

# The Establishment U.S. Media: Comparative Treatment of the Iranian and Honduran Elections

## Part II

By [Edward S. Herman](#) and [David Peterson](#)

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

Below is [Part 2](#) of our comparative analysis in *MRZine* of the treatment of Iran and Honduras by the Western establishment, including the media and an important segment of the “left.”

As we stated at the outset of [Part 1](#),<sup>[1]</sup> there is no better test of the independence and integrity of the establishment U.S. media than in their comparative treatment of Iran and Honduras in 2009 and 2010.

Iran held its most recent presidential election on June 12, 2009. This followed a typically short three-week campaign period between the four candidates who had been vetted by Iran’s Guardian Council out of a list of some 475 hopefuls, but a campaign that nevertheless was open and adversarial, and energized Iran’s electorate unlike any other in the 30-year history of the Islamic Republic. A record-high 85% turnout returned the incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to office with a reported 62.6% of the votes cast.<sup>[2]</sup>

Sixteen days later, on June 28, a *coup d’état* was executed in Honduras that overthrew the country’s democratically-elected President José Manuel Zelaya. Almost five-months-to-the-day after this, on November 29, the coup-regime carried out national elections long-scheduled for this date. The constitutional government of Honduras never served another day in office.<sup>[3]</sup>

The winner of Honduras’ presidential election with 56.6% of the votes was the National Party’s Porfirio Lobo Sosa. Both Lobo and the second-place finisher with 38%, Elvin Santos Lozano of the Liberal Party, were supporters of the coup, and both opposed the restoration of the ousted Zelaya. Opponents of the coup as well as Zelaya himself had called for Honduran voters to boycott the elections, and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal estimated turnout to be only 49% (some independent estimates ran lower<sup>[4]</sup>), after the Tribunal falsely reported turnout as high as 62% on election night.<sup>[5]</sup>

For many years leading up to Iran’s June 2009 election, Iranians had suffered the consequences of U.S. and allied invasions of countries that border Iran to the east (Afghanistan) and to the west (Iraq), U.S. and Israeli threats and attacks by proxy forces, U.S.- and ultimately UN Security Council-imposed economic sanctions, and even an open U.S. destabilization campaign to foster regime-change inside Iran.<sup>[6]</sup> It follows that any Iranian presidential election that did not serve regime-change ends would be judged seriously defective by U.S. and Western officials—that efforts would be taken to discredit Iran’s election results and to delegitimize any government formed on their basis.

On the other hand, the coup in Honduras was engineered by a deeply entrenched oligarchy and involved the military, members of parliament, and the judiciary, and it removed a populist president from office. It was also implemented with advance notice to U.S. officials, and received their *ex post* acceptance and approval as well;[7] after the coup, Washington even declined to withdraw its ambassador from Honduras. It follows from this official acquiescence to the coup, and violent suppression of democracy, that the November elections would not be denounced as a fraud. Instead, U.S. officials asserted that the mere holding of elections was an “important part of the solution to the political crisis in their country,”[8] and urged other states to accept this “solution” as well, to normalize relations with Honduras’ new government—and to “start from zero,” in the revealing words that U.S. President Barack Obama used in a letter to the president of Brazil.[9]

### **Legitimizing versus Delegitimizing Elections in the 1980s**

In covering both the Iran and Honduran elections, the establishment media followed closely the lead of the U.S. government, furiously assailing Iran’s election as stolen and a sham, and quietly accepting Honduras’ elections as a meaningful step forward. For the *Newspaper of Record*, Iran’s election was “Neither Real Nor Free” (June 15), but Honduras’ election was “clear and fair” (December 5).[10]

This is in a long tradition of media propaganda service in dealing with foreign elections. In fact, the media’s performance on Iran and Honduras in 2009 was a throwback to their performance on El Salvador and Nicaraguan during the elections held in these countries in the 1980s. The Salvadoran elections of 1982 and 1984 were held under a regime of extreme state terrorism, with thousands of civilians killed, obligatory voting, no freedom of assembly or press, and no peace or dissident candidates on the ballot. But as these elections were sponsored by the U.S. government, and were designed to show the U.S. population and the world that U.S. intervention was justified, and that the United States was supporting a “fledgling democracy,” the media swallowed them whole. The media featured the high voter turnout, without noting that voting was required by law and was carried out under a system of ongoing state terrorism.[11] The *New York Times* found that the “most remarkable” fact of El Salvador’s 1982 elections was the “determination of so many Salvadorans to participate....The Salvadoran turnout marks a significant achievement”—not for Salvadorans, however, but for the “Reagan Administration [which] may be learning how to use its enormous diplomatic influence in the Caribbean.”[12] It was not until 1989 that the *Times* reported the existence of the military’s “1981 death list,” which in retrospect it called a “symbol of the army-linked repression that turned criticism of the right into a capital offense, the armed forces [having] put a bounty on the heads of 138 leftists by publishing a list of their names and describing them as wanted traitors.”[13]

On the other hand, the Nicaraguan election, held by the Sandinista government in November 1984, was opposed by the U.S. government, which did not want the Sandinistas legitimized and therefore sought to discredit it. Although the Nicaraguan election was a model of democratic practice compared with that in El Salvador, here again the media followed the official party-line and suddenly became uninterested in voter turnout but attentive to basic electoral conditions that they ignored in El Salvador (where they were much worse than in Nicaragua).[14] As early as July 1984, Ronald Reagan had likened the Sandinistas’ proposal to hold elections to a “Soviet-style sham.” Sure enough, five months later, after the election was held, the *New York Times* found that “Only the naive believe

that [the] election in Nicaragua was democratic or legitimizing proof of the Sandinistas' popularity....The Sandinistas made it easy to dismiss their election as a sham.”[15] In fact, by taking a strong, categorical position against anything related to the Sandinistas, it was the U.S. government that made it easy for the *Times* to dismiss the Nicaraguan election.

