

Can the West Accept Iran's Opening?

The mainstream U.S. news media always blames Iran for the nuclear dispute, while ignoring other key facts like Israel's rogue nuclear arsenal and the failure of the West to offer Iran meaningful sanctions relief. But Iran's election of Hassan Rouhani creates a chance for mutual concessions, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Hassan Rouhani's stunning and sweeping victory in the Iranian presidential election is already generating much debate among expert Iran-watchers about how to interpret this outcome. There are different views, for example, on what inference should be drawn regarding the posture of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei toward the election.

Was this outcome one that the leader might have anticipated and is part of a skillful management of contending factions, or does the election result instead indicate that the leader's control of Iranian politics is less than was often surmised? There also are different views on what role sanctions-induced economic strain may have had on the election.

These are genuine questions on which objective and well-informed observers can disagree. Not genuine is the spin from some other fast-off-the-mark commentators who are endeavoring to deny any significance to Rouhani's victory and to portray the Iranian regime as nothing but the same old recalcitrant adversary, a spin motivated by opposition to reaching agreements with Iran and the favoring of confrontation and even war with it.

Useful implications for policy toward Iran can be drawn without resolving all these analytical questions, even the genuine ones. Sometimes a particular course of action is the best course under any of several different interpretations of exactly what is going on in another nation's capital. This is one of those instances.

In particular, there are clear implications for approaching the next stage of negotiations on, and policy toward, Iran's nuclear program, which, for better or for worse, is the subject dominating discussion of relations with the Islamic Republic.

One thing that the Iranian election would have changed no matter what the outcome on election day is that we soon will not have Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to kick around anymore. The end of his distracting and annoying presence can only

be to the good.

Perhaps at least a little more serious attention will be devoted in the United States to policy and diplomacy when there is a little less energy allocated to expressing outrage over the outgoing Iranian president's mistranslated quotes about wiping maps and his other intentionally inflammatory rhetoric.

Rouhani's win brings to Iran's presidency the candidate who was least associated with attributes of the Iranian regime that the West finds most offensive. While one must always be careful in affixing labels to individual leaders and factions in Iranian politics, the pre-election characterization of Rouhani as the most moderate of the six candidates remaining in the race until election day is accurate.

The election result also is a vote in favor of flexibility and going the extra mile to reach agreement in the nuclear negotiations. In this regard one of the significant aspects of the result is not only how well Rouhani did but also how bad the result was for one of the other candidates, Saeed Jalili, the current nuclear negotiator.

Conduct of the negotiations was an issue in the campaign. Yet another candidate, former foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati (who possibly could become foreign minister again under Rouhani) pointedly criticized Jalili in one of the candidates' debates for apparently expecting too much from the other side while offering little in return.

Jalili, who before the election had been dubbed the supreme leader's man and was considered by some the favorite, finished a far-behind third place, with less than a quarter as many votes as Rouhani.

There clearly is an opportunity for diplomatic progress. More to the point, there is a challenge, to the United States and its P5+1 partners in the nuclear negotiations, to do their part to make such progress possible. This is true no matter which of several possible interpretations of the details of politics in Iran is valid.

Whether the supreme leader is stage-managing a process that leads to an outcome he has always welcomed, or is being pushed toward that outcome by forces and sentiments he cannot control, the implication for western policy is the same. We should spend less time trying to interpret what's happening on the other side and more time thinking about how the other side interprets *our* policies.

This is important because a lack of Iranian confidence in the West's desire and willingness to make a deal and to stick with it almost certainly has been one of the impediments to progress in the nuclear negotiations.

Rouhani's election presents the United States and its partners with a test, of our intentions and seriousness about reaching an agreement. Failure of the test will confirm suspicions in Tehran that we do not want a deal and instead are stringing along negotiations while waiting for the sanctions to wreak more damage.

Passage of the test will require placing on the table a proposal that, in return for the desired restrictions on Iran's nuclear activities, incorporates significant relief from economic sanctions and at least tacit acceptance of a continued peaceful Iranian nuclear program, to include low-level enrichment of uranium.

The sad fact is that the criticism Velayati leveled at Jalili's negotiating approach could be applied just as easily to the approach of the P5+1, which so far have coupled their demands about the nuclear program with sanctions relief that is only a pittance compared to the large and ever-growing array of sanctions applied to Iran.

Passage of the test also means not making any proposal an ultimatum that is coupled with threats of military force, which only feed Iranian suspicions that for the West the negotiations are a box-checking prelude to war and regime change.

The Iranian electorate has in effect said to the United States and its Western partners, "We've done all we can. Among the options that the Guardian Council gave us, we have chosen the one that offers to get us closest to accommodation, agreement and understanding with the West. Your move, America."

