

Protests erupt after Iranian election

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Clashes between police and supporters of defeated candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi erupted in the Iranian capital of Tehran over the weekend, after election officials declared the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the winner in last Friday's presidential election.

Mousavi, widely promoted in the international press as riding a wave of popular opposition, received just 34 percent against 63 percent for Ahmadinejad. Disappointed supporters, mostly young people, took to the streets, burning vehicles, torching shop fronts and clashing with riot police to vent their anger over the result.

US and Western media have generally inflated the extent of the protests and the police crackdown. In an on-the-spot report, BBC journalist John Simpson breathlessly speculated on whether he was witnessing the beginning of a revolution against the regime—from a crowd that he estimated at 3,000. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that “huge swathes of the capital erupted in fiery riots” but went on to describe clashes involving “hundreds” of demonstrators chanting “Down with dictatorship!” and “Give me my vote back!”

There are reports that up to 100 people have been arrested, including 10 leaders of two groups that backed Mousavi. At one point it was reported that Mousavi had been detained, but his wife denied that was the case. The brother of ex-president Mohammad Khatami was detained then later released. Al-Arabiya television was shut down for a week and a number of websites have been blocked. Mobile phones, which were not functioning on Saturday, were working again on Sunday.

Undoubtedly, there was bitter disappointment among layers of students and young people who expected that a Mousavi victory would bring an easing of the Iranian regime's anti-democratic restrictions. Mousavi branded the outcome “a dangerous charade” and protested against the “numerous and blatant irregularities” in the vote count. Yesterday, he wrote to the Guardian Council calling for the election to be annulled. The other so-called reform candidate Mehdi Karroubi, who polled just 0.8 percent, condemned the result as “engineered” and “ridiculous”.

Several commentators have pointed to anomalies in the results. The *Christian Science Monitor*, for instance, noted: “Mousavi lost to Ahmadinejad in his hometown and ethnic Azeri heartland; reformist candidate Mehdi Karroubi lost in his ethnic Lur home province and scored only a miniscule number of votes nationwide; and Ahmadinejad won Tehran and many other urban centres, where he has long been considered to have less support than rural areas.”

While election rigging probably took place, the outcome is not the “surprise” and “shock” presented in the international media. All of the candidates—the conservatives Ahmadinejad and Mohsen Rezai, and the reformers Mousavi and Karroubi—were vetted by the unelected Guardian Council and are part of the political establishment. In the final weeks, the campaign was highly polarised around Ahmadinejad and Mousavi, who represent different factions of the ruling elite. As a result, the very low votes for Rezai and Karroubi are hardly surprising.

Mousavi speaks for sections of the regime who are seeking to ease tensions with the US as a means of ending international sanctions and opening up the deteriorating Iranian economy to foreign capital. For all the fanfare of its highly-orchestrated “colour revolution”—in this case, green—Mousavi's campaign was directed at a relatively narrow social base—the urban middle classes, particularly students and youth. Moreover, his criticisms of Ahmadinejad's handouts—particularly in rural areas—will only have alienated broad layers of the working class and rural poor, who, while discontented over rising unemployment and soaring inflation, would hardly welcome the tougher austerity measures advocated by the “reformers”.

Those suspicions would have been reinforced by the support for Mousavi from two former presidents—Mohammad Khatami and Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Ahmadinejad won an upset victory in the 2005 presidential elections by capitalising on the widespread anger among working people over the impact of Khatami's free market agenda from 1997 and 2005. He soundly defeated Rafsanjani in the second round in 2005 by promising to put the country's oil revenues on people's tables and inveighing against corruption. Rafsanjani, one of the

country's wealthiest men, is widely regarded as a crooked politician.

In the course of this campaign, Ahmadinejad again seized on Rafsanjani's alleged corruption to posture as a defender of the poor against the wealthy, corrupt elite and to deflect attention from his own economic record. Against his opponents, Ahmadinejad was also able to posture as an opponent of the US, despite the fact that his administration tacitly supported the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. In the final analysis, Ahmadinejad's ability to make such demagogic appeals rests on the absence of any genuinely progressive alternative representing the interests of the Iranian working class and oppressed masses.

While boosting Mousavi's campaign, various Western commentators acknowledged that Ahmadinejad, who was previously mayor of Tehran, had a substantial base among the urban poor and in the rural areas. A class divide was evident in the reaction in the capital to the election outcome. Young protesters took to the streets in the more affluent northern and north-eastern suburbs. But as the *New York Times* noted: "Meanwhile, the working-class areas of southern Tehran where Mr Ahmadinejad is popular were largely quiet, despite rumours of wild victory celebrations."

The reaction suggests that significant sections of working people, in rural and urban areas, voted for Ahmadinejad, if only grudgingly, as the lesser evil. Their distrust will only have been confirmed by the barely concealed class contempt of Mousavi and his backers for the "ignorance" and "backwardness" of Ahmadinejad's poorer supporters. For others, there was deep suspicion and contempt for the entire regime. As one flower shop attendant told the *Los Angeles Times*: "This is a mammoth battle between two Islamic Republic dinosaurs."

Reaction in Europe and the US to Ahmadinejad's victory has been generally muted. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier condemned the police crackdown on protests as "unacceptable" and suggested that voting irregularities required "a comprehensive explanation". The Czech presidency of the European Union expressed the hope that the election outcome of the election would not hinder dialogue on Iran's nuclear program.

US Vice-President Joe Biden declared that there was "some real doubt" about the election outcome, but indicated that the Obama administration would continue its attempts to open a dialogue with Tehran. "Talks with Iran are not a reward for good behaviour. Our interests are the same before the election as they are after the election," he said. In other words, efforts to enlist Iranian assistance for American economic and strategic objectives in the Middle East and Central Asia, in return for

better relations and an ending of sanctions, will continue.

Commentator Yoav Limor described the response in Israeli ruling circles as "warnings outwardly, and smiles inwardly." Explaining the inward "smiles" over Ahmadinejad's victory, he said: "Why? Because a moderate president would speak softly and the world would be tempted to believe him and would refrain from a confrontation." As if to confirm this assessment, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, an extreme right-winger, immediately seized on the result to demand "uncompromising" international action against Iran's nuclear programs and "aid to terrorist organisations".

Within Iran, the protests certainly point to deeper social tensions. Inflation has soared to more than 20 percent hitting workers and the rural poor hard. Unemployment is on the rise, particularly among young people who constitute well over half of the population. Low oil prices and declining oil revenues—the main source of government income—mean that Ahmadinejad will quickly jettison his pro-poor promises and make further inroads into the social position of working people.

The fragility of the regime was underscored by Mousavi's appeal to his supporters to act "in a peaceful and legal way". His comments reflect fears within the Iranian political establishment as a whole that demonstrations could open the door for the eruption of broader social discontent. By tying young people to Mousavi—a conservative representative of the Iranian bourgeoisie—various student groups and the Stalinist Tudeh Party effectively blocked any turn to the only social force that is capable of challenging the regime—the working class.

A genuine struggle for democratic rights and decent living standards will only go forward through the independent political mobilisation of workers, and behind them the urban and rural poor, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. Central to this perspective must be the unification of workers in Iran with their class brothers and sisters throughout the region and internationally to abolish the outmoded profit system and replace it with a world planned socialist economy.



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