### **Media Coverage of the 2009 Iran and Honduran Elections**

The 2009 coup in Honduras was a throwback to the 1954 U.S.-organized overthrow of the democratically-elected government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala and the 1964 military coup in Brazil, which removed an elected social democratic government and installed a military dictatorship, with the enthusiastic support of the liberal Democratic government of Lyndon Johnson. The Obama government's support for the coup and coup regime in Honduras is thus in a great Democratic tradition. We may recall that there has been a great deal of talk in recent years about the new era of “humanitarian intervention” and the “responsibility to protect” in this post-Soviet age, in which, according to Michael Ignatieff, the United States has once again “changed course” and abandoned its earlier tendency to align with cooperative dictators, and now favors “democracy promotion.”[16] But the Honduras case shows that so-called democracy-promotion is an instrument of policy, not a generally-applicable principle, and will be used or set aside in accord with perceived real interests.

The U.S. government and media response to the Honduras case also raises some questions about the meaning and integrity of their intense focus on, and harsh treatment of, the election in Iran. There is no question that in 2009 – 2010, a sizable fraction of Iran's domestic opposition to Ahmadinejad and critics of the clerical regime in general have been motivated by genuinely democratic and liberal aspirations. But is it not revealing that so many of the *foreign, Western-based campaigners* in the name of Iran's “pro-democracy” and “reform” movement paid so little attention, first to the coup in Honduras and to the military and security apparatus' violent repression of opponents of the coup, and then to the “demonstration elections” that the coup regime carried out in November, the results of which were officially sanctioned by Washington?

It is also of interest that in Iran, the major government repression came *after* the June 12 election, and was directed against Iranians who rejected the official results. But in Honduras, violent repression *preceded* the November 29 elections (and appears to have greatly escalated since[17]), and was and remains directed against opponents of the coup regime and its overthrow of the democratic order. Nevertheless, whereas Iran's relatively open and hotly contested presidential election, with credible albeit disputed results, was rejected out-of-hand in the metropolitan centers of the West, and generated a huge bandwagon process of denigration, Honduras' coup-consolidation elections were quietly accepted, subjected to little criticism, inspired no bandwagon effect against them, and few public displays of “solidarity” with the massive grassroots opposition to the coup—in particular, the more than 1.25 million Hondurans who have added their signatures to the Sovereign Declaration for the Popular and Participatory Constituent Assembly, a demand that the 1982 Constitution be rewritten, and over which Zelaya was deposed?[18]

As we can see from Table 1, Western newspapers were very sensitive and alert to the topic of human rights in the immediate aftermath of Iran's presidential election, and used phrases such as ‘human rights abuses’ and ‘human rights violations’ a total of 89 times during the first 30 day after the election. But though the human rights of Hondurans were also under severe pressure and widespread abuse after the June 28 coup as well as before and after

the demonstration elections staged by the coup regime on November 29, these same phrases were used by Western newspapers only *once* in the 30 days leading up to the Honduran elections,[19] *once* in the 30 days after the elections,[20] and *zero* times in the 30 days after the coup.

**Table 1. Differential media usage of the phrases ‘human rights abuses’ and ‘human rights violations’ in two countries where dissidents were repressed by their own governments [21]**

Newspaper coverage	
Iran’s presidential election, June 13 – July 12, 2009 (first 30 days after)	89
The Honduras <i>coup d’état</i> , June 29 – July 28, 2009 (first 30 days after)	0 [22]
The Honduras elections, October 31 – November 29 (last 30 days through the date of the election)	1
The Honduras elections, November 30 – December 29, 2009 (first 30 days after)	1

Table 1 thus captures quite dramatically the different levels, not of human rights abuses in Iran as opposed to Honduras, but of U.S. and Western interest in and expressed solidarity towards the respective victims of human rights abuses in each country during four specific periods in 2009. In these two cases, sensitivity and alertness towards the human rights of Iranian and Honduran citizens followed the guidance of establishment leaders and reveals a starkly dichotomous pattern: Iranian victims of human rights abuses received a great deal of attention, but Honduran victims did not. This was also dramatically displayed in the intense and indignant treatment of the murder of Neda Agha-Soltan in Iran, and the lack of interest in the murder of Isis Obed Murillo in Honduras or the murder of at least 24 Honduran activists (see Table 1 and Table 2 in [Part 1](#)), showing that Iranians were “worthy” victims in 2009 – 2010, whereas Honduran victims were “unworthy.”

**Was the Iran Election Stolen?**

In thinking about the treatment of the Iran election it is also important historical context that the last time the United States was really happy with Iran was when that country was ruled by a U.S.-sponsored dictator, the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The Shah was actually encouraged to develop a nuclear capability, apparently quite acceptable for a U.S.-client dictator, but not for a regime, dictatorial or not, that is not under proper control. The U.S. support of the Honduran coup and coup-organized election also strongly suggests that

official U.S. concern over the fairness of the 2009 Iran election was larded with hypocrisy and covered over the real agenda—destabilization and regime-change.

For many foreign critics of Iran's election, it is believed that the massive street protests beginning June 13 showed that Iranians themselves preferred the main challenger Mir Hossein Mousavi over the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and that the mechanics of the election, character of the vote returns, and speed with which the final results were announced all showed that the election was stolen. But these criticisms do not withstand close examination. As we have pointed out in detail elsewhere,[23] a series of independent public opinion polls taken both before and after the election asked Iranians either who they were going to vote for, or who they in fact had voted for. Almost invariably, these reports show Ahmadinejad receiving some 2 votes for every one vote given to Mousavi. These results range from a low-end of 1.75-to-1 in a poll carried out between June 19 and 24, 2009, to a high-end 3.93-to-1 in a poll carried out from August 27 to September 10, 2009; the actual ratio of Ahmadinejad's official victory over the challenger Mousavi's was 1.85-to-1. Thus numerous polls carried out by respectable organizations using familiar and widely accepted polling techniques show Ahmadinejad winning a popular vote with numbers not far off from those of the official results. None of these polls even remotely suggest a Mousavi victory, or even a race too close to call. The results also parallel those of the second-round runoff election of June 2005, in which Ahmadinejad defeated Ali Akbar Rafsanjani by 62% to 32% (or 1.94-to-1).[24]

