

IRAN ELECTIONS: A RESOUNDING VICTORY FOR PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD*

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President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran won a second four-year term in office by securing an overwhelming 62.63 per cent of the total valid votes cast as against the 33.75 polled by his main opponent, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, in the June 12, 2009, elections.¹ The victory of the incumbent head of Iranian government was reinforced by two attendant factors. In the first place, he secured an outright majority in the first round, thus obviating the need for the run-off elections that has often been the case in the country's 30-year post-Revolution electoral history.² The second outstanding aspect of his win was the record voter turnout of 85 per cent³ in this tenth presidential election in Iran over the same period.

However, Mir-Hossein Mousavi was remarkably quick in claiming victory. Polling was originally scheduled to be held from 8:00 a.m. till 6:00 p.m. on Friday, June 12, "unless turnout is exceptionally high and provincial governors secure ministry approval for an extension of voting hours."⁴ Voter turnout did in the event turn out to be exceptionally high, and polling time was thus extended by four hours till 10:00 p.m. Not just that, but the Interior Ministry also announced that "those still queuing when the polling stations closed were allowed to stay to vote."⁵ Actual voting, therefore, remained in progress beyond 10:00 p.m.

It remains a mystery as to how the losing candidate could in less than an hour of the close of voting determine and proclaim most unequivocally that he had in fact won by "a very large margin": "I am the absolute winner of the election by a very large margin,' Mr Mousavi said during a news conference with reporters just after 11 p.m. Friday, adding: 'It is our duty to defend people's votes. There is no turning back.'"⁶ Such a premature declaration of victory by Mousavi only reinforced the understanding voiced by certain officials on the eve of the elections that the Mousavi camp had determined to claim victory regardless of the result.

Thomas Erdbring of the *Washington Post* had reported that from Tehran just ahead of polling: "Aides to Ahmadinejad ... say Mousavi's backers plan to claim victory before the votes are fully counted and to mount a 'colour revolution' like the Rose Revolution that swept away the post-Soviet government of Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. 'According to their plan, these people will make a heavy media atmosphere, claiming premature victory with rallies to mobilize their supporters,' Gen. Yadollah Javani, head of the political office of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, predicted in an interview with the guards' magazine, *Sobh-e Sadegh*."⁷

Soon after Mousavi's hasty claim of victory, Iran's election commission also felt obliged to issue its official figures, even though just around 19 per cent of the total votes cast had till then been counted. The head of the electoral body, Kamran Danesho, stated in a press conference at 11:45 p.m. that, according to the results received till then, "the

* *Written in the aftermath of the elections held on June 12, this paper takes into account the relevant developments till June 16.*

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president was leading with 3,462,548 votes (69.04 per cent), while his main challenger, Mousavi, had 1,425,678 (28.42 per cent).⁸

By Saturday, June 13, evening, complete results (as noted above) had been announced with President Ahmadinejad emerging as the clear winner. In a speech delivered on national television, the re-elected president described the elections as free and fair, appreciated the high turnout and promised a “new beginning” to his nation. He was reported to have added, “‘There were two options,’ he said. ‘Either to return to the old days or continue our leap forward towards high peaks . . . and progress. Fortunately, the people voted for that last option.’ He said the Iranian people had chosen a programme over a personality, and he promised to continue his policies ‘only with more energy’.

“He also attacked foreign media coverage of the campaign, saying ‘they have launched the heaviest propaganda and psychological war against the Iranian nation.’ . . . [He] criticized his opponents, particularly the influential clerics and former officials behind Mousavi who have ties to the 1979 Islamic revolution. He said it did not matter what they had done at the time of the revolution. ‘It matters what they do now,’ he insisted, suggesting that his opponents were not working for the people.”⁹

Post-poll Violence

Amid reports of violence in parts of Tehran subsequent to Mousavi’s consistent refusal to accept the results, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, also issued a statement calling upon the people to respect President Ahmadinejad’s victory. “Khamenei, Iran’s top authority, told defeated candidates and their supporters to avoid ‘provocative behaviour’. ‘The chosen and respected president is the president of all the Iranian nation and everyone, including yesterday’s competitors, must unanimously support and help him,’ Khamenei said in a statement read on state television.”¹⁰

Mousavi, however, kept up his defiance, asking his supporters to continue protesting the results in a peaceful manner. The authorities, on the other hand, had forbidden street protests due to fear of violence. The defeated candidate had chosen to stay away from the public scene on Saturday, but posted a provocative statement on his Website: “‘I’m warning that I won’t surrender to this manipulation,’ he said. ‘The outcome of what we’ve seen from the performance of officials . . . is nothing but shaking the pillars of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s sacred system and governance of lies and dictatorship.’

