

What Actually Happened in the Iranian Presidential Election?

A Hard Look at the Numbers

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Global Research, June 22, 2009

[CounterPunch](#) 22 June 2009

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

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Since the June 12 Iranian presidential elections, Iran “experts” have mushroomed like bacteria in a Petri dish. So here is a quiz for all those instant experts. Which major country has elected more presidents than any in the world since 1980? Further, which nation is the only one that held ten presidential elections within thirty years of its revolution?

The answer to both questions, of course, is Iran. Since 1980, it has elected six presidents, while the U.S. is a close second with five, and France at three. In addition, the U.S. held four presidential elections within three decades of its revolution to Iran’s ten.

The Iranian elections have unified the left and the right in the West and unleashed harsh criticisms and attacks from the “outraged” politicians to the “indignant” mainstream media. Even the blogosphere has joined this battle with near uniformity, on the side of Iran’s opposition, which is quite rare in cyberspace.

Much of the allegations of election fraud have been just that: unsubstantiated accusations. No one has yet been able to provide a solid shred of evidence of wide scale fraud that would have garnered eleven million votes for one candidate over his opponent.

So let’s analyze much of the evidence that is available to date.

More than thirty pre-election polls were conducted in Iran since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his main opponent, former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, announced their candidacies in early March 2009. The polls varied widely between the two opponents, but if one were to average their results, Ahmadinejad would still come out on top. However, some of the organizations sponsoring these polls, such as Iranian Labor News Agency and Tabnak, admit openly that they have been allies of Mousavi, the opposition, or the so-called reform movement. Their numbers were clearly tilted towards Mousavi and gave him an unrealistic advantage of over 30 per cent in some polls. If such biased polls were excluded, Ahmadinejad’s average over Mousavi would widen to about 21 points.

On the other hand, there was only one poll carried out by a western news organization. It was jointly commissioned by the BBC and ABC News, and conducted by an independent entity called the Center for Public Opinion (CPO) of the New America Foundation. The CPO has a reputation of conducting accurate opinion polls, not only in Iran, but across the Muslim world since 2005. The poll, conducted a few weeks before the elections, predicted an 89 percent turnout rate. Further, it showed that Ahmadinejad had a nationwide advantage of two to one over Mousavi.

How did this survey compare to the actual results? And what are the possibilities of wide scale election fraud?

According to official results, there were 46.2 million registered voters in Iran. The turnout was massive, as predicted by the CPO. Almost 39.2 million Iranians participated in the elections for a turn out rate of 85 percent, in which about 38.8 million ballots were deemed valid (about 400,000 ballots were left blank). Officially, President Ahmadinejad received 24.5 million votes to Mousavi's 13.2 million votes, or 62.6 per cent to 33.8 per cent of the total votes, respectively. In fact, this result mirrored the 2005 elections when Ahmadinejad received 61.7 per cent to former President Hashemi Rafsanjani's 35.9 per cent in the runoff elections. Two other minor candidates, Mehdi Karroubi and Mohsen Rezaee, received the rest of the votes in this election.

Shortly after the official results were announced Mousavi's supporters and Western political pundits cried foul and accused the government of election fraud. The accusations centered around four themes. First, although voting had been extended several hours due to the heavy turnout, it was alleged that the elections were called too quickly from the time the polls were closed, with more than 39 million ballots to count.

Second, these critics insinuated that election monitors were biased or that, in some instances, the opposition did not have its own monitors present during the count. Third, they pointed out that it was absurd to think that Mousavi, who descended from the Azerbaijan region in northwest Iran, was defeated handily in his own hometown. Fourth, the Mousavi camp charged that in some polling stations, ballots ran out and people were turned away without voting.

The next day, Mousavi and the two other defeated candidates lodged 646 complaints to the Guardian Council, the entity charged with overseeing the integrity of the elections. The Council promised to conduct full investigations of all the complaints. By the following morning, a copy of a letter by a low-level employee in the Interior Ministry sent to Supreme Guide Ali Khamanei, was widely circulating around the world. (Western politicians and media outlets like to call him "Supreme Leader" but no such title exists in Iran.)

The letter stated that Mousavi had won the elections, and that Ahmadinejad had actually come in third. It also promised that the elections were being fixed in favor of Ahmadinejad per Khamanei's orders. It is safe to assume that the letter was a forgery since an unidentified low-level employee would not be the one addressing Ayatollah Khamanei. Robert Fisk of The Independent reached the same conclusion by casting grave doubts that Ahmadinejad would score third - garnering less than 6 million votes in such an important election- as alleged in the forged letter.

There were a total of 45,713 ballot boxes that were set up in cities, towns and villages across Iran. With 39.2 million ballots cast, there were less than 860 ballots per box. Unlike other countries where voters can cast their ballots on several candidates and issues in a single election, Iranian voters had only one choice to consider: their presidential candidate. Why would it take more than an hour or two to count 860 ballots per poll? After the count, the results were then reported electronically to the Ministry of the Interior in Tehran.

Since 1980, Iran has suffered an eight-year deadly war with Iraq, a punishing boycott and embargo, and a campaign of assassination of dozens of its lawmakers, an elected president

and a prime minister from the group Mujahideen Khalq Organization. (MKO is a deadly domestic violent organization, with headquarters in France, which seeks to topple the government by force.) Despite all these challenges, the Islamic Republic of Iran has never missed an election during its three decades. It has conducted over thirty elections nationwide. Indeed, a tradition of election orderliness has been established, much like election precincts in the U.S. or boroughs in the U.K. The elections in Iran are organized, monitored and counted by teachers and professionals including civil servants and retirees (again much like the U.S.)