Of course, the establishment media and Western-based Iran campaigners have preferred citing the U.K.-based Chatham House allegations of "irregularities" in Iran's official results, and its claim that the Interior Ministry's allocation of 1.85 votes to Ahmadinejad for every one vote given to Mousavi was "problematic" and "highly implausible." [25] We believe that Western media and intellectuals gravitated to Chatham House's analysis while ignoring independent polling data for the simple reason that Chatham House served up the requisite negative view of the official result—and these other sources, such as the joint effort by the Program on International Policy Attitudes and WorldPublicOpinion.org,[26] did not. Hence, whereas Chatham House's "preliminary" analysis was cited frequently in the Western media, the PIPA – WPO analysis based on no fewer than 12 different opinion surveys, released on February 3, 2010, was ignored.[27]

But Chatham House's *Preliminary Analysis of the Voting Figures in Iran's 2009 Presidential Election*, released to considerable fanfare just nine days after Iran's election, did not engage in any direct independent polling or provide any answer to the conflicting results of the actual polls—and perhaps most revealing of all, has never been followed-up by a *non*-“preliminary” analysis.

Even more important, however, is the fact that the allegations advanced as evidence of fraud in Iran's official results, and therefore of a stolen election, wither under close scrutiny. In a self-published analysis, Eric A. Brill[28] assessed each of the major complaints made against Iran's 2009 election results, whether by Mousavi and his supporters or by Western analysts, including Chatham House. As regards the Chatham House assertion that Iran's Interior Ministry reported higher vote totals in several provinces than there were citizens eligible to vote (“excess voting”), Brill countered that Iran's so-called “vote anywhere” rule meant that local turnout could legitimately exceed 100% of the eligible voters in a given area, and though the “2009 turnout was the highest ever for an election (85%), it was well

under 100%—and far short of the 98% turnout for the 1979 referendum held to ratify the creation of the Islamic Republic.” As an earlier critique of the Chatham House allegations pointed out, the same “excess voting” phenomenon “also happened in previous elections where there too was a very high turnout, such as in [the] 1997 presidential election....” That year, one of the West’s favorite Iranian political figures, Mohammad Khatami, was elected to his first term, “which none would dispute as being fraudulent.”[29]

Brill also showed that out of Iran’s approximately 45,000 polling stations (including some 14,000 mobile stations that traveled to voters whose remote locations would have discouraged their participation), the Mousavi campaign placed observers at more than 40,000 of them (7,500 more than observed the election for Ahmadinejad), and not only did these Mousavi observers sign off on the official results at each polling station where they were present, none of them has ever retracted their assent, despite the Mousavi campaign’s highly publicized allegations of vote fraud. Among Brill’s other crucial points, he reminds us that in 2009, Iran started reporting separate vote counts for each of the 45,000 polling stations, and that any disputed totals reported by the Interior Ministry need only be compared to each of these polling stations’ totals. If they had real reasons to allege massive fraud, Mousavi’s observers could have checked the official counts in this manner and publicized the difference—but they did not.

“The Guardian Council,” Brill writes, “claims that it asked Mousavi ‘time and time again to provide the council with any evidence of examples about the discrepancy’ in ballot-box counts, but that ‘no documents or evidence were received’,”—and “Mousavi has not disputed this, nor has he ever cited a discrepancy for any of the...ballot boxes in the 2009 election.” “Since the necessary data have long been available to compare ballot-box counts,” Brill concludes, “only two explanations for Mousavi’s silence come to mind: either no such discrepancy exists, or no one has bothered to check.” Either way, it is the allegations of fraud that fare badly.[30]

Chatham House did not publish a report on the quality of the November 29, 2009 elections in Honduras, and in line with the official U.S.-U.K. agenda as well as establishment media interests, Chatham House took no interest in Honduras. Table 2 shows that whereas the staged election in Honduras, carried out under a state of siege and with no alternative candidates comparable to Mir Hossein Mousavi available to Honduran voters, came and went with virtually no media assertions of fraud or indignation over a stolen election, allegations of fraud and of a stolen election in Iran were frequent. Thus in a large sample of newspaper coverage, use of various negative words that suggest fraud (e.g., rigged, stolen, sham, and the like) for each election shows that the ratio of such word usage to describe the 2009 elections in Iran and Honduras ran 76-to-1. Institutionalized bias could not be more blatant.

**Table 2. Differential attributions of “fraud” (etc.) to two presidential elections in 2009: Iran and Honduras [31]**

‘phony’

‘rigged’

‘stolen’



'fake'

'farce'

'sham'

'fraud'

TOTALS

Iran presi-dential election, June 12, 2009

0

1,005

182

19

9

40

875

2,130

Honduras presidential election,

Nov. 28, 2009

0

1

0

0

10

1

16

28

### **Foreign Involvement in the Iran and Honduras Elections**

It is important to Western ideologues to downplay any foreign involvement in the rise of Iran's oppositional and protest movement, and any U.S. involvement in the Honduran coup, repression and demonstration election. If that involvement was large, it would make the

Iranian opposition appear a bit compromised, serving to a greater or lesser degree as agents of the Western regime-change program rather than a strictly indigenous democratic movement. As the U.S.-based International Center on Nonviolent Conflict's Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall cynically cautioned in 2003, for a destabilization campaign to be maximally effective in Iran, it "should not come from the CIA or Defense Department, but rather from pro-democracy programs throughout the West." [32] In Honduras' case, on the other hand, evidence of a U.S. role in the coup and U.S. support for the coup regime's November 2009 election would be recognized as a throwback to traditional U.S. gunboat diplomacy and support of military-oligarchic dictatorships throughout the hemisphere.

There is no doubt that Iranian opposition to the clerical regime and to Ahmadinejad was based on serious internal dissatisfaction and required no outside support to make a strong electoral showing for the main challenger, Mir Hossein Mousavi. But external influence was far from negligible, and played a significant role in how events inside Iran were represented to the world and then back again into Iran via major foreign media such as BBC Persian and Voice of America Persian.

