

## **Election Analysis: A Conservative Mandate?**

Bahman Baktiari

*Director of the International Affairs Programme and Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Maine*

*This comment analyses Iran's latest presidential elections and the circumstances which led to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's, largely unexpected, victory in the runoff with Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjan.*

The Islamic Republic's ninth presidential election on June 24 has Iranians debating, as during the previous election in 1997, whether their country is moving toward becoming more conservative, curtailing the social freedom enjoyed by many during the eight years of the Khatami presidency. Most analysts and long time observers of Iranian politics anticipated a victory of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Yet, in the runoff election on June 24, Iranian voters chose Tehran's conservative mayor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, over Rafsanjani. When the first round of voting ended on June 17, the country was seriously divided over who they believed to be the best choice for President with no single person receiving more than 50% of the vote, the threshold required to win in the first round. Held only one week after the first round, the run-off election did little to transform Iranian factionalism.

While pre-election polls and analysis had failed to predict the outcome, they properly assumed that Iranian voters were divided and the first round illustrated that they were genuinely divided amongst who they believed should be their first choice.

Following the first round of voting, the Reformist and Conservative camps appeared evenly split amongst Iranian voters, with Hashemi Rafsanjani comfortably leading as an independent centrist with 6,159,453 votes. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had earned his place in the second round with almost six million (5,710,354) votes, and an additional 6 million were split between Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf (4,075,189) and Ali Larijani (1,740,163), totaling an estimated 12 million Conservative votes. Ahmadinejad would have been expected to carry these votes in the second round. Third place finisher Mehdi Karroubi, a reform-minded cleric who had more than five million votes (5,066,316), led the loosely constructed Reformist camp. An additional 6 million votes belonged to Mostafa Moin (4,054,304) and Mohsen Mehr-alizadeh (1,221,940), totaling around 11 million Reformist votes. Had the Reformists enthusiastically lined up behind the pragmatist Rafsanjani, he would have earned approximately 16 million votes in the second round.

Even if the above scenario had taken place, Rafsanjani's record was hard to ignore. Rafsanjani could not run on the record of his two-term presidency, 1989-97. After some initial socioeconomic liberalization, his administration had not trimmed Iran's unwieldy bureaucracy nor cut its red tape enough to attract foreign investors. Rafsanjani did not capitalize on either the Bush or Clinton teams' subtle overtures to restore ties with the United States, and by the time he left office in 1997, all EU states had withdrawn their ambassadors from Tehran, charging Iranian agents of assassinating dissidents in exile.

Instead of campaigning on his record, Rafsanjani chose to emphasize future policies if he were elected. Perhaps more than any other candidate, Rafsanjani's camp insisted that this seasoned politician, with his revolutionary credentials and experience in the Islamic Republic's labyrinthine factional struggles, was the only man who could reinvigorate the economy, resolve the nuclear dispute with the West and normalize relations with Washington.

In contrast to Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad focused his campaign on the poor and the middle class. The hard-line Tehran mayor never missed a chance in the election campaign to promote himself as a friend of the poor, complaining he had trouble paying phone bills and proudly styling himself as a lowly "street sweeper". There was a massive vote by impoverished voters in favor of Ahmadinejad, who wanted to show their dissatisfaction with the policies of the past 16 years when successive governments did not worry about the lower classes.

According to economists, there is a massive class gulf in Iran, where some 76 per cent of the national income goes to just 10 percent of the population, "In a place where the rich buy a Mercedes or a BMW for more than 110,000 dollars and civil servants get less than 220 dollars a month, you cannot feel anything other than a great sense of injustice."

For his supporters, Ahmadinejad is the man to change this, having sacked municipal officials in Tehran over corruption and already hitting out at the oil ministry for letting one "family" control the country's oil wealth. In his election film, an explicit comparison was made between the luxurious villa of the former mayor of Tehran, now a museum, and Ahmadinejad's modest dwelling, an old house in a low-income area.

While hardliners are jubilant that Ahmadinejad won, they should be careful not to view this as a Conservative mandate. Following the first round, there were more votes leaning towards the center-left, than towards the hard-line camp. In light of this evidence, there are two possibilities that explain Ahmadinejad's surprise win; 1) a recomposition of the electorate (i.e. first round failures demobilized liberal votes while mobilizing conservative votes), 2) a voter shift (i.e. some five million voters transferred their vote from left leaning candidates to the conservative candidate). A combination of the two possibilities is likely to have occurred.

Reformists were reluctant to line up behind Hashemi Rafsanjani. This lack of enthusiasm likely emboldened allegations that he has grown rich from his two decades of political dealings and injured his chances of carrying the 11 million Reformist votes in the second round. Although Ahmadinejad is an ultra-conservative candidate, Rafsanjani's personal status symbolizes the generation that has ineffectively run the country since the 1979 revolution. It is likely that a number of liberal voters shifted towards Ahmadinejad in protest to Rafsanjani.

Conversely, most hard-line candidates had fallen to the back of the pack after early suggestions that the ninth presidential election would be a race between Conservative challengers. However, Ahmadinejad represents a new generation of conservative Iranians that have risen in the shadows of multi-millionaire clerics. He ran a campaign based on promises to end corruption and protect workers and small-business owners. The Reformist slogans of democracy, human rights, and freedom were eclipsed by Ahmadinejad's campaign of social justice and criticism of the rich, embodied by Rafsanjani.

Although one cannot deny Ahmadinejad's success, the country remains divided. Only six million voters view Ahmadinejad as their first choice, ten million voters chose Rafsanjani in the second round, and another twenty million voters failed to cast their votes at all, many in protest to the regime's lack of substantive democracy. The nature of a run off election perpetuates the myth of a landslide victory. It should be noted that Ahmadinejad received 63% of the total votes cast in the run off, only about 37% of all eligible voters. Contrast this with President Khatami's 1997 first round landslide and a different picture is apparent. In 1997, 80% of eligible voters participated, 70% cast their vote for Khatami in the first round and a real majority of eligible voters were united behind the newly elected President. Ahmadinejad's victory was not an electoral landslide and in the haze of victory one