“He warned that ‘people won’t respect those who take power through fraud.’ The headline on the Web site declared, ‘I won’t give in to this dangerous manipulation,’ the AP reported. Mousavi appealed to Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to intervene.”¹¹ Ayatollah Khamenei, however, had already endorsed President Ahmadinejad’s victory as noted above.

Street protests continued on Sunday, June 14, in different Tehran localities, mostly in the more affluent northern parts of the capital which was the base of Mousavi’s support, in defiance of governmental restrictions. However, no major incident of violence was reported.

Taking heed of Mousavi’s unrelenting position and the unrest that it had caused, Ayatollah Khamenei ordered a probe into his complaints of poll irregularities the next day. “According to Iranian state television, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei - the all-powerful

Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic since 1989 - told Mousavi he had instructed the Guardian Council supervisory body 'to precisely examine' his complaints. Mousavi, 67, [had] lodged a formal appeal on Sunday for the cancellation of the results of what he charges was a rigged 'charade'. A spokesman for the 12-member Council of Guardians said it would announce its decision in 10 days."¹²

Mousavi, however, was not pacified. He called a public rally at central Tehran's Azadi, or Freedom, Square after the announcement about investigation into his complaints. "... Hundreds of thousands of opponents of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad massed in central Tehran to cheer their pro-reform leader in his first public appearance since elections that he alleges were marred by fraud. ... Security forces watched quietly, with shields and batons at their sides."¹³

Trouble, however, erupted after the rally: "A group of demonstrators with fuel canisters attempted to set fire to the compound of the Basij, a volunteer militia linked to Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guards, as the crowd dispersed from Azadi, or Freedom, Square after dark. As some attempted to storm the building, people inside could be seen firing directly at the demonstrators at the northern edge of the square, away from the heart of the demonstration. An AP photographer saw one person fatally shot and several others who appeared to be seriously wounded."¹⁴ The number of dead was later reported to have risen to seven.¹⁵

The Guardian Council, on the other hand, refused on Tuesday, June 16, to accept Moasavi's demand for annulment of the electoral process, but said that it was "ready to recount the disputed ballot boxes claimed by some candidates, in the presence of their representatives."¹⁶

A possible showdown between the supporters of President Ahmadinejad and Mir-Hossein Mousavi at a central Tehran square later the same day was in the event averted when the defeated candidate called off the gathering of his supporters at the joint scene of the rallies announced by the two sides. Calm was thus restored to the Iranian capital after four days of post-poll unrest. Reports of demonstrations at smaller scales had, meanwhile, also come from some other major cities.

Meanwhile, Iran's Intelligence Minister stated on June 16 that authorities were going after "two types" of individuals responsible for the unrest: "One wanted to achieve its goal through explosions and terror, and in this connection 50 people were arrested and more than 20 explosive consignments were discovered. They were supported from outside the country,' he told state radio. 'The second category was made up of counter-revolutionary groups who had penetrated election headquarters (of the election candidates) ... Some 26 such elements have been arrested,' he added."¹⁷

Nevertheless, the potential for further unrest remains as Mir-Hossein Mousavi has anything but reconciled with his defeat. He has expressed his distrust in the Guardian Council and would not settle for anything short of the election results being declared null and void and fresh polling called.¹⁸ That demand does not appear likely to be met.

International Response

The response of the international community to the announcement of electoral results and Iran's domestic developments consequent to that was mixed. Pakistan was among the first countries to congratulate President Ahmadinejad on his re-election. Both

President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani sent messages to that effect. “This is indeed testimony of the confidence of the people of Iran in your leadership qualities and an acknowledgement of your outstanding services,’ Pakistani President Zardari said in his message. He also wished further expansion for Tehran-Islamabad ties in a near future based on close, brotherly relations. ‘I wish you every success and ever greater prosperity for the brotherly people of Iran. Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration,’ he reiterated.