Some of it was also indirect and easy to underestimate. Thus one frequently prescribed tool in the regime-change playbook is to "tighten sanctions on the Iranian economy and publicize the connection between regime belligerence [against the United States] and economic malaise," [33] and Iran has suffered income losses from externally imposed sanctions and the diversion of resources based on open U.S. and Israeli threats of attack and active support of terrorist groups and actions. Indeed, three decades earlier, U.S. sanctions and U.S.-sponsored contra terrorism in Nicaragua prior to the 1990 election helped cut per capita income by one-half, and though the *New York Times* found the Sandinista election loss in 1990 a "devastating rebuke" and a testimony to U.S. patience and fair play, [34] there can be little doubt many voters chose Violeta Barrios de Chamorro in the belief that her victory would end the patient U.S. assault.

But the direct interventionism in Iran was also conspicuous. Beginning in 2006, large sums of money were openly voted by Congress for interfering in Iran, [35] and numerous National Endowment for Democracy, Agency for International Development, and other sources funded "democracy promotion" programs that supplied telecommunication tools and propaganda to help anti-government groups and parties. Many NGOs, partly funded by Western governments, played the same role. Ackerman's ICNC participated in training sessions held in Dubai in 2005 that instructed Iranian dissidents on the techniques used in "successful popular revolts in places like Serbia," the *New York Times* reported. "This was like a James Bond camp for revolutionaries," one participant said. [36] As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted in a major policy address at Georgetown University in December 2009, "We can help change-agents gain access to and share information through the internet and mobile phones so that they can communicate and organize. With camera phones and Facebook pages, thousands of protestors in Iran have broadcast their demands for rights denied, creating a record for all the world, including Iran's leaders, to see. I've established a special unit inside the State Department to use technology for 21st century statecraft." [37] In March 2010, the Treasury Department lifted export restrictions on various mass-market software to Iran, Cuba, and the Sudan that will increase the power of Internet and cellphone users to circumvent government control in these countries. [38] Across the board, the publicly-expressed rationale repeats a single message: "viral videos and blog posts are becoming the *samizdat* of our day." [39]



So the U.S. government’s role as a “change-agent” in Iran included many forms of intervention in the 2009 election and protest process. To cite one further example of how the U.S. government aided the opposition there, a State Department official famously emailed Twitter impresario Jack Dorsey on the third day after Iran’s election to urge Dorsey to keep Twitter from undergoing a scheduled maintenance shutdown; Dorsey and Twitter complied.[40] Such interventions, direct and indirect, educational, “democracy promotion,” other informational and propaganda efforts, and the provision of cellphones and other technical equipment to Iranians, all helped make the protest less-than-perfectly indigenous, as the protesters cooperated and interacted with foreign agents pursuing an explicit and long-standing post-Shah agenda of destabilization and regime-change.

It is interesting to see how outwardly oriented was the protest movement in Iran. A large fraction of the tweeting and standard text-messaging was carried out in English, not in the indigenous languages of Iran.[41] The same was true of many of the signs on display in the protest photos shown in the West. This appeal to foreigners was undoubtedly intended to bring foreign pressure to bear on the Iranian government and to discredit it for a variety of possible ends. The discrediting and delegitimizing parts of this campaign were accomplished with a great deal of success, in large part because of the receptivity of both Western establishment as well as the left to anything that denigrates the Islamic Republic of Iran.[42]

Nothing like this was to be found in official, NGO, and media treatment of Honduras. Hillary Clinton barely touched on Honduras in her Georgetown University lecture in December 2009: She boasted of “publicly denouncing” the coup in Honduras—highly misleading, as it took the Obama administration 67 days (through September 3) before someone within its ranks actually referred to Zelaya’s ouster as a “coup,”[43] and by its actions from the June 28 date of the coup onwards, there was never any doubt that the real change-agents in Honduras supported by the Obama administration were the oligarchy and military-security apparatus. Nor is there any reason to suppose that the Obama administration supplied a single cell phone to the true democratic opposition in Honduras. And there were no tweets and other information and protest flows from the “citizen journalists” and *samizdat*-protesters in Honduras into the waiting arms of the Western media. As Table 3 shows, a large sample of newspapers produced an enormous (approximate) 2,000-to-11 disparity in items that mentioned the public protests in Iran or Honduras in connection with one of more of the newer telecommunication tools such as the Internet, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and the like.

**Table 3. Differential media interest in the role of some newer electronic communications technologies in two countries where political unrest was met by government repression: Iran and Honduras [44]**

Newspaper coverage

Iran: The first 30 days of protests following the June 12, 2009 presidential election (June 13 – July 12)

Approx. 2,000

Honduras: The first 30 days of protests following the June 28, 2009 *coup d’état* (June 29 –

Even more striking, however, whereas a large fraction of the items in the first row that dealt with Iran's protests featured quite prominently the role played by these tools in organizing protests and in resisting and circumventing Iranian government efforts to quell the protests and to silence dissent, in the 11 items on Honduras reported in row 2, these same tools were treated in passing—not as *samizdats* in the hands of Honduras' democratic opposition to the coup. Instead, the exact same technologies that Western policymakers and reporters and commentators lauded for helping to pry open greater democratic spaces inside Iran were virtually ignored when the focus turned away from a regime opposed by the United States and its allies and towards a coup regime supported by the United States. And this pattern was true even during the overlapping period between the protests in Iran and the protests in Honduras. "The government television station and a television station that supports the [ousted] president were taken off the air," the *New York Times* reported from Honduras on the morning after the coup. "Television and radio stations broadcast no news. Only wealthy Hondurans with access to the Internet and cable television were able to follow the day's events." [45] But, typical of Western media coverage of Iran's protests, the *Times* quoted James K. Glassman, an under secretary of state for public diplomacy in the Bush administration, and now the executive director of the George W. Bush Presidential Center in Dallas. "What we saw in Iran is that the private sector played a very important role in disseminating information there," Glassman told the *Times*. "Companies like Twitter and Facebook facilitated a lot of the activity in Iran." [46]

