

FRAUD

THE IRANIAN ELECTION

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Azerbaijan. Certainly, his rallies there were very well attended. So for an Azeri urban center to go so heavily for Ahmadinejad just makes no sense. In past elections, Azeris voted disproportionately for even minor presidential candidates who hailed from that province." (Juan Cole, 13 June, tinyurl.com/jnv203)

Cole is even more suspicious of the poor showing of Mehdi Karoubi, the other reformist candidate, who officially received only 320,000 votes, and who did poorly in Iran's western provinces, even losing in Luristan.

Cole: "He is a Lur and is popular in the west, including in Kurdistan." Karoubi received 17% of the vote in 2005. "While it is possible that his support has substantially declined since then, it is hard to believe that he would get less than one percent of the vote [in 2009]. Moreover, he should have at least done well in the west, which he did not."

Nate Silver, a statistical expert with generally agnostic views on the 2009 election, points out the oddity of Luristan where "conservative candidates received only about 20 percent of the vote in 2005 but where Ahmadinejad supposedly got 71 percent on Friday." (FiveThirtyEight blog, tinyurl.com/jnv214)

Tehran Bureau, an excellent independent reporting site, notes: "according to the data released by Iran's Interior Ministry, in both cases, Mr. Ahmadinejad has far outdone both candidates in their own provinces of birth and among their own ethnic populations." (13 June, <http://tehranbureau.com/faulty-election-data/>)

Tehran Bureau also note that, strangely, throughout election night, as the Interior Ministry announced vote totals in 5m batches, the Ahmadinejad:Moussavi ratio retained a 2:1 "perfect linear relation".

FINALLY

The indications of fraud **do not mean** that Ahmadinejad did not win the elections. He may have done. It is also difficult to see how the fraud could have taken place without alerting powerful allies of the candidates. Nevertheless, **the overall picture is damning.**

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The disputed Iranian presidential election of 12 June 2009 has sparked massive anti-government protests inside the country, and brutal repression. There has been significant debate outside Iran (including in anti-war circles) as to whether the election was rigged.

Close analysis of the voting figures, and especially the regional pattern of alleged voting, seems to indicate that fraud did take place, though this does not necessarily mean that re-elected President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad did not win the election. We are unlikely ever to know who actually won the election, and it is difficult to know how the Iranian opposition could gain confidence in the result of a re-run election – unless it wins.

BACKGROUND

There were four candidates in the 2009 presidential elections – two candidates identified as "reformers" and two as "conservatives". "Conservatives" in Iran generally describe themselves as "principle-ists", meaning they base their politics on what they claim to be revolutionary and Islamic "principles". The main reform candidate, Mir-Hossein Moussavi described himself as both reformist and principle-ist (BBC News, <http://tinyurl.com/jnv201>).

The position of the president in the Iranian constitution is quite limited. "It is the Supreme Leader, not the president, who controls the armed forces and makes decisions on security, defence and major foreign policy issues." (BBC News, tinyurl.com/jnv204)

The Supreme Leader (who is appointed, not elected) is Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

FAST WORK

The result of the election was announced just 90 minutes after polls closed – on the basis of counting 5m out of a total of 39.2m votes. (AP, 15 June, tinyurl.com/jnv202)



Even more surprising than the speed of the announcement was the scale of Ahmadinejad's alleged victory - 63% of votes, to only 34% for his main challenger Mir-Hossein Mousavi. This seemed unbelievable to Moussavi's supporters, given the momentum that had built up behind him in the last weeks of the campaign.