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UK Grapples with Spying Disclosure

Exclusive: British authorities are scrambling to justify how they while hosting a global economic summit in 2009 spied on their guests with help from America's National Security Agency. Some UK media outlets seem a little spooked themselves in getting commentary on the incident, ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern writes.

By Ray McGovern

How inconvenient for Great Britain. Just as world leaders of the G-8 countries gather for a meeting in Northern Ireland, The Guardian front-pages the news that the last time they got together in territory controlled by the UK, the British subjected them to the kind of intrusive eavesdropping that most folks still think is reserved for “suspected terrorists” or “foreign enemies.”

Even though this kind of monitoring is now widely seen by governments as *de rigueur* whether in London, Washington, New York or wherever we can assume that the new eavesdropping disclosure makes things a bit uncomfortable as G-8 leaders sit down together for friendly discussions about the global economy and other matters. Conceivably, it could even cause some embarrassment to the British government, even though the bar to embarrassment is already at an unprecedentedly high level.

The Guardian story revealed that when these world leaders from G-8 countries got together with others in London for two G-20 meetings in 2009, they had their computers monitored and their phone calls intercepted. The more naive of the visitors were even enticed into Potemkin-Village-style Internet cafes set up by British intelligence to read their e-mail traffic. All this as a courtesy, with no extra charge, by the U.K. Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) helpmate and handmaiden to the U.S. National Security Agency.

Special help came from NSA to handle the tougher technical challenges like eavesdropping on then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev as his phone calls passed through satellite links to Moscow. Even though Russian President Vladimir Putin has larger fish and chips to fry in this week’s UK visit, it will be difficult for him to resist the temptation to make political hay out of the eavesdropping disclosure.

Arriving in Northern Ireland today, British Prime Minister David Cameron refused to answer media questions about UK/US eavesdropping on his VIP colleagues. Meanwhile, “independent” UK media seem to be under some constraint witness the bizarre behavior recently encountered by some of my British colleagues in Sam Adams Associates for Integrity in Intelligence (SAII).

Not surprisingly, two of them Katharine Gun (formerly of GSHQ) and Craig Murray (former UK ambassador to Uzbekistan) were eagerly sought for interviews to provide expertise and insight regarding the revelations about spying on visiting VIPs and other disclosures of joint GCHQ/NSA snooping emanating from documents leaked by American Edward Snowden.

Both Gun and Murray have a history of speaking truth to power. Gun disclosed NSA spying on (or attempted blackmailing of) UN Security Council members whose votes were sought to give some legal cover to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and Murray

exposed human rights crimes in Uzbekistan. (For their risky truth-telling, both were recipients of SAAII awards.)

Despite the timeliness of getting their comments on the Guardian reports, the British media was having trouble trying to “manage” as the British like to say their efforts to flesh out the story. Here’s the text of Katharine Gun’s e-mail to SAAII members. (This is provided, in part, as a courtesy to GCHQ and NSA which, busy as they are today, probably have not yet had time to do anything more than collect and store the metadata.)

Katharine Gun wrote: “Anyone read the latest headlines in The Guardian today? Kind of strange, although don’t know if this sort of thing is perfectly normal. I got a call from Sky News, they wanted to interview me today regarding the latest releases, they said they would send a TV truck, then a call back to say the truck had technical problems.

“Next they propose to use the local TV studio, but needed to make sure there was a cameraman available; just got call back to say, ‘no cameraman, so have to call it off.’ Left it vaguely that they would be in touch perhaps at a later date.”

Ambassador Murray commented: “I had precisely the same experience and precisely the same excuse, last week with the BBC. They don’t have difficulty finding satellite trucks to film Prince William’s wife attending a gardening class.”

And, as if more were needed to prompt Edmund Burke, the great defender of the British press, to roll over in his grave, this just in from Annie Machon, another Sam Adams Associate for Integrity in Intelligence and former officer of Britain’s FBI equivalent, MI5. Her note strikes a discordant note regarding the BBC’s jealously guarded and broadly vaunted “fierce independence,” suggesting that the BBC has some sort of allergy to information originating with whistleblower Snowden that reflects poorly on the UK and its intelligence services.

She wrote: “Last Monday I got bumped at the last minute from BBC Newsnight at the height of the initial Snowden frenzy – Newsnight is the flagship UK evening news programme. They were keen to get me on, booking a studio in Dusseldorf (routine to do), and I was all ready to go, taxis arranged, etc., only to have the following message:

“‘I’m sorry also to say that the way things are looking, I don’t think we’ll actually need you for the discussion tonight. Everything has been up in the air, but the plans have just been finalised and they’re a little different to what we had in mind earlier, so I think we probably have to stand you down.’ This, after lots of emails and skype chats throughout the afternoon and evening.”

Back to Northern Ireland. Would it not be fascinating to be a fly on the wall as David Cameron tries to convince Putin and the others out of earshot of President Obama “The Americans made me do it.”