There was clearly a class element involved in the protests in Iran and Honduras. The protesters in Iran were heavily middle and upper class, people who could afford and would have cell phones and could speak English. The situation was reversed in Honduras, where the coup and demonstration- election candidates were oligarchy-based, with the poorer masses protesting—but not supplied with or able to use cellphones to their pro-democracy messages out, and with Western elites, governments, media, NGOs, and even liberals and the left overwhelmingly preoccupied with Iran. So the alignment is a familiar one to students of U.S. history: On the one hand, the United States sided with an oligarchy in Latin America to carry out an anti-democratic coup, and the establishment U.S. media accommodated this policy with their apologetics on behalf of the coup regime and their suppression of the voices of Honduras' real democrats. On the other hand, the United States pursued a regime-change agenda in Iran against its clerical regime, exploiting a highly Westernized, rebellious middle and upper class minority to help destabilize its target, again with sure establishment media support and worldwide amplification of protest voices, but this time even the support of a new kind of Western political configuration—call it the *democracy- promotion left*.

### Concluding Note

During the peak of Iran's street demonstrations in June 2009, Ethan Zuckerman of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society summed up the role played by the newer telecommunication technologies and software applications there: "[S]ocial media at this point is most useful at making that what is a local struggle become a global struggle. I think

that is what is happening here. It is helping people globally feel solidarity and it's keeping international attention on what's happening. It's giving people a sense of involvement that they otherwise wouldn't have...."[47] An accompanying photograph (see [here](#)) depicted several Iranian woman with their backs turned towards the camera, and another Iranian woman sitting to their rear, facing the camera and holding a mobile phone; apparently, she was text-messaging.

But Zuckerman's explanation misses the crucial selectivity of this global role now played by the new "social media." As we have observed throughout [Part 1](#) and now [Part 2](#) of this analysis, the moment the accusation of vote fraud in Iran (however unsubstantiated) triggered massive street demonstrations in protest of a "stolen" election, foreign news media were riveted to these events, and featured the stolen-election line as well as reports about Iran's pro-democracy, reformist movement for several weeks. So, yes, in this case, people around the world (but especially in the metropolitan centers of the West) expressed solidarity towards Iran's protestors, as the Western media kept people's attention focused on struggles inside Iran, and propagated questions globally about the legitimacy of the regime.

When we turn to Honduras, however, this pattern breaks-off, and the existence of so-called social media contributed nothing. For as we just saw, during the first 30 days after the coup, the signature "social media" were barely mentioned in reports about Honduras. But this was not because the Internet and blogs, mobile phones, text-messaging, Facebook and Twitter, and digital videographic capabilities were inaccessible to Hondurans who opposed the coup and who demanded the restoration of their democratic rights. Rather, this was because the same Westerners who featured these capabilities when discussing Iran shut-down mentally and morally when Honduras was concerned, and ignored its democratic movement. In dramatic contrast to those who struggle for democracy and social justice inside Iran, the local struggles of Hondurans were prevented from becoming a "global struggle," far fewer people outside of Latin America expressed solidarity with Hondurans, and international attention (but especially in the metropolitan centers of the West) faded almost immediately.

At a conference called "Cyber Dissidents: Global Successes and Challenges" in April 2010,[48] presenters attended from a number of countries where telecom + apps have been used to circumvent government censorship and repression. Non-U.S. speakers were featured from opposition movements in Iran, Syria, China, Russia, Cuba, and Venezuela.[49] Evidently, whereas regimes that the United States targets for destabilization produce "cyber dissidents" of interest to U.S. conference organizers,[50] the conference managed to miss voices of opposition from any country where repressive regimes are supported by the United States (Honduras included).

Just as there are "worthy" victims, there are also "cyber dissidents" who become of great interest to the enlightened West, as in Iran. Early this year, a George Polk Award (for journalism) was given in the new category of videography to the "anonymous individuals" who digitally recorded the shooting death of Neda Agha-Soltan on a street in Tehran in June 2009, and then uploaded the video to the Internet, YouTube, and beyond, along with the message "Please let the world know." "The video became a rallying point for the reformist opposition in Iran," the Polk Award's panel of advisers explained in giving the award to otherwise anonymous recipients.[51]

But there are also "unworthy" victims, who find it difficult, if not impossible, to establish any

kind of recognition of their “dissident”-status in the West, and who receive little, if any, help in publicizing their struggles against repressive status quos, as in Honduras. Thus, as we showed in [Part 1](#), the individuals who recorded and then uploaded to the Internet and YouTube the video images of the July 2009 shooting death of the Honduran protester, Isis Obed Murillo, not only received no Polk or any other award, but these images failed to become a rallying cry within the Western media and among human rights campaigners—even the same campaigners for whom the images of Neda’s death were recognized as the “most significant viral video of our lifetimes.”[52]

The world never heard.

Indeed, this dichotomous pattern is long-standing, and reflects the structure of power in the global system. It shows not the slightest sign of being overcome—or even significantly reduced—by the spread of “social media” and the refurbished, empire-friendly ideology of “democracy-promotion.”

*Edward S. Herman is professor emeritus of finance at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania and has written extensively on economics, political economy, and the media. Among his books are [Corporate Control, Corporate Power](#) (Cambridge University Press, 1981), [The Real Terror Network](#) (South End Press, 1982), and, with Noam Chomsky, [The Political Economy of Human Rights](#) (South End Press, 1979), and [Manufacturing Consent](#) (Pantheon, 2002). David Peterson is an independent journalist and researcher based in Chicago. Together they are the co-authors of [The Politics of Genocide](#), recently published by Monthly Review Press. ]*

## Notes

[1] See Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, “[Iran and Honduras in the Propaganda System—Part 1. Neda Agha-Soltan Versus Isis Obed Murillo](#),” *MRZine*, October 5, 2010.