“Meantime, Pakistani Prime Minister Gilani said in his message, ‘It gives me immense pleasure to congratulate you on your well deserved re-election as the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. On behalf of the government and people of Pakistan, I wish to convey to you and our Iranian brothers every success, peace, happiness and prosperity.’ Pakistan’s Prime Minister also said, ‘We are determined to further strengthen our cooperative ties in a comprehensive manner. I have no doubt that our close brotherly relations will strengthen and attain new heights in the years ahead.’”¹⁹

A large number of primarily non-Western heads of governments and states also congratulated President Ahmadinejad. *Reuters* reported from Russia on June 16 when the re-elected Iranian leader was there to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit, that all SCO member countries, including the host Russia and China, had congratulated President Ahmadinejad. “The heads of SCO member states congratulated Ahmadinejad on his re-election,’ Kremlin spokeswoman Natalya Timakova said.”²⁰

The report added: “Russia declined to criticize the Iranian election. ‘The Iranian elections are the internal affair of Iran,’ Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told reporters. ‘We welcome the fact that elections took place, we welcome the ... president on Russian soil and see it as symbolic that he made his first visit to Russia. This allows hope for progress in bilateral relations.’”²¹

A *Xinhua* report from Beijing the same day gave the official Chinese response to the situation in Iran: “Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang voiced respect Tuesday for ‘the choice of the Iranian people’ and called for stability in post-election Iran. Qin made the remarks at a regular press conference, responding to a question on the situation in Iran, where President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s victory over opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi in last week’s election is being contested.”²²

The United States, on the other hand, continued to maintain a studied, calculated posture on the issue – in sharp contrast to the bitter criticism voiced by some of its West European allies. The initial response of the U.S. secretary of state in this regard seemed to have set the tone on the evolving situation in Iran. According to a *Reuters* report on June 14, “U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the United States was monitoring the outcome of the election closely and hoped the result reflected the will of the Iranian people.”²³

President Obama made his first comments the next day, even as protests in Iran had gathered strength. The *BBC* reported his remarks: “U.S. President Barack Obama says he is ‘deeply troubled’ by violence in Iran following last week’s disputed presidential elections. Mr Obama called on Iran’s leaders to respect free speech and the democratic process, and said he would continue pursuing tough dialogue with Iran. ... But the *BBC*’s Jonathan Beale, in Washington, says the president studiously avoided any comment on

the allegations of vote fraud. 'We respect Iranian sovereignty and want to avoid the United States being the issue inside of Iran,' Mr Obama said."²⁴

President Obama maintained more or less the same position in another statement he gave on June 16: "U.S. President Barack Obama reacted on Tuesday to Iran's post-election violence by saying he believed 'people's voices should be heard and not suppressed.' But he also said that, 'I have deep concerns about the election. I think that the world has deep concerns about the election. You have seen in Iran some initial reaction from the Supreme Leader that indicates he understands the Iranian people had deep concerns about the election.' Obama added: 'it is not productive, given the history of U.S.-Iranian relations, to be seen as meddling - the U.S. president, meddling in Iranian elections.'"²⁵

Despite President Obama's such a cautious approach, however, the U.S. government "took the unusual step" after the announcement of election results "of asking micro-blogging website Twitter to delay a planned maintenance outage because of its use as a communications tool by Iranians, a senior official said Tuesday [June 16]. Twitter delayed Monday's scheduled tune-up, which would have taken place during daylight hours in the Islamic Republic and rescheduled it to be in the middle of the night in Iran instead, but said the decision was made with its network provider, not the State Department."²⁶

Apparently, that is what prompted Iran to accuse the United States of 'intolerable' meddling in its internal affairs, alleging that "Washington has fuelled the bitter post-election dispute. The Iranian government summoned the Swiss ambassador, who represents U.S. interests in Iran, to complain about American interference, state-run *Press TV* reported."²⁷

