

IRAN'S SUMMER OF DISCONTENT

Introduction



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Focus

After a controversial presidential vote in June 2009, the citizens of Iran took to the streets to challenge the validity of the election results. This *News in Review* story looks at the controversy surrounding the election and the mass protests that followed.

Definition

The term *velvet revolution* refers to a non-violent revolution. The term finds its origins in the non-violent demonstrations in Prague that eventually led to the collapse of the Czechoslovakian government in 1989.

It was supposed to be one of the closest elections in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Instead the “official” results made it look like a landslide victory for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as the incumbent raked in over two-thirds of the votes. Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared the results a “divine assessment.”

But there was something wrong with the numbers being tossed around by Iran’s election officials. First of all, the results were announced before the polls closed. How can a nation declare an election winner when people are still putting their votes into ballot boxes? Second, even if Ahmadinejad was the victor, how did election officials manage to count close to 40 million votes so quickly when they were counting the votes by hand at polling stations scattered across the nation?

These two problems, and a host of other voting irregularities, set off a series of protests in Tehran and a number of other Iranian cities. Some claimed that Iran had not seen such passionate protests since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Hundreds of thousands of protestors defied the Supreme Leader’s “divine assessment” and hit the streets in support of reformist leader Mir Hossein Mousavi and the other defeated candidates.

The government scrambled to respond, summoning the Revolutionary Guard

and the Basij militia to stem the rising tide of the protestors. Within days of the election, 17 protestors were killed in skirmishes with authorities. Despite the brute force being used by the Iranian government, the protestors pressed on.

The government also tried to shut down Web sites and cell service, but young, techno-savvy Iranians bypassed proxies and posted messages via the social networking site Twitter. Those messages managed to disseminate information about government violence against protestors, despite the government’s attempts to block all media coverage of the demonstrations.

Within a week of the election, Ayatollah Khamenei confirmed the election results despite irregularities with close to three million votes. He told protestors that further demonstrations would not be tolerated. He made good on his threat with the arrest of close to a thousand protestors. In August 2009, nearly 100 reformists were accused of trying to overthrow the government and were put on trial.

Eventually the protests faded, but there is no telling how much life the reform movement gained over the summer of 2009. The Iranian government establishment fears a velvet revolution is brewing that will see the power structure shift from the ruling clerics to the surging reformers.

To Consider

Governments that want to tightly control their country tend to fear public demonstrations and protests. Why might that be so? In what ways might public demonstrations actually be a good thing? Explain.

IRAN'S SUMMER OF DISCONTENT

Video Review

See for Yourself

View a photo gallery of images taken during the Iran demonstrations at www.cbc.ca/photogallery/world/2338/.

Focus for Viewing

Review the following two scenarios before watching the documentary. Write your answers down in point form and share them with a classmate.

1. Imagine if a Canadian prime minister appeared on TV and said that the Holocaust never happened and that Israel needed to be destroyed. How do you think Canadians would respond to these claims? How do you think our allies would respond to these claims? How well do you think the prime minister would fare in the next election?

2. Imagine if a Canadian governor general met the press about a week after an election and speculated that about a million votes were cast under suspicious circumstances but, in the government's opinion, there was no reason to order a recount or to overturn the results of the vote. How do you think Canadians would react to this kind of scenario?

Questions for Viewing

As you watch this *News in Review* story, complete the following questions:

1. Why do experts claim that Iran plays a major role on the world stage?

2. Who holds the most powerful position in Iran? Who holds the second most powerful position?

3. What did reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi come to represent as the election moved toward the national vote?

4. What modern means did the reformers use to spread their message and organize their events?

5. (a) Early on voting day, who looked like they were going to win the election?

Did you know . . .

Iranian-Canadians protested the Iranian election results in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, and other major centres across the country.

(b) In the end, who was declared the winner?

6. (a) How did the reformers react to the election results?

(b) How did the government respond to the reformers?

7. Who did President Ahmadinejad and his supporters blame for the civil unrest after the election?

8. What percentage of Iranians are under the age of 25? How did the under-25 population circumvent government censorship to communicate during the crisis?

9. How did Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini regain control in Iran? Describe the human cost of his decision.

10. About two-thirds of MPs chose not to attend President Ahmadinejad's victory party. What message do you think this sent to the President and the Supreme Leader?

