One of humanity’s perennial problems centers on balancing religion and government. How can the cosmic authority of the divine being(s) interact with the day-to-day authority of people. King James I (he of the King James Bible) believed in the divine-rule of kings, i.e., that God gave a king like him the authority to rule. The founders of the United States of America thought that religion and government should be separate, with government staying out of religious matters and religion having no official role in government. The communist government of China held for many years that religious belief and activity should be banned, and only in recent years has relaxed that view.

When Iran established its new constitution after 1979, the country formulated the balance of religion and human governance in a new manner. It started with a surprisingly American-like balance of powers in three branches—executive, legislative and judicial. The constitution then divided the executive branch between a president who administers the country on a daily basis and a “Supreme Leader” who constitutes a religious authority tasked with ensuring that the country’s policies follow the dictates of Islam.

This organization of government leads to a lively democracy in daily affairs which is then supervised, overseen, and sometimes restricted by religious mores, concerns, and judgments. Elections for president and the legislature are held every four years, with multiple candidates running campaigns, taking positions on issues, and holding debates. From this perspective, Iran has had one of the most free and lively democracies in the Muslim world.

This democracy is carried out within the boundaries of the Muslim religion, however. Candidates for president and the legislature have their worthiness for potential office evaluated by the Guardian Council; their character and moral behavior are judged by Islamic standards by the Council, whose membership consists of the highest experts in Islamic law and morality.

The Guardian Council supervises elections, and this is the beginning of the current uproar over the supposed landslide victory of Mahmud Ahmadinejad to a second term as president.

Since the elections of June 12 concerned the administrative side of the executive branch, it was supervised by the religious side. To question the election results, therefore, is to ask whether the country’s religious leaders are incompetent, corrupt, or simply hoodwinked by their own employees.

Wherever one comes down on this question, the religious authorities who are tasked by the constitution for carrying out Allah’s will have done a poor job.

The opposition protesting the election results, led by presidential candidate Mir Hussein Moussavi, has tried (as of Tuesday June 23) to focus its demands on the votes and not to challenge the system. That is, they have asked that their votes be tabulated and counted, rather than question the religious leaders’ authority directly.

The religious side has responded by calling on the one who cannot be questioned, God himself. Soon after the election results were published, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared the election results a “divine assessment” of the candidates. To question the results is thus to question Allah Himself!

Furthermore, Supreme Leader Khamenei stated in a speech at Friday prayers on June 19th that the election results were valid. Perhaps, he admitted, perhaps there were problems with 100,000 votes here or there, as the legal challenges have suggested, but how could “11 million votes be replaced or changed?” He thus denied suggestions that there was any wide scale fraud.

At the same time, Khamenei celebrated the campaign. He rejoiced in the openness of the debates, the ability of the candidates to express themselves, and praised everyone who voted, saying, “whoever has voted for [any of] these candidates will receive divine reward.”

In this way, Khamenei tried to emphasize that the elections had been fair and placed his religious authority behind the results.

The problem is that the Iranian people want more than God’s representative declaring that the election was just and fair, they want to see it. Justice must be seen to be just; election results should be transparent. Although Khamenei’s speech praised the “transparency” of the campaign, he demanded the acceptance of the published results without any accounting.

Will the balance between religious and human governance laid out in the Iranian constitution work? If religious authorities are not seen to act responsibly and morally, as is their charge, how can that be dealt with satisfactorily?