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## Iran's disputed presidential election

### A hollow victory

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#### **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad keeps power but loses legitimacy, particularly among the middle class**

THE case is closed. The landslide claimed by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the June 12th presidential election was real, says Iran's government, and anyone who doesn't like it can lump it or, indeed, risk going to jail. After weeks of unrest, the state has reasserted its power. Heavy policing has blunted public protests, while a more targeted campaign of arrests, intimidation and controls on communications has hamstrung attempts to organise and sustain opposition. But with accusations of foul play still being voiced, even within the religious establishment that supports the Islamic Republic, Iran's hardliners will struggle to re-establish legitimacy.

The Guardian Council, an appointed body dominated by clerics allied to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was in charge of investigating allegations of electoral fraud. Considering that it has a record of barring reformist candidates and that its chairman publicly endorsed the arch-conservative Mr Ahmadinejad before the ballot, the result was preordained: the council announced on June 29th that its researches, including a partial recount, had produced no sign of wrongdoing, so closing the last legal channel to contest the outcome. Pro-regime news outlets even suggested that the revised tally showed gains for Mr Ahmadinejad. The president declared not just a personal triumph but the defeat of an enemy plot to overthrow the regime.

Yet his three rival candidates have remained defiant, insisting that Mr Ahmadinejad's claimed 63% victory could have been secured only by fraud. They insisted that the election either be annulled or subjected to a full, impartial investigation.

Mir Hosein Mousavi, the runner-up to Mr Ahmadinejad, and another reformist candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, said the government was illegitimate. Mr Mousavi asked: “How can people trust a regime which imprisons its friends, colleagues and children?” Websites close to him called for peaceful protests to continue, including a possible general strike. Even close associates of the sole conservative challenger, Mohsen Rezai, who has lately muted his criticism in deference to the supreme leader, continued to assert that he had been cheated.

But such displays of defiance belie a widening sense of despair among Mr Ahmadinejad’s opponents. A statement from an influential group of reformist clerics hinted at the change in mood. While reserving the right to protest, it said that Iranians had already paid a high price for speaking out and gave warning that escalating tensions and street protests “are not the solution”. Powerful reformist allies, including the former presidents Muhammad Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani, have taken to reasserting their loyalty to the Islamic Republic while working behind the scenes to negotiate a compromise.

The toll from the weeks of post-election unrest, which at its peak brought as many as 2m protesters onto Tehran’s streets, includes perhaps 20 deaths, hundreds of injuries and extensive property damage. Much of this was perpetrated by government agents, judging from extensive footage captured in amateur videos and posted on the internet.

The widest sweep of suspected regime opponents since the 1980s has seen hundreds of ordinary citizens hauled off to jail, along with prominent journalists, human rights advocates and dozens of reformist party leaders, many of whom served as senior officials in previous administrations. In what appears to be the beginning of a full-scale purge, reformist sympathisers in Iran’s oil ministry have been replaced by hardliners. Even those with no apparent involvement in politics, such as Bijan Khajepour, a well-known business consultant, have been detained.

Chillingly, the state-controlled media have taken to airing purported confessions from some of these prisoners. The interior minister also claims to have uncovered a conspiracy whereby armed saboteurs pretended to be members of the *baseej*, a vigilante force of zealots which has been widely accused of brutality.

Hardliners are trying to present the unrest as the result of foreign intrigue, notably by Britain, the old colonial meddler. Britain and Iran have engaged in tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats. Local staff of the British Embassy in Tehran were rounded up (and most then released). Iran’s interior minister claims he has footage showing them taking part in anti-government demonstrations. Some pro-regime loyalists claim that the fatal shooting of Neda Agha Soltan, captured on video by bystanders during a demonstration, was staged by agents in the pay of the BBC, whose Persian television channel has drawn the regime’s ire.

Hardline clerics say that in future protests will be viewed as *haraba*, a crime of banditry for which the punishment is execution. Yet the shrillness of such threats, and the violence of the crackdown, have only strengthened the impression that Iran has experienced something like a coup d’état by hardliners, not by the reformists who are accused of trying to mount one. With the bulk of Iran’s middle class now alienated from its leadership, and the Islamic Republic’s prestige sullied before the world, this is not much of a victory for Mr Ahmadinejad to savour.