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Obama, ‘War on Terror’ Captive

President Obama has alienated much of his liberal base by coming across increasingly as a toady to the Establishment, with his defense of drone strikes, his embrace of the surveillance state and his prosecution of anti-secrecy whistleblowers, as Lawrence Davidson explains.

By Lawrence Davidson

Context One: It is 1971 and the United States is mired in a losing war in Vietnam. Thousands of young American soldiers are coming back to the U.S. in coffins or physically and psychologically maimed. Scenes of war can be witnessed nightly on the evening news.

In the midst of this mayhem the American military analyst Daniel Ellsberg gives the New York Times a copy of a classified analysis of the war entitled, “United States – Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967” aka the “Pentagon Papers.” The Nixon administration then sought to prevent the publication of this report through a court injunction. Ultimately the Supreme Court overturned the injunction in a 6-3 ruling that favored the public’s right to know.

The government also attempted to prosecute Ellsberg under the 1917 Espionage Act for releasing classified information to the public. That was thrown out of court because in making their case, government agents had gathered information through an illegal wiretap.

Subsequently, the media widely covered the Pentagon Papers and its demoralizing description of how the U.S. was fighting the war. It can be argued that this reporting helped turn the tide of public opinion against the slaughter in Vietnam.

Context Two: It is 2012-2013 and the United States is waging a “War on Terror.” This is the result of highly destructive terrorist attacks that occurred a dozen years earlier on September 11, 2001. Both these attacks, the lies and misplaced aggression of the Bush administration that followed, and the skewed media coverage over the intervening years, have sensitized the country to the issue of security.

In this environment the government was able to put in place legislation such as the Patriot Act that allows it to, among other things, broadly increase its powers of surveillance both of American citizens and foreigners, and to develop (with the aid of Israeli companies) a secret, massive information gathering program, code named PRISM, and operated by the National Security Agency (NSA).

It is also within this environment that a series of whistleblowers revealed to the public both the brutal nature of U.S. warfare in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, and the widespread spying regime evolved by the American government. Many of these whistleblowers have been charged with felonies and labeled traitors.

The Whistleblowers Aim

Between 1971 and 2012-2013, a lot has changed. However, the seminal difference is that in 1971 a good number of American citizens were being traumatized by the death and maiming of their relatives in a losing war that was publicized in a relatively objective way. In 2012-2013 that factor is missing because the “War on Terror” does not entail a military draft, has resulted in relatively few U.S. casualties, and is brought to the American people by a managed media.

This allows the public to assume what is, in truth, its “normal” default position: an everyday indifference to national government behavior. The general citizenry is at once uninterested in what the federal government is doing as long as they feel no immediate negative impact (this is particularly true of foreign policy), and naively ready to accept the government’s protestations that it is acting in their best interests.

Thus, it is no doubt true that heroes (and indeed they are heroes), such as Pvt. Bradley Manning and NSA employee Edward Snowden, decided to release massive amounts of secret government data in order “to make their fellow citizens aware of what their government is doing in the dark.”

However, what the historical record suggests is that, under most circumstances, only a minority of the general population will care. Thus, in the case of the United States, the effectiveness of whistleblowers may be more successfully tested in the law courts wherein meaningful judgment can be rendered on the

behavior of the other branches of government, than in the court of public opinion.

However, this judicial arena is also problematic because it depends on the changing mix of politics and ideology of those sitting in judgment rather than any consistent adherence to principles. In 1971 judicial judgment went for Ellsberg. In 2013, men like Manning and Snowden probably do not have a snowball's chance in hell.

The Government's Aim

The existence of men like Manning, Snowden and a handful of others demonstrates that there are employees of the government who have a superior sense of morality as well as the courage to act on their principles. However, the numbers are very small and they are invariably considered as dangerous mistakes within the system. What of the rest of the government's personnel?

It is important to understand that the vast majority of government employees do not act, except in the most abstract and idealistic way, as citizens of the United States. They are much more immediately, if you will, citizens of the bureaucracies within which they are embedded. This is not an unusual situation.

People tend to identify with their local community and for some this may include a strong identification with their place of employment. Also, bureaucracies are notable for setting their own rules and enforcing them as if they were forms of law. Employees are regularly "oriented" to their bureaucracy's institutional worldview.

At one time the union movement provided a potential check to this process because class identity was a viable competitor to bureaucratic identity. But the union movement within the United States is very weak. Particularly within secretive organizations such as the CIA or the NSA, competitive points of view are carefully weeded out.

Simultaneously, the value set on loyalty to the organization and its rules is very high. Such organizations come first, even before family and friends.

Even most elected politicians are fated to become "organization men or women" wherein their first loyalty lies not with the electorate or the Constitution, but to their political parties. If they are part of the "select" group of senators and congresspersons associated with the intelligence agencies they will absorb their secretive orientation as well.

