



Getting at the Truth

Mathematics has helped investigators in several major cases of human rights abuses and election fraud. Among them:

The 2009 election in Iran. A mathematical result known as Benford's Law states that the leading digits of truly random numbers aren't distributed uniformly, as might be expected. Instead, smaller digits, such as 1's, appear much more frequently than larger digits, such as 9's. Benford's Law and other statistical tests have been applied to the 2009 election and suggest strongly that the final totals are suspicious.



Photo: Dario Pignatelli/Reuters

Ethnic cleansing. At his trial, Slobodan Milošević claimed that the mass exodus of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo was due to NATO bombings and the activities of the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army rather than anything he had ordered. A team collected data on the flow of refugees to test those contentions and refute his claim in its entirety.



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