

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

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**Unrest in Iran and Possible Outcomes**

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A few weeks ago in another CSIS *Critical Questions*, I wrote that because of the demographics and communication channels, the June 12 Iranian election is quite different from past elections. However, I could not have imagined what has actually occurred. Since then, there have been numerous statements and comments ranging from questioning the election results to recommending U.S. action; unfortunately, not all take into account the facts as we know them. I strongly urge that we pay close attention to the facts, and I would like to address some of questions posed by a number of commentators.

**Q1: Does the opposition seek regime change and is this a true revolution?**

**A1:** Mir Hossein Moussavi is one of the pillars of the 1979 revolution. Moussavi was chosen by Ayatollah Khomeini as prime minister during the Iran-Iraq war. In 2009, the Guardian Council approved his candidacy to run for the presidency. I do not believe he desires regime change. The opposition is asking for a reelection; they are not asking for regime change, either. The opposition wants a marginally more accommodating foreign policy, a more effective and efficient economic policy, and more freedom for women and the younger population. Up to now, this does not seem like a revolution, based on the demands of the opposition. This is, as a colleague of mine mentioned, more a request for a "nip and tuck."

**Q2: Which candidate received the most votes? If the election is rerun, who will win?**

**A2:** The election results reported by the Ministry of Interior indicate that Ahmadinejad won by 63 percent of the votes while Moussavi received only 34 percent of the votes. These results are suspect for a number of reasons. The outcome was announced very quickly, yet the counting of more than 30 million hand-written votes seems insurmountable in such a short time. There was a curious uniformity to the results in very different parts of the country; in Tabriz, the home of Moussavi (the Azari candidate), Ahmadinejad won by 57 percent. In addition, the overall margin by which Ahmadinejad won seems incredible, given that 70 percent of the Iranian population is urban and some 50 percent of the voting public is under 30 years old. Finally, the quick endorsement by the supreme leader, made before the three-day verification requirement, was unprecedented and unconstitutional.

The election results mentioned by the opposition that have allegedly been leaked to them by Ministry of Interior officials are also suspect. Out of 42 million votes, Moussavi received 19 million (42 percent) while Mehdi Karrubi received 13 million (31 percent) and Ahmadinejad only under 6 million (14 percent) with the balance for Mohsen Rezaie and unreadable votes.

A commonly quoted survey by Terror Free Tomorrow indicated that among the respondents, 33.8 percent would vote for Ahmadinejad and 13.6 percent for Moussavi. However, this survey was conducted in May before the election process started and thus before Moussavi became a serious candidate. Terror Free Tomorrow gathered its information by calling landlines—not the younger population's favorite communication method. The respondents also may have been hesitant or even fearful of giving a response contrary to the will of the supreme leader. Some 50.1 percent of those contacted refused to give any answer. Thus, this survey is highly suspect.

In short, we cannot know with any degree of confidence who was actually elected nor who will be president if Iran has a free and unbiased election.

**Q3: What is the implication of the supreme leader's two-hour speech at Friday's prayer?**

**A3:** Ayatollah Khamenei ruled out massive fraud in the elections and warned Moussavi's supporters that if the protests don't end, "then the consequences lie with them."

He blamed foreign media and governments for interfering. This is a clear warning that the supreme leader is supporting Ahmadinejad and is not backing down. He said, "the way of the law is open." However, "the way of the law" is the Guardian Council, which he controls both directly and indirectly. Therefore, it is very unlikely that a new election will be held. It is clear to most of the loyalists that his statements and gestures are a call for a crackdown on the demonstrators.

In essence, the supreme leader is not willing to even consider “a nip and tuck” of the regime’s policies.

To placate the opposition leaders, he did say that the TV debates had been harsh and praised all the candidates as loyal members of the Islamic republic. In other words, let us calm the situation; we are all together as one nation. Whether the opposition will believe his statement about unity given the mass arrest of opposition candidates’ supporters and the manner in which opposition leaders were treated in past disagreements with the supreme leader leaves much room for skepticism.

**Q4: What is likely to happen in the near future?**

**A4:** Given the supreme leader’s unbending position, it is unlikely that the opposition will fade away. Therefore, the most likely outcome would be further mass arrests and a harsh and bloody confrontation. The Revolutionary Guards and Basij will likely have a challenging role in putting down any opposition. Already, the Basij were posted all over Tehran Friday evening, fully geared in their black uniforms with helmets, batons, and many with Kalashnikov assault rifles. The police were in full force on Saturday, while Basij members were present in civilian clothing. Saturday demonstrations continued. The security forces and police have used water cannons, tear gas, and fired shots in the air. A number of persons have been shot already.

However, complementary actions such as massive strikes in key industries (oil) and key governmental organizations were effectively used during the 1979 revolution and may be repeated by the opposition. The response of the regime will probably continue to be very harsh and ruthless.

If a reasonable compromise is not reached soon, the ultimate outcome will depend on who will be able to last the longest. I am not very hopeful that the opposition will be able to withstand a severe crackdown by the regime. That said, I did not think the 1979 revolution would bring the Shah’s regime tumbling down. It is difficult to predict what a frustrated and disenfranchised population may do.

**Q5: Should President Barack Obama speak up on the Iranian situation?**

**A5:** The Iranian election is a matter for the Iranian people. It is up to them to elect their leadership. Of course, we hope that the real will of the people will be reflected in their elections. But any other statement at this time by President Obama and his administration would be counterproductive. If the intention is to help the opposition, it would likely backfire and have the regime calling the opposition “agents of the great Satan.” The supreme leader saying that the Western powers are interfering is not accepted by the opposition, and we need to keep it that way.

If the United States approves of the election results, it will be abandoning the faction that believes the election has been stolen from them. Since we do not know what the actual results were, any statement is highly inappropriate and would be considered meddling by the majority of the Iranian public.

There is reason to be deeply concerned about the events in Iran. Peaceful dissent must not be suppressed, and human rights should be respected—which is what President Obama has already reiterated. The United States should refrain from being the world’s referee—we are not perceived as unbiased, and certainly not in Iran.

Just think, how would we have responded if the Iranian regime had chimed in on the hanging Chad fiasco and supported George W. Bush or Al Gore?

**Q6: What can go really wrong?**

**A6:** Bloodshed in the streets and seeing your fellow citizens be beaten, imprisoned, and shot for expressing their right to free speech and peaceful assembly is bad enough, but my real fear is what will happen if the paramilitary groups do gain control by squashing the opposition. Will the regime morph from an Islamic republic into a military dictatorship?

What will the ayatollahs say then? You sometimes get what you wish for and realize it is not at all desirable.

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