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IRANIAN PUBLIC ON CURRENT ISSUES

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no two presidents have dominated headlines during 2009 the way Barack Obama and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have. Obama's inauguration in January not only gave the United States its first black president, it brought to power a Democratic administration with a policy agenda markedly at odds with that of Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush. Ahmadinejad's reelection threw Iran into turmoil, as opposition supporters took to the streets of Tehran and other cities challenging his election, and raising new questions about how Iranians feel about their government and the way it is selected.

The nations that Obama and Ahmadinejad govern also share a penchant for making news, often concerning their relations with each other. At odds for 30 years, the governments of the US and Iran frequently find themselves on opposite sides of the world's most pressing issues – most recently the controversy over Iran's own nuclear program. At the same time, Washington and Tehran pursue sporadic diplomatic contacts.

In an effort to accurately gauge how Iranians feel about their government, the US government and the American people, WorldPublicOpinion.org undertook a poll of a nationally representative sample of Iranians. Interviewing was conducted August 27-September 10, 2009 among a national sample of 1,003 Iranian adults aged 18 and older. The margin of error for a sample of this size is no larger than +/- 3.1 percentage points.

This study was conducted with support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Calvert Foundation.

Methodology

This study was designed, managed, and analyzed by WorldPublicOpinion.org, a project managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland. Staff from this organization have carried previous studies in Iran using face-to-face interviewing and have also conducted focus groups in Iran. This organization is responsible for all of the survey questions and the interpretation of the findings.

The survey was executed by means of computer-assisted-telephone interviewing by a professional research agency outside Iran. All interviewers were native Farsi speakers. Telephone interviewing and an outside agency were chosen for this study so that there would be no political constraints on questions asked or speculation about the influence of Iranian authorities on the data collection process. In the past, when we have examined clearly documented studies of the Iranian public, such as those by Terror-Free-Tomorrow and WorldPublicOpinion.org, we have found that telephone methods and face-to-face methods have produced very similar findings with comparable questions.

The sample was stratified by Iranian provinces using area codes and telephone exchanges for landline telephones in Iran. Numbers were randomly selected and the last four digits of actual telephone numbers were randomly varied. Academic and commercial research

organizations in Iran use very similar telephone methods for surveys. When a residence was reached, an adult was selected randomly using the next birthday technique. An initial attempt and three callbacks were made in an effort to complete an interview. A total of 1,003 interviews were completed; the interview refusal rate was 52 percent.

The household penetration of telephone landlines in Iran is reported to be over 80 percent by Iran's telecommunication company. WorldPublicOpinion.org conducted an in home survey with a national probability sample of Iranians in January-February, 2008 and found that 84 percent of Iranians reported having a landline telephone in their household.

All thirty Iranian provinces were represented in the completed sample in proportions similar to their actual populations, as were rural and urban areas and females and males. A post-weighting procedure was employed using gender, age, province, and urban-rural residence as factors. Demographic targets were based upon 2005 data from the Statistical Center of Iran. In general, the weighting effect was quite small; however, respondents 55 years and older had to be up-weighted and those 35-44 down-weighted somewhat.

Naturally a question that arises is whether respondents are freely speaking their minds in such a poll, especially when the Iranian government has been recently cracking down on dissent. As discussed below, the fact that one in four respondents refused to answer the question about who they voted for in the presidential election suggests that some people may have felt uncomfortable answering and thus the findings need to be viewed with caution and not as a clear indication of how people voted. Some questions for which we have trendline data also show a bit less readiness to take controversial positions in the current poll.

However, overall, it should be noted that on most questions the number of people who refused to answer was quite small and only in the question on the presidential vote were there large numbers of refusals, though respondents always had that option. More significantly, in many questions large numbers, in some cases majorities, took positions that were less than fully complimentary of the government, the Iranian system, and government policies.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Diplomatic ties

Six in ten Iranians favor restoring diplomatic relations with the US. An equal number favor unconditional negotiations between the countries. Many favor cooperation on dealing with the Taliban.

2. Views of Obama

Confidence in President Obama to do the right thing in world affairs is quite low, lower than all 20 other countries around the world polled on this question. However, views of Obama are substantially better than views of his predecessor. Despite Obama's speech in Cairo in June 2009, in which he stressed that he respects Islam, few Iranians believe he does.