A number of West European countries and the European Union, on the other hand, were harshly critical of both the conduct of elections and of the manner in which authorities in Iran had handled the post-poll unrest. Even as Iranian ambassadors were called in some of the capitals to lodge protests, Tehran reciprocated by summoning the envoys of the respective capitals to complain of their unwarranted interference in the country's internal affairs.²⁸

A rather unconventional response to the Iranian elections, however, came from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on June 15. He was reported to have stated: "The position of me and the United Nations is that the genuine will of Iranian people should be fully respected. I'm closely following how this investigation into this election result will come out," thus implying that the electoral results as officially announced in Tehran did not somehow represent the will of the Iranian nation."²⁹

Western 'surprise'

At any rate, quite regardless of the range of international reaction to the outcome of Iran's elections, it has to be recognised that the Western world in particular did not expect President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to win a second term in office, and with such a resounding majority at that. The reason is not far to seek. In a word, the West, by and large, got trapped in the web of its own media's making, which for various reasons had in the run-up to the polls projected a larger than life image of Mir-Hossein Mousavi's popularity.

More or less dependent as they are on the same Western mainstream media for information on foreign developments in particular, many in the developing world also were no less surprised at the outcome of the elections.

In the first place, Western distrust of post-Revolution Iran is too well known for it to be elaborated here. That has become all the more pronounced during the tenure of President Ahmadinejad starting in August 2005 when he first assumed office. Again, without going into the details involved here, suffice it to say that his consistent position on a number of issues – Iran’s nuclear programme, the Palestinian question, racism and imperialism, to name just a few – has continued to come at odds with the policy approach of the United States in general and Western Europe in particular.

That brings in the possibility of a deliberate slant or spin being given by the corporate Western media in its coverage of the hustings in Iran to magnify the electoral prospects of Mir-Hossein Mousavi who had made the “confrontationist” position of the incumbent president a major plank in his campaign opposition to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. That posture of the Iranian president, according to his main challenger, had left the country in a state of “international isolation” – without a doubt, music to Western ears.

Aligned to this aspect is something of a conspiracy theory hinted at by some in the Iranian government both ahead of and subsequent to the elections: to so build up the prospects of Mir-Hossein Mousavi’s imminent victory that his defeat would lack credibility and, conversely, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s victory would be shorn of legitimacy. Certainly, the losing candidate’s own conduct of continuing to insist on his victory does give credence to the argument. It would not be out of place here to make a reference again to the criticism of the foreign media’s role by President Ahmadinejad as noted above. He had stated after the announcement of results: “they have launched the heaviest propaganda and psychological war against the Iranian nation.”

Secondly, as suggested by some observers and analysts of the election process, the media in question may well have fallen prey to its “wishful thinking”. In his article “Wishful thinking from Tehran” published by *The Guardian* on June 13, Abbas Barzegar, who was in Iran for a week covering the elections, has given the same assessment: “the question occupying the international media, ‘How did Mousavi lose?’ seems to be less a problem of the Iranian election commission and more a matter of bad perception rooted in the stubborn refusal to understand the role of religion in Iran. ...

“Until hard evidence emerges that can substantiate the claims of the opposition camp we need to look to other reasons to explain why so many are stunned by the day’s events ... It is the religious aspects of enigmatic Persia that helped put an 80-year-old exiled ascetic at the head of state 30 years ago [Ayatollah Khomeini], then the charismatic cleric Khatami in office 12 years ago, the honest son of a blacksmith – Ahmedinejad – four years ago, and the same yesterday.”³⁰

A similar explanation of “wishful thinking” for the Western surprise at the election results has also come from Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, the couple that has formerly served at the U.S. National Security Council and are reputable Middle East experts: “The shock of the ‘Iran experts’ over Friday’s results is entirely self-generated, based on their preferred assumptions and wishful thinking.”³¹ They noted:

“Like much of the Western media, most American ‘Iran experts’ overstated Mir Hossein Mousavi’s ‘surge’ over the campaign’s final weeks. More important, they were

oblivious — as in 2005 — to Ahmadinejad’s effectiveness as a populist politician and campaigner. American ‘Iran experts’ missed how Ahmadinejad was perceived by most Iranians as having won the nationally televised debates with his three opponents — especially his debate with Mousavi.”³²

Yet another reason for Western surprise has come forward from George Friedman of *Stratfor*. “Limited to information on Iran from English-speaking opponents of the regime ... Iran experts got a very misleading vision of where the revolution was heading — because the Iranian revolution was not brought about by the people who spoke English. It was made by merchants in city bazaars, by rural peasants, by the clergy — people Americans didn’t speak to because they couldn’t. This demographic was unsure of the virtues of modernization and not at all clear on the virtues of liberalism. From the time they were born, its members knew the virtue of Islam, and that the Iranian state must be an Islamic state.

