

The New York Times and the Iranian election

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The response of the US media to the Iranian election says more about the state of democracy and the so-called “free press” in America than it does about the state of democratic rights in Iran.

The coverage by the *New York Times* typifies a presentation of the victory of the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, over his main challenger, former Prime Minister Mirhossein Mousavi, that abandons any pretense of journalistic objectivity. It is sheer propaganda aimed at discrediting the election result.

No sooner had Iranian authorities announced late Friday, US time, that Ahmadinejad had defeated Mousavi by a 30 percent margin than the *Times* and virtually the entire media proclaimed the election a fraud. The *Times* did not simply report the allegations by Mousavi that the election had been stolen, it embraced them wholeheartedly and uncritically.

It did so without undertaking any independent investigation. It brought forward no serious facts to substantiate the claim. Rather, it relied on allegations made by Mousavi and his supporters.

Already on Saturday, the *Times* made a video, which it posted on its web site Sunday, in which its leading foreign correspondent, Roger Cohen, breathlessly denounced the “hastily declared” victory of Ahmadinejad and gave the impression that Tehran had been placed under martial law, with droves of black-clad police roaming the city and beating oppositionists.

The only “evidence” Cohen was able to produce for his claim of a stolen election was the fact that the authorities had declared Ahmadinejad the victor “within hours” of the polls closing and that the official vote numbers had “scarcely varied” from the initial tallies.

Cohen’s video was supplemented by a front-page article on Sunday by the *Times*’ executive editor, Bill Keller, in which Keller cited uncritically the claims of opposition voters that Ahmadinejad’s reelection was “the imposed verdict” of the

regime and a “coup d’état.” He adduced not a single fact to back these charges. In lieu of evidence, he reported the claim by “somebody’s brother who supposedly knew someone inside” that “vote counters simply were ordered to doctor numbers.”

The core of Keller’s argument that the election had been manipulated was what he called the “preposterous margin of victory” for Ahmadinejad. But he himself acknowledged in his piece that Ahmadinejad successfully appealed to the Iranian poor, a huge percentage of the electorate. And he acknowledged the severe disappointment of “Western leaders who had seen a better relationship with Iran as potentially helpful in resolving the problems of Afghanistan, Iraq and nuclear proliferation.”

The *Times* and the rest of the US media, directly reflecting the outlook of the government, had promoted the candidacy of Mousavi and depicted a rising tide of popular support that was certain to either sweep the “reformer” into office or obtain a close enough result to force a run-off contest with Ahmadinejad. In their function as conduits for the state and US imperialist policy, they were seeking to promote the notion that a victory for Mousavi would represent a triumph of democracy and open up a new chapter in US-Iranian relations. The only possible explanation for Ahmadinejad’s landslide victory, they immediately concluded, was fraud.

For anyone with a serious knowledge of Iranian society and politics, the decisive victory of Ahmadinejad could not have come as a surprise. Even Western newspapers that denounced the election admitted that the incumbent had strong support among urban workers and the rural poor—the vast majority of the population. Ahmadinejad has retained this constituency, despite the repressive and corrupt character of the regime, because of the absence of a socialist alternative.

On what mass base could Mousavi depend for a successful bid to unseat Ahmadinejad? The candidate of the Iranian liberal establishment, he campaigned as no less an ardent defender of Islamist clerical rule than Ahmadinejad. On domestic policy, he vaguely called for more openness, while opposing Ahmadinejad’s “populist” subsidies to the urban poor and the

peasantry.

The media has not sought to explain why the mass of the Iranian people should be expected to support an advocate of the same free market policies that have produced a social disaster throughout the world. Mousavi's most prominent backer, moreover, was Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a leading figure in the state apparatus and one of the country's wealthiest men. Rafsanjani, notorious for his corruption, is despised by Iranian workers and the poor.

Mousavi's actual electoral base did not extend beyond better-off-sections of the urban middle class, university students and businessmen.

There is another issue. What standing do the *New York Times* and the US media as a whole have to lecture Iran about democratic elections?

The *Times* accepted the theft of the 2000 US presidential election without a whimper. That was a presidential coup, and it was carried out in broad daylight, with Bush and the Republicans suppressing votes and the Supreme Court halting a recount in Florida that would have given the election to Al Gore, who had won the popular vote nationally. One need only recall the extraordinary events of election night 2000, when the networks suddenly reversed their call for Gore in Florida and declared the pivotal state for Bush.

The American elections are among the least genuinely democratic elections in what passes for the world's democracies. Working and poor people are routinely denied the right to vote. The elections are dominated by corporate money and media manipulation. Third parties find it virtually impossible to obtain ballot status because of laws that are designed to maintain the monopoly of two big business parties.

The state of American democracy is summed up in the current mayoral election in the country's largest city, New York. There, a multi-billionaire media tycoon, Michael Bloomberg, overturned a term limit law and is running unopposed for reelection.

The *Times* is silent about the historical record concerning US "support" for democracy in Iran. This includes the 1953 coup, organized by the CIA, which overthrew the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and installed the Shah. From then until the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the US backed the Shah's torture regime and hailed it as the bulwark of the "free world" in the Persian Gulf.

The filthy role of the *Times* in seeking to discredit the Iranian election epitomizes the corruption of the American media and

its integration into the state. The mass media serve ever more openly as instruments for the manipulation of public opinion in the interest of state concerns.

That the role of the *Times* as a conduit for US foreign policy aims is not limited to one country or one part of the world is underscored by another example of propaganda in the guise of news. Just two weeks ago, on May 30, the *Times* published a diatribe against another regime deemed by Washington to be an obstacle to US imperialist interests—that of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Headlined "Chávez Seeks Tighter Grip on Military," the article retailed without substantiation claims of a massive crackdown by Chávez against dissidents within the military.

In this article, as in the articles published on the Iranian election, there is a large element of provocation. Such "news" items are written on assignment from US intelligence agencies. This corruption of the media is itself a critical expression of, and factor in, the advanced decay of American democracy.

The election in Iran underscores the necessity for an orientation to the Iranian working class on the basis of a clearly defined socialist and internationalist program as the only foundation for opposition to the reactionary bourgeois regime of the clerics.

The response of the US media to the election underscores the fact that the American working class can defend its democratic rights only by developing its own mass, independent socialist movement.

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