3. Views of US Government

A large majority continue to have an unfavorable view of the US government, though views have softened a bit. An overwhelming majority say the US does not treat Iran fairly and abuses its power. Large majorities think US is trying to weaken and divide Islam, impose American culture on Muslim society, and control the oil resources of the Middle East.

However, there are a few positive signs. While most do not think it is a real US goal to create a Palestinian state, the number believing that is a goal has increased substantially. Also, a modest majority have a favorable view of the American people, and only minorities support attacks on US troops in Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf.

VIEWS OF IRAN'S GOVERNMENT AND SOCIETY

4. The June 2009 Presidential Election

Among those who say they voted, a modest majority say they voted for Ahmadinejad. However, one in four refused to say how they voted, limiting confidence in how well this number represents the actual vote. Asked how they would vote if the election were held again, half say they would vote for Ahmadinejad. Eight in 10 say Ahmadinejad is honest, but only half say he is very honest.

5. The Election Process

Eight in ten say they consider Ahmadinejad to be the legitimate president of Iran. Most express confidence in the election process and the declared results. However three in four say it is inappropriate for members of the Guardian Council to endorse candidates, which did occur. In general, eight in 10 say they are satisfied with the process by which Iranian authorities are elected, but only four in 10 say they are very satisfied. Only four in 10 support the general idea of having international observers monitor elections.

6. Assessments of Developments Over Last Four Years

A majority says that in the past four years, there has been an improvement in Iran's ability to resist foreign pressures, and a plurality says there has been an improvement in civil liberties over the same period. Views lean in the direction that the country's economic situation has gotten worse and that economic equality has gotten worse. Views are mixed as to whether Iran's relations with other countries have gotten better or worse and whether people's own economic situation has gotten better or worse.

7. The Iranian System

Overall, most Iranians express support for their current system of government. Nine in 10 say they are satisfied with the system, though only four in 10 say they are very satisfied. Six in 10 approve of having a body of religious scholars with the capacity to overturn laws, while one in four expresses opposition. A modest majority says that the way the supreme leader is selected is consistent with the principles of democracy, though three-fifths say they are comfortable with the extent of his power.

8. Freedom of Expression

A large majority says that people in Iran are at least somewhat free to express controversial views without fear of being harassed or punished, but only one in four say they are completely free. A majority—up from a plurality last year—says that the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it thinks will be destabilizing.

9. Assessment of Iranian Governmental Institutions

A large majority says they trust the Iranian government to do the right thing at least some of the time, but only a modest majority trusts it to do the right thing most of the time. Large majorities express at least some confidence in all major government institutions and two thirds express a lot of confidence in the president, as do a modest majority in the police. However less than half express a lot of confidence in the Ministry of Interior, the parliament, the Guardian Council, or the Judiciary Branch.

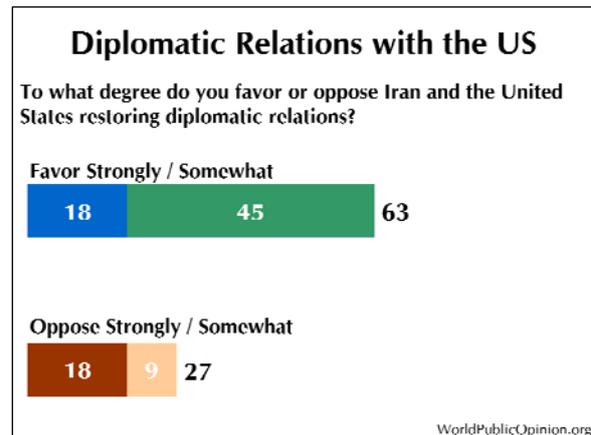
FINDINGS

RELATIONS WITH THE US

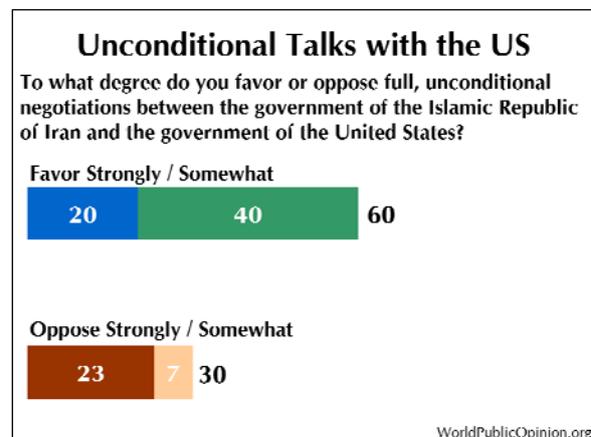
1. Diplomatic ties

Six in ten Iranians favor restoring diplomatic relations with the US. An equal number favor unconditional negotiations between the countries. Many favor cooperation on dealing with the Taliban.