Take Senator Diane Feinstein, D-California, who is head of the Senate Intelligence Committee. She has insisted on the need and the worth of massive

spying by the NSA whereby the “megadata” of almost everything that goes through the Internet, and a lot that goes through the phone lines, is collected and stored, placing all content in a state of ready availability to the government if it chooses to look at it.

She and others like Director of National Intelligence James Clapper claim that this enormous gathering up of personal data has helped “foil multiple terrorist plots” against Americans and others. Those who have made public this secret process are, according to Feinstein, “traitors.”

In a real sense, Feinstein has metamorphosed into the loyal citizen of a bureaucracy that has relegated to itself the right to define both security and the public’s need to know. It does not appear to concern Feinstein that this bureaucracy is determined to function in a way that will allow no viable accountability to anyone beyond its own community.

In contrast to Feinstein, William Binney, former head of the NSA’s global digital data program, claims that having such a huge data base has meant the information overwhelms the analysts, causing the secret PRISM program to become “dysfunctional.”

Perhaps that is why a few in the Senate, like Mark Udall of Colorado, say that they are not “convinced that the collection of this vast trove of data has led to disruption of plots against the U.S.” Thus the “protecting the American people” justification is debatable.

Even if it turns out that this information orgy has assisted in foiling a limited number of plots, it is not a practicable approach to threat prevention. What is? *Changing the policies and behaviors that have caused much of the terrorist threats in the first place.* Do that, and you won’t need to stockpile everyone’s communications from now to the end of time.

The President

One of the best examples of the conversion of an American from a servant of the citizenry to a servant of the government bureaucracy is President Barak Obama. As Glenn Greenwald points out, during President Obama’s 2008 campaign “openness and transparency” were central issues.

Obama denounced President George W. Bush’s regime as “one of the most secretive administrations in our nation’s history,” and added “it is no coincidence” that such a secrecy-obsessed presidency “has favored special interests and pursued policies that could not stand up to the sunlight.” He vowed: “as president, I’m going to change that.”

To that end he pledged to protect whistleblowers and called them, “the best source of information about waste, fraud, and abuse in government,” saying that “such acts of courage and patriotism . . . should be encouraged rather than stifled.”

Then he won the 2008 election. All of a sudden his constituents ceased to be the voters and became instead institutionalized aspects of the government system: the bureaucracy, the Democratic Party and a host of special interests. Thus, it did not take long for his tone to change.

Surrounded now by bureaucrats and party men whose devotion was to something other than the Constitution, the massive invasion of privacy represented by the vacuuming up of all information available on the Web became “necessary for national security and well within the bounds of the law.”

That is, the Bush-era laws that Obama once deplored. Now Obama is prosecuting the whistleblowers and protecting Bush-era criminals.

This metamorphosis into participants in an amoral system seems to be the fate of most men and women elected to national office. They join an organization assumed wiser than the citizenry because it knows more than they do and, more often than not, it does its learning in secret, clandestine ways.

Notions such as transparency and the behaviors of whistleblowers, which sounded so right on the campaign trail, now take on opposite connotations in the environment of bureaucracy. Principles that once were worthy of protection now must be “balanced” against procedures and policies too valuable to be exposed to daylight.

This is a standard scenario for the erosion of the rights, ideals and principles that make a democracy worthy of its name. As Thomas Drake, another whistleblower, recently put it “What does the NSA need with a 100 million phone records? We are losing the foundation of innocence until proven guilty. The assumption of innocence no longer exists in a surveillance state.”

Neither does a Constitution with a Fourth Amendment. Neither does habeas corpus or due process. All of those are things of value in the world of democratic men and women. In the world of the National Security Agency, they are all conditional to the needs of a system with very different rules.

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Iran's 'Paradox' of a Fair Election

Four years ago, the U.S. news media pronounced Iran's elections a fraud despite no hard evidence, and predicted a similar outcome again this year. But the election of Hassan Rouhani is now hailed as a democratic victory, a paradox addressed by Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett and Seyed Mohammad Marandi.

By Flynt Leverett, Hillary Mann Leverett and Seyed Mohammad Marandi

The United States' perennially mistaken Iran "experts" are already spinning Hassan Rouhani's victory in Iran's presidential election as a clear proof of the Islamic Republic's ongoing implosion. In fact, Rouhani's success sends a very different message: it is well past time for the U.S. to come to terms with the reality of a stable and politically dynamic Islamic Republic of Iran.

Three days before the election, we warned that U.S. and expatriate Iranian pundits were confidently but wrongly positing how Iran's election process would "be manipulated to produce a winner chosen by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei a "selection rather than an election" consolidating Khamenei's dictatorial hold over Iranian politics."

Many, like the Brookings Institution's Suzanne Maloney, identified nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili as Khamenei's "annointed" candidate; the *Washington Post* declared that Rouhani "will not be allowed to win."