“Americans and Europeans have been misreading Iran for 30 years. Even after the shah fell, the myth has survived that a mass movement of people exists demanding liberalization — a movement that if encouraged by the West eventually would form a majority and rule the country. We call this outlook ‘iPod liberalism’, the idea that anyone who listens to rock ‘n’ roll on an iPod, writes blogs and knows what it means to Twitter must be an enthusiastic supporter of Western liberalism. Even more significantly, this outlook fails to recognize that iPod owners represent a small minority in Iran — a country that is poor, pious and content on the whole with the revolution forged 30 years ago.”³³

Statistical Analyses

Meanwhile, some statistical analyses of the electoral results, and from Western sources at that, had also appeared to further accord credibility, by and large, to the outcome of the polls as announced officially by Iran on June 13. Even *Washington Post* conceded in a story by its staff writers Glenn Kessler and Jon Cohen on June 16 that President Ahmadinejad had in fact won a “commanding victory”. The report, contributed to by polling analyst Jennifer Agiesta, noted:

“... The case for a rigged outcome is far from ironclad, making it difficult for the United States and other Western powers to denounce the results as unacceptable. Indeed, there is also evidence that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the incumbent president deeply disliked in the West for his promotion of Iran’s nuclear program and his anti-Israeli rhetoric, simply won a commanding victory. Some analysts have suggested that the attention given the protests and anger in Tehran - where Western media outlets are concentrated - gives a misleading picture of the Iranian electorate...

“‘There are suspicious elements here, but there’s no solid evidence of fraud,’ said Walter R. Mebane Jr., a University of Michigan professor of political science and statistics and an expert on detecting electoral fraud ... ‘The results definitely look suspicious, but you need hard evidence to know the election was cooked,’ said Joe Lenski, co-founder and executive vice president of Edison Research. ‘We may never find hard evidence here.’”³⁴

The same day, *BBC* also ran a report, “Poll hint at plausible vote”, based on research conducted by three American polling organisations: “The official result in Iran’s disputed presidential election could plausibly reflect the will of the people, a group of international pollsters says. An independent poll three weeks ago had Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ahead

of his closest rival by a similar 2:1 ratio...The research was conducted by US-based polling organisations Terror Free Tomorrow, the New America Foundation and KA Europe SPRL.

“‘We found that President Ahmadinejad was leading by a substantial margin,’ Ken Ballen from Terror Free Tomorrow told the *BBC World Service*. The nationwide poll was conducted between 11 and 20 May and consisted of 1,001 random interviews covering all 30 provinces of Iran. It had a 3 per cent margin of error. Its results gave Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a 33.8 per cent share of the vote, more than twice as much as Mr Mousavi with 13.6 per cent, and with Mehdi Karroubi and Mohsen Rezai trailing on less than two per cent and one per cent respectively. Respondents say none of the candidates in 7.6 per cent of interviews, while 15.1 per cent refused to answer and 27.4 per cent said they didn't know.

“‘Whether or not this would have changed, or whether Mr Ahmadinejad would hold that lead which would have translated into a victory, that's where the unknown factors arise,’ Mr Ballen said ... However, the large number of students now protesting against the results was also in keeping with the findings and did not necessarily reflect the will of the whole country, Mr Ballen said. ‘The only groups we found in Iran that were supportive of Mousavi or [among whom] ... he was competitive with Ahmadinejad were university students, university graduates and the highest-income Iranians.’