There has not been a tradition of election fraud in Iran. Say what you will about the system of the Islamic Republic, but its elected legislators have impeached ministers and “borked” nominees of several Presidents, including Ahmadinejad. Rubberstamps, they are not. In fact, former President Mohammad Khatami, considered one of the leading reformists in Iran, was elected president by the people, when the interior ministry was run by archconservatives. He won with over 70 percent of the vote, not once, but twice.

When it comes to elections, the real problem in Iran is not fraud but candidates’ access to the ballots (a problem not unique to the country, just ask Ralph Nader or any other third party candidate in the U.S.) It is highly unlikely that there was a huge conspiracy involving tens of thousands of teachers, professionals and civil servants that somehow remained totally hidden and unexposed.

Moreover, while Ahmadinejad belongs to an active political party that has already won several elections since 2003, Mousavi is an independent candidate who emerged on the political scene just three months ago, after a 20-year hiatus. It was clear during the campaign that Ahmadinejad had a nationwide campaign operation. He made over sixty campaign trips throughout Iran in less than twelve weeks, while his opponent campaigned only in the major cities, and lacked a sophisticated campaign apparatus.

It is true that Mousavi has an Azeri background. But the CPO poll mentioned above, and published before the elections, noted that “its survey indicated that only 16 per cent of Azeri Iranians will vote for Mr. Mousavi. By contrast, 31 per cent of the Azeris claim they will vote for Mr. Ahmadinejad.” In the end, according to official results, the election in that region was much closer than the overall result. In fact, Mousavi won narrowly in the West Azerbaijan province but lost the region to Ahmadinejad by a 45 to 52 per cent margin (or 1.5 to 1.8 million votes).

However, the double standard applied by Western news agencies is striking. Richard Nixon trounced George McGovern in his native state of South Dakota in the 1972 elections. Had Al Gore won his home state of Tennessee in 2000, no one would have cared about a Florida recount, nor would there have been a Supreme Court case called Bush v. Gore. If Vice-Presidential candidate John Edwards had won the states he was born and raised in (South and North Carolina), President John Kerry would now be serving his second term. But somehow, in Western newsrooms Middle Eastern people choose their candidates not on merit, but on the basis of their “tribe.”

The fact that minor candidates such as Karroubi would garner fewer votes than expected, even in their home regions as critics charge, is not out of the ordinary. Many voters reach the conclusion that they do not want to waste their votes when the contest is perceived to be between two major candidates. Karroubi indeed received far fewer votes this time around than he did in 2005, including in his hometown. Likewise, Ross Perot lost his home

state of Texas to Bob Dole of Kansas in 1996, while in 2004, Ralph Nader received one eighth of the votes he had four years earlier.

Some observers note that when the official results were being announced, the margin between the candidates held steady throughout the count. In fact, this is no mystery. Experts say that generally when 3-5 per cent of the votes from a given region are actually counted, there is a 95 per cent confidence level that such result will hold firm. As for the charge that ballots ran out and some people were turned away, it is worth mentioning that voting hours were extended four times in order to allow as many people as possible the opportunity to vote. But even if all the people who did not vote, had actually voted for Mousavi (a virtual impossibility), that would be 6.93 million additional votes, much less than the 11 million vote difference between the top two candidates.

Ahmadinejad is certainly not a sympathetic figure. He is an ideologue, provocative, and sometimes behaving imprudently. But to characterize the struggle in Iran as a battle between democratic forces and a "dictator," is to exhibit total ignorance of Iran's internal dynamics, or to deliberately distort them. There is no doubt that there is a significant segment of Iranian society, concentrated around major metropolitan areas, and comprising many young people, that passionately yearns for social freedoms. They are understandably angry because their candidate came up short. But it would be a huge mistake to read this domestic disagreement as an "uprising" against the Islamic Republic, or as a call to embark on a foreign policy that would accommodate the West at the expense of Iran's nuclear program or its vital interests.

Nations display respect to other nations only when they respect their sovereignty. If any nation, for instance, were to dictate the United States' economic, foreign or social policies, Americans would be indignant. When France, under President Chirac opposed the American adventure in Iraq in 2003, some U.S. Congressmen renamed a favorite fast food from French Fries to "Freedom Fries." They made it known that the French were unwelcome in the U.S.

The U.S. has a legacy of interference in Iran's internal affairs, notably when it toppled the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953. This act, of which most Americans are unaware, is ingrained in every Iranian from childhood. It is the main cause of much of their perpetual anger at the U.S. It took 56 years for an American president to acknowledge this illegal act, when Obama did so earlier this month in Cairo.

Therefore, it would be a colossal mistake to interfere in Iran's internal affairs yet again. President Obama is wise to leave this matter to be resolved by the Iranians themselves. Political expediency by the Republicans or pro-Israel Democrats will be extremely dangerous and will yield serious repercussions. Such reckless conduct by many in the political class and the media appears to be a blatant attempt to demonize Iran and its current leadership, in order to justify any future military attack by Israel if Iran does not give up its nuclear ambition.

President Obama's declarations in Cairo are now being aptly recalled. Regarding Iran, he said, "I recognize it will be hard to overcome decades of mistrust, but we will proceed with courage, rectitude, and resolve. There will be many issues to discuss between our two countries, and we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect."

But the first sign of respect is to let the Iranians sort out their differences without any overt

-or covert -interference.

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