[2] Following the elimination of invalid votes, the handling of complaints, and a 10% vote recount by Iran’s Guardian Council in the second-half of June 2009, the final results as reported by Iran’s Interior Ministry on June 29, 2009 were as follows: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, 24,525,491 (62.6%); Mir Hossein Mousavi, 13,258,464 (33.8%); Mohsen Rezai, 656,150 (1.7%); and Mehdi Karroubi, 330,183 (0.8%).

[3] See [Honduras: Human Rights and the Coup d’État](#), Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, December 30, 2009, especially “The ‘fourth ballot box’,” para. 82-87.

[4] See “[Honduran Election Results Still Need to be Scrutinized](#),” Council on Hemispheric Affairs, December 15, 2009. This article reported that on the night of the election, the “U.S.-backed Honduran civil society coalition, *Hagamos Democracia* (Making Democracy, HD)” estimated the voter turnout rate to be 48.7% and “claiming 99% accuracy.” Also, the “pro-Zelaya National Front of Resistance against the Coup calculated a 65-70% rate of abstention by counting the number of voters entering polling stations and comparing that figure to the number of individuals who were registered to vote,” which is to say, a voter turnout rate of 30-35%.

[5] See Jesse Freeston, “[Honduran elections exposed](#),” *The Real News Network*, December 8, 2009. “The coup government, not officially recognized by any country in the world, was

hoping to gain international legitimacy by demonstrating a large turnout at the polls," Freeston explains. "That 62% figure appeared at 10 p.m. on election night, after the Electoral Tribunal's computer system broke down for three hours....So where did the 62% number come from? A high-ranking official at the Electoral Tribunal told me off-camera that the president of the tribunal, Saul Escobar, on the night of the election announced the number out of nowhere. When I asked the official to say that on camera, they responded: do you really want me to get shot? The coup regime's announcement that more than 60 percent of Hondurans voted on election day has been enough to drastically change the dynamics of the situation. Governments that previously stated the elections were illegitimate now consider them a triumph."

[6] See, e.g., Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, "[The U.S. Aggression Process and Its Collaborators: From Guatemala \(1950-1954\) to Iran \(2002-\)](#)," *Electric Politics*, November 26, 2007; and Seymour M. Hersh, "[The Bush administration steps up its secret moves against Iran](#)," *New Yorker*, July 7, 2008.

[7] See, e.g., Eva Golinger, "[Washington and the Coup in Honduras: Here Is the Evidence](#)," Postcards from the Revolution, July 15, 2009; and Michaela D'Ambrosio, "[The Honduran Coup: Was It A Matter of Behind-the-Scenes Finagling by State Department Stonewallers?](#)" Council on Hemispheric Affairs, September 16, 2009. In a letter signed and circulated by the deposed President José Manuel Zelaya on the one-year anniversary of the coup, Zelaya himself stated: "The United States was behind the coup d'état. The intellectual authors of this crime were an illicit association of old Washington hawks and Honduran capitalists with their partners, American affiliates and financial agencies." ("[Zelaya: Coup was planned by U.S. Southern Command](#)," Agence France Presse, June 28, 2010.)

[8] See Ian Kelly, "[Honduran Elections](#)," U.S. Department of State, November 29, 2009.

[9] See Alexei Barrionuevo, "[Obama Writes to Brazil's Leader About Iran](#)," *New York Times*, November 25, 2009. "President Obama sent a letter on Sunday [Nov. 22] to President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil reiterating the American position on Iran's nuclear program, a day before Iran's president made his first state visit to Brazil....On Honduras, Mr. Obama justified American support for a presidential election there after the ouster of President Manuel Zelaya in June. Mr. Obama said in his letter that the situation would 'start from zero' after the [Nov. 29] election, the Brazilian official said."

[10] "[Neither Real Nor Free](#)," Editorial, *New York Times*, June 15, 2009; "[The Honduras Conundrum](#)," Editorial, *New York Times*, December 5, 2009.

[11] See Edward S. Herman and Frank Brodhead, *Demonstration Elections: U.S.-Staged Elections in the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, and El Salvador* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), Ch. 4, "El Salvador," pp. 93-152.

[12] "Democracy's Hope in Central America," Editorial, *New York Times*, March 30, 1982.

[13] Lindsey Gruson, "A fingerhold for dissent in Salvador," *New York Times*, March 17, 1989.

Also see Herman and Brodhead, *Demonstration Elections*. As these authors noted, in March 1981, the military of El Salvador "published a list of [some 138] 'traitors' responsible for the country's woes—essentially a death list....There ensued an increase in violence under a



state of siege, with many thousands of civilian murders and the emergence of a society whose most revealing feature was the daily search for and removal of mutilated bodies” (pp. 117-118). Under conditions such as these, El Salvador held both its March 1982 and March 1984 elections.

[14] See Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, [\*Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media\*](#), 2nd Ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), Ch. 3, “Legitimizing versus Meaningless Third World Elections: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua,” pp. 87-142.

[15] Steven R. Weisman, “Reagan Predicts Nicaraguan Vote Will be ‘Sham’,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1984; “Nobody Won in Nicaragua,” Editorial, *New York Times*, November 7, 1984.

[16] Michael Ignatieff, [“Who Are Americans To Think That Freedom Is Theirs To Spread?”](#) *New York Times Magazine*, June 26, 2005. For bland lies told in the service of American Power, it would be hard to surpass Ignatieff’s work overall and this essay in particular.

[17] See, e.g., Kari Lydersen, [“Welcome to the new Honduras, Where right-wing death squads proliferate,”](#) *AlterNet*, April 27, 2010; and Kari Lydersen, [“Violence Against Honduran Resistance Movement, Unionists Continues,”](#) *In These Times Blog*, October 11, 2010.