“Other groups, such as Azeris, to whom Mr Mousavi was considered likely to appeal because of his Azeri background, also showed stronger support for Mr Ahmadinejad ahead of Mr Mousavi. Only 16 per cent of Azeris said they intended to vote for Mr Mousavi, compared to 31 per cent who said they would vote for Mr Ahmadinejad.”³⁵

Support Bases

The poll findings cited above explain not just the two distinct support bases of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Mir-Hossein Mousavi, respectively, but also the former's large margin of victory. As recorded by Thomas Erdbrink of the *Washington Post*, again, from the Iranian capital just before the nation went to poll on June 12, the contest between the two leading contenders had already turned into a “battle of haves and have-nots, old and new guard”:

“Though he holds many of the levers of power, Ahmadinejad is proud of his status as an outsider. He says the country's political class has drifted away from its religious and revolutionary roots. Since his surprise election in 2005, he has constantly attacked Iran's post-revolutionary elites, contending that they long ago gave up fighting for the ‘barefooted’ masses and began doing business deals from their villas on the slopes of affluent North Tehran.

“Ahmadinejad has turned the Iranian economy upside down, making sure that advantages flow to the lower class. His government has increased state wages and pensions and has made health insurance free for 22 million people. He derides economists who blame him for high inflation and unemployment, saying that they are tied to the higher classes and that his goal is to ‘spread justice’.

“But his support does not come solely from the downtrodden. He is also backed by a small group of hard-line Islamic clerics and leaders of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps

who share his resentment toward the West, his calls for Iran to occupy its rightful place as a world power and his championing of Iran's nuclear program.

"His leading challenger is Mousavi, an urbane, soft-spoken architect who was prime minister from 1981 to 1989. Though out of power for two decades, Mousavi is in many ways the Iranian establishment's candidate. He represents an older generation of Islamic clergy and politicians who fought side by side with the leader of the 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, but whose power and positions have gradually been stripped away by Ahmadinejad and his associates.

"Mousavi's political foot soldiers, in turn, are disgruntled middle-class youths, intellectuals, artists and academics who have been alienated by the current government's radical rhetoric and pervasive restrictions on personal freedom, such as police controls on the way people dress, the banning of books and the disciplining of dissident students ...

"The result is a confrontation not just between Iran's haves and have-nots, but between the old revolutionaries who seized power from the shah and a new cadre of radicals seeking to dislodge them. 'Our mistake has been that we have not dealt with the power seekers,' said Mehdi Kalhor, Ahmadinejad's media adviser ... 'They are like a bacteria in every empire. The Islamic revolution was a fight against these 1,000 ruling families,' Kalhor added. 'We now need to carry out the objectives of the revolution.'³⁶

In his analysis of the election results quoted above, George Friedman has also identified similar factors behind President Ahmadinejad's victory: "Ahmadinejad enjoys widespread popularity. He doesn't speak to the issues that matter to the urban professionals, namely, the economy and liberalization. But Ahmadinejad speaks to three fundamental issues that accord with the rest of the country.

"First, Ahmadinejad speaks of piety. Among vast swathes of Iranian society, the willingness to speak unaffectedly about religion is crucial. Though it may be difficult for Americans and Europeans to believe, there are people in the world to whom economic progress is not of the essence; people who want to maintain their communities as they are and live the way their grandparents lived. These are people who see modernization — whether from the shah or Mousavi — as unattractive. They forgive Ahmadinejad his economic failures.

"Second, Ahmadinejad speaks of corruption. There is a sense in the countryside that the ayatollahs — who enjoy enormous wealth and power, and often have lifestyles that reflect this — have corrupted the Islamic Revolution. Ahmadinejad is disliked by many of the religious elite precisely because he has systematically raised the corruption issue, which resonates in the countryside.

"Third, Ahmadinejad is a spokesman for Iranian national security, a tremendously popular stance. It must always be remembered that Iran fought a war with Iraq in the 1980s that lasted eight years, cost untold lives and suffering, and effectively ended in its defeat. Iranians, particularly the poor, experienced this war on an intimate level. They fought in the war, and lost husbands and sons in it ... By arguing that Iran should not back down but become a major power, he speaks to the veterans and their families, who want something positive to emerge from all their sacrifices in the war.