By contrast, we held that Iran was "in the final days of a real contest", during which candidates had "broad and regular access to national media," had "advertised and held campaign events," and had "participated in three nationally televised (and widely watched) debates." The election "will surprise America's so-called Iran 'experts'," we wrote, for the winner will emerge "because he earned the requisite degree of electoral support, not because he was 'annointed'".

The real contest

Rouhani's victory demonstrates that the election was a real contest, and that the perceived quality of candidates' campaigns mattered greatly in many Iranians' decisions for whom to vote. In the end, most Iranians seemed to believe and acted as if they believed that they had a meaningful choice to make.

Besides the presidential ballot, Iranians voted for more than 200,000 local and municipal council seats with more than 800,000 candidates standing for those seats a "detail" never mentioned by those constantly deriding the Islamic

Republic's "dictatorship".

Certainly, Western "experts" were wrong that former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's disqualification had driven Iranians into a state of political alienation and apathy. Rafsanjani is, at this point, not a popular figure for many Iranians; he almost certainly would have lost had he been on this year's ballot. Rafsanjani's sidelining was a necessary condition for the rise of Rouhani, a Rafsanjani protégé.

More broadly, Rafsanjani's dream has been to build a pragmatic center in Iranian politics, eschewing "extremes" of both conservatives or "principlists," as they are called in Iran and reformists. Instead, he has antagonized both camps without creating an enduring constituency committed to a centrist vision.

The election of Rouhani the only cleric on the ballot, who campaigned against "extremism" in all forms and was endorsed by Rafsanjani may contribute more to realizing Rafsanjani's dream than another unsuccessful Rafsanjani presidential bid.

Going into the campaign, Rouhani's biggest weakness was foreign policy; in 2003-05, during Rouhani's tenure as chief nuclear negotiator, Tehran agreed to suspend uranium enrichment for nearly two years, but got nothing from Western powers in return. In fact, criticism of Rouhani's negotiating approach was an important factor in Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's first election to the presidency in 2005.

During this year's campaign, Rouhani effectively addressed this potential vulnerability, arguing that his approach allowed Iran to avoid sanctions while laying the ground for the subsequent development in its nuclear infrastructure. Moreover, Rouhani's campaign video included praise from armed forces chief of staff General Seyed Hassan Firouzabadi, which bolstered Rouhani's perceived credibility on security issues.

In the week between the third candidates' debate on foreign policy and election day, polls showed with accumulating clarity that Rouhani was building the strongest momentum of any candidate, along with Tehran Mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf who came in second, and whom we **flagged** two days before the vote as a likely contender with Rouhani in a second-round runoff.

By election day, polls showed Rouhani pulling ahead of Qalibaf and his other opponents a sharp contrast to Iran's 2009 presidential election, when no methodologically sound poll ever showed former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi ahead of incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Key to Rouhani's success was his ability to forge coalitions, especially with

reformists. Rouhani is not himself a reformist. He belongs to the Society of Combatant Clergy, the conservative antipode to the Assembly of Combatant Clerics founded by Mohammad Khatami who became Iran's first reformist president in 1997 and other reform-minded clerics.

Overall, Rouhani's share of the vote was higher in small towns and villages, where people are more conservative, than in larger cities largely because he is a cleric.

The real reformist on this year's ballot was Mohammad Reza Aref, who served as Khatami's first vice-president. Aref, however, proved a lackluster candidate and attracted little popular support. Other reformists pressed him to quit after the final candidates' debate, which freed Khatami to endorse Rouhani. While reformists were not the core of Rouhani's electoral base, their votes were crucial to getting him over the 50 percent threshold.

Iran's 2013 presidential election also confirms a point we have been making for four years that, contrary to Western conventional wisdom, no hard evidence has been put forward showing that Iran's 2009 presidential election, when Ahmadinejad won re-election over Mousavi and two other opponents, was "stolen."

No Post-Election Gatherings

Even so, Iran's political system adopted last year a law creating an election commission to oversee and certify the Interior Ministry's conduct of the 2013 election. This and other systemic responses to potential or real abuse such as the closure of the Kahrizak Detention Centre where cases of police brutality were reported after the 2009 election demonstrate the Islamic Republic's capacity to reform itself.

Pointing this out in the West prompts slanderous accusations of murderous appeasement but those who make such accusations are consistently proven wrong, as Iranian politics regularly defies their cartoonish and derogatory stereotypes.

The biggest difference from 2009 is the behavior of the candidates themselves. This year, all of the candidates agreed not to hold post-election gatherings or make statements about the outcome until all votes were counted and final results officially announced.

They stuck to this agreement as the Interior Ministry periodically announced partial results coming in from polling stations across Iran. Despite the fact that president-elect Rouhani won by just 261,251 votes over the 50 percent threshold, his rivals immediately issued messages of congratulations, as did Ayatollah Khamenei.