Thirty years after the United States and Iran broke diplomatic relations, Iranians overwhelmingly support repairing that longstanding breach. Both governments have opposed restoration of full diplomatic relations since 1979, when the Islamic Revolution toppled the U.S.-backed regime of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and ties were severed over Iran's takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. However, 63% of those polled say they favor restoration of formal diplomatic ties, with 18% favoring it strongly. Only 27% are opposed (18% strongly).



A similar number of Iranians—60%--favor “full, unconditional negotiations” between the governments of the two countries. Thirty percent are opposed. This level of support is consistent with the views expressed by Iranians for more than a year, though the intensity of support has waned. A poll conducted in May 2009 by Terror Free Tomorrow also showed 60 % of Iranians supporting unconditional negotiations, with 40% expressing strong support. A February 2008 poll by the same organization found 61% support, with (39% strong support).

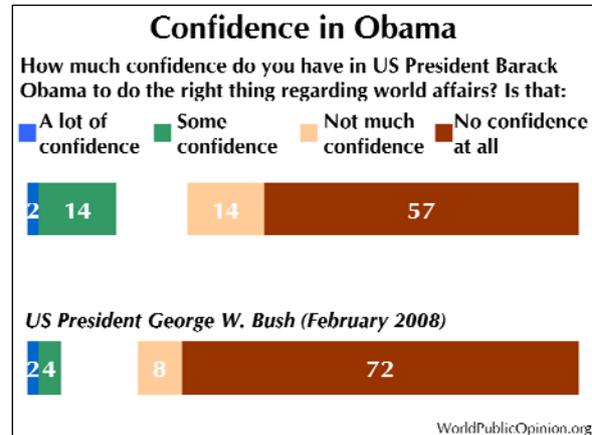


A substantial number of Iranians favor the United States and Iran working together to fight the Taliban, the Sunni Muslim insurgent group in Afghanistan that has long been anathema to Shiite-majority Iran. Asked specifically about the option of “Iran cooperating with the US to combat the Taliban operating in Afghanistan near Iran's border,” 43% are in favor and 41% opposed. A fairly high number—12%--say they do not know how they feel.

2. Views of Obama

Confidence in President Obama to do the right thing in world affairs is quite low, lower than all 20 other countries around the world polled on this question. However, views of Obama are substantially better than views of his predecessor. Despite Obama's speech in Cairo in June 2009, in which he stressed that he respects Islam, few Iranians believe he does.

Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, Iranians have consistently held American presidents in low regard. In a 2008 poll by WPO, a mere 6% of Iranians expressed confidence in George W. Bush. Attitudes toward Barack Obama are more positive, yet Iranians remain distrustful. Asked how much they trust Obama to do the right thing in international affairs, only 16% say that have a lot (2%) or some (14%) confidence in him. Seventy-one percent say that they have not much confidence (14%) or no confidence at all (57%). This is lower than any of the 20 countries polled by WPO on this question in the spring of 2009.



During a visit to the Middle East in May and June 2009, Obama delivered a speech in Cairo, where he stressed that he respects Islam. Nevertheless, only 25 percent of Iranians are convinced he does. Fifty-nine percent say they think he does not, and 17 percent say they don't know or refuse to answer.