11. Where did things stand for the government and the reformers by the end of the documentary?

Post-Viewing Activity

Before you watched the documentary you were asked to take part in two imaginary scenarios. Both of those scenarios are based on things that happened in Iranian politics during the presidential election campaign of 2009. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has repeatedly claimed that the Holocaust never took place and has called for the destruction of the state of Israel. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini appeared on Iranian state television and admitted that around three million votes were cast under suspicious circumstances. However, he said the voting irregularities wouldn't have affected the outcome of the election.

Based on this information, and what you learned from watching the video, why are the views of Ahmadinejad and Khomeini so troubling?

IRAN'S SUMMER OF DISCONTENT

Election Outrage

Did you know . . .

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was an obscure figure when he was appointed mayor of Tehran in the spring of 2003. He was still relatively unknown when he won the second round run-off vote in the 2005 presidential election.

Reading Prompt

As you read the following information, consider which factors contributed to the election outrage that surfaced in the summer of 2009.

Mistakes Made by the President

Most political observers saw the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a foregone conclusion early in the campaign. By all accounts, Ahmadinejad's support among his constituents—mostly working-class Iranians and political conservatives—was rock solid and more than enough to put him back in office.

However Ahmadinejad is famous for saying and doing controversial things. On the world stage, he is notorious for denying the Holocaust and declaring that Israel should be wiped off the face of the Earth—comments that are so alienating that it makes it difficult to keep diplomatic channels open with Iran.

He also courted controversy during the election, making what many are calling two serious mistakes: first, he claimed that revered former-president Hashemi Rafsanjani was involved in political corruption and later he held up the picture of the wife of his main rival during a televised debate and claimed that she obtained her university degrees fraudulently. While many felt Ahmadinejad overpowered his opponents in the debates, he unwittingly unleashed the will of millions of undecided voters with his antics.

The Reform Movement Gains Strength

Suddenly, voter apathy transformed into activism. Reformist Mir Hossein Mousavi, viewed as a passive, uncharismatic candidate with questionable leadership qualities early in the race, became the voice of change

deep into the campaign. His message of economic and social reform finally found a wider audience and, by the time the election came on June 12, reformists felt that the election was theirs for the taking.

Unfortunately, the hopes of the reformists were soon dashed. Before the polls even closed, the Interior Ministry, the government agency that administered the election, declared Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the landslide victor, with 63 per cent of the vote. Almost immediately Ahmadinejad's rivals cried foul. They contended that the President could not have garnered so high a percentage of the vote. A higher voter turnout should have meant more votes for the reform candidates. With voter turnout at 85 per cent, and the fact that the election was declared in favour of Ahmadinejad so early, the reformists went on the hunt for voting irregularities.

Voting Irregularities

They didn't have to look very far. Almost immediately reformists found electoral districts where the number of ballots cast exceeded the number of voters on the voting list. They also discovered that Ahmadinejad had substantially more votes in his rival's home districts, a highly unlikely proposition according to most pundits. Mousavi had also received word that thousands of voters were not allowed to vote, and thousands of election scrutineers were barred from polling stations.

Protests Erupt

The reform candidates were quick to mobilize their constituents. Within hours

Did you know . . .

The Islamic Revolution occurred during 1978 and 1979 when Islamic fundamentalists overthrew the country's secular (nonreligious) monarchy. The new Islamic Republic of Iran rejected Western influences and was guided by Shia Islamic teachings.

of the Interior Ministry's announcement, thousands of people in Tehran protested publicly. The next day, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of Tehran and many other cities around Iran. Protestors chanted "Death to the dictator," "God is great," and "Where's my vote?" in demonstrations that have been called the most passionate since the Islamic Revolution led to the formation of the republic in 1979.

The protests were not without violence. At least 17 people were killed in clashes with the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij militia. Despite the violence, people protested by the hundreds of thousands. Eventually, a partial recount of the votes was allowed. However, a partial recount was not enough for the reformists. They wanted the presidential election results nullified and a whole new election to take place.

On June 19, Supreme Leader Khamenei went on state television and told the protestors to cease their demonstrations. He warned them that they would be held responsible for any bloodshed stemming from their protests. The people of Iran understood that this meant the Supreme Leader was willing to let loose the Revolutionary Guard and Basij, leading to a massive escalation in the level of violence heaped upon protestors. In the days following the

Supreme Leader's speech there were protests—but not nearly on the scale seen previously. Many of the protestors were arrested, and about 100 were put on trial for attempting to overthrow the Iranian government.