Compare that with 2009, when while polls were still open and no votes had been counted Mousavi **declared** to have official “information” that he had won “by a substantial margin.” This set the stage for him to claim fraud and call supporters into the streets to protest, giving birth to the Green Movement.

When Mousavi failed to back up his charge of fraud with a shred of hard evidence, the Greens’ popular base shrank dramatically because they were no longer challenging a particular election outcome, but the very idea of the Islamic Republic as a political system.

Notwithstanding the Greens’ failure, the movement has ever since been a primary vessel for the fantasies of Iranian expatriates, pro-Israel advocates and Western interventionists that Western-style secular democracy would replace participatory Islamist governance in Iran.

But reformists and their centrist allies who support the Islamic Republic, even if their visions for its future differ from those of Iranian principlists distanced themselves from the Green Movement. This enabled them to regroup and to learn lessons from the 2009 election, from Rafsanjani’s presidential defeat in 2005, and from Khatami’s setbacks during his presidency that proved crucial to Rouhani’s electoral success this year.

The United States and the West need to get over the pernicious wishful thinking that the Islamic Republic is not an enduring and legitimate system for Iranians living in their country.

And the Islamic Republic’s core features of participatory Islamist governance and foreign policy independence have broad appeal not just in Iran, but for hundreds of millions of Muslims across the Middle East. It’s time for the U.S. to come to terms with that reality.

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Ahmadinejad Won, Get Over It!

From the Archive: When the U.S. news media adopts a “conventional wisdom,” it is hard to dislodge, as the narrative of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad “stealing” the 2009 election shows. Though still politically pleasing to Big Media, the storyline was never supported by evidence, Robert Parry reported in 2010.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on Feb. 27, 2010)

Many in the West may agree that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is an unpleasant politician with a rhetorical tendency to bluster about Iran’s power and to foolishly question the historical accuracy of the Holocaust, but that doesn’t answer the crucial question of whether he was democratically reelected.

Despite what you may have read in the New York Times and the Washington Post, the available evidence is that Ahmadinejad did win the June 2009 presidential election and that efforts embraced by nearly the entire U.S. news media to oust him amount to yet another case of seeking the removal of a democratically chosen leader.

Though widely ignored by the major American news media, [a recent study](#) by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland found little evidence to support allegations of fraud, nor to conclude that most Iranians view President Ahmadinejad as illegitimate.

PIPA analyzed multiple polls of the Iranian public from three different sources, including some before the June 12, 2009, election and some afterwards. The study found that in all the polls, a majority said they planned to vote for Ahmadinejad or had voted for him. The numbers ranged from 52 to 57 percent just before the election to 55 to 66 percent after the election.

“These findings do not prove that there were no irregularities in the election process,” said Steven Kull, director of PIPA. “But they do not support the belief that a majority rejected Ahmadinejad.”

To address the possibility that some poll data collected within Iran might have been fabricated, PIPA matched up patterns of responses collected inside Iran to those obtained by calling into Iran and found the patterns so similar “that it is hard to conclude that these data were fabricated,” Kull said.

Regarding the possibility that Iranians felt intimidated, PIPA noted that responses to other poll questions such as criticism of the Islamic Guardian Council and the Interior Ministry showed Iranians willing to express less than

favorable views about powerful institutions.

And, further undercutting the U.S. news media's cheerleading for "regime change" in Iran, PIPA's analysis noted that none of the polls supported such a radical step. Large majorities and even most supporters of opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi endorsed the Islamist character of the regime, such as allowing Islamic scholars to veto laws that violate principles from the Koran.

"Our analysis suggests that it would not be prudent to base U.S. policy on the assumption that the Iranian public is in a pre-revolutionary state of mind," Kull said.

Collapsing Assumptions

Beyond PIPA's analysis, other U.S. media claims, which supposedly supported the theory of massive election fraud, have collapsed under closer examination. For instance, one fraud assumption was that Azeris would have voted heavily for one of their own, Mousavi, instead of for Ahmadinejad, who nevertheless carried that region in the official results.

However, a pre-election poll, sponsored by the New America Foundation, found a 2-to-1 breakdown for Ahmadinejad among Azeris. Part of the reason appeared to be that Ahmadinejad had poured government resources into that area. So, the assumption of Azeris automatically lining up behind Mousavi proved false.

Another frequent charge from the Western press was that Ahmadinejad's claim of victory came too fast, but that ignored the fact that Mousavi was out with a declaration of victory before any votes were counted. The first partial results, showing Ahmadinejad in the lead, came out hours later.

The reason why Ahmadinejad might have really won the election by something like the 2-to-1 margin in the official tallies was that his support was concentrated among the urban and rural poor who benefited from government food giveaways and jobs programs and who tend to listen more to conservative clerics in the mosques.

