

# The New York Times and Iran: Journalism as state provocation

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In an editorial published Thursday entitled “Iran’s Nonrepublic,” the *New York Times* once again denounced the country’s presidential elections, declaring that “government authorities bulldozed the results” and that the victory of the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was “bogus.”

At the same time, echoing a statement made by President Barack Obama the day before, the newspaper warned, “Given its history with Iran, the United States must take special care not to be seen as interfering.”

The *Times* editorial board does not believe that this stricture applies to itself. Since the results of the June 12 election were announced, the newspaper has pursued a journalistic policy of out-and-out provocation in service of the imperialist interests that official Washington insists it must not be seen as pursuing.

The *Times* observes no standard of journalistic objectivity, reporting as fact that the Iranian election was stolen, without providing a scintilla of proof to back it up. Instead, it uncritically repeats the insistence of the Mousavi camp that it is so.

The newspaper has not even bothered to report, much less analyze, the vote totals, which are readily available by both city and province and refute the claims made that the ballots were rigged to give Ahmadinejad a 60 percent margin across the board.

On the contrary, they show that Mousavi won—in some cases by a two-to-one margin—precisely in the areas that are now the center of the election protests—the wealthier suburbs of Tehran, Shiraz and elsewhere.

The US has intense interests in Iran, with the Obama administration fighting wars on its eastern and western borders. There is, moreover, the long history of hostility between the two countries, stemming from Washington’s previous domination of Iran and its oil wealth through its dictatorial client regime under the Shah, and the revolution that brought that regime to an end. Given these interests and this history, conscientious coverage of Iranian politics, particularly by US journalists, calls for not only objectivity, but also sensitivity to Washington’s intervention in Iran’s affairs and attempts to influence its politics.

The *Times* coverage, however, exhibits no such objectivity whatsoever. The newspaper has simply ignored commentary from prominent analysts of the region who have suggested that the claims of a rigged election are not supported by the evidence. These include Anthony Cordesman, the chief military strategy and Middle East analyst for the Center for Strategic and International Studies; Hillary Mann Leverett, the former chief Iran analyst on George W. Bush’s National Security Council, and her husband Flynt Leverett, a long time CIA analyst and NSC staffer, who together wrote a column entitled “Ahmadinejad won. Get over it;” and George Friedman, the head of the Stratfor private intelligence service.

All of them said that the right-wing populist Ahmadinejad retained substantial popular support in Iran, particularly among the rural poor and more oppressed social layers, and warned against “Iran experts” who based their analyses on wishful thinking and contact with a more affluent, English-speaking minority in Iran.

*Times* employs its pretenses of fraud to demand election—calling the Guardian Council’s call for recounting ballots a “cynical gesture”—is highly significant. The newspaper is not interested in correcting vote fraud, but rather in bringing pressure to bear within the Iranian state to effect a political coup.

This was spelled out explicitly Thursday by *Times* foreign affairs columnist Roger Cohen, who speculated that Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, “will come to view Ahmadinejad as a liability.” He continued, “In Mousavi he has a credible vehicle for a reform of the regime that serves to preserve it... The supreme leader can find the means to reverse course.”

This succinctly sums up Washington’s aims—to exert pressure on the Iranian state to carry out a change at the top that will render the regime more amenable to US interests in the region and more open to American capital within Iran. The concern for democracy, while sincerely held by millions of Iranians, is for the *Times*, as for the US government, merely a pretext.

No doubt there were instances of vote-rigging in Iran, but this is the rule, not the exception, in elections around the globe. And not infrequently, particularly in the so-called lesser developed countries, elections end in charges of fraud by the losing party that trigger mass demonstrations and even armed clashes.

Just last April, elections in Moldova ended in violent protests, with the losing party claiming fraud and the winning one saying it was the victim of an attempted coup. In November of last year in Nicaragua, nationwide local elections in which the opposition claimed irregularities led to confrontations involving thousands of people armed with bats, rocks, machetes and guns. Last July, charges of election fraud led to mass rioting in the capital of Mongolia. There is no record of the *Times* becoming particularly exercised about any of these events.

Particularly instructive is the attitude taken by the newspaper toward the disputed 2006 presidential election in Mexico, when the conservative candidate Felipe Calderon—with just 36 percent of the vote and amid substantiated charges of gross electoral fraud—claimed victory over his left-nationalist opponent, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

The *Times* called for no new election then, and was largely indifferent to the evidence that the election had been rigged. While the massive crowds that took to the streets of Mexico City were comparable to those seen in Tehran, the newspaper showed only disdain for the protesters.

On July 7, just five days after the contested vote totals were announced, the *Times* haughtily editorialized: “Mr. Lopez Obrador has occasionally furthered his political career by inviting supporters to take to the streets... but he should resist inciting mass protests, which would harm Mexico’s stability and add to his image as a less-than-committed democrat.”

In Mexico, the victim of vote fraud was told to stand down in the interests of “stability,” while mass protests by his supporters were portrayed as a threat to democracy—the exact inverse of the newspaper’s approach to the Iranian events. Why the difference? In Mexico, the

candidate favored by Washington won, and in Iran, the White House seeks not stability, but destabilization.

