

A Response to Ken Ballen and Patrick Doherty's article in *Washington Post*, Monday, June 15, 2009  
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In the June 15, 2009 issue of *Washington Post*, Ken Ballen and Patrick Doherty wrote that "The election results in Iran may reflect the will of the Iranian people. Many experts are claiming that the margin of victory of incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was the result of fraud or manipulation, but our nationwide public opinion survey of Iranians three weeks before the vote showed Ahmadinejad leading by a more than 2 to 1 margin -- greater than his actual apparent margin of victory in Friday's election."

However, scrutiny of the data posted at Terror Free Tomorrow ([www.terrorfreetomorrow.org](http://www.terrorfreetomorrow.org)) fails to support Ballen and Doherty's interpretations. Their findings, from a telephone survey conducted four weeks before the election, are based on the responses of only 57.8% of the 1,731 people who were successfully contacted by telephone from outside of Iran. Among these, 34% said they would vote for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, 14% for Mir Hussein Mousavi, 2% for Mehdi Karoubi, 1% for Mohsen Rezaie, and 27% did not know. (These figures add up only to 78% in the Ballen report.) In other words, of 1,731 people contacted, well over half either refused to participate (42.2%) or did not indicate a preferred candidate (15.6%) While we cannot guess at the political preferences of this nonresponding/noncommitting group, we do know from these data that just 19.7% of all those contacted indicated they planned to vote for Ahmadinejad. This polling figure is very low for an incumbent – particularly for a self-described populist candidate – and cannot be responsibly interpreted as representing a clear harbinger of election victory.

Among those who follow Iranian politics closely, another concern about Ballen and Doherty's espousals based on these data is that key political events occurred between the data gathering and the election, as one would expect given Iran's relatively compressed presidential campaigning. For instance, many believe that Ahmadinejad's June 3rd debate with Mousavi was particularly damaging to the incumbent. Rather than noting his own political accomplishments, Ahmadinejad began the debate by attacking his detractors, none of whom were among the rival candidates, and was even highly critical of

Mousavi's wife, waving a photo of her in front of the camera for emphasis. During most of the remainder of the debates Ahmadinejad appeared defensive, edgy, and even rude, in high contrast to Mousavi, who by comparison seemed professional and polite. This bizarre behavior opened the door for Ahmadinejad's rivals to reproach him not only for his economic policies but also his erratic behavior inside the country and abroad. In the week leading up to the election, many observers noted a concomitant rise in the Mousavi's political popularity.

So even if Ahmadinejad had an edge over Mousavi a month before the election – even if we subscribe to the interpretation that he was the 2 to 1 favorite among potential voters in mid-May – it is quite reasonable to suppose that his popularity eroded following these debates. And many believe that the erosion became a steep downhill slide. A swift sea change in Iranian politics is consistent with other events in Iran's political history--from the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, to the oil nationalization movement, the Iranian revolution of 1979, and the election of Khatami as president in 1997. In all these cases, Iranians reached national consensus fairly quickly. One month before the election, many thought that the re-election of Ahmadinejad was a *fait accompli*, but not because Khamenei supported him. Rather, Iranians were demoralized and uninterested in the elections, especially non-supporters of Ahmadinejad. Keen prognosticators argued that the outcome of the election was very sensitive to voter turnout, with rates of voting higher than 65% favoring Mousavi. For a good many reasons that do not concern us here, opinion leaders inside the country and abroad reached the conclusion that the boycott of the previous election had been counterproductive and that this time participation was key to challenging the extant administration. And, because the relationship between voting rates and candidate preference had a curvilinear shape in favor of the pro-reformist candidates, a linear extrapolation from weeks-old polling numbers makes little sense. And in fact, several polls taken just days before the election showed Mousavi with a lead over Ahmadinejad – this despite government-orchestrated threats and media obstructions designed to derail the pro-reformist candidates and their supporters.

How then do we explain Balen and Doherty's legitimization of the declaration from Iran's Interior Ministry that Ahmadinejad prevailed with 63.62% of the votes? The absurdity of the government's election engineering is that none of the candidates managed to get more than a fraction of the votes even in their hometowns. And the scarcely veiled threats by the Revolutionary Guards to swiftly stifle any attempt at a "velvet revolution," the disconnection of the SMS network of mobile users, and the filtering of websites belonging to the reformist candidates – all seem more characteristic of a dictatorship staging a political coup than of a confident incumbent administration awaiting a mandate from the people. Despite the approbation of Iran's election results by Balen, Doherty, and a number of other U.S. commentators, many controversies have marred this election and much skepticism surrounds the official results. Without an honest and objective recounting of the votes, this controversy and skepticism far outweigh any legitimacy conferred by a small set of questionably interpreted polling data.