Generally speaking, Mousavi had the backing of the urban middle class and the well-educated, especially in the more cosmopolitan capital of Tehran where universities became a center for protests against Ahmadinejad.

The president's policies and his sometimes offensive remarks have created hardships and embarrassment for this middle-class voting bloc, which has found it hard to travel abroad and do business in the face of Western sanctions and restrictions.

So, the election outcome could be explained simply by Iran's middle class and intellectuals voting for Mousavi, while larger numbers of poor and conservative Muslims favored Ahmadinejad.

Mousavi seemed to acknowledge this point when he released his supposed proof of the rigged election, accusing Ahmadinejad of buying votes by providing food and higher wages for the poor. At some Mousavi rallies, his supporters reportedly would chant "death to the potatoes!" in a joking reference to Ahmadinejad's food distributions.

Yet, while passing out food and raising pay levels may be a sign of "machine politics," such tactics are not normally associated with election fraud. And if the central principle of democracy holds one person, one vote then the ballot of a poor uneducated Iranian in the countryside should count as much as one cast by a wealthy college-educated Iranian in the capital.

Dangerous Conventional Wisdom

But the major U.S. news media, led by the New York Times and the Washington Post, has been unwilling to accept this analysis or even consider it a plausible explanation. In editorial after editorial, the big newspapers dismiss the Iranian election as "fraudulent," without qualification or substantiation.

The oft-repeated assumption has congealed into Washington conventional wisdom, what all the important pundits just know to be true. Richard Haass, president of the influential Council on Foreign Relations, appeared on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" pronouncing the Iranian election a "fraud" and drawing only nods or silence from others around the table.

Yet, this dubious certitude is not without consequence. It cuts into President Barack Obama's political maneuvering room for engaging Iran in serious negotiations; it justifies covert operations aimed at destabilizing the Tehran regime; ultimately, it could give a moral rationale to a military assault on Iran.

There also are troubling parallels between the way the U.S. news media has reacted to the Iranian election as well as the dispute over Iran's nuclear program and how many of these same news outlets helped stampede the American people into war with Iraq.

For instance, the Washington Post's neoconservative editorialists declared flatly in 2002 and early 2003 that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Only later, after the U.S. invasion and the discovery of no caches of WMD did the Post's editorial page editor Fred Hiatt concede that maybe the Post should not have been so categorical.

"If you look at the editorials we write running up [to the war], we state as flat fact that he [Hussein] has weapons of mass destruction," Hiatt said in an interview with the Columbia Journalism Review. "If that's not true, it would have been better not to say it." [CJR, March/April 2004]

Yet, despite the deaths of more than 4,300 American soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, Hiatt is still directing the Post's editorial page and spoiling for a new confrontation with another Muslim nation, Iran, in part by touting as "flat fact" that Iran's election was "fraudulent."

The New York Times and its senior editors have matched the Post's hysterical coverage of Iran, much as they also contributed to the rush to war in Iraq. Since last June, the Times has run many editorials and news stories that reflect a deep-seated bias against Ahmadinejad and his government.

When the Times executive editor Bill Keller assigned himself to cover Iran's election, he co-authored a front-page news analysis that began with an old joke about Ahmadinejad having lice in his hair.

Since then, the Times has consistently published one-sided articles about both the election and the nuclear dispute. For instance, while decrying Iran's alleged nuclear-bomb ambitions, the Times almost never mentions actual nuclear states in the region, including Israel, Pakistan and India.

Ducking a Recount

The Times editorialists even cheered as Mousavi turned his back on the last real hope for definitive evidence that might have proved Ahmadinejad's victory was fraudulent. Mousavi rebuffed offers for a partial recount, instead seeking an entirely new election.

Mousavi's position was supported by the New York Times' top brass. "Even a full recount would be suspect," the Times wrote in an editorial entitled "Iran's Nonrepublic." "How could anyone be sure that the ballots were valid?"

But one reason for a recount is that examining ballots can unearth evidence of fraud, especially if ballot-box stuffing was done chaotically or if the tallies were simply fabricated without ballots to support them, as some Western observers have speculated regarding Iran.

Mousavi's unwillingness to exploit the recount opportunity might have left an objective observer with another suspicion: that Mousavi believed he actually did lose and recognized that maintaining the uncertainty was better for him than a conclusive judgment confirming his defeat.

That uncertainty about election fraud was then transformed by the U.S. news media into conventional wisdom accepting the certainty of fraud and indeed has proved valuable for those supporting both internal and external opposition to Ahmadinejad's government.

However, if Iran's election truly was legitimate, then the American news media is helping to create a political climate favoring the removal of a democratically elected government.