3. Views of US Government

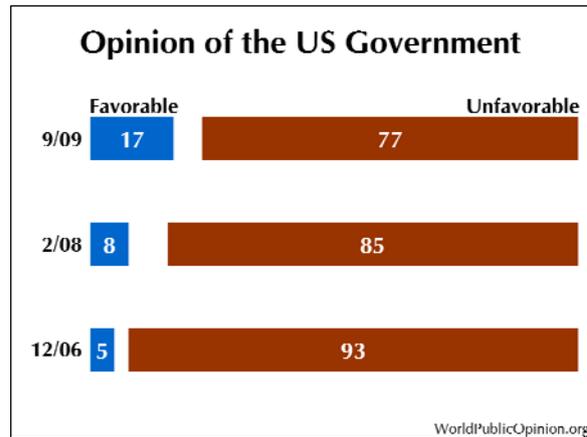
A large majority continue to have an unfavorable view of the US government, though views have softened a bit. An overwhelming majority say the US does not treat Iran fairly and abuses its power. Large majorities think US is trying to weaken and divide Islam, impose American culture on Muslim society, and control the oil resources of the Middle East.

However, there are a few positive signs. While most do not think it is a real US goal to create a Palestinian state, the number believing that is a goal has increased substantially. Also, a modest majority have a favorable view of the American people, and only minorities support attacks on US troops in Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf.

Just as views of President Obama are quite negative, so views of the US government are even a bit worse. Seventy-seven percent of Iranians say that they have an unfavorable view of the US government, with a remarkable 69 percent saying that they have a very unfavorable view. Seventeen percent have favorable views (3% very).

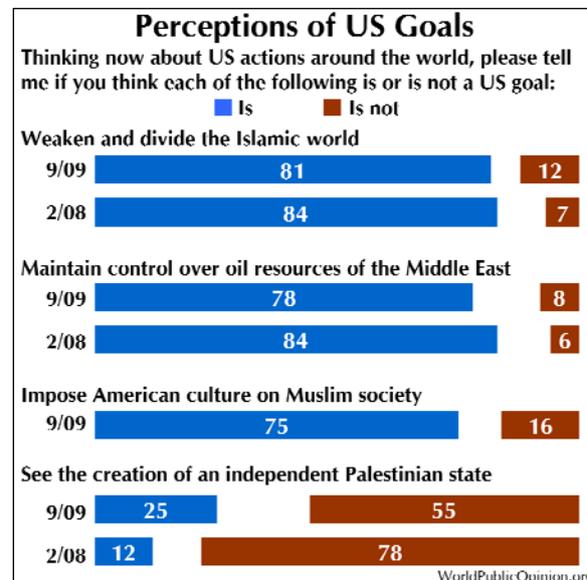
At the same time, there are some signs of softening toward the United States: the 77% having an unfavorable view of the US government is down from 85% in 2008 (WPO). The 68%

having very unfavorable views is down from 75%, while the 17% with favorable views are more than double the proportion – 8% -- in 2008.



Large majorities of Iranians feel the United States treats them unfairly. Asked, “In the way US behaves toward our government, do you think US more often treats our government fairly, or abuses its greater power to make our government do what the US wants?” an overwhelming 85% say the US abuses its power, while just 7% say the US treats Iran fairly. In a 19-nation WPO poll in the spring of 2009, only three other nations had similarly negative views: Pakistan (90%), the Palestinian Territories (87%), and Turkey (86%). On average across the 19 countries, however, two-thirds agreed with this position.

Iranians continue to express high levels of suspicion about US goals. Large majorities think it is a goal of the United States “to weaken and divide the Islamic world” (81%) and “maintain control over the oil resources of the Middle East” (78%)—numbers that have not changed significantly from 2008. Also, three in four say that the US has the goal to “impose American culture on Muslim society.”



Few trust that creating a Palestinian state is a real US goal; on the other hand, there has been some improvement on this front—maybe because of Obama’s efforts to press Israel to stop building in West Bank settlements. One-fourth of Iranians (25%) now believe it is definitely or probably a goal of the US, up from 12% in 2008. A majority (55%) still do not believe the US intends to see Palestine become a state, though this is significantly lower than the 78% found in the earlier WPO poll.

Among other more positive signs, a modest majority has a favorable view of the American people, as 51% say their opinion of Americans is either very or somewhat favorable. Thirty-eight percent say they have an unfavorable opinion, with 31% saying very unfavorable. This finding is largely consistent with 2008 polling, while views in 2006 were slightly more negative.

