



Commentary: Iranians want more democracy

Story Highlights

Ballen, Doherty: Iranians, including Ahmadinejad backers, want more democracy

They say their poll can't determine whether Moussavi had a late surge

They say government actions have shifted debate to democracy not to who won

By Ken Ballen and Patrick Doherty
Special to CNN June 16, 2009

Editor's note: Ken Ballen is president of Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion, a nonprofit institute that researches attitudes toward extremism. Patrick Doherty is deputy director of the American Strategy Program at the New America Foundation, a think tank that promotes ideas across the ideological spectrum.

(CNN) -- In a poll conducted three weeks before Iran's June 12 vote, our nonprofit organizations found a consensus among Iranians, including almost all of those who told us they would vote for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. And that consensus is that Iranians want a truly democratic system.

Given Iranians' own priorities for their government, the events of the past few days may ultimately weaken President Ahmadinejad's standing -- even among those who did vote to re-elect him.

In fact, our survey found that more than 86 percent of Iranians who said they would vote for Ahmadinejad also chose ensuring free elections and a free press as among the most important priorities they have for the Iranian government.

The recent events -- the early announcements of election returns, the shutting down of communications networks, the massive protests and now the bloodshed -- have the potential to change what was once an electoral contest into a broader struggle for the soul of the Islamic Republic and the future of Iran itself.

Let us be clear: Our polling indicates that the government's actions run counter to the priorities of almost all Iranians, including its own supporters. And our survey

shows beyond dispute that Iranians of all political persuasions want more democratic freedoms, not less.

Our [op-ed](#) published on Monday has drawn much attention -- and misunderstanding. Our nonprofit organizations conducted the only independent and transparent nationwide public opinion survey in Iran before the June 12 vote. The poll found that [Ahmadinejad](#) was leading his nearest opponent, the more reform-minded candidate Mir Hossein Moussavi, by a more than 2-to-1 margin, with almost a third undecided.

Our poll concluded three weeks before the election. It does not predict the final vote, nor does it measure a possible surge for Moussavi, which many believe occurred in the final weeks. Instead, as we wrote on Monday, our survey indicates "the possibility that the vote is not the product of widespread fraud" because of Ahmadinejad's formidable early lead.

This single finding, however, has obscured our most important findings, and their significance to what is now unfolding in [Iran](#).

Nearly 80 percent want the right to vote for all their leaders, including the all-powerful supreme leader, while nearly 90 percent chose free elections and a free press as the most important goals they have for their government -- virtually tied with the top priority of improving the Iranian economy.

And here is the most important fact of all: More than 86 percent of those who told us they support Ahmadinejad also choose free elections and a free press as their most important priorities for their leaders. In other words, in our survey, Ahmadinejad supporters back real democratic reforms in Iran as much as supporters of the more avowedly reform candidate [Moussavi](#).

Put all together, our polling shows that Ahmadinejad, running a competent campaign, may have had enough support three weeks before the vote to possibly win the election under the electoral rules as they stood. With Ahmadinejad's early lead, it is possible that the vote reported did actually reflect the will of the Iranian people, though now, it is impossible to know.

Yet the government's actions since the election may have changed the debate in Iran from being about candidates to being about democracy. While we do not know whether the election results were rigged, the government's handling of the election itself runs counter to principles of democracy, free press and free elections -- goals our polling shows almost all Iranians, whether or not they support Ahmadinejad, strongly support.

Moussavi appears to understand this. Yesterday in a massive rally in Tehran, Moussavi stated as much, saying "The vote of the people is more important than Moussavi or any other person." Meanwhile, the subsequent killing of protesters

by government security forces will likely only work against Ahmadinejad and by extension now, the supreme leader, even among more than 86 percent of their supporters.

While our poll showed Ahmadinejad with an early commanding lead, by the government's post-election response, the irony is that Ahmadinejad may indeed end up stealing the election -- from himself.



June 16, 2009:

CNN ANCHOR Well, Iran's government says President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won reelection by a landslide. Many Americans, many American journalists, many analysts, and many politicians here in this country think there was massive voter fraud there. So far, there's not much evidence to support that allegation, at least. So, the question is now, is it possible that Ahmadinejad really did win this thing?

Our next guest is Ken Ballen. He says that is a distinct possibility. He is president of Terror Free Tomorrow, the Center for Public Opinion, a nonprofit group that does some polling. He joins us now from Washington. Sir, the reason you say it is a possibility is because your organization did one of the last, one of the most extensive and also transparent polls just a couple weeks before the election in Iran. What did your poll tell you?

