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Iran awash with mistrust, despair

By Sara Farhang
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TEHRAN - After a televised counting of 10% of the [ballot boxes](#) on Monday, the body that oversees the Iranian elections upheld the results of the disputed [presidential elections](#).

The Guardians Council, a 12-member constitutional body, confirmed the controversial landslide win of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad and rejected claims of widespread fraud.

The morning after the June 12 election, the Ministry of Interior declared Ahmadinejad the winner, leading to 16 days of protest and unrest by supporters of former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi and reformist politician Mehdi Karroubi, two of the leading candidates who claimed election fraud.

The announcement by the Guardians Council, which followed statements by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in support of the election results and Ahmadinejad, came as no surprise to Iranians.

Despite the heavy presence of security officials, military personnel and basiji militia, sporadic protests in Tehran were reported on Monday evening after the announcement. New rounds of protests are scheduled for the upcoming week.

But given the heavy presence of security and military personnel on the streets, it is unlikely that mass protests will resemble the first few days of unrest.

A feeling of anger, despair and mistrust of government prevails among Iranian citizens, which has only deepened after the Guardians Council's announcement.

Arash, a 26-year-old college student who was active in the campaign of one of the reformist candidates, describes the current situation as worrisome.

"I am afraid that things will only get worse as the split in the power structure progresses," he said. Arash expressed concern about the uncertain fate of those who have been arrested and especially the hundreds of political and [human rights](#) activists currently in detention.

Arash's concerns are echoed by many Iran analysts and human-rights organizations that believe political and rights activists in prison are under pressure - possibly being tortured - to confess to cooperation with [foreign governments](#) intent on overthrowing the regime.

Judiciary Spokesman Alireza Jamshidi reported that a special committee has been set up to investigate and decide on the situation of those arrested. Human-rights activists in Iran claim the

nominated members of the committee have dismal human-rights records.

Minister of Intelligence Mohsen Ejeie, in a press conference in the holy city of Qom, classified those arrested over the past two weeks into three groups: decision-makers, those who carried out the plans, and those who are opposed to the Islamic Revolution. He emphasized that those opposed to the revolution would not be released.

Ejeie also alleged that some of the reformists have "joined forces with the enemy", claiming that these individuals, "after the end of the elections, demanded the overturning of election results and, in an effort to press for their demands, they have initiated the project of yelling 'Allah-o-Akbar' and street protests."

While official figures place the number of those arrested in the past two weeks at 500, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) asserts that approximately 2,000 individuals have been arrested during that time.

Iranian officials blamed foreign intervention for the recent unrest. Subsequently, nine Iranian staff members of the British Embassy were arrested on Sunday, five of whom were released after swift condemnation by the British Foreign Ministry and the [European Union](#). Those who remain in detention, according to the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, are being questioned further about their alleged involvement in the unrest.

Ahmad, a 32-year-old insurance salesman, views the unfolding events negatively. "I think that there will be a grand bargain between the warring factions within the government and they will as usual settle their differences to the detriment of the public," he said.

"After all, Mousavi and Karroubi are a part of this same system. They were approved by the Guardian Council to stand for elections and so in the end they will do what is best for the Islamic Regime. They just wanted to kill some young people, to warn against any dissent, which they have," Ahmad said.

Authorities have come under heavy criticism from national and international groups for the level of violence used to quash recent protests, leading to a blame game among Iranian authorities for the violence and mass arrests.

Officials are claiming that suspicious characters posing as basiji militiamen have carried out this violence. In a letter to the Judiciary chief Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, Ahmadinejad urged an investigation of the "suspicious" death of Neda Agha Soltan.

Earlier in the week, officials claimed that Neda, now an iconic figure of the unrest, was shot as a part of a plot devised by an expelled BBC correspondent.

Mehri, a 62-year-old grandmother who was active during the Islamic Revolution, expresses regret about the dwindling of public protest. "I don't know why people don't continue protesting in the streets," she said. "Perhaps the difference is that in 1979, when we protested in the streets, the [army](#) sided with the public. Now they are standing against us and killing protesters."

Asal, a 48-year-old mother and former activist during the time of the revolution, echoed Mehri's sentiment. "It is true that during those times we did not have the Internet nor did we have mobile phones, but we managed to find each other," she said. "We cannot overlook the organizing role of the political groups, especially leftist groups."

"Those in power now don't care about the country, nor do they care about the people," she added. "They will just keep killing until they are sure of their hold on power and this level of violence is difficult to contend with for a public who is committed to non-violence and is unarmed."

A 40-year-old cab driver named Ahmad expressed frustration about the economic loss he and others have incurred during the past two weeks.

"At the end of the month, there will still be bills to pay," he said. "I have to pay rent, but I have made no money in the past two weeks. Every day, I go home early, because the streets are crowded with

protesters and [military](#) and where there is no protest, the streets are empty. All the businesses in the main squares of Tehran close early these days."

"The government should compensate us for this loss," he added. "Of course I hope that the situation resolves in a manner which is beneficial for the country, but I doubt it will."

Ahmad lamented the loss of credibility of Iran in the [international community](#) and said that he worries about the country's image among foreign observers.

"Everyone knows that this is not a legitimate government and they will not take Iran seriously," he said.

At the same time, he is hopeful about the fact that people are no longer fearful. "Before these elections we could never talk so freely about the situation of the country. This is positive, but it will take time. It is like a time bomb waiting to go off."

As for Arash - and many other young reform-minded intellectuals who participated in the elections - the future looks bleak.

"I don't see any space for civil action and organizing. How can we organize and address civil issues and concerns in a peaceful manner, when the government doesn't even take our votes into account?" he asked.

"Civil society activists have lost credibility among the public and our voices will no longer be heard. Plus, those of us who have not been arrested yet will probably be arrested in the near future. I am thinking that I have to leave Iran now. Perhaps this is a good time to leave and continue my studies, until the situation improves a bit."