Only minorities support attacks on US troops in Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf. Regarding attacks on US troops in Afghanistan, 26% express approval (16% strongly) while 49% are opposed and 18% have mixed feelings. Support for attacks on troops based in Persian Gulf states is slightly higher, with 32% approving (21% strongly); 41% disapprove, and 13% express mixed feelings.

Iranians distrust American intentions when it comes to democracy promotion in the Islamic world. Only 16% believe the US unconditionally supports democracy in Muslim countries. A small majority (51%) believe “the US favors democracy in Muslim countries, but only if the government is cooperative with the US.” Roughly one-fifth (19%) believe the US uniformly opposes democracy in the Muslim world.

VIEWS OF IRAN’S GOVERNMENT AND SOCIETY

4. The June 2009 Presidential Election

Among those who say they voted, a modest majority say they voted for Ahmadinejad. However, one in four refused to say how they voted, limiting confidence in how well this number represents the actual vote. Asked how they would vote if the election were held again, half say they would vote for Ahmadinejad. Eight in 10 say Ahmadinejad is honest, but only half say he is very honest.

The reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009, sparked violent protests in Tehran and other Iranian cities by opposition supporters who claimed the election was rigged. But among the 87% of poll respondents who say they voted in June, 55% say they voted for Ahmadinejad. Only 14% say they voted for the leading opposition candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi, whom supporters in Iran and outside the country hailed as the real winner of the election. Fully 26% refused to answer.

For several reasons we cannot use these findings as a solid basis for estimating the actual vote. Exceptionally large number of respondents refused to answer the voting choice question (unlike other questions asked), suggesting that many respondents may have felt uncomfortable answering this question. Also, as a general rule, after an election when people are asked who they voted for they tend to over-report voting for the winning candidate—what is known as the bandwagon effect.

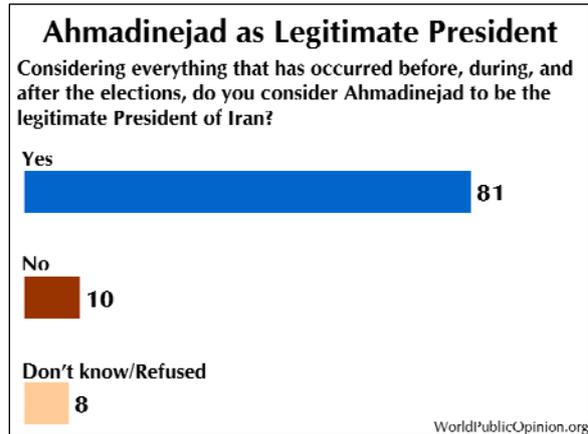
Asked how they would vote if the election were repeated, overall 49% say they would vote for Ahmadinejad, 8% say Mousavi, 13% say they would not vote, and 26% would not answer.

Ahmadinejad is broadly perceived as being honest with the Iranian people. Eighty-one percent say he is honest, though only 48% say he is very honest. A very small majority (11%) say he is not very honest or not honest at all.

5. The Election Process

Eight in ten say they consider Ahmadinejad to be the legitimate president of Iran. Most express confidence in the election process and the declared results. However three in four say it is inappropriate for members of the Guardian Council to endorse candidates, which did occur. In general, eight in 10 say they are satisfied with the process by which Iranian authorities are elected, but only four in 10 say they are very satisfied. Only four in 10 support the general idea of having international observers monitor elections.

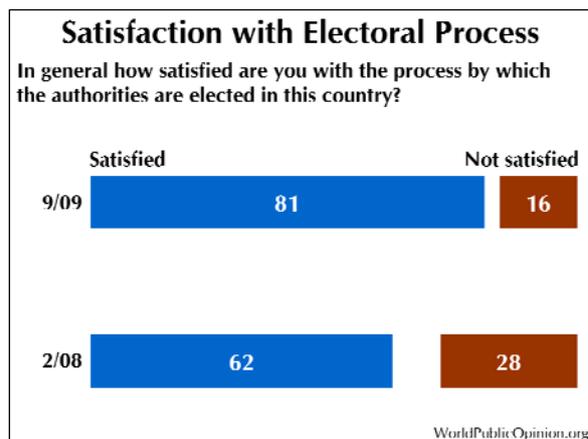
Polled two months after the disputed election, 81 percent of Iranians consider Ahmadinejad to be Iran’s legitimate president. Only 10% disagree. Eighty-three percent say the election was free and fair, though only 66% say it was completely free and fair, while 17% say it was somewhat free and fair. The same number (83%) say they are confident in the results, though only 62% say they have a lot of confidence, while 21% say they have some confidence.