Even closer to home, the approach of the newspaper to the claims of a stolen Iranian election stands in stark contrast to the open theft of the 2000 election by the Republican Party, which only two years before had sought to carry out an extra-constitutional coup against an elected president by means of a bogus impeachment—an operation that the *Times* had helped legitimize.

In that election, it was not a matter of the government offering a partial recount of disputed ballots in Florida, but a direct intervention by the US Supreme Court to stop a statewide recount that had been ordered by the Florida Supreme Court to insure that all votes were properly counted. Did the *Times* advocate mass protests or demand a new election? Far from it. The newspaper made itself an accomplice to this unprecedented assault on democratic rights—the suppression of the vote to install the candidate who had lost the popular vote nationally.

In the course of the bitter battle over the Florida vote, a *Times* editorial demanded an end to “wild talk of vote-stealing and coups d’état”—precisely what was happening. And after the US Supreme Court selected Bush, negating the will of the majority of voters, the newspaper demanded that the decision be accepted in order to “unify the nation.” It praised Democratic candidate Al Gore for capitulating, calling it “a patriotic duty.”

Neither the *Times* nor the US government are in a position to give lessons to Iran or anyone else on the subject of democracy. The American electoral system, rife with fraud, is controlled lock, stock and barrel by two parties of big business whose national candidates are vetted for their loyalty to a financial oligarchy.

Leading US politicians—including John Kerry in an op-ed piece published by the *Times* Thursday—have insisted that the US must keep a low profile in Iran because of its role in organizing the 1953 coup that overthrew the nationalist prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, and ushered in the 26-year torture regime of the Shah. By the same token, the editors of the *Times* should keep their mouths shut.

In 1953, their correspondent in Tehran, Kennett Love, was not only a willing conduit for CIA disinformation, but acknowledged participating directly in the coup. He subsequently wrote of giving an Iranian army tank column instructions to attack Mossadeq’s house. Afterwards, the *Times* celebrated the coup and demanded unconditional support for the Shah’s regime.

Little has changed since. It is not difficult to find evidence that the *Times* acts—both in its news coverage and its editorial line—as a major instrument of US foreign policy. Its main function is to provide justifications for the policies pursued by American imperialism around the globe, while manipulating public opinion at home and abroad to support them. As the “newspaper of record,” it sets the agenda for much of the US media, which echoes its line.

There was, of course, the well-known and criminal role played by the newspaper in promoting—and through its senior correspondent Judith Miller helping to fabricate—the lies of the Bush administration about “weapons of mass destruction” that were used as the pretext for the war against Iraq.

Then there was the newspaper’s endorsement of the abortive April 2002 coup against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. The *Times* praised the sections of the Venezuelan military that had “intervened and handed power to a respected business leader.” It argued that, as a result of the armed overthrow of an elected president, “Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened.” It likewise helped Washington cover its tracks, claiming—incredibly—that the coup was “a purely Venezuelan affair.”

More recently, there was the newspaper’s response—both its reporting and editorials—to the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war. Using the same methods as in Iran—contempt for journalistic objectivity, the retailing of

claims made by Washington and its allies as fact and disregarding of all evidence to the contrary—the *Times* presented the war as an unprovoked act of Russian aggression. It willfully ignored undeniable evidence that the fighting began as an unprovoked and brutal attack by Georgian forces on Tskhinvali, the capital of Georgia’s breakaway province of South Ossetia.

The *Times* cast the conflict as “Russia’s war of ambition,” an attempt by Vladimir Putin “to re-impose by force and intimidation as much of the old Soviet sphere of influence as he can get away with.” Facts on the ground, reported by monitors in Georgia from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) among others, belied this account and pointed to the US using Georgia as its proxy in an act of aggression against Russia itself.

In the case of the present crisis in Iran, the *Times* has employed all of these methods of distortion and deceit on a grand scale, in an effort that was prepared well before the elections were held.

Leading this effort is Executive Editor Bill Keller, who is arguably the most morally compromised editor in the US today—and that’s saying something! It was Keller who, at the request of the Bush administration, withheld a story on the National Security Agency’s illegal domestic spying operation until after the 2004 election, playing what may have been a decisive role in delivering Bush a second term.

He was recently dispatched to Tehran to write “Memos from Iran.” The extraordinary character of this assignment is shown in the fact that between taking over as the newspaper’s senior editor in July 2003 and his trip to Iran, Keller—the newspaper’s man in Moscow during the collapse of the Soviet Union—is credited by the *Times* web site with writing precisely six articles, none of them news stories.

Keller’s presence is evidence that the *Times* is involved in a major operation. He was accompanied to Tehran by a number of others, including the vicious anti-socialist foreign affairs columnist Roger Cohen. A veteran propagandist for US imperialist interests, Cohen has churned out justifications for the US intervention in the Balkans, the war against Iraq, the US policy in Georgia, and now the destabilization effort in Iran.

In the days of Kennett Love, the CIA put journalists on its payroll to secure their collaboration. With the likes of Keller and Cohen, this is no longer necessary. The lavishly-paid senior columnists and editors at the *Times* don’t need to be bribed. Their social interests are naturally in sync with the aims of US imperialist policy.

The seamless intersection of the news and views published in America’s leading newspaper with the interests of US imperialism and its ruling elite is both a symptom and contributing factor in the advanced decay of democratic processes in the United States.

It poses the urgent necessity of building a new independent socialist media of the working class, the task being carried forward by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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