KEN BALLEEN, TERROR FREE TOMORROW: Well, our poll told us that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President Ahmadinejad, was ahead by a 2-1 margin over his nearest rival. Now, I have to caution you that was three weeks before the election. And a lot of people believe that Mr. Mousavi, his main challenger, gained strength after that time. So, that's perfectly possible. Let me clear: Our result does not predict the actual election.

CNN: Yes.

BALLEEN: It can't predict the vote three weeks out. But what it does show is, it is a distinct possibility that Ahmadinejad, if he maintained that early lead and that early momentum, did, indeed, win.

CNN: But is it not true that your poll was done as well before presidential elections happened -- excuse me, not elections -- but a debate happening there that many thought Ahmadinejad did very well in?

BALLEEN: That's right. Well, that's right. So, we just don't know.

But what we -- we -- it's too bad we don't have other polls that are -- that are independent and uncensored, so we know. I want to point out something very interesting now that is happening today...

CNN: Go ahead. Uh-huh.

BALLEN: ... which is that what we found in our poll, in addition to Ahmadinejad being ahead, is that even most of his supporters were in favor of more democracy for Iran, free press and free elections as their top priorities.

So, the government is in a very dangerous position right now. It may be alienating by its actions Ahmadinejad's very base of support, who also want free elections, just like the rest of Iranians. Almost 90 percent of Iranians said: Give us free elections. Give us a free press. We want democracy.

These include Ahmadinejad supporters. So, if the government clamps down too hard, if this is perceived as a stolen election, then Ahmadinejad may be sealing this election from himself.

CNN: From himself. That was the point. I think I heard you made that -- make that point before, that, in fact, yes, he could have won this thing, and fair and square. I mean, nobody is saying the elections there are necessarily that open and fair, if you will, but nobody necessarily saying maybe there was fraud. So, he could have won it. But the way he has handled it since might put kind of a stain on his next four years.

BALLEN: Well, that's exactly right. And it might -- what the irony is, we found in our poll, even among Ahmadinejad's own supporters, they want a more democratic system. Most of them do, not all. There are a small minority that are kind of the true believers who will go to the barricades no matter what. But most of his supporters want a more open, free system as their top priorities for their government. So, he is now, maybe, along with the supreme leader, in the danger of stealing this election...

CNN: Right.

BALLEN: ... and diminishing his own standing among his own supporters.

(CROSSTALK)

CNN: Last thing I want to ask you here -- and this is something maybe that didn't show up in your polling -- but, in your opinion, in the coverage you have seen, maybe the coverage you saw leading up to the election in Iran, did you feel that maybe there was some overstating and some wishful thinking, as some have termed it, on behalf of some of the -- the folks in the West, some of the politicians in the West, by really wanting to build up and really hope that Mousavi was making a movement and was making and gaining some ground?

BALLEN: It is hard to really know the answer to that. Absent polls, absent a more transparent and open system in -- in Iran, we just don't really know whether Mousavi was gaining strength or not. A lot of very knowledgeable Iranians who I respect tell me that that's the case. So, it -- it may very well be the case.

But what's happening now is, the government's actions since the election, particularly if the bloodshed becomes more widespread, risk alienating some of their own supporters. And that is putting the government, I think, in a very difficult position, which may be why -- may be why you see the supreme leader today wanting to bring people in and try to work this out, because I think that they realize this could be a potentially explosive situation between two camps.

CNN: Well, again, Ken Ballen, the president of Terror Free Tomorrow, the Center for Public Opinion, sir, I know you have been busy the last few days because of that poll. Everybody wants to talk to you. But we appreciate you being here to talk to us.



June 16, 2009:

CNN ANCHOR: Our guest is the President of Terror Free Tomorrow, the Center for Public Opinion. He conducted a poll three weeks before the election that shows Iranians favored Ahmadinejad by more than a 2-1 margin. Ken is joining us now from Washington. Thanks for being with us, Ken. First of all, given this latest news, Ken, how do we really know what the Iranian people want?

KEN BALLEN, TERROR FREE TOMORROW: That's exactly the point, we don't know. Our poll was three weeks before the election. It is the only independent poll we have and at that time, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was leading by a 2-1 margin. That does not mean that he would have won the election, and we never said he would. Many people think there was a late surge for Mousavi and our poll does not reflect that. What our survey does say is there may be, in fact, a very large base of support for Ahmadinejad, possibly enough votes for him to win. We simply do not know. And we do not know whether the election was rigged. What we certainly know it wasn't completely free and fair but we don't know what the will of the Iranian people is.