Yet 75% believe that members of the powerful Guardian Council -- 12 appointees who have final say over legislation and candidacies - should always remain neutral in an election. This was an issue in the June election as some Council members endorsed Ahmadinejad. Only 16% say this type of support is appropriate.

A related controversy erupted when Iran,s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, endorsed Ahmadinejad’s victory before the results of the election were official. But only 13% say that the supreme leader should not have supported Ahmadinejad after the election while 76% approve.

On the general “process by which the authorities are elected” in Iran a very large majority (81%) say they are satisfied with the general process, though only 40% say they are very satisfied. Sixteen percent say they are not satisfied.



This reported level of satisfaction in the electoral process has increased significantly from 2008, when 62 percent said they were satisfied and only 18 percent said they were very satisfied. Those saying they are dissatisfied are down 12 points from 28%.

The controversy over the vote spurred a variety of demands by Iranian opposition supporters and outside analysts that Iran take steps to ensure that its elections are demonstrably free and fair. One widely expressed suggestion was that the country allow United Nations observers to monitor its elections. But only 37% of Iranians say that, as a general rule, countries should allow UN monitors for elections, and a majority (55%) say countries should not. Iran is the only country other than Chile to take this position out of 18 nations polled by WPO this year.

6. Assessments of Developments Over Last Four Years

A majority says that in the past four years, there has been an improvement in Iran's ability to resist foreign pressures, and a plurality says there has been an improvement in civil liberties over the same period. Views lean in the direction that the country's economic situation has gotten worse and that economic equality has gotten worse. Views are mixed as to whether Iran's relations with other countries have gotten better or worse and whether people's own economic situation has gotten better or worse.

Iranians were asked to assess changes over the last four years, since the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005. During that four-year period, Iran has come under intense pressure from the United States and other countries over its nuclear program – arguably the defining issue of Ahmadinejad's first term. A majority (57%) say that in that time "Iran's ability to resist foreign pressures" has improved, while only 14% say it has gotten worse and 13% say it has remained the same. Another area of perceived improvement was the degree of civil liberties, as a plurality (48%) say this has gotten better (23% worse, 22% remained the same).

Attitudes were more negative on change in other areas. Forty-five percent believe the economic situation as a whole has gotten worse, while 29% believe it has improved and 14% believe it remained the same. Views lean negative on the degree of economic equality, a major issue in a country with high unemployment, a youthful population, and wide gaps between rich and poor. Thirty-five percent say the level of equality had gotten worse, 30% say it improved, and 18% say it remained the same. Iranians are divided on the change in their country's relations with the West (33% better, 30% worse, 16% same).

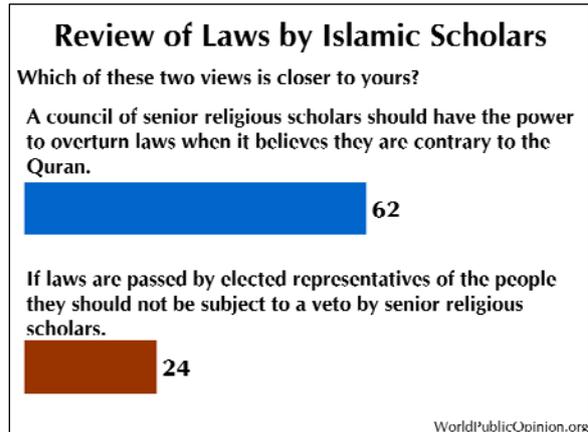
When asked about their own families' economic situation, respondents' views were mixed. The most common response is that their economic outlook has remained the same (42%), followed by 31% who believe it has gotten worse and 27% who say it has gotten better. Similar results were found in a May 2009 Terror Free Tomorrow poll, in which 47% said their economic situation had remained about the same since Ahmadinejad was first elected.

