

## The West has got it Wrong about Iran

By Syed Khurram Zaki

**Prelude:** *Ukraine; Late November 2004. Run-off Presidential election between Victor Yanukovych, the then Prime Minister, who secured 39.32% votes in first round, and Victor Yushchenko, the opposition candidate who got 39.87% of the votes. The third and fourth candidate receive just around 5% each. Orange was embraced as the signifying color by the Yushchenko's camp. After the second round of voting, Yanukovych was leading with 49.2% votes with Yushchenko at 46.69%. Yushchenko called for civil disobedience and a massive protest was held at Independence Square (Azadi Square, anyone?). According to Times Magazine Yushchenko asked his supporters not to leave the Square till they achieved victory. The elections were all about whether the Ukraine would pursue closer ties with the West or stick closer to Russia. The Guardian reported on November 24<sup>th</sup> 2004: "The Democratic party's National Democratic Institute, the Republican party's International Republican Institute, the US state department, and USAid are the main agencies involved in these grassroots campaigns, as are the NGOs Freedom House and billionaire George Soros's Open Society Institute". The same daily observed about a year later on Oct 14, 2005: "The winning coalition that orchestrated last winter's street protests collapsed in disarray last month. Leading members accused each other of corruption... Far from being motivated by a genuine wish to promote democracy, many leading Yushchenko-backers only wanted to grab a greater share of the post-Soviet pie". That was the sad ending of the US orchestrated—and much cheered—"Orange Revolution". Similar revolutions fomented elsewhere in the region including the Pink Revolution (Kyrgystan) and the Rose Revolution (Georgia). The same American billionaire, George Soros, spent \$42 million to overthrow Shevardnadze in the later one.*

It was February 2006 when Dr. Condoleezza Rice requested Congress to increase the funds to promote "Democracy" and help "Change in regime behavior" in Iran. Rice requested \$75 million for the purpose. One of the figures who helped launch this program was Elizabeth Cheney, the daughter of Dick Cheney and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs. The state department officials at that time talked of a desire to stir up internal forces for massive political change, as done in the Ukraine and Georgia. But they refused to disclose the specific details to protect the identity of Iranian individuals and organizations that had received funding. Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian Nobel Laureate for Peace, wrote in an article published in International Herald Tribune on May 30, 2007:

The secret dimension of the distribution of the \$75 million has also created immense problems for Iranian reformists, democratic groups and human rights activists. Aware of their own deep unpopularity, the hard-liners in Iran are terrified by the prospects of a 'velvet revolution' and have become obsessed with preventing contacts between Iranian scholars, artists, journalists and political activists and their American counterparts.

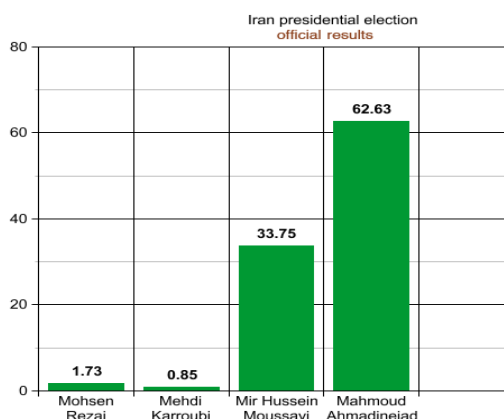
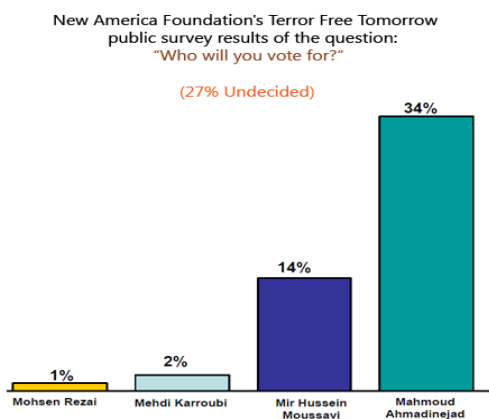
To gauge the depth of these clandestine operations, I refer to a report that appeared in the *Asia Times Online* on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2006 titled "Inside the US's regime-change school". The report detailed on how an Iranian lady named Nilofar, working for an International organization in Tehran, suddenly got an invitation to attend a Human Rights workshop in Dubai. When she went over there, she came to know that the conference was falsely advertised in the lobby of the hotel as the conference by the "Griffin Hospital". The

participants identified themselves only through aliases. The course organizers were L.A. based exile-Iranians and Americans plus three Serbs belonging to the Otpor movement that overthrew the President Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. The workshop stressed the importance of ridiculing the political elite so as to demystify the aura of sacredness surrounding them and employing different methods to bring down the government. That crash course for changing a regime from within was held several months before the Bush administration requested the extra funding to accelerate the purpose. So for all practical purposes they had a lead time of three full years for breeding and training the required herd of color revolutionists.

