

Question & Answer on the Iran Crisis

Thursday 9 July 2009, by [HARRISON Thomas](#), [LANDY Joanne](#), [LEMISCH Jesse](#), [SHALOM Stephen R.](#) (Date first published: 7 July 2009).

(July 7, 2009) — Right after the June 12 elections in Iran, the Campaign for Peace and Democracy issued a statement expressing our strong support for the masses of Iranians protesting electoral fraud and our horror at the ferocious response of the government. Our statement concluded: “We express our deep concern for their well-being in the face of brutal repression and our fervent wishes for the strengthening and deepening of the movement for justice and democracy in Iran.” Since the elections, some on the left, and others as well, have questioned the legitimacy of and the need for solidarity with the anti-Ahmadinejad movement. The Campaign’s position of solidarity with the Iranian protesters has not changed, but we think those questions need to be squarely addressed.

Below are the questions we take up. Questions three, four and five deal with the issue of electoral fraud; readers who are not interested in this rather technical discussion are invited to go on to question six. And we should say at the outset that our support for the protest movement is not determined by the technicalities of electoral manipulation, as important as they are. What is decisive is that huge masses of Iranians are convinced that the election was rigged and that they went into the streets, at great personal risk, to demand democracy and an end to theocratic repression.

1. Was the June 12, 2009 election fair?
2. Isn’t it true that the Guardian Council is indirectly elected by the Iranian people?
3. Was there fraud, and was it on a scale to alter the outcome?
4. Didn’t a poll conducted by U.S.-based organizations conclude that Ahmadinejad won the election?
5. Didn’t Ahmadinejad get lots of votes from conservative religious Iranians among the rural population and the urban poor? Might not these votes have been enough to overwhelm his opponents?
6. Hasn’t the U.S. (and Israel) been interfering in Iran and promoting regime change, including by means of supporting all sorts of “pro-democracy” groups?
7. Has the Western media been biased against the Iranian government?
8. Is Mousavi a leftist? A neoliberal? What is the relation between Mousavi and the demonstrators in the streets?
9. Is Ahmadinejad good for world anti-imperialism?
10. Is Ahmadinejad more progressive than his opponents in terms of social and economic policy? Is he a champion of the Iranian poor?
11. What do we want the U.S. government to do about the current situation in Iran?
12. What should we do about the current situation in Iran?

13. Is it right to advocate a different form of government in Iran?

1. Was the June 12, 2009 election fair?

Even if every vote was counted fairly, this was not a fair election. 475 people wished to run for president, but the un-elected Guardian Council, which vets all candidates for supposed conformity to Islamic principles, rejected all but 4.

Free elections also require free press, free expression, and freedom to organize, all of which have been severely curtailed.” [1]

2. You call the Guardian Council un-elected, but isn't it true that it is indirectly elected by the Iranian people?

Every eight years the Assembly of Experts is popularly elected. Candidates must be clerics and must be approved by the Guardian Council. The Assembly of Experts then chooses a supreme leader, who rules for life (though he can be removed by the Assembly of Experts for un-Islamic behavior). The supreme leader appoints the head of the judiciary. The supreme leader chooses half of the 12 members of the Guardian Council and the judiciary nominates the other six, to be ratified by the Parliament. The Guardian Council then vets all future candidates for president, parliament, and the Assembly of Experts. [2]

Thus, once this system was in place the possibilities of fundamentally changing it have been essentially nil. If 98 percent of the Iranian people decided tomorrow that they opposed an Islamic state, the rules would still enable the theocracy to continue in power forever — because the only people who could change things have themselves to be vetted by the theocratic rulers. Even amending the constitution requires the approval of the supreme leader.

Iran is not a dictatorship of the Saudi Arabian sort, where there are no elections and where people have zero input. But the basic prerequisite of a democratic system — that the people can change their government — is missing.