Even more surprising: "Even though Iran's Electoral Commission allows three days to hear challenges before presenting results to Khamenei for approval, the Supreme Leader rushed to put his seal of approval on the outcome, and warned all political factions to refrain from challenging it." (*Time* magazine, 15 June, tinyurl.com/jnv205)

THE UNRELIABLE POLLS

The first Western argument in support of Ahmadinejad's victory came from an unexpected quarter, the right-wing US Terror-Free Tomorrow (TFT) organization, which conducted a telephone poll of 1,001 voters inside Iran from 11-20 May covering all 30 provinces of Iran, "with a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percent". (tinyurl.com/jnv206)

The TFT poll results: Ahmadinejad (34%); Moussavi (14%); Mehdi Karoubi (reformist, 2%) and Mohsen Rezai (principle-ist, 1%).

Ken Ballen and Patrick Doherty, directors of the poll, wrote in the *Washington Post* that: "our nationwide public opinion survey of Iranians three weeks before the vote showed Ahmadinejad leading by a more than 2 to 1 margin - greater than his actual apparent margin of victory in Friday's election." (15 June, tinyurl.com/jnv207)

This was cited approvingly by, among others, Seumas Milne in the *Guardian*. Milne suggested that "most official figures don't look so implausible" and that "it's hard to believe that rigging alone could account for the 11 million-vote gap between the main contenders". (18 June, p.33, tinyurl.com/jnv208)

There are many problems with this interpretation of the TFT poll, not the least of which are that (a) it gave Ahmadinejad a result **29% short of his alleged victory**; (b) it was taken only a week into the campaign, before the Moussavi bandwagon began rolling. (For biting comments by region specialist Juan Cole, see tinyurl.com/jnv209)

There were other opinion polls. Martin Fletcher of *The Times* comments: "Of the last dozen polls, seven put Mr Mousavi ahead, with leads of up to 41.5 per cent, while five had Mr Ahmadinejad ahead, with leads of up to 37 per cent. They are, in short, all but useless." (18 June, p.7, tinyurl.com/jnv210)

One interesting survey was a government-funded poll, apparently

seen by *Newsweek* magazine, predicting 16m-18m Iranians would vote for Mousavi, "compared with just 6 million to 8 million for Ahmadinejad". *Newsweek* commented: "This is a tidal shift from just four weeks ago, when public polls showed Ahmadinejad ahead by 50 percent, and the turnaround has shocked the country's political elite." (online: 6 June, print: 15 June, tinyurl.com/jnv211)

BIG NUMBERS

Seumas Milne (see above) suggests that: "It's hardly surprising that Ahmadinejad... might have achieved a similar majority to that of his first election in 2005." But in 2005, the reformists boycotted the election for fear of giving it legitimacy, while they mobilized massively for the 2009 elections.

Instead of looking at the ratio of votes (Ahmadinejad/Moussavi), many commentators have focussed on the absolute numbers.

If we are comparing the 2005 and 2009 elections, we should be clear about which round we're talking about. In the second round in 2005, Ahmadinejad did indeed win 62% of 22m votes in the presidential election (on a 60% turnout). (BBC tinyurl.com/jnv212) That's 13.6m votes. However, that was a one-on-one contest.

If we look at the first round of the 2005 election, as suggested by Professor Ali Ansari, Director of the Institute of Iranian Studies at the University of St Andrews and regional specialist at Chatham House; we see that all conservative candidates together won 11.6m votes.

To win 62% of the vote in 2009 (on an 85% turnout, that's 24.5m votes), Ahmadinejad would have had to win **an extra 13m votes**. According to Ansari, this means that: "in 10 out of 30 provinces, mainly former Mehdi Karrubi [reformist] strongholds, the official data suggests that Ahmadinejad not only received the votes of **all former non-voters** and former President, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani voters, but also took **up to 44% of the vote from those who had previously voted reformist**." (Chatham House, 21 June, tinyurl.com/jnv213)

Unlikely.

PATTERNS OF SUSPICION

The pattern of reported voting was highly suspicious.

Ahmadinejad is supposed to have won over 50% of votes in Tabriz, the capital of Azerbaijan, even though Moussavi is an Azeri. Juan Cole comments: "Mousavi, according to such polls as exist in Iran and widespread anecdotal evidence, did better in cities and is popular in