A similar situation occurred in Iran in 1953 when the United States and Great Britain helped overthrow Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who was nationalizing Iran's oil resources. The CIA undertook a propaganda campaign to depict Mossadegh as unstable while also passing out millions of dollars to rally big crowds demanding his ouster.

Given that history, it would not be unreasonable for the Iranian government to suspect that the United States, possibly with its UK junior partner and the help of Israeli intelligence, is conducting a new covert operation today.

Prior to the 2009 election in Iran, it was well known and widely reported that President George W. Bush had signed a covert action finding targeting Iran's Islamic government with propaganda and political destabilization.

In the July 7, 2008, New Yorker magazine, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh wrote that late the previous year, Congress had agreed to Bush's request for a major escalation in covert operations against Iran to the tune of up to \$400 million.

"The Finding was focused on undermining Iran's nuclear ambitions and trying to undermine the government through regime change," one person familiar with its contents told Hersh. The operation involved "working with opposition groups and passing money," the person said.

Other news organizations reported similar facts, with Bush administration officials even citing the aggressive covert action as one reason why the Israelis should tamp down speculation about launching a military strike against Iran's nuclear sites.

Down the Memory Hole

Yet, when the Mousavi campaign took on the appearance of a "velvet revolution," with Mousavi claiming victory before any ballots were counted and then organizing mass demonstrations when the official vote count went against him, the U.S. press corps mocked any suggestion from Ahmadinejad's government that foreign operatives might have had a hand in the disruptions.

Not to say that Mousavi's campaign definitely was orchestrated from outside Iran nor to suggest that it didn't speak for genuine grievances inside Iran but the U.S. press corps behaved as if it had forgotten its own earlier reporting about the CIA covert operation.

Truly objective journalism at least might have included some historical facts about the three chief opposition leaders and their longstanding (often secret) ties to the West.

In the 1980s, then Prime Minister Mousavi was, in effect, the control officer for Manucher Ghorbanifar, the Iranian agent who hooked up with neoconservative activist Michael Ledeen for the clandestine Iran-Contra weapons shipments that involved both the United States and Israel.

In November 1985, as one of the missile shipments via Israel went awry, Ghorbanifar conveyed Mousavi's anger to Ronald Reagan's White House.

"On or about November 25, 1985, Ledeen received a frantic phone call from Ghorbanifar, asking him to relay a message from the prime minister of Iran to President Reagan regarding the shipment of the wrong type of HAWKs," according to Iran-Contra special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh's Final Report.

"Ledeen said the message essentially was 'we've been holding up our part of the bargain, and here you people are now cheating us and tricking us and deceiving us and you had better correct this situation right away.'"

Ghorbanifar also had dangled the possibility of Reagan's national security adviser Robert McFarlane meeting with high-level Iranian officials, including Mousavi. In May 1986, when McFarlane and White House aide Oliver North took their infamous trip to Tehran with the inscribed Bible and the key-shaped cake, they were planning to meet with Mousavi.

Rafsanjani's Wealth

Another leading figure in Iran's 2009 opposition, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, also sat at the center of the web of arms deals that Israel arranged for Iran in its long war with Iraq. Rafsanjani, who was then parliamentary chairman, built his personal fortune, in part, as a war profiteer benefiting from those lucrative deals with Israel. [For more on the arms deals, see Ari Ben-Menashe's *Profits of War*.]

A third key opposition leader, Mehdi Karoubi, and his brother Hassan also were linked to the secret arms deals. Mehdi Karoubi has been identified as an intermediary as early as 1980 when he reportedly had contacts with Israeli and U.S. intelligence operatives and top Republicans working for Ronald Reagan. [See

Robert Parry's [Secrecy & Privilege](#).]

The brother, Hassan Karoubi, was another Iran-Contra figure, meeting with Ghorbanifar and Ledeen in Geneva in late October 1985 regarding missile shipments in exchange for Iranian help in getting a group of U.S. hostages freed in Lebanon, according to [Walsh's report](#).

Normally, such an unusual line-up of opposition leaders might be expected to raise some eyebrows in the U.S. press corps. If the CIA or Israeli intelligence were trying to achieve regime change in Iran, they might reasonably reach out to influential figures with whom they've had prior relationships.

But all that history, as well as the media's prior knowledge of Bush's covert operation seeking "regime change" in Iran, disappeared into a memory hole, not to be mentioned in the volumes of reporting about the 2009 election.

Ironically, in December 2000, when there was clear and convincing evidence that George W. Bush grabbed the U.S. presidency through a brazen power play relying on his brother's political allies in Florida and his father's political chums on the U.S. Supreme Court the same American newspapers mostly retreated into silence or rallied behind Bush out of a sense of patriotism.

The relatively few Americans, who took to the streets to protest Bush's election theft, were met with the taunt, "Bush won, get over it!" In the Iran case, when there is no similar evidence of election fraud, it might finally be time to say, "Ahmadinejad won, get over it!"

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).