3. OK, but was there fraud? And was it on a scale to alter the outcome?

There was certainly fraud: The Iranian government acknowledges that in 50 cities there were more votes cast than registered voters. (In Iran, voters can cast their ballots in districts other than those in which they reside, but “many districts where the excess votes were recorded are small, remote places rarely visited by business travelers or tourists.” [3]) Moreover, the vote total also exceeded the number of registered voters in two provinces. [4] (Province-wide excess is more significant than city-wide, because people would be less likely to vote in another province than another city.)

Perhaps the most damning indication of fraud was the fact that Mousavi's observers, as well as those of the other opposition candidates, were frequently not allowed to be present when ballots were counted and the ballot boxes sealed — a flagrant violation of Iranian law. [5] Moreover, supporters of opposition candidates had planned to independently monitor the results by text messaging local vote tallies to a central location, but the government suddenly shut down text messaging, making this impossible.

The question, though, is whether the extent of fraud was sufficient to change the results of the election. We can't be fully sure. But there is very powerful evidence that either no one emerged with a majority, which would have required a run-off election, or that Mousavi won outright.

According to an analysis by researchers at Chatham House, a British think tank, and the Institute of Iranian Studies at the University of St Andrews:

“In a third of all provinces, the official results would require that Ahmadinejad took not only all former conservative voters, and all former centrist voters, and all new voters, but also up to 44% of former Reformist voters, despite a decade of conflict between these two groups.” [6]

Since Ahmadinejad’s victory in 2005, when many reformists boycotted the elections and questions of fraud were raised, the hardliners lost their control of local councils in 2007. So an Ahmadinejad sweep in 2009 — when reformist leaders, responding to a growing wave of discontent with the regime, were newly energized to challenge the President — is hard to credit.

Ahmadinejad allegedly won in areas where other candidates had strong ties and support, including their home provinces. Some have suggested that this was a result of people not wanting to “waste” their votes on candidates unlikely to win. [7] But in Iran, elections are in two stages: if no candidate gets a majority in round one, then there is a run-off. So there was no reason for anyone to refrain from voting for her preferred candidate in the first round.

4. Didn’t a poll conducted by U.S.-based organizations conclude that Ahmadinejad won the election?

The poll, conducted by Terror Free Tomorrow and the New America Foundation, found that Ahmadinejad was favored over Mousavi by two to one. But the poll was conducted between May 11 and May 20, 2009, before the official beginning of the three-week election campaign, and before the (first-ever) televised presidential debates. These debates were a turning point: millions of Iranians saw displayed the deep divisions in the leadership of the Islamic Republic. They sensed that there was now an opportunity for real change.

More importantly, however, Ahmadinejad received the support of only a third of the poll respondents, with almost half either refusing to answer or saying they hadn’t yet made up their minds:

“At the stage of the campaign for President when our poll was taken, 34 percent of Iranians surveyed said they will vote for incumbent President Ahmadinejad. Mr. Ahmadinejad’s closest rival, Mir Hussein Moussavi, was the choice of 14 percent, with 27 percent stating that they still do not know who they will vote for. President Ahmadinejad’s other rivals, Mehdi Karroubi and Mohsen Rezaei, were the choice of 2 percent and 1 percent, respectively.” A close examination of our survey results reveals that the race may actually be closer than a first look at the numbers would indicate. More than 60 percent of those who state they don’t know who they will vote for in the Presidential elections reflect individuals who favor political reform and change in the current system.” [8]

When a government acts in secret, conducts an election lacking in transparency, and bars and restricts foreign journalists and the free flow of information, it makes sense not to accept its claims.

5. But didn’t Ahmadinejad get lots of votes from conservative religious Iranians among the rural population and the urban poor? Might not these votes have been enough to overwhelm his opponents?