The chasm between the two sides widened once the Guardian Council delivered the results of their investigation into the election. The Council found that, in 50 Iranian cities, the number of votes cast had exceeded the number of voters to the tune of about three million votes. They concluded that, even if the three million votes were given to Mousavi or one of the other defeated candidates, there still would not be enough ballots to topple Ahmadinejad, who finished 11 million votes ahead. In their eyes, Ahmadinejad had won his bid for president fairly.

As the summer of 2009 pressed on, the protests continued, and a deep sense of unrest set in. Politicians and clerics began openly challenging the Supreme Leader—something unheard of in Iranian politics. Mousavi and his reformist colleagues continued to call for a nullification of the vote. But in early August 2009 Khamenei formally endorsed the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, employing a strategy that appeared to suggest, "If you ignore the problem, there is no problem."

Analysis

At the end of this section, the author makes a claim that the Iranian establishment was employing a strategy that seemed to suggest, "If you ignore the problem, there is no problem." How is this evident in the government's response to the election crisis?

IRAN'S SUMMER OF DISCONTENT

Iran: The View from the West

Note

When news organizations speak of Iran's distrust of the West, they are speaking of Western democracies like the U.S., Canada, and Britain.

Did you know . . .

During the Iranian hostage crisis, 53 Americans were held hostage in Iran for 444 days. The United States military made a failed attempt to rescue the hostages, which resulted in the crash of two aircraft and the deaths of eight U.S. servicemen and one Iranian civilian.

One of the hallmarks of modern Iranian political rhetoric is a healthy dose of anti-West chatter. In fact, in Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's first televised address after the disputed election of June 2009, he started his speech by warning the "arrogant powers" of the West that an 85 per cent turnout at the polls showed the democratic strength of the Islamic Republic. Meanwhile President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad routinely blamed the West—namely Britain and the U.S.—for inciting riots in Tehran in the post-election period.

It is not like Iran has no reason to distrust the West. Britain is often referred to as the "little Satan" who flexed its imperial muscles in the late 1800s and most of the 1900s to control the social, political, and economic activity of Iran and other nations in the Middle East. Meanwhile the U.S. is called the "Great Satan." The main reason Iranians see the U.S. as their ultimate enemy comes from the fact that the CIA, working with British intelligence, helped overthrow the democratically elected government of Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953 in favour of the unpopular dictatorship of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The Shah ruled with an iron fist up to 1979, when the Islamic Revolution forced him out of power.

Iranian Hostage Crisis

The Shah fled the country and soon discovered he had serious health problems that needed expert medical attention. President Jimmy Carter allowed the Shah to come to the U.S. for treatment. Iranians were furious with Carter and the U.S. so they protested outside the U.S. embassy in Tehran. What started as a mass protest turned into a storming of the embassy itself,

and 53 embassy personnel were taken hostage. The hostages were finally set free the day new U.S. President Ronald Reagan was inaugurated. To say that the diplomatic relationship between the U.S. and Iran has been tense ever since would be an understatement.

Iran's Nuclear Program

Today, the most pressing international problem that the West faces in dealing with Iran has to do with Iran's desire to build nuclear power facilities. The West worries that Iran is also trying to build nuclear weapons and, since Iran already has the ability to launch warheads to Israel and Europe, observers are very concerned. For its part, the Iranians claim that they have no desire to build nuclear weapons and that the international community has no right to interfere with their desire to develop nuclear facilities.

In the era after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States engaged in military operations in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. Despite intentions, this made Iran stronger. With two of its neighbours more or less occupied by foreign troops, Iran was able to take advantage of instability in the region and improve its financial fortune in oil revenues and other economic activity. Another thing that helped Iran was George W. Bush's labelling of the nation as part of the "axis of evil." Iranians had the confirmation they needed that the "Great Satan" was out to get them, and Iranian nationalism surged.

Can U.S. President Obama Usher in a New Era?

With the victory of Barack Obama in 2008, a new era of diplomacy began. Obama knew that the adversarial politics

of the past was no way to deal with a potential nuclear power. Obama seemed to appreciate the fact that Iran took major exception to the U.S. and sought to remedy the situation as soon as he took office. One of the first things he did was let Iran know that he was willing to open diplomatic channels on a variety of issues, including the nuclear issue.

In March 2009, he broadcast an address to the people of Iran where he laid out his approach: “This [diplomatic] process will not be advanced by threats. We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect” (*Toronto Star*, March 21, 2009). Later, when the presidential election results were challenged by the reformists, Obama was quick to condemn government violence against protestors but was careful not to attack the Iranian government specifically. He didn’t want his attacks to be used by the government as an excuse to escalate violence against

the protestors. He also wanted to keep diplomatic channels open with Iran.