“Perhaps the greatest factor in Ahmadinejad’s favour is that Mousavi spoke for the better districts of Tehran — something akin to running a U.S. presidential election as a spokesman for Georgetown and the Lower East Side. Such a base will get you hammered, and Mousavi got hammered. Fraud or not, Ahmadinejad won and he won significantly. That he won is not the mystery; the mystery is why others thought he wouldn’t win.”³⁷

The question posed by Friedman regarding the nature of mystery is highly pertinent. For, any sound reading of the Iranian national pulse in the run-up to the June 12 elections in the country would not have failed to acknowledge the incumbent president’s popularity among the masses. The present look at the given polls may be rounded off by referring to one such write-up by Jay Deshmukh of *AFP* filed from Tehran on June 10:

“Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ... still commands strong loyalty among swathes of Iran’s poor ... For many poorer Iranians, the blacksmith’s son who rose to the presidency is still lionized as a devout, hardworking man of the people, a reputation he cultivated during his first four-year term with big spending programmes and repeated tours of the countryside. Ahmadinejad presents himself as an ordinary man - usually casually dressed in a shirt and jacket.

“Soon after becoming president, he revealed he owned an old Peugeot car and had two bank accounts, one of which was empty and the other was used for his salary from his previous job as a university professor. He also ended the practice of receiving foreign dignitaries such as heads of state in the posh palace of the former shah in northern Tehran by welcoming them at the presidential office instead ... Ahmadinejad has said he regrets not spending enough time at home. He is often seen in the office at 5:30 a.m. and working until midnight.”³⁸

References

- ¹ The total number of votes cast was 39,165,191 of which 409,389 (1.05 per cent) were officially described as blank or invalid. Of the remaining 38,755,802; 24,527,516 (62.63 per cent) went to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and 13,216,411(33.75 per cent) were cast in Mir-Hossein Mousavi’s favour. Two other candidates, Mohsen Rezaee and Mehdi Karroubi, were also in the run. However, both of them failed to garner any substantial support – with the former getting just 678,240 (1.73 per cent) votes, and the latter only 333,635 (0.85 per cent).
http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2009/06/090612_op_ir88_latest_result.shtml
- ² Iranian electoral laws stipulate that the successful presidential candidate secures at least 50 per cent plus one of the total valid votes cast in an election. Should any such clear winner not emerge as a result of the first round of polling, a second round is to be called. In the present instance, such a second round, had there been a need for that, was scheduled for Friday, June 19, 2009.
- ³ The total number of eligible voters was 46.2 million out of which 39.2 million were cast.
- ⁴ “Mousavi puts Ahmadinejad’s ‘halo’ beneath spotlight”, *The Daily Star*, Lebanon, *AP/AFP*, June 9, 2009. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=2&article_id=102803
- ⁵ “Mousavi claims victory in Iranian polls”, *The Daily Star*, Lebanon, *Reuters*, June 13, 2009. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=2&article_id=102987
- ⁶ Robert F. Worth and Nazila Fathi, “Both sides claim victory in presidential election in Iran”, *New York Times*, June 13, 2009. www.nytimes.com/2009/06/13/world/middleeast/13iran.html?ref=middleeast
- ⁷ Thomas Erdbrink, “A polarised Iran prepares to go to polls”, *Washington Post*, June 12, 2009. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/11/AR2009061104106.html?wpisrc=newsletter>
- ⁸ *Stratfor*, “Red alert: Iran’s election results”, June 12, 2009 (received by the present writer through e-mail).

- ⁹ Thomas Erdbrink, "Ahmadinejad vows new start as clashes flare", *Washington Post*, June 14, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/13/AR2009061300627.html?wpisrc=newsletter>
- ¹⁰ *Reuters*, "Protests hit Iran after Ahmadinejad wins poll", June 14, 2009. http://www.gulfintimedia.com/index.php?id=474780&news_type=Top&lang=en
- ¹¹ Thomas Erdbrink, "Ahmadinejad vows new start as clashes flare", *Washington Post*, June 14, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/13/AR2009061300627.html?wpisrc=newsletter>
- ¹² Anna Johnson and Ali Akbar Dareini, "Hundreds of thousands defy Iran ban on pro-Mousavi rally", *Associated Press*, June 16, 2009.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
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