Ahmadinejad’s support from ultraconservative voters was certainly not insignificant. In addition, his social welfare programs, funded from oil revenues, have undoubtedly induced many among the poor to give him their allegiance (see below). And then there are the members of the security apparatus — the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij, the pro-government religious paramilitary force — who, together with their families, number in the millions. But there is no evidence that these were enough to give him the huge majorities he claims. As for peasants and villagers, only 35 percent of Iranian voters live in rural areas. And in any event, there is good reason to believe that rural voters are not

strongly pro-Ahmadinejad. [9] As Chatham House noted, “In 2005, as in 2001 and 1997, conservative candidates, and Ahmadinejad in particular, were markedly unpopular in rural areas. That the countryside always votes conservative is a myth. The claim that this year Ahmadinejad swept the board in more rural provinces flies in the face of these trends.” [10]

6. Hasn't the U.S. (and Israel) been interfering in Iran and promoting regime change, including by means of supporting all sorts of “pro-democracy” groups?

In the 1950s and 60s, rightwingers charged that the U.S. civil rights movement was actually controlled by the Soviet Union, through the U.S. Communist Party. Of course Communists were involved in the civil rights movement and no doubt Moscow approved. But that's a far cry from indicating that the Soviet Union was a decisive force in the civil rights movement, let alone that it controlled the movement.

There is no doubt that U.S. agents, as well as those of other countries, are hard at work in Iran, as elsewhere. It is well known that Washington has meddled in the politics of Venezuela and Bolivia, as well as Georgia, Ukraine and Lebanon, to take only the most recent examples. Congress has even set up a special fund for “democracy promotion” in Iran. But foreign meddling does not prove foreign control. And foreign meddling does not automatically discredit mass movements or their goals; it depends on who is calling the shots. In any event, there is no evidence that the CIA or any other arm of U.S. intelligence — or Mossad — had anything to do with initiating or leading the protests in Iran. And it is absurd to see a parallel between the rightwing elements in Venezuela and Bolivia — who are not fighting for greater popular control over their governments — and the millions of protesters who have demanded democracy in Iran.

In 1953 U.S. and British intelligence engineered a coup to oust the democratically-elected Mossadeq government in Iran. But that coup involved bribing street gangs and a treasonous military. There was nothing like the mass upsurge that we've recently seen in Iran, and there has been not a scrap of credible evidence that the millions of people in the streets these past few weeks were brought out by CIA money.

On the contrary, for years now leading Iranian human rights activists, feminists, trade unionists — people like Shirin Ebadi and Akbar Ganji — have taken the position that Iranian dissidents should not accept U.S. financial support. [11] They have a consistent record of opposing U.S. bullying, sanctions and threats of war, [12] and they know that any hint of links to Washington would be the kiss of death in Iran.

Recently, Iranian state television has broadcast footage of alleged rioters stating “We were under the influence of Voice of America Persia and the BBC” and some detainees — politicians, journalists, and others — are said to have confessed to all sorts of Western plots. [13] Surely, though, no one should take such claims, elicited under torture or duress, seriously. [14]

7. Has the Western media been biased against the Iranian government?

Mainstream Western media have clearly been more interested in pointing out electoral fraud and repression in Iran than in states that are closely allied with Washington. But this doesn't mean that there has been no fraud or repression in Iran.

For example, a video of the killing of Neda Agha Soltan spread widely on the internet and the media was quick to turn her death into a icon of the brutality of the Iranian government. We never saw a similar response to the many victims of government atrocities in Haiti or Egypt or Colombia. Nevertheless, the claim by some Iranian officials that she was killed by the CIA or by other

demonstrators just to make the regime look bad [15] is totally lacking in credibility.

Western media have always selectively publicized and often exaggerated the crimes of official enemies. But we shouldn't conclude from this that crimes have not been committed. And in the case of Iran, there is no good evidence so far that Western news reports on the government's electoral fraud and violent repression of dissent have been fundamentally inaccurate.

