

## ***Wikileaks and the 2009 Iran Election***

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Barbara Tuchman tells this story in *The Proud Tower*, her impressive history of the lead-up to World War I. Philipp Ernst, the father of surrealist painter Max Ernst, once painted a scene of his backyard garden, but left out a tree because he believed it would ruin his composition. Later, overcome with remorse at his "offense against realism," he chopped down the tree.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory spoiled many pre-painted pictures of Iran's 2009 presidential election, and critics have since insisted he does not belong in the scene. Most seek to prove their point by contending that post-election protesters were brutally mistreated – a proper subject to raise, but unconvincing when offered as evidence that the election was fraudulent.

Electoral fraud would have been easy to detect. For the first time ever, the Iranian government reported the vote-count separately for each of the 45,692 local polling stations, not merely a national total for each candidate. Many thousands of Mir-Houssein Mousavi's representatives had observed election-day activities at polling stations all across Iran and in 95 other countries, and had signed a government form to verify the local vote-count reported to Tehran. When official figures were published for the 45,692 local polling stations, no one disputed the vote count reported for any of them. Mousavi continued to make sweeping fraud allegations, but none of his on-site observers has ever backed him up. Fraud occurred everywhere, it seems, but nowhere in particular. Some Mousavi supporters attribute this to a fear of punishment. Apparently it is safe to insist that blatant electoral fraud occurred all over Iran, but dangerous to give an example.

The deafening silence of Mousavi's election-day observers has had its effect. After some widely cited "preliminary analyses" published shortly after the election, not a single scholar (to this writer's knowledge) has published a systematic challenge to the official result. Respected journalists such as the *New York Times'* Roger Cohen, who initially offered statistical proof of election fraud (easily refuted), retreated to subjective pronouncements such as "Sometimes you have to smell the truth, breathe it."

Evidence or not, some US State Department employees apparently never stopped believing in fraud. According to a January 2010 "Wikileaks" cable sent from the US' Iran-watching station in Dubai:

While we don't know nor might not ever know the real June 12 vote count, it is clear that ... there was systematic vote count fraud (if in fact the votes were even counted) ....

He did not explain what made this "clear," or give any reason at all. Perhaps he had been persuaded by Roger Cohen's several "smell and breathe" articles published shortly after the election. Whatever unstated reasons this cable writer may have had, Mr. Cohen was content to learn that they agreed: "It is good to know that this is the innermost conviction of American diplomacy." A single cable from a field office in Dubai is hardly a sufficient basis for such a statement, but Mr. Cohen may well be correct.

Other Wikileaks cables did state reasons. Three days after the election, an "Iran watcher" in Turkmenistan reported that:

Based on calculations from Mousavi's campaign observers who were present at polling stations around the country and who witnessed the vote counts, Mousavi received approximately 26 million (or 61%) of the 42 million votes cast in Friday's election, followed by Mehdi Karroubi (10-12 million). ... Ahmadinejad received "a maximum of 4-5 million votes."

In other words, Mousavi had outpolled Ahmadinejad by 21 million votes – an astonishing 32-million vote difference from the 11-million vote margin reported for Ahmadinejad. This Turkmenistan source claimed to know who had engineered this massive fraud – the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps – and how: In a departure from past election practices, local vote counts had been reported directly to the Interior Ministry in Tehran, rather than to regional election offices:

The Iranian authorities knew ... that attempts to falsify individual precinct counts could be countered by observers from the Mousavi and the other campaigns [at regional election offices], so ... they had no choice but to conceal the precinct results [by ordering that local vote counts be transmitted directly to Tehran].

Once the local results reached Tehran, the Interior Ministry could report whatever numbers it liked. No one would ever know whether the vote count from one – or even all

– of the 45,692 local polling stations had been altered, or ignored entirely. Each local vote count would become an indistinguishable drop in the ocean.

The Turkmenistan Iran watcher knew just how to expose this fraud:

[T]he international community should ... demand that the Iranian authorities release and account for the results from each precinct.

Excellent advice – but Iranian election officials had already done precisely that, without being prompted. Anticipating (correctly) that a disappointed candidate might dispute the reported result, they had ordered ballot-box level reporting so that local vote-counts could be verified by each candidate's on-site observers. Anticipating (correctly again) a very high turnout, they had ordered that local vote counts be transmitted directly to Tehran so that results could be tabulated more quickly.

If the 2009 election results had been reported as in previous elections – a single nationwide total for each candidate – this Turkmenistan Iran watcher might have had a valid point. This time, his complaint merely proved the wisdom of the old adage: "Be careful what you ask for." It was a simple matter for Mousavi to detect fraudulent vote-counting: compare the official vote count with the count witnessed by Mousavi's own observers. He has never reported any discrepancy. The Iranian government appears to have reported the very same vote-counts that Mousavi's own observers had witnessed.

This may explain why election critics quickly shifted their focus to the post-election protests and government crackdown – an important subject in its own right, but separate from the election. A December 2009 Wikileaks cable reports that former President Hashemi Rafsanjani encouraged the United States to support this new tack:

Rafsanjani believed that the best help possible from foreigners would be to say that the elections were not fair and to note the human rights violations in the aftermath...

In yet another Wikileaks cable (August 28, 2009), the source predicted that Iran's Supreme Leader would die from cancer within months (an old rumor even then), upon which Rafsanjani would get himself appointed as Supreme Leader and "then invite Ahmadinejad to resign and call a new election." Since Ahmadinejad predictably would decline and the Supreme Leader has no authority to call a new election or remove the President, presumably Ahmadinejad was to be forced out. This inevitably would require assistance from the very same Revolutionary Guard leaders who had just engineered his

fraudulent election. All very confusing, but nevertheless offered up without comment in this cable – as was this remark: "The real tabulation results show Mousavi winning 16 million votes" – a substantial decline from the 26 million votes reported by the State Department's source in Turkmenistan.

Though this assessment may change as more Wikileaks cables are released, those released so far make at least two points clear: (1) the US State Department has received considerable election-related information from secret Iran watchers in several foreign countries; (2) those sources have reported a great deal that is demonstrably false, and nothing that cannot be found very quickly by anyone with access to the Internet.