[18] See [“Frente Nacional de Resistencia supera la meta de un millón 250 mil firmas,”](#) *Resistencia*, September 13, 2010. (For an English translation, see [“1,250,000 signatures for the refounding of Honduras,”](#) *Quotha*, the personal website of the U.S. academic Adrienne Pine. Pine translates the opening two paragraphs of the article from the website of the National Front of Popular Resistance in Honduras as follows: “The National People’s Resistance Front FNRP today exceeded its goal of one million 250 thousand signatures on the Sovereign Declaration for the Popular and Participatory Constituent Assembly, and for the return of Presidente Manuel Zelaya Rosales, Father Andrés Tamayo and the rest of those Hondurans who have been expatriated and are in political exile. The Front today, Sunday, reached one million 269 thousand 142 signatures, earlier than the deadline for their collection, this September 15th, the day on which the 189th anniversary of Honduran independence from the kingdom of Spain will be celebrated.”)

[19] Namely, in Ginger Thompson, [“Region Finds U.S. Lacking on Honduras,”](#) *New York Times*, November 28, 2009.

[20] Namely, in Elizabeth Malkin, [“Fate of Ousted leader Clouds Election Result in Honduras,”](#) *New York Times*, December 1, 2009.

[21] Factiva database searches carried out under the “Newspapers: All” category on October 7, 2010. The exact search parameters were as follows: For Iran: *rst=tnwp and atleast2 Iran\* and (human rights abuse\* or human rights violation\*)* for the two time periods specified; and for Honduras: *rst=tnwp and atleast2 Hondur\* and (human rights abuse\* or human rights violation\*)* for the three time periods specified.

[22] About the zero in the third row for the first 30 days after *coup d’état* in Honduras (June 29 – July 28, 2009): In fact, Factiva produced 8 matches. But upon checking each of them, we determined that all mentions of human rights abuses in articles also mentioning Honduras referred to human rights abuses that either had occurred in the past in Honduras



or that had occurred elsewhere in Latin America. For this reason, we've excluded these from our total, leaving us with zero. Thus, for example, Simon Romero wrote in the *New York Times* about "countries like Chile, Argentina and Brazil, where bitter memories linger over human rights abuses by military officials that toppled civilian rulers in the 1960s and 1970s" ("[Rare Hemisphere Unity In Assailing Honduran Coup](#)," June 29, 2009). Similarly, the *Toronto Globe and Mail* reported that "The coup in Honduras brings back bitter memories in Latin America, where for years military officials toppled civilian rulers at will, unleashing horrific human-rights abuses" (Marina Jimenez, "Honduras coup at odds with new politics in Americas," July 1, 2009). In London's *Independent*, Hugh O'Shaughnessy reported that in 2001, "Democratic Senator Chris Dodd attacked Mr. [John] Negroponte...for drawing a veil over atrocities committed in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, by military forces trained by the US. Mr. Dodd claimed that the forces had been 'linked to death squad activities such as killings, disappearances and other human rights abuses'" ("[Democracy hangs by a thread in Honduras](#)," July 19, 2009). Richard Collie wrote in the *Korean Times* that "since World War II, the School of the Americas (SOA), founded in Panama but now based in Fort Benning, Ga., under the new guise of 'Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation'...has its grubby finger prints all over a long list of political assassinations, coups and human rights abuses in the region" ("[Iron Fist, Velvet Glove: Obama and Honduras](#)," July 20, 2009).

[23] See Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, "[Chutzpah, Inc.: 'The Brave People of Iran' \(versus the Disappeared People of Palestine, Honduras, Afghanistan, Etc.\)](#)," *MRZine*, February 20, 2010.

[24] For the results of Iran's June 24, 2005 presidential runoff, see Ali Akbar Dareni, "[Iran Council OKs Presidential Vote Results](#)," Associated Press, June 29, 2005.

[25] See Ali Ansari et al., [Preliminary Analysis of the Voting Figures in Iran's 2009 Presidential Election](#), Chatham House (U.K.), June 21, 2009, p. 3, p. 10.

[26] See Steven Kull et al., [An Analysis of Multiple Polls of the Iranian Public](#), PIPA – WPO.org, February 3, 2010; Steven Kull et al., [Iranian Public on Current Issues: Questionnaires](#), PIPA – WPO.org, February 3, 2010; and the accompanying [Press Release](#).

[27] Factiva database searches carried out under the "Newspapers: All" category on August 25, 2010. The exact search parameters were as follows: For the Chatham House analysis: *rst=tnwp and Iran and (Chatham House or Ali w/2 Ansari)* for the period June 21, 2009 – December 21, 2009; and for the second PIPA-WPO analysis: *rst= tnwp and Iran and (Program on International Policy Attitudes or worldpublicopinion)* for the period February 3, 2010 – August 3, 2010. We found zero reports on the PIPA-WPO survey released on February 3, and 150 reports either on the Chatham House study that criticized Iran's election results or that invited Ali Ansari to comment on Iranian affairs.

[28] Eric A. Brill, [Did Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Steal the 2009 Iran Election?](#), Self-Published Manuscript, last updated August 29, 2010. Also see Alvin Richman, "[Post-Election Crackdown In Iran Has Had Limited Impact on the Minority Expressing Strong Opposition to the Regime](#)," PIPA – WPO.org, February 18, 2010.

[29] See Reza Esfandiari and Yousef Bozorgmehr, [A Rejoinder to the Chatham House report on Iran's 2009 presidential election offering a new analysis on the results](#), Self-Published Manuscript, August, 2009, p. 2

[30] Brill, [Did Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Steal the 2009 Iran Election?](#).

[31] Factiva database searches carried out under the “Newspapers: All” category on August 25, 2010. The time-periods searched began four-weeks-to-the-day (or 28 days) prior to each election, and continued through four weeks (or 28 days) after the election, for a combined search period of 57 days each. The exact search parameters were as follows: For Iran: *rst=tnwp and Iran and (election\* or vote\*) w/10 ((phony or phony) or (rig or rigg\*) or stole\* or fake\* or farc\* or sham or fraud\*) not (Afghanistan or Honduras)* for the period May 15-July 10, 2009; and for Honduras: *rst=tnwp and Honduras and (election\* or vote\*) w/10 ((phony or phoney) or (rig or rigg\*) or stole\* or fake\* or farc\* or sham or fraud\*) not (Afghanistan or Iran)* for the period November 2-December 28, 2009.