CNN: Maybe we should talk a little bit more about the way the poll was taken.

BALLEN: Sure, sure; it was a scientific sampling and up on our website, we did the poll with the New America Foundation. We've disclosed everything, all the questions and the methodology and that's what makes it transparent, but I would say this, I don't want to miss the larger significance of our poll because what we also found is that even among most people who support Ahmadinejad, they favor more democracy for Iran. Most

Ahmadinejad supporter favor free elections, almost as high a priority for them as improving the economy, if you can imagine that.

CNN: Does anyone know if this was a free election?

BALLEN: It's not a free election and the Guardian Council in advance--

CNN: You think when they recount some of these votes in some of the areas of the country the result will be the same.

BALLEN: I don't know how fair the recount will be. I want to make this point because I think most viewers and most commentators are missing it. Our poll found among most Ahmadinejad supporters that democracy and free elections are the most important priorities they have for their government. Therefore, the Iranian government's actions now since the election has been held are risking alienating some of their own supporters. So, the situation in Iran may be changing from an electoral contest that's in dispute to a contest over the soul of Iran and in that struggle, Ahmadinejad's own supporters, we found, many of them would be on the side of Mousavi in term of wanting more democracy and free and fair election. So, the government's actions and Ahmadinejad may actually be stealing this election from himself.

CNN: Quickly, when you say we're missing the point in some of this, I just wonder people if in Iran have a good grasp of what democracy is.

BALLEN: Well, actually, I they absolutely do, because in our poll they said they wanted to freely elect a supreme leader. 77% of them said that. And the supreme leader is the person who is the ultimate authority in Iran and not the President. But the supreme leader is not subject to election and the people want to elect him. The people also want a free press; they don't want foreign journalist excluded from Iran. They want better relations with the United States. I think they understand very well what the parameters of a real democracy are, and they're asking for it. Here's the really critical point: Ahmadinejad supporters, most of them want a full democracy, too. By the government actions, in not being transparent and the other events that have taken place now in Iran, the government is risking alienating their own base.

CNN: Before we let you go, the way the poll is conducted and some the findings here regarding the young vote, you're saying that 18 to 24 year olds are actually part of the strongest block for Ahmadinejad. What about women? That was a big issue, something we have been talking here quite a bit, especially with Mousavi and his wife.

BALLEN: The only groups we found Mousavi leading Ahmadinejad were among university students and graduates and the highest income Iranians. Again, our poll was taken three weeks before the election and things might have changed with Mousavi and his wife. Her role came up after our survey. So we didn't measure that and unfortunately there's no other reliable and transparent poll that does. If we had a fully free democracy

in Iran, we could have done exit polls, and we would have had a more definitive answer for you right now.



Poll hint at plausible Iran vote

The official result in Iran's disputed presidential election could plausibly reflect the will of the people, a group of international pollsters says.

June 16, 2009

An independent poll three weeks ago had Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ahead of his closest rival by a similar 2:1 ratio.

Runner-up Mir Hossein Mousavi has claimed the election result was fixed.

The research was conducted by US-based polling organisations Terror Free Tomorrow, the New America Foundation and KA Europe SPRL.

"We found that President Ahmadinejad was leading by a substantial margin," Ken Ballen from Terror Free Tomorrow told the BBC World Service.

The nationwide poll was conducted between 11 and 20 May and consisted of 1,001 random interviews covering all 30 provinces of Iran. It had a 3% margin of error.

Its results gave Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a 33.8% share of the vote, more than twice as much as Mr Mousavi with 13.6%, and with Mehdi Karroubi and Mohsen Rezai trailing on less than 2% and 1% respectively.

Respondents says none of the candidates in 7.6% of interviews, while 15.1% refused to answer and 27.4% said they didn't know.

"Whether or not this would have changed, or whether Mr Ahmadinejad would hold that lead which would have translated into a victory, that's where the unknown factors arise," Mr Ballen said.

Cautious

According to official results Mr Ahmadinejad, the incumbent president, won 62.6% of votes cast. Mr Mousavi trailed with 33.8%.

"It's a plausible result, but the way the Iranian government handled it raises lots of questions," Mr Ballen told the BBC.

His polls predicted that no candidate would pass the 50% threshold for an automatic win, and a second round would take place between the two highest finishers.

In the 2005 presidential elections, the leader in the first round, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, lost to the runner-up, Mr Ahmadinejad, in the run-off.

