Newspapers: All” and “Transcripts” categories on August 25, 2010. The exact search parameters for each column are described in notes 17 and 18. The time-periods searched for each individual murder victim began on the day they were murdered and continued for four-weeks-to-the-day (or 28 days more). We selected the murders of both Neda Agha-Soltan and Isis Obed Murillo for study based on several factors, one of which is that both murders were highlighted in Amnesty International’s [The State of the World’s Human Rights](#) (London: Amnesty International Publications, 2010), p. 173 and p. 163, respectively.

17. The exact search parameters were: Rst=(tnwp or ttpt) and Iran and (neda or agha-soltan) for the 29 day period June 20 - July 18, 2009.

18. The exact search parameters were: Rst=(tnwp or ttpt) and Honduras and (isis murill* or obed murill*) for the 29 day period from July 5 - August 2, 2009.

19. Factiva database searches carried out under the “Newspapers: All” category on August 25, 2010. The exact search parameters for each column are described in notes 20 and 21. Our list of the 24 Honduran victims derives from two Inter-American Human Rights Commission reports: [Honduras: Human Rights and the Coup d’État](#), “The right to life,” para. 235-251, December 30, 2009; and [Preliminary Observations of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on Its Visit to Honduras, May 15 to 18, 2010](#), “Murders of journalists in 2010,” para. 23 -24, and “Murders of human rights defenders and social leaders,” para. 52-62, June 3, 2010.

20. The exact search parameters were: Rst=tnwp and Iran and (neda or agha-soltan) from the date of her death, June 20, 2009 through June 20, 2010.

21. The exact search parameters were: Rst=tnwp and Honduras and [each victim’s name] from the date of the first victim’s death, July 5, 2009 through July 5, 2010.

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