7. The Iranian System

Overall, most Iranians express support for their current system of government. Nine in 10 say they are satisfied with the system, though only four in 10 say they are very satisfied. Six in 10 approve of having a body of religious scholars with the capacity to overturn laws, while one in four expresses opposition. A modest majority says that the way the supreme leader is selected is consistent with the principles of democracy, though three-fifths say they are comfortable with the extent of his power.

The Islamic Republic's complex system of government, which parcels out power among a variety of elective, appointive and often overlapping institutions, has been the subject of bewilderment and frequent criticism in the West, yet Iranians express support for it. Asked if they were generally satisfied with the system, an overwhelming 87% express satisfaction, though only 41% say they are very satisfied. Just 10 percent are dissatisfied (3% not at all satisfied).

The Guardian Council, a 12-member panel of Islamic theologians and jurists that can veto legislation and bar candidates from running for office, also enjoys substantial support. Sixty-two percent of those polled said that a council of senior religious scholars should have the power to overturn laws when it believes they are contrary to the Quran, while 24% said that laws that are passed by elected representatives of the people should not be subject to a veto by senior religious scholars.



The most powerful position in Iran’s political hierarchy is that of supreme leader, a role created by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and held by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei since Khomeini’s death in 1989. Though the supreme leader is appointed by the 86 clerics who make up the Assembly of Experts, 55% of Iranians say the way he is selected is consistent with the principles of democracy. However, this may be due to the fact that Assembly of Experts is popularly elected—thus giving the people indirect influence over the choice of the supreme leader.

A larger majority (61%) say Iran’s constitution grants the supreme leader the necessary amount of power, and another 6% say he should have less power. Only 17% say he has more power than he should.

8. Freedom of Expression

A large majority says that people in Iran are at least somewhat free to express controversial views without fear of being harassed or punished, but only one in four say they are completely free. A majority—up from a plurality last year—says that the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it thinks will be destabilizing.

Though Iran’s human rights record has been criticized by a multitude of international organizations, Iranians themselves hold it in higher regard. Seventy-one percent of Iranians consider themselves at least somewhat free “to express controversial political views, without fear of being harassed or punished.” However only 27% say they are completely free.



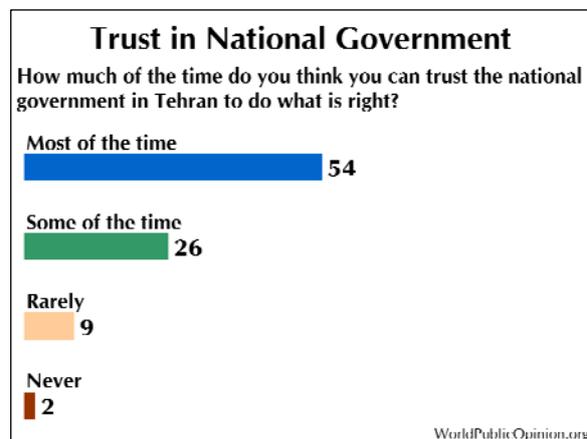
A large majority of Iranians endorse the principle of press freedom, but most of them support some government control over the media. Fifty-eight percent say the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it thinks will be destabilizing, while just 36% say the press should have the right to publish news and ideas without any government control. Both numbers are higher those found in the 2008 WTO poll (45% for controls, 31% against), but the earlier poll

showed 24 percent refusing to answer saying they didn't know – four times as many as this year (6%).

9. Assessment of Iranian Governmental Institutions

A large majority says they trust the Iranian government to do the right thing at least some of the time, but only a modest majority trusts it to do the right thing most of the time. Large majorities express at least some confidence in all major government institutions and two thirds express a lot of confidence in the president, as do a modest majority in the police. However less than half express a lot of confidence in the Ministry of Interior, the parliament, the Guardian Council, or the Judiciary Branch.

Eighty-five percent of Iranians say they trust their government to do the right thing at least some of the time, but only 54% say they trust it to do the right thing most of the time. Eleven percent say the government will do the right thing rarely at most (2% say never).



Different governmental institutions earn varying degrees of confidence. The president ranks highest, with 85% expressing at least some confidence (64% a lot of confidence). The police have the confidence of 83% of Iranians (52% a lot of confidence), the parliament 79% (40% a lot), the judiciary 73% (43% a lot), the Interior Ministry 72% (38% a lot), and the Guardian Council 71% (42% a lot).