Negotiating with Iran can be a difficult proposition. Iran has often been characterized as a closed society. While there are democratic elements to the Iranian government system, the power of the Supreme Leader makes the nation very close to a dictatorship. When the election results of 2009 were challenged, the Khamenei government shut down Web sites and cell services, mobilized the Revolutionary Guard, and locked foreign journalists in their hotel rooms. Meanwhile President Ahmadinejad called the hundreds of thousands of people protesting the election results the equivalent of soccer hooligans who weren’t happy they lost the game. If Western countries hope to keep diplomatic channels open with Iran they will need to be prepared for many bumps along the road.

Analysis

1. Why is Iran so suspicious of the West? Do you feel their concerns are historically warranted?
2. What has President Obama done to open diplomatic channels with Iran?
3. What challenges does the West have when it comes to communicating with the government of Iran?

IRAN'S SUMMER OF DISCONTENT

Youth Revolution

Did you know . . . Supporters of Mousavi adopted the colour green. Young Iranians were seen wearing green clothing, green nail polish, green eye shadow, and waving green banners and scarves.

In 2005, disillusioned youth stayed away from polling booths as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad swept his way into power. In 2009, political pundits expected the same thing. Iran tends to be a nation where older men run the show and youth are told to stay in line. However, something sparked the interest of young people, as the presidential election became a lightning rod for change and reform.

All four presidential candidates knew they needed to court the youth vote. With close to 70 per cent of the Iranian population under the age of 30, the candidates knew that young Iranians could be their ticket to power. Of the four men vying for the presidency, Mir Hossein Mousavi was by far the most effective at reaching youth. Mousavi used his Web site and a companion Facebook site (where he quickly attracted close to 40 000 supporters) to get his message out to young people.

Mousavi delivered a platform that vowed to get Iran's 25 per cent inflation rate under control and improve unemployment. He hammered Ahmadinejad for squandering close to \$300-billion in oil revenue over his four-year term and soundly criticized the president for damaging Iran's international reputation with his anti-Israel rants and Holocaust denial. Mousavi also vowed to introduce measures designed to improve women's rights and Iran's diplomatic standing in the global community.

Momentum Shifts

Things changed dramatically for Mousavi after one of the televised presidential debates. His campaign had been gaining momentum in the weeks

prior to the debate. Many observers believe that Mousavi's wife, Zahra Rahnavard, was giving life to his campaign and drawing women and young people to the reformist side. An accomplished scholar, author, artist, and one-time university chancellor, Rahnavard drew rock-star-style enthusiasm to her husband's campaign.

This did not go unnoticed by Ahmadinejad and, in an effort to discredit Rahnavard, he took aim at his opponent's wife in one of the debates. Ahmadinejad pulled a picture of Rahnavard out of an official looking file (some believe it was her intelligence file) and held it up to the camera. He then proceeded to claim that Rahnavard obtained her university degrees by bending government rules. The president's supporters loved the tactic, but his opponents, and many undecided Iranian voters, thought the attack was unwarranted and unfounded.

For her part, Rahnavard demanded an apology from Ahmadinejad saying, "Either he cannot tolerate highly educated women or he's discouraging women from playing an active role in society" (*Toronto Star*, June 12, 2009). Rahnavard's conduct was gold for the Mousavi campaign. Suddenly people were flocking to gather as much information on the man and his crusade as they could find. Overwhelmingly, women and youth flocked to the would-be president's side.

The Role of Telecommunications Technology

When election day came, and Ahmadinejad was declared the winner, Iranians went to Mousavi's site for guidance, only to find that the site was

Further Research

Learn more about the movement toward an open Internet experience and the software of Psiphon at <http://psiphon.ca>.

unavailable. They turned to their cell phones. Cell service was also down. The timing of the communication breakdown seemed too coincidental. With visions of government conspiracies in their head, angry Mousavi supporters took to the streets.

In the days that followed, when Mousavi's site was available, he encouraged his supporters to keep up the fight, to demand a new election, and to let their voices be heard. He discouraged violence and, when the government resorted to violence, he encouraged his supporters to publically mourn for those who died. While Mousavi did his best to get his message out to the people, the voice of the protest movement really came from the people themselves.

Twitter users communicated protest locations and times to each other. They also sent messages to friends who lived in Toronto, London, Paris, and New York, providing the world with eyewitness accounts of what was going on in Iran. In fact, Twitter was so widely used during the weeks after the June 12 vote that the U.S. government asked Twitter administrators to avoid doing maintenance and upgrades that might disrupt the protestors' ability to communicate. Protestors also used Facebook to share their stories, and some Iranians managed to post videos of protests and skirmishes with police on YouTube.