Then came the 10<sup>th</sup> Iranian Presidential Election. The main contestants were Mahmood Ahmadinejad and Mir Hossein Mousavi. During the last run-off presidential elections Ahmadinejad defeated Hashemi Rafsanjani by 17.28 million votes to just above 10 million of his opponent with the turnout in the second round at 48%. Many were perplexed by the defeat of a person of such a stature as Rafsanjani's. But the general perception of wealth mingled with corruption and his luxurious and lavish lifestyle compared to the austere Ahmadinejad's reputation as a hard working mayor of Tehran and the latter's full backing of religious clerics well account for the setback.

There were rumors circulating widely involving Hashemi's family members in corruption, kickbacks, and embezzlement. During the live broadcast of the presidential debate on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, Ahmadinejad hit the nerve directly by exposing Rafsanjani's role behind the Mousavi campaign. It was already known among the political and media circles that it was Hashemi who was the main backer of Mir Housein Mousavi (as evident from the article of 18 June by David Blair in "Telegraph"), but it struck the masses like a revelation. Rafsanjani had become a kind of *bête noire* for the majority of the Iranian public since the last election. Those accusations worked as a catalyst for the massive turnout in the election. The only independent opinion poll conducted by "Terror Free Tomorrow (TFT): The Center for Public Opinion" and "New America Foundation" gave Ahmadinejad a lead of 2 to 1.

If you compare the election results with the poll results you will find out that they are just mirror images of each other though polls predicted a bit more votes for Ahmadinejad.



In his article in the New York Post Joshua Muravchik raised several points about this poll that deserve some scrutiny. The article, in which Muravchik calls the referred poll a "Junk Poll", opens with this comment:

No sooner had the first truncheon fallen on the head of an Iranian protester demanding that votes be fairly counted than two researchers from American advocacy groups rushed into print to vouch for the legitimacy of the official outcome of Iran's presidential election.

This implies that the report came in the aftermath of protests which is not the case. The report appeared on the websites of different news channels well before the election. Voice of America reported the results of this survey on 8<sup>th</sup> June in an article by Meredith Buel.

I will come to the technical points later but will start with a claim from the end of the article where Muravchik writes: "Oh, and the alleged tally of 10 million paper ballots was announced just three hours after polls closed, a feat that could only have been managed one way—by counting the votes before they were cast." There were a total of 45,713 ballot boxes set up all across Iran and total of 39.2 million votes being casted. If you divide those 10 million votes among 45,000 ballot boxes you get an average of around 220 votes per box. Even if you take a minute to count a single vote—it takes about 10-15 seconds, 3 hours are more than enough, in order of magnitude, to count those 10 million votes. And if there are more than 4 persons counting the votes the whole lot can be counted within a few hours, even with uneven distribution of votes among ballot boxes and less-than-perfect synchronicity. As far as communication of the result to regional offices are concerned we can safely presume that when all the opposition was tweeting and posting on facebook, the election results were not being communicated through Pigeon-Post. Now building on the same argument I would like to quote what Time Magazine had reported on the same issue:

"Friday's announcement, which was based on a very small count, came just minutes after Mousavi declared himself to be "definitely the winner." According to a Mousavi official in Paris, the opposition leader was initially informed by the Interior Ministry that he had won."