Mr Ballen said the independent survey was a rarity in Iran, where polls are normally carried out by state agencies.

"It is not a society that allows independent polling or exit polling or election monitors or independent monitors so it's very hard to ascertain whether or not the results actually reflect the will of the people," he said.

"We need to be cautious in drawing a conclusion," Mr Ballen said. "We know it [the election] wasn't free and fair. "



June 22, 2009 (BBC's flagship international news show)

There is an opinion poll that has drawn world-wide attention, conducted in Iran by the American non-profit organization, Terror Free Tomorrow. We have on Mr Kenneth Ballen, the president of the organisation. The poll had shown support for Ahmadinejad three weeks before the election, but according to Mr. Ballen, has been misunderstood:

"Our poll did not find that Ahmadinejad would have won, just that he had an early lead - there's a big difference - and a lot of people have misrepresented the survey. It is important that he had an early lead but it's not definitive. I wish Iran were a free society, then we could have conducted exit polls and found out who really won this election."

Mr. Ballen, what is your poll's relevance to what is unfolding now inside Iran?

"That's the important point. Our poll before the election found a consensus inside Iran, including almost all of those who told us they would vote for Ahmadinejad. And that consensus is that Iranians want a truly democratic system. Iranians fundamentally reject the current system, and overwhelmingly want to elect the Supreme Leader, and have free elections and a free press. Here's the important point: our survey found that more than 86 percent of Iranians who said they would vote for Ahmadinejad also chose ensuring free elections and a

free press as among their most important priorities. Our polling indicates that the government's actions run counter to the priorities of almost all Iranians—including their own supporters.”



June 16, 2009

BBC: Mr. Ballen, I have here that your poll before the elections actually predicted the actual election results?

BALLEN: No, absolutely not. Let me be clear: Our poll did NOT predict the election results. Nearly a third didn't know. And our poll was taken 3 weeks before Election Day. Also, Ahmadinejad's early support could have faded. All we're saying is that an Ahmadinejad victory is a plausible outcome, and his early lead is mirrored by the official returns.

Imagine if our poll showed Moussavi leading 2 to 1 in May. Wouldn't that be an important fact in assessing the reported results now?

BBC: Tell me more about the survey. This was done by phone.

BALLEN: Yes, more than 90 percent of Iranians have land-line phones.

BBC: Did they all answer?

BALLEN: Our response rate was 58 percent. That's a much higher response rate than you typically get in Western countries, like the U.S. or U.K., where response rates are less than half of what we got. So, the response rate was good.



June 16, 2009:

Nate Silver, who runs the U.S. election Web site FiveThirtyEight, told CNN the official results were "ambiguous."

Ken Ballen, the head of a Washington think tank that polled Iranians three weeks before the vote, said it was premature to declare the Iranian vote fraudulent. Ballen said his organization, Terror Free Tomorrow, surveyed 1,001 Iranians in mid-May. That poll found Ahmadinejad leading the four-candidate field with 34 percent support, while [Moussavi](#) trailed with 14 percent. The remaining two candidates, former parliament speaker Mehdi Karrubi and onetime Revolutionary Guards commander Mohsen Rezaie, drew 2 percent and 1 percent.

"That does not mean that he would have won the election, and we never said he would," Ballen told CNN's "Newsroom" on Tuesday. "Many people think there was a late surge for Moussavi, and our poll does not reflect that." But he said the poll suggested that [Ahmadinejad](#) would have had a "very large" share of the vote "and possibly enough votes for him to win." The survey had a sampling error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

Silver said the Terror Free Tomorrow poll was conducted "about as well as a poll can be done in Iran." But he said the number of people who expressed no preference -- 27 percent -- suggests that "a lot of people are scared to admit their true preferences."



6/15/09

The head of an international polling group that did an independent survey of Iranians three weeks before the election says its poll showed Ahmadinejad ahead by a two one margin.

KEN BALLEEN, TERROR FREE TOMORROW: That does not mean he would have won the election. What it does tell us is that he enjoyed substantial support in Iran and that his re-election was possible, at least 3 weeks out. Our poll did not measure whether Moussavi had surge between our poll and the election. Remember, there was three weeks' time between the two.

The Washington Post

The Iranian People Speak

By Ken Ballen And Patrick Doherty
Monday, June 15, 2009

The election results in Iran may reflect the will of the Iranian people. Many experts are claiming that the margin of victory of incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was the result of fraud or manipulation, but our nationwide [public opinion survey](#) of Iranians three weeks before the vote showed Ahmadinejad leading by a more than 2 to 1 margin -- greater than his actual apparent margin of victory in Friday's election.