8. Is Mousavi a leftist? A neoliberal? What is the relation between Mousavi and the demonstrators in the streets?

Mousavi's politics and economic program are not very clear. He is in many ways a pillar of the Establishment — approved as a candidate by the Guardian Council and a former prime minister who served under Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1980s. He had a reputation for being one of the leaders more sympathetic to welfare state programs. Under his prime ministership many such programs were enacted, but also leftists were brutally repressed. With Washington's assistance: using U.S. intelligence information, the Iranian government rounded up members of the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party and conducted mass executions, virtually eliminating the Tudeh in Iran and killing many other leftists as well. [16] It has been argued that the repression was carried out by the ministry of intelligence and the judiciary, and that these institutions were not in fact under his control even though he was prime minister. Whether or not this is the case, at a minimum Mousavi neither resigned nor publicly protested the violent repression that took place when he was prime minister, and thus he cannot be absolved of responsibility.

More recently, he has been an ally of the powerful billionaire cleric and former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, who is close to major private business interests. Mousavi supports turning over many of the publicly-owned sectors of the Iranian economy to private hands, but so does Ahmadinejad, who boasts that he has privatized more public assets than his predecessors, [17] and in fact privatization has been going on for several years and is mandated by recently passed legislation. [18] In his campaign for the presidency, Mousavi called for loosening some of the Islamic Republic's restrictions on personal liberties, especially as concern women's rights. But Mousavi came to embody the aspirations of millions of Iranians for more than this — for an end to the terrorism of the Basijis and the Revolutionary Guards and for an even broader democratization of the Islamic Republic. Undoubtedly, some of them hoped — as do we — that the protests would be a first step towards dismantling the fundamentally anti-democratic system of clerical rule itself.

During the weeks that followed the election, demonstrators protested voting fraud, but also called increasingly for equality and freedom — “down with dictatorship!” The marches may have been started mainly by students and liberal-minded middle class people, but they were quickly joined by growing numbers of workers, elderly people and women in conservative chadors.

It seems that Mousavi's electoral organization did not anticipate the massive outpouring of protest after the election and was unable (and perhaps unwilling, given Mousavi's Establishment ties) to provide any organization or real leadership. The ferocious violence of the security forces has left the protesters, and the general public in Iran, stunned and understandably intimidated. However, their outrage is deep, and it will not go away. Protest may soon return to the streets and rooftops. And many are looking for other forms of protest. Mousavi, Khatami and Rafsanjani have not made their peace with Ahmadinejad, and the split in Iran's clerical establishment deepens.

The millions who have gone into the streets have already shown themselves capable of acting independently of Mousavi, and, as has often been the case in democratic struggles historically around the world, there is good reason to believe that the masses of protesters who have entered into the fight for limited demands can transcend the political, social and economic program of the

movement's initial leaders. In Iran, this is especially the case if trade unions are able to use the opening created by today's challenges to Ahmadinejad to assert the interests of the poor and lend their organized strength to the movement.

9. Is Ahmadinejad good for world anti-imperialism?

There is a foolish argument in some sectors of the left that holds that any state that is opposed by the U.S. government is therefore automatically playing a progressive, anti-imperialist role and should be supported. On these grounds, many such "leftists" have acted as apologists for murderous dictators like Milosevic and Saddam Hussein. The Campaign for Peace and Democracy has always argued that we can oppose U.S. imperial policy without thereby having necessarily to back the states against which it is directed.

Ironically, despite their current rhetoric, some U.S. neoconservatives favored an Ahmadinejad victory. [19] They knew that on the main issues dividing the U.S. and Iran — Tehran's pursuit of nuclear energy, its support for Hamas and Hezbollah, and its insistence on forcing Israel to withdraw completely from the Occupied Territories — Ahmadinejad's position was no different from that of Mousavi or that of Iranian public opinion. [20] But Ahmadinejad, with his confrontational style and his outrageous "questioning" of the Holocaust, is a much easier leader to hate and fear; his continuing grip on power therefore serves the goals of neoconservative hawks and Israeli hardliners. [21] And they know that Iranian public opinion solidly supports the cause of Palestinian rights; and that Ahmadinejad's anti-Jewish rhetoric has harmed, not helped, the Palestinians.