If partial announcement of the counts was not possible, which I have proven is not the case, how come Mousavi's announcement of his success is possible even before that and from the same Interior Ministry? Why has nobody said that it was Mousavi who wanted to rig the results in his favor through an early claim of victory quoting unknown officials? Perhaps double standard caused by wishful thinking? If a count was not possible, then it was not for all the candidates and not just for Ahmadinejad. It is, by the way, the same arch-conservative Interior Ministry who declared Muhammad Khatami, a more popular and liberal candidate, the winner in the past, not once but twice. Khatami, unlike Mousavi, also never had the stigma—from a liberal viewpoint—of working as a Prime Minister under the more radical leadership of Imam Khomeini. If we check the results of that 1997 and 2001 elections, we would find that Khatami won with an even higher percentage of votes—i.e. 70% and 78% respectively—and both times the turnout was over 80%. After winning his re-elections in 2001, Muhammad Khatami said: "Every ballot in the box is a vote for an Islamic system of government here". It has been claimed that a larger turnout invariably means a turnout for change. But if the rhetoric is true, why was there a considerably higher turnout in the second term of Khatami? Apparently turnout is still linked to popularity in Iran. And it is almost the same case with the elections in 2005 when Ahmadinejad surprised by winning the elections against a very powerful candidate, Hashemi Rafsanjani. Ahmadinejad got more than 17 million votes though voter turnout was just 48% compared to 85% this time. This makes the lead this time around look more realistic and in sync with previous results. It is the reason that John Stremalu, Vice President for Peace Programs at the Carter Center,

admitted that fast announcement is not necessarily proof of rigging. Stremalu has monitored 75 elections over the past two decades.

But back to Mr. Muravchik's Post article where he further states that: "Mir Hussein Mousavi's campaign rallies were larger than Ahmadinejad's, although the latter had state resources. Voter turnout, all sides agree, was 35 percent higher than last time."

Yes of course, if the media—in particular the BBC, show images of rallies in support of Ahmadinejad and pass them it off as Pro-Mousavi, such perceptions are not entirely incorrect. Other than that, there is no evidence for such claims. Both sides came out with good rallies and there are no parameters available to judge which ones were bigger. If all sides agree that voter turnout was 35% higher, this proves that no ballot-stuffing was committed to artificially increase the turn out. People actually voted for one candidate or other. Now I revert to his main argument against the New America poll:

It turns out that their callers reached 1,731 people. Fully 730 refused to speak to them. Of the remaining 1,001, half (501) either refused to say how they'd vote or said they didn't know or had no preference.

This implies that the ratio of refusal to engage in that particular telephone survey—58%—is dramatically low and perhaps therefore inferior. But as per Lisa Harrison's "Political Research: An Introduction", in the US the telephone response rate stands merely at '30%'.

I would also like to point out a fact missed by Mr. Muravchik. In his article he referred to the Freedom House Rating which, according to him, places Iran among the two dozen least free countries in the world. The interesting part with this Freedom House rating is that in 2008 it showed Afghanistan, a country under occupation, and Kashmir, an area occupied by India, as partially free and included Yemen, Somalia, Turkey, Jordan and Ethiopia in same category while Iran and Pakistan were not free at all. That's curious, to say the least—and the most generous reading of that conclusion is that Freedom House places higher expectations on the democracies Iran and Pakistan than anarchic Somalia. (Interestingly, in the same survey Iran also scored the highest in Freedom of Expression and Individual Rights.)

Now if we go back to the original argument of Mr. Muravchik where he combines the undecided (27.4%) with the ones who refused to answer (15%) we will find out that even if we put all the 'refused to answer' votes in the basket for Mr. Mousavi, and divide the remaining undecided votes equally between the two candidates, Ahmadinejad would have won a simple majority. If these voters were in fact afraid of the consequences of expressing their true opinion (Mr. Muravchik considers being a Mousavi supporter such an opinion), why did they express heterodox views on other questions? Muravchik suggests that "many dictatorships allow some diversity of expression regarding abstract issues". Abstract issues? Surely the question as to whether the foundation of the current theocratic system should be disposed with goes well beyond abstraction:

"...tell me whether you support or oppose a political system where the 'Supreme Leader', along with all leaders, can be chosen and replaced by a free and direct vote of the people"

A good 66% supported the idea of electing the Wali Faquih, the Supreme Leader, by popular vote, not by edict of the Assembly of Experts. If that reply is not a daring one, then what is?

The elections results in 2009 did not just reflect the TFT polls' prediction but also the pattern of the 2005 election results when Ahmadinejad garnered 61% votes. The higher voter turn-out was not likely caused by a desire of change but thanks to the media frenzy and subsequent polarization of the society after the televised debate between the two competitors. The TFT polls also happen to match the demographic patterns of Iran as established by the census and other official data, which speaks in favor of their accuracy.