While Western news reports from Tehran in the days leading up to the voting portrayed an Iranian public enthusiastic about Ahmadinejad's principal opponent, Mir Hossein Mousavi, our scientific sampling from across all 30 of Iran's provinces showed Ahmadinejad well ahead.

Independent and uncensored nationwide surveys of Iran are rare. Typically, preelection polls there are either conducted or monitored by the government and are notoriously untrustworthy. By contrast, the poll undertaken by our nonprofit organizations from May 11 to May 20 was the third in a series over the past two years. Conducted by telephone from a neighboring country, field work was carried out in Farsi by a polling company whose work in the region for ABC News and the BBC has received an Emmy award. Our polling was funded by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

The breadth of Ahmadinejad's support was apparent in our preelection survey. During the campaign, for instance, Mousavi emphasized his identity as an Azeri, the second-largest ethnic group in Iran after Persians, to woo Azeri voters. Our survey indicated, though, that Azeris favored Ahmadinejad by 2 to 1 over Mousavi.

Much commentary has portrayed Iranian youth and the Internet as harbingers of change in this election. But our poll found that only a third of Iranians even have access to the Internet, while 18-to-24-year-olds comprised the strongest voting bloc for Ahmadinejad of all age groups.

The only demographic groups in which our survey found Mousavi leading or competitive with Ahmadinejad were university students and graduates, and the highest-income Iranians. When our poll was taken, almost a third of Iranians were also still undecided. Yet the baseline distributions we found then mirror the

results reported by the Iranian authorities, indicating the possibility that the vote is not the product of widespread fraud.

Some might argue that the professed support for Ahmadinejad we found simply reflected fearful respondents' reluctance to provide honest answers to pollsters. Yet the integrity of our results is confirmed by the politically risky responses Iranians were willing to give to a host of questions. For instance, nearly four in five Iranians -- including most Ahmadinejad supporters -- said they wanted to change the political system to give them the right to elect Iran's supreme leader, who is not currently subject to popular vote. Similarly, Iranians chose free elections and a free press as their most important priorities for their government, virtually tied with improving the national economy. These were hardly "politically correct" responses to voice publicly in a largely authoritarian society.

Indeed, and consistently among all three of our surveys over the past two years, more than 70 percent of Iranians also expressed support for providing full access to weapons inspectors and a guarantee that Iran will not develop or possess nuclear weapons, in return for outside aid and investment. And 77 percent of Iranians favored normal relations and trade with the United States, another result consistent with our previous findings.

Iranians view their support for a more democratic system, with normal relations with the United States, as consonant with their support for Ahmadinejad. They do not want him to continue his hard-line policies. Rather, Iranians apparently see Ahmadinejad as their toughest negotiator, the person best positioned to bring home a favorable deal -- rather like a Persian Nixon going to China.

Allegations of fraud and electoral manipulation will serve to further isolate Iran and are likely to increase its belligerence and intransigence against the outside world. Before other countries, including the United States, jump to the conclusion that the Iranian presidential elections were fraudulent, with the grave consequences such charges could bring, they should consider all independent information. The fact may simply be that the reelection of President Ahmadinejad is what the Iranian people wanted.

Ken Ballen is president of Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion, a nonprofit institute that researches attitudes toward extremism. Patrick Doherty is deputy director of the American Strategy Program at the New America Foundation. The groups' May 11-20 polling consisted of 1,001 interviews across Iran and had a 3.1 percentage point margin of error.



Commentary: Iranians favor peace deal with U.S.

Story Highlights

Ballen, Atallah: Most Iranians are not extremists; they favor peace with U.S.
Their poll shows overwhelming support for negotiations
Poll finds Iranian support for a deal regardless of whether Ahmadinejad is re-elected

By Ken Ballen and Amjad Atallah
Special to CNN June 8, 2009

Editor's note: Ken Ballen is president of Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion, a nonprofit institute that researches attitudes toward extremism. Amjad Atallah co-directs the Middle East Task Force at the New America Foundation, a think tank that promotes ideas across the ideological spectrum.

(CNN) -- In a new public opinion poll before Iran's critical June 12 presidential election, by large margins, most Iranians said they support an American-Iranian rapprochement for bringing a new era of peace to the Middle East. Surveyed on a wide range of issues, Iranians overwhelmingly favor better relations with the United States and greater democracy for Iran.