Some of these "leftists" say that whatever Ahmadinejad's faults, the mass upsurge in Iran plays into the hands of U.S. imperialism. On the contrary, a people's pro-democracy movement is the worst fear of the many authoritarian regimes on which Washington relies to maintain its hegemony; such as the rulers of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Pakistan and elsewhere. And not just among U.S. clients. It is significant that news of the demonstrations was heavily censored in China and Myanmar, and that the Russian government was one of the first to congratulate Ahmadinejad on his "victory."

Hugo Chavez too congratulated Ahmadinejad. As Reese Erlich, author of *The Iran Agenda* who frequently appears on *Democracy Now!*, has commented,

"On a diplomatic level, Venezuela and Iran share some things in common. Both are under attack from the U.S., including past efforts at 'regime change.' Venezuela and other governments around the world will have to deal with Ahmadinejad as the de facto president, so questioning the election could cause diplomatic problems." But that's no excuse." [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/13/AR2006031301761_pf.html] *Washington Post*, Oct. 26, 2007; Patrick Disney, "Iranian Civil Society Urges US to End 'Democracy Fund,' Ease Sanctions," <http://www.niacouncil.org/index.php...> 16 July 2008.

[12] See, for example, "Iran's Civil Society Movement Sets Up 'National Peace Council'," <http://www.campaigniran.org/casmii/...> CASMII Press Release, 10 July 2008.

[13] AFP, "Iran shows footage of 'rioters influenced by Western media'," <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/Display...> 23 June 2009; Michael Slackman, "Top Reformers Admitted Plot, Iran Declares," <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/04/w...> *New York Times*, July 4, 2009; CNN, "Newsweek reporter in Iran reportedly 'confesses'," <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/m...> July 1, 2009.

[14] Of course, when similar torture was carried out by the U.S. government, U.S. media only referred to "harsh interrogation techniques." See Glenn Greenwald, "The NYT calls Iranian interrogation tactics 'torture'," <http://www.salon.com/opinion/greenw...> Salon, July 4, 2009.

[15] Thomas Erdbrink and William Branigin, "Iranian cleric says protesters wage war against God," <http://www.boston.com/news/world/mi...> *Boston Globe*, June 27, 2009.

[16] *The Tower Commission Report, President's Special Review Board*, New York: Bantam Books/Times Books, 1987, pp. 103-04.

[17] Ehsani, et al., op. cit.

[18] Billy Wharton, "[Selling Iran: Ahmadinejad, privatisation and a bus driver who said 'no'](#)," Dissident Voice, June 28th, 2009.

[19] Stephen Zunes, "Why U.S. Neocons Want Ahmadinejad to Win," <http://www.alternet.org/story/140707/> AlterNet, June 17, 2009.

[20] See Obama's assessment of the lack of difference between Mousavi and Ahmadinejad <http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalp...>; on public opinion, see Terror Free Tomorrow poll cited above.

[21] Joshua Mitnick, "Why Iran's Ahmadinejad is preferred in Israel <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0621/...>; The incumbent president will be easier to isolate than reformist leader Mr. Mousavi, say some leading Israeli policymakers," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 21, 2009.

[22] Reese Erlich, "[Iran and Leftist Confusion](#)," ZNet, June 29, 2009.

[23] See ILO, "Ratifications of the Fundamental human rights Conventions by country" <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/d...> (7/1/09).

[24] International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, "Workers' Rights." <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2006...>

[25] Amnesty International, "Iran: Prisoners of conscience / fear of torture or ill-treatment," <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/i...> 10 June 2009, MDE 13/054/2009.

[26] International Labour Organization, "ILO Governing Body elects new Chairperson — Committee on Freedom of Association cites Myanmar, Cambodia and Islamic Republic of Iran," http://www.ilo.org/global/About_the... Press release, 19 June 2009, ILO/09/41.

[27] Amnesty International, "Iran: New executions demonstrate need for unequivocal legal ban of

stoning," <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/i...> 15 January 2009, MDE 13/004/2009.