The turnout was overwhelming on June 12<sup>th</sup>, a massive 85%. But the designs of the color revolutionists were different. They were planning for a run-off and propagating vehemently that higher turnout will drag the elections into the second round. From that moment on, western coverage focused on the possibility of a run-off, which probably was already more the product of wishful thinking, than hardnosed analysis—even if that should have struck as unlikely, considering the social and economic breakdown of the population and the effective exposé of Rafsanjani's role behind the Mousavi camp.

Instead they focused on the important, but not all relevant facts that people were frustrated with the economic slowdown, high inflation, and unemployment rate. But that's the case with every third world country where incumbency is a liability. From the perspective of an ordinary Iranian, Iran has made enormous progress on scientific and foreign policy fronts. And there might have been a chance for Mousavi had Rafsanjani's presence not been felt as strongly.

Mousavi was claiming victory before the polls were even closed. (Precisely what western commentators then accused Ahmadinejad of, as a sure sign of rigged elections.) There were no allegations of any sort of rigging that whole day—until the Interior ministry announced partial results and cries of foul play suddenly started pouring out. For a day or two we only heard about voting irregularities, followed by reports of a color revolution on the streets of northern Tehran. That was an attempted coup d'état by the elite and bourgeois with green flags in their hands. The color green has special symbolic value in Iran as it is the color reserved for the progeny of the last Holy Prophet. But that movement was doomed to failure. There is no example in history of any mass revolution by the upper class. Then there was the issue out of the murder of Neda Sultan, but there is no evidence available to incriminate Basij, the paramilitary volunteer force that acts on orders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, in the incident. Dr. Hejazi, the music teacher present on the spot, and eyewitnesses of the incident didn't see anyone killing her. Nobody else saw any Basij firing on her. The story remains rather a murder mystery.

Still, the media trial judged it otherwise. Parallels to the murder of investigative journalist Georgy Gongadze, which triggered the Orange revolution in Ukraine, were drawn. Initially the clerical establishment allowed the protests. When some of these turned into arson and property destruction, the Revolutionary Guard clamped down on the violent protests which diverted the efforts of color revolutionists towards the "twitter revolution", spreading (mis-)information through cyberspace. One of these rumors thus spread was that the president of the Election Monitoring Committee declared the election result invalid. It was in fact Ali Akbar Mohtashami, a campaigner for Mousavi, who had done so. Twitters from non-Iranian sources (some of them from Israel) got in on the propaganda against the Ahmadinejad regime.

What remains of the election dispute is a limited number of irregularities—going both ways, apparently—at a few polling booths and, later, at some protest sites. The media was projecting it as a mass revolution against Ahmadinejad. *That*, it was not; but rather a case of simplistic, wishful thinking. Imam Khamenei, on June 19<sup>th</sup>, asked a pertinent question: How can one rig more than 10 million votes in such a situation with huge presence of International media and with no such complaint from the competitor all election-day? He urged the Iranian nation to grasp the real motivation behind the chaos and requested restraint from both sides. And it was tense but peaceful situation on the coming Sunday when in spite of the appeal made by Mousavi, no major demonstration took place in Tehran. But the real revelation surfaced when none other than Secretary of State Hillary Clinton confessed that US did a lot “behind the scenes” to show support for the demonstrators. Her words in fact reveal much more than they hide:

And we knew that if we stepped in *too soon, too hard...* the leadership would try to use us to unify the country against the protestors.

Rafsanjani, Mousavi, and Karoubi didn't show up at Khamenei's sermon which is a vital indication of their future course of action. The pundits who were predicting—or rather wishing—that the Assembly of Experts, headed by Rafsanjani, would initiate any action against Imam Khamenei don't seem to be familiar with the concept of Imamate in the Shiite doctrine. Rafsanjani cannot dare challenge the Supreme Leader so openly. Aside, this election was (and remains) more about Ahmadinejad vs. Rafsanjani than Khamenei vs. Rafsanjani. (Mousavi, in any case, is a puppet.) The advent of the Ahmadinejad phenomenon can be seen in the context of Islamic history as the Caliphate of Ali and the subsequent trouble from the same bourgeois class like Muawiah, Talha and Zubair. For few coming years I do not foresee any major political turmoil in Iran. By siding with Mousavi, Hashemi lost any chances of becoming future Supreme Leader of Iran, if he had any.