Washington’s double standard: The elections in Iran and Afghanistan

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Despite the increasing evidence of systematic and massive vote fraud, the Obama administration and the American media are still seeking to sustain the pretense that Afghanistan’s August 20 presidential election was a basically democratic affair.

The Electoral Complaints Commission, a United Nations-backed oversight group, said that it had received more than 800 charges of irregularities, with 50 of them so serious that they could potentially alter the result of the vote.

A half dozen candidates who opposed incumbent president Hamid Karzai, including his leading challenger, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah, have charged the government with falsifying the vote. Abdullah’s campaign released video footage Tuesday showing Karzai campaign supporters and election officials marking blank ballots for Karzai and threatening voters at the polls. Another candidate, Mirwais Yasini, produced bags full of ballots he said were cast for him in Kandahar but dumped by election officials and recovered by his campaign.

In the two southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, the site of some of the bloodiest fighting between the US-NATO occupation force and Afghan guerrillas, foreign election observers estimated turnout to be only 5 to 10 percent. The Karzai regime claimed a 40 percent turnout, giving ample margin for systematic ballot-stuffing.

While the American press reported the charges of fraud and the indications of low turnout, the official US position remains one of endorsing the election as an expression of the popular will and a victory, albeit limited, for “democracy” over “terrorism”—i.e., the Taliban-linked insurgents.

President Obama hailed the election in a statement issued August 21, declaring, “This was an important step forward in the Afghan people’s effort to take control of their future...”

Top US officials on the spot, including Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, General Stanley McChrystal, the top military commander, and Richard Holbrooke, chief US envoy to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, all chimed in with endorsements of the basic legitimacy of the vote, suggesting the widespread reports of irregularities were merely the growing pains of democracy.

No such forgiving approach was taken to the election in Iran two months before. The American media denounced the presidential vote in Iran as fraudulent almost as soon as the polls closed June 12. Both the Obama administration and the European powers called into question the legitimacy of the reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

As opposed to Afghanistan, however, neither the Iranian opposition nor its American backers could produce any significant evidence of vote fraud. There were no videos of ballot-stuffing, no boxes of ballots marked in advance for Ahmadinejad. This in a country where the opposition had a significant presence in all parts of the country, and where the technical resources to publicize election irregularities—using cell phone photos and videos, text-messaging, and so on—are far greater than in Afghanistan.

There is a clear political explanation for the double standard. The decision to charge vote fraud in Iran, and to downplay the obvious ballot-rigging in Afghanistan, is driven by the foreign policy interests of American imperialism, not the supposed devotion of Washington and the American media to democratic principles.

The charge of ballot fraud was employed to destabilize the Ahmadinejad government, which Washington regards as an obstacle to its plans to strengthen its control over the oil and gas resources of

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The calculated nature of the provocation was made clear when the leading Iranian opposition candidate, Mirhossein Mousavi, declared himself the winner of the vote even before the polls had closed, in order to discredit the official results in advance.

The contrast with Afghanistan is instructive. When the Karzai and Abdullah camps each issued claims of victory shortly after the polls closed, Holbrooke met with both candidates and gave them their marching orders: No claims of victory should be made until after the bulk of the votes have been officially certified in Kabul.

Holbrooke told reporters, “Ten percent of the vote is in. Imagine an American election with 10 percent in. You don’t call it with 10 percent.” His audience obligingly did not ask him why the US-backed candidate in Iran had called the election with zero percent of the votes counted, or why the State Department had not objected.

The Obama administration’s policy in relation to the Afghanistan vote is complicated by its contentious relationship with President Karzai, widely regarded by his American patrons as weak, corrupt and incompetent. Washington appears to favor pushing Karzai into more of a ceremonial role while other US stooges, including Abdullah and former finance minister Ashraf Ghani, are brought into top government positions.

This means limiting the ballot-rigging so that Karzai does not receive the 50 percent required to win the election outright, thus forcing him into a runoff with Abdullah and dealing a significant blow to his political standing. The maneuver is quite dangerous, however, since it threatens to touch off ethnic tensions within the US-backed regime, particularly between the Tajik minority, which backed Abdullah overwhelmingly, and the larger Pushtun population, where Karzai’s main support lies.

There is yet another contrast between the US approach to the Iranian election and its response in Afghanistan. The American media cited the timing of the Iranian government declaration that Ahmadinejad had won reelection with a two-thirds majority, which came only a few hours after the polls had closed—albeit hours after Mousavi’s claim of victory.

But a top Karzai aide, Finance Minister Hazrat Omar Zakhilwal, made a similar declaration in Afghanistan, which was given little attention by the American media. Zakhilwal spoke to the media on August 23, less than three days after the polls had closed, and said that Karzai had won 68 percent of the vote. He gave relatively precise totals, saying that Karzai had received more than 3 million votes, Abdullah 1.5 million votes, and the other candidates much lesser amounts. Five million votes had been cast, and only 450,000 still remained to be counted.

There was no American media barrage citing the preposterous character of the minister’s claim, although a day later, the Independent Election Commission had tallied votes from only 500 of the more than 6,000 polling stations throughout the country.

In Iran, the declaration of victory by Ahmadinejad was treated as evidence of a major vote-rigging effort. A similar declaration in Afghanistan is dismissed as insignificant.

The comparison of the two elections demonstrates the fraud of the US posture of defending democracy and popular sovereignty. One election is praised and the other damned, without regard to evidence, in order to further the interests of the imperialist power which seeks to dominate both countries.

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