

The Voting Manipulation Industry in Iran

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Brief Analysis

With Iran's presidential campaign culminating on June 12, all three challengers to incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad are expressing increased concern about the possibility of election fraud and manipulation of the election. Not only are there complaints about regime influence on the campaign, such as biased coverage by state-run television, the voting itself can be manipulated in numerous ways.

Voting Procedures

According to Iranian law, the Interior Ministry administers elections. In each ward or county, the ministry forms an executive committee that consists of the ward or county head, the local head of the National Organization for Civil Registration, the chief prosecutor or his representative, and eight respected local figures. The Guardian Council has the duty of supervising the electoral process at each polling station and has created observation committees with more than 130,000 members. Each candidate has the right to send an observer to each fixed polling station to observe both the voting process and the ballot count.

In Iran, voting follows quite different procedures than those used in most Western countries. For instance, there is no voter registration. Instead, a person's voting eligibility is determined by a "birth certificate" (BC). (Although Iran has recently introduced national identification cards, these are not used for voting.) The BC, issued by the National Organization for Civil Registration, looks like a passport, with pages that can be stamped. Voters can go to any of the more than 60,000 voting stations across the country or around the world, including those in thirty-five U.S. cities. Since there is no requirement to vote near one's residence, voter turnout at a particular voting station, or even in a city, can theoretically exceed the estimated number of eligible voters in that locality. When a person receives a ballot, the BC is recorded and stamped, but there appears to be no verification, either during the voting or after, of the documentation.

Manipulation Mechanisms

Voting can be easily manipulated in several ways:

Collecting birth certificates. In previous elections, reports have surfaced that the Imam Khomeini Committee, a large state charity affiliated with the leader (or, as he insists, supreme leader), Ali Khamenei, "rent" BCs belonging to the poor. It has been alleged that after regular voting hours, those engaged in fraud fill out ballots using the rented BCs.

In some elections, polls remained open for many hours after the designated closing time, feeding concern that irregular votes were being cast.

Eligible voters. Relying on birth certificates complicates the calculation of eligible voters. Different government offices give very different estimates: while the Interior Ministry puts the total number of eligible Iranian voters at 46 million, Iran's Center for Statistics claims the number is over 51 million. Not being able to even estimate the number of eligible voters makes it difficult to judge if "ghost" votes have been cast. According to the National Organization for Civil Registration, the number of existing BCs considerably exceeds the number of Iranians. Many BCs are issued as replacements for reportedly lost BCs, and there is little to prevent people from using the duplicate BCs to vote at two different polling stations. Also, some Iranians do not invalidate their relatives' BCs after they die. In the last presidential election, reformist sources announced that more than two million fraudulent BCs may have been used by the Basij militia and others to obtain ballots.

Illiteracy. According to official statistics, the illiteracy rate in Iran is more than 20 percent. Voters are required to write the name of their preferred candidate on the ballot; there are no pictorial symbols, and voters are not allowed to make an "X" to indicate their choice. Since many people are unable to write, the government allows volunteers, mostly affiliated with the Basij, to be inside polling stations to help voters write the name of their preferred candidate. Obviously, these Basij volunteers can easily write in any name they wish.

Mobile polling stations. According to the Ministry of Interior, there will be more than 14,000 mobile ballot boxes for people unable to vote at the nearly 47,000 fixed polling stations (for instance, the infirm, the elderly, and the military); the number of mobile boxes is more than ten times the number used in the previous election. Adequate supervision of the mobile boxes is extremely difficult, creating a situation where no one watches who casts the ballots or is present during the tally.

Counting process. The two-stage counting process presents perhaps the most troubling aspect of the elections. At each polling station, after the end of voting hours, the votes are counted and recorded on Form 22 in the presence of representatives from the candidates, the Interior Ministry, and the Guardian Council. These forms are secret however; the results are not announced to the press or released to the candidates. Instead, in the second stage of the counting process, the forms are sent to the Interior Ministry, where the votes are tallied and published on Form 28, which reports the votes by province or county. But because there is no supervision of the preparation, there is no way to compare Form 28 to Form 22. In other words, it is possible for agents from the Guardian Council or the Interior Ministry to change the vote totals before announcing them. This stage provokes suspicion among candidates as well as independent observers about the accuracy and fairness of the counting.

Validation of the election. The official validation of the election results is a two-stage process. The first stage is validation by the Guardian Council, which is a partisan body that does not bother to conceal its political preference. In the past, the Guardian Council has canceled the voting in some districts where voting problems allegedly occurred, and not surprisingly, these are often districts where reformers do well. The second stage of validation is by Khamenei, who has the constitutional authority to overrule the voters if he so chooses.

In an open letter published on June 7, a group of Interior Ministry employees expressed concern about the ministry's plans to intervene and manipulate the election by various means. They mentioned a fatwa issued by an ayatollah in Qom, which provides ministry officials with a religious justification for manipulating the election in favor of Ahmadinezhad. Some reformist sources such as roozonline.com believe that the fatwa was issued by Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, who is known to be a fervent supporter of Ahmadinezhad and his religious worldview. The representatives of Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi also sent an open letter, published on June 8, to Ahmad Jannati, the secretary of the Guardian Council, warning about manipulation of the election.

Conclusion

Ahmadinezhad's rivals have no faith that the Interior Ministry will respect the law and conduct a fair election. Mehdi Karrobi and Mir Hossein Mousavi suggested that a "committee for safeguarding the fairness of vote" supervise the election on behalf of the candidates, but the Interior Ministry and the Guardian Council rejected the idea. It is not clear how much voting manipulation will occur on June 12, but it is abundantly clear that Iran's election procedures leave ample opportunity for massive voter fraud.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the domestic policy of Iran as well as the politics of Shiite groups in the Middle East. ❖

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