Analysis

1. List some of the main ideas of Mir Hossein Mousavi during the election of 2009. Why would this platform appeal to youth?
2. How did Zhara Rahnavard help her husband's election campaign?
3. How did protestors use technology to communicate after the election results were announced?
4. What do the Supreme Leader and President have to worry about going into the next election?

For its part, the Iranian government shut down reformist Web sites and disrupted cell services as much as they could. However, young, techno-savvy Iranians would not be deterred. Many used a cyber back door developed by Canadians at the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab. Psiphon is a software package that allows people to form trusted groups. Once in these trusted groups, the software allows members to communicate undetected by government communication experts. Psiphon was designed to be used in precisely the kind of circumstances distraught Iranians found themselves in during the summer of 2009.

The disputed presidential election may have done irreparable damage to the government of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He openly showed his support for the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and, when the results were announced, it looked like the fix was in. In essence, by not addressing the voting irregularities that he admits occurred, he has left the disaffected youth who so passionately participated in the protests with ammunition going into the next election. At that point they will be four years older and may no longer have an appetite for the heavy-handedness of the Supreme Leader and his band of old men.

IRAN'S SUMMER OF DISCONTENT

The Governments of Canada and Iran

Definition

Theocracy means "rule by God." It refers to a state that is governed by religious leaders using religious teaching and laws.

Canada and Iran have very different government structures. Canada is clearly a democracy that sees power divided within a constitutional monarchy framework but with the power clearly resting with elected officials. On the other hand, Iran is often referred to as a quasi-democracy because the real power lies with unelected religious clerics, and only a small share of the power is in the hands of elected politicians. Take a look at the tables below and complete the activity that follows.

	Canada	Iran
Type of Government	Democracy	Theocracy
Head of State	Queen or King — represented by the Governor General (term appointment)	Supreme Leader (lifetime appointment)
Head of Government	Prime Minister (elected)	President (elected)
Administration	Cabinet (drafts legislation that is then put before Parliament for a vote)	Council of Guardians (has the power to strike down laws passed by the National Assembly; also approves all candidates running for public office)
Legislature	Parliament (elected)	<i>Majlis</i> or National Assembly (elected)
Other government bodies	Senate ("the house of sober second thought," reviews and approves legislation passed in Parliament)	Assembly of Experts (composed of 86 clerics who monitor the performance of the Supreme Leader)

Activity

Go online and see if you can find out who currently holds key positions of power in the Canadian and Iranian governments. Just write the names of each person you discover in pencil beside the person's position (e.g., Supreme Leader – Ayatollah Khamenei). For positions like the Canadian Cabinet and the Iranian Council of Guardians, see if you can find one or two names for each.

IRAN'S SUMMER OF DISCONTENT

Activity: Driven to Protest

Note

During the Islamic Revolution of 1979, protestors communicated by spray painting protest locations on the sides of buildings and shouting directions from the rooftops of Tehran. Even during the 2009 protests, when the government disrupted cell phone services and shut down Web sites, protestors spray painted information on cardboard to direct fellow activists to protest locations.

At the height of the struggle between protestors and the Revolutionary Guard in the post-election frenzy in Iran, a young woman became the face of the protest movement. Neda Agha-Soltan was gunned down, apparently by a member of the Basij militia—a group under the direct control of the Revolutionary Guard. Her death was captured on video and posted on YouTube. People were appalled when they saw images of her last moments of life and directed their anger at the Iranian establishment in the form of more protests. The government responded by forbidding any commemoration of Agha-Soltan's death and threatening to put a stop to anyone who attempted to make the young woman a martyr for the reformist cause.

Imagine that you are part of the reformist protest movement in Iran in the summer of 2009. You have just received a Twitter message reporting the death of a protestor and understand that a video of the event has been posted on YouTube. The government says that the video is a fake and that it was produced by the BBC and CNN. You are incensed.

How will you mobilize your fellow protestors to demonstrate against the government's use of force against this innocent young woman?

Technology available:

- Cell phone – phone calls and text messaging
- Video cameras
- Internet – personal Web sites, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter

Your Task

Make a plan that outlines what you will do to help mobilize fellow protestors in Iran.

Your plan will be accepted in any of the following formats:

- Written report: two pages
- Web site: two pages
- Audio or video podcast: four to six minutes in length