[32] Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, [“The nonviolent script for Iran,”](#) *Christian Science Monitor*, July 22, 2003.

[33] James K. Glassman and Michael Doran, [“The Soft Power Solution in Iran,”](#) *Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2010. As Glassman and Doran continue: “Despite Iran’s oil wealth, the economy has for years been in miserable shape thanks to bad management, corruption and the squandering of funds on Arab terrorist groups and the nuclear program. The slogans of the [Green Wave] protestors demonstrate that they are connecting the dots between the regime’s foreign policy and economic privation.”

[34] See “The Morning After in Nicaragua,” Editorial, *New York Times*, February 27, 1990; and “Nicaragua’s Second Revolution,” Editorial, *New York Times*, April 25, 1990.

[35] The September 30, 2006 [Iran Freedom Support Act](#) directed the executive branch to destabilize Iran (which it had been doing anyway), but the Act left the actual sums of money to be used for this purpose to its discretion. Quoting the Act: “Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the President is authorized to provide financial and political assistance (including the award of grants) to foreign and domestic individuals, organizations, and entities working for the purpose of supporting and promoting democracy for Iran. Such assistance may include the award of grants to eligible independent pro-democracy radio and television broadcasting organizations that broadcast into Iran.” (Sec. 302(a)(1), [“Assistance to Support Democracy for Iran.”](#)) For contemporaneous reporting on the actual dollar-sums involved, see Robin Wright, [“Iran on Guard Over U.S. Funds,”](#) *Washington Post*, April 28, 2007.

[36] Negar Azimi, [“Hard Realities of Soft Power,”](#) *New York Times Magazine*, June 14, 2007.

[37] Hillary Rodham Clinton, [“Remarks on the Human Rights Agenda for the 21st Century”](#) (Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.), U.S. Department of State, December 14, 2009.

[38] See Mark Landler, [“U.S. Hopes Export of Internet Services Will Help Open Closed Societies,”](#) *New York Times*, March 8, 2010.

[39] Hillary Rodham Clinton, [“Remarks on Internet Freedom”](#) (at the Newseum in Washington, D.C.), January 21, 2010.

[40] See Brad Stone and Noam Cohen, [“Social Networks Spread Iranian Defiance Online,”](#) *New York Times*, June 16, 2009; Mark Landler and Brian Selzer, [“Washington Taps Into a Potent New Force in Diplomacy,”](#) *New York Times*, June 17, 2009; and Mike Musgrove,

[“Twitter Is a Player in Iran’s Drama,”](#) *Washington Post*, June 17, 2009.

[41] See Golnaz Esfandiari, [“The Twitter Devolution,”](#) *Foreign Policy Blog*, June 7, 2010. Also see the analysis by Malcolm Gladwell, [“Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted,”](#) *New Yorker*, October 4, 2010. Esfandiari summed up the real contribution of the newer telecommunication technologies and software applications less in terms of their impact on Iranian life, than in terms of their impact on the Western consumers of non-Iranian media: “Twitter played an important role in getting word about events in Iran out to the wider world. Together with YouTube it helped focus the world’s attention on the Iranian people’s fight for democracy and human rights. New media over the last year created and sustained unprecedented international moral solidarity with the Iranian struggle.”

[42] In the past, we’ve analyzed at great length both Western-establishment as well as left-denigration of the Islamic Republic of Iran. For one example of the former, see Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, [“The Iran Versus U.A.-NATO-Israeli Threats,”](#) *MRZine*, October 20, 2009; and for one of the latter, see Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, [“Riding the ‘Green Wave’ at the Campaign for Peace and Democracy and Beyond,”](#) *MRZine*, July 24, 2009. In the case of Iran in particular, the alignment between the Western establishment and the Western left (or *faux* left) is striking.

[43] See Ian Kelly, [“Termination of Assistance and Other Measures Affecting the De Facto Regime in Honduras,”](#) U.S. Department of State, September 3, 2009. On this day, this State Department spokesman’s exact words were: “The Department of State announces the termination of a broad range of assistance to the government of Honduras as a result of the coup d’etat that took place on June 28.”

[44] Factiva database searches carried out under the “Newspapers: All” category on October 7, 2010. The exact search parameters were as follows: For Iran: *rst=tnwp and atleast2 Iran\* and (internet or facebook or youtube or twitter or sms or text-messaging or mobile communication\*) not Hondur\** for the 30-day period specified; and for Honduras: *rst=tnwp and atleast2 Hondur\* and (internet or facebook or youtube or twitter or sms or text-messaging or mobile communication\*) not Iran\** for the 30-day period specified. Note that in row 1, column 2, we report the total as “approximately 2,000.”

[45] Elizabeth Malkin et al., [“Honduran President Is Ousted in Coup,”](#) *New York Times*, June 29, 2009.

[46] Julie Creswell, [“How to Start a Company \(And Kiss Like Angelina\),”](#) *New York Times*, July 12, 2009.

[47] Yigal Schleifer, [“Why Iran’s Twitter revolution is unique,”](#) *Christian Science Monitor*, June 19, 2009.

[48] See the website for the [Conference on Cyber Dissidents: Global Successes and Challenges](#), George W. Bush Presidential Center, April 19, 2010.

[49] See [“Speaker Biographies,”](#) George W. Bush Presidential Center, April 19, 2010.

[50] In keeping with this pattern, the “Cyber Dissidents” conference also invited Oscar Morales Guevara, the founder of *One Million Voices Against FARC*—a Facebook group that, like official U.S. policy, supports the regime in Colombia, while propagating worldwide opposition to the main rebel force that opposes it.

[51] See the George Polk Award for Videography, "[2009 Award Winners](#)," Long Island University. Also see Brian Selter, "[Honoring Citizen Journalists](#)," *New York Times*, February 22, 2010.

[52] Here quoting the State Department's Jared Cohen, in Jesse Lichtenstein, "[Digital Diplomacy](#)," *New York Times Magazine*, July 18, 2010.

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