The poll shows that the Iranian public remains far removed from the stereotypes of apocalyptic fanatics commonly asserted in some circles in the United States. The survey suggests that Iranians instead are a people with self-confidence and hope in a more democratic future.

It also reveals a population with a strong awareness that the United States is as much a potential ally as it is now seen as a current threat. This holds much promise for U.S. national security interests in the region.

These are some of the many findings from a new nationwide public opinion [survey](#) of Iran, to be released Monday.

Independent and uncensored nationwide surveys of Iran are rare. Typically, pre-elections polls in Iran are either conducted or monitored by the Iranian government and other affiliated interest groups. Consequently, they are notoriously untrustworthy.

By contrast, our poll -- the third in a series over the past two years -- was conducted by telephone from a neighboring country, uncensored, with time-tested methodology. Funding for the survey was provided by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

The poll was led by Terror Free Tomorrow: the Center for Public Opinion and the New America Foundation, with fieldwork by KA Europe SPRL. The full results and methodology are available at terrorfreetomorrow.org. The survey was conducted from May 11 to 20, with 1,001 random interviews proportionally distributed covering all 30 provinces of Iran, and a margin of error of 3.1 percentage points.

Though our poll results show President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) in the lead, it appears that none of the presidential candidates will pass the 50 percent threshold needed to automatically win; a second-round runoff between the two highest finishers -- as things stand, Ahmadinejad and Mir Hussein Moussavi -- is likely.

Regardless of whom they may vote for, the No. 1 priority Iranians have for their government is improving the Iranian economy, very closely followed by ensuring free elections, a free press and better trade and relations with the West.

It is in this context that the [Iranian](#) people strongly support a fundamental change in American-Iranian relations.

Right now, Iranians consider the United States and Israel as the greatest -- and only -- threats to Iran. As a result, more than six out of every 10 Iranians oppose any peace deal with Israel and are in favor of the government of Iran providing military and financial assistance to Palestinian groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as well as providing military and financial assistance to Iraqi Shiite militias. A majority of Iranians also favor Iran developing nuclear weapons.

These "hard-line" attitudes dramatically change, however, as part of a potential deal with the United States. More than 70 percent of Iranians favor providing full access to inspectors and a guarantee not to develop or possess [nuclear weapons](#), in return for outside aid and investment. In another consistent trend over the past two years, 77 percent of Iranians also back normal relations and trade with the United States.

Indeed, as part of a deal with the United States, 54 percent of Iranians would endorse the Iranian government ending support for Iraqi militias instead of providing military assistance. Rather than supporting the destruction of the state of Israel, as they do now, as part of a deal with the United States, a majority of Iranians would even favor recognizing the state of Israel.

Greater democracy, economic progress and good relations with the United States are the ultimate goals for most Iranians.

In another indication of the public's strong support for a more open and fully democratic system of government, 77 percent said they support a political system where the supreme leader, along with all leaders, can be chosen and replaced by a free and direct vote of the people.

The vision of the Iranian people for a more democratic future, with normal trade and relations between Iran and the United States, remains the consensus over our three nationwide surveys. Iranians also view their support for Ahmadinejad -- or whoever might be elected the next president of Iran -- as consistent with those goals.

The Iranian people are apparently looking to their next president, whether or not it's Ahmadinejad, to be a Persian Nixon going to China. They want a tough negotiator to bring home a deal for Iran. His mandate is not to continue current hard-line policies with the United States but to change -- if the United States, in turn, is willing to recognize the Islamic Republic and end its policy seeking regime change in Tehran.

For Washington, this means that the Iranian people are not an obstacle and that a real bargain can be struck that would find popular support. But the Iranian people are endorsing a negotiating position that leaves little time and much room for miscalculation. President Obama needs to integrate this reality into his strategy for the greater Middle East and, once the elections are complete, engage Iran on the potential of a new strategic relationship.

<http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/08/ballen.iran/index.html>



June 8, 2009:

WOLF BLITZER, CNN NEWS ANCHOR: I wonder if any of the polls being taken in Iran are really reliable.

BRIAN TODD, CNN NEWS CORRESPONDENT: Well, there is one poll that was conducted that is reliable. It was uncensored, independent, taken from a neighboring country by telephone. This was done by two groups -- Terror-Free Tomorrow: the Center for Public Opinion and the New America Foundation. It was just released today.

It does show Ahmadinejad in the lead. But it also shows that none of these four candidates would pass that 50 percent threshold needed to win outright. There could be a runoff.

It's important to say this poll was taken before some of these presidential debates took place. Those debates could have had a huge impact since this poll was taken.