

Iran: Election clashes mount as West escalates pressure

By Bill Van Auken
16 June 2009

Over 100,000 people demonstrated Monday in the streets of Tehran against the results of last week's presidential election as the US and the major Western European powers intensified their own demands for an investigation into the opposition's charges of vote-rigging.

The protest was the largest in a series of actions including sporadic rioting by supporters of presidential challenger Mirhossein Mousavi since the June 12 poll. The government had earlier banned all demonstrations, but there was no attempt by security forces to break up the gathering.

While it was largely peaceful, the protest was marred by a clash outside a compound used by Basijis, a volunteer militia loyal to the government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. One demonstrator was reportedly killed and several others wounded by gunfire. A photographer who was at the scene told news agencies that shooting broke out after the crowd attacked the compound.

Footage of the clash broadcast Monday night showed the crowd stoning the building and the militiamen guarding it, who answered with gunfire. In retaliation, the crowd set the structure on fire.

The night before, thousands of students at Tehran University staged a demonstration, chanting "Death to the dictator"—referring to Ahmadinejad—and clashing with riot police. The students threw bricks and paving stones at the police, who responded with tear gas and plastic bullets.

Also on Sunday, Ahmadinejad held a huge victory rally in the center of the capital. It received little coverage in the Western media, but a reporter for the *Irish Times* recounted, "In some districts, the mood was jubilant, as tens of thousands of supporters of newly re-elected President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made their way home from a victory rally in central Tehran." The Iranian capital, he said, "felt like two cities instead of one," divided between the celebrations in the poorer neighborhoods of southern Tehran and the protests centered in the city's more affluent northern suburbs.

The official results reported from Friday's election gave 63 percent of the vote to Ahmadinejad and 34 percent to

Mousavi. Supporters of Mousavi immediately denounced the results as rigged and accused Ahmadinejad and the government of staging a "coup." While vote-rigging is certainly a possibility, given the anti-democratic character of the regime headed by Ahmadinejad, the Western media echoed the opposition's charges without any substantive evidence that the results were fraudulent.

In a column published in the *Washington Post* Monday, the heads of two US non-governmental groups that organized a voter survey, using one of the most respected polling agencies in the region, rebutted the claims that because of the wide margin of victory the vote totals had to be fraudulent.

"The election results in Iran may reflect the will of the Iranian people," wrote Ken Ballen, president of Terror Free Tomorrow: the Center for Public Opinion, and Patrick Doherty of the American Strategy Program of the New America Foundation.

They pointed out that their opinion poll, carried out between May 11 and May 20, "showed Ahmadinejad leading by a more than 2 to 1 margin—greater than his actual apparent margin of victory in Friday's election."

The two specifically rebutted claims by Mousavi supporters that the fact that as an ethnic Azeri he failed to win a larger share of the Azeri vote proved that the totals were rigged. The poll, they said, showed that Azeris also favored Ahmadinejad 2 to 1 over Mousavi.

"The only demographic groups in which our survey found Mousavi leading or competitive with Ahmadinejad were university students and graduates, and the highest-income Iranians," they wrote.

They also noted that, while the media had cast younger Iranians using the Internet as the heart of the anticipated "reform" surge—NBC News called the protests an "Internet uprising"—the poll showed that "only a third of Iranians even have access to the Internet."

It is this class divide that is largely ignored by the Western media. Mousavi's so-called reforms were pitched largely to a relatively privileged and narrow social base. The reforms

themselves consisted essentially of a toning down of the rhetoric employed by Ahmadinejad in order to smooth the way to improved relations with Washington, an easing of US-backed sanctions and the opening up of the country to foreign capital. At the same time, they were identified with “free market” capitalism and opposition to the social assistance programs for the working class and rural poor. Such austerity measures hardly served as a pole of attraction for these layers, which constitute the majority of the Iranian population.

For his part, Ahmadinejad utilized these programs—combined with populist demagoguery and appeals to religious piety—to maintain a popular base for the regime.

The bitterness of the election campaign and its aftermath is a distorted reflection of the class tensions building up in Iran as well as a product of the increasing fissures within the ruling political establishment of the Islamic Republic, both of which are exacerbated by the pressure exerted by the US and the European powers.

All of those running in the election were vetted by the clerics on the Guardian Council and are members of the same political establishment.

Lionized by the Western press, Mousavi is an unlikely champion of “reform.” During the period he held the post of prime minister—1981-1989—he presided over mass executions of political dissidents, many of them leftists, as well as the Iran-Iraq War, in which Iran suffered a million casualties, dead and wounded.

Considered a “hardliner” during this period, he has been cast as a reformist and a modernizer in an appeal to the Iranian middle classes. Behind his campaign, however, are right-wing elements within the clerical hierarchy and, most importantly, former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, reportedly the richest man in Iran.

While the differences between the sections of the regime backing Mousavi and those supporting the re-election of Ahmadinejad are of a tactical character, they are no less bitter because of it. Involved are major financial interests as well as concerns about how best to manage Iran’s relations with Washington and the other major imperialist powers.

The elections and the claims of fraud have been utilized by the major powers to orchestrate a campaign of pressure against Iran, aimed at bringing about a shift in policy that would favor their interests in the region.

Initially, the Obama administration remained somewhat aloof from the controversy, with Vice President Joseph Biden declaring that US interests in Iran “are the same before the election as after the election.”

By Monday afternoon, however, the US State Department signaled a shift. “We are deeply troubled by the reports of violence, arrests and possible voting irregularities,” a State

Department spokesman said. “We are calling for Iran’s authorities to respect the right of the people to express themselves peacefully.”

This was followed by a statement from President Barack Obama. “I think that the democratic process, free speech, the ability for folks to peacefully dissent, all those are universal values and need to be respected,” he said. “Whenever I see violence perpetrated on people who are peacefully dissenting, and whenever the American people see that, I think they’re rightfully troubled.”

No such qualms were expressed by Washington when the troops of the US-backed Shah shot down demonstrators by the thousands in 1978 and 1979. At the height of this bloodbath, then-US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski told the Shah that the US would “back him to the hilt.” Brzezinski has re-emerged as a prominent foreign policy adviser to the Obama administration.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, meanwhile, condemned the use of “completely unacceptable” force against demonstrators. “We believe there should be a transparent evaluation of the election result,” she added. “There are signs of irregularities.” European Union foreign ministers also called for Iranian officials to investigate the election results.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s announcement Monday that he had instructed the Guardian Council to investigate charges of vote-rigging was aimed at least as much at placating this pressure from the imperialist powers as at diffusing tensions within Iran itself.

This pressure has no more to do with democratic rights in Iran than the arms and support provided to the Shah did 30 years ago. The aim of the US and the rest of the Western powers is to fully subjugate Iran in order to further their strategic interests in the region and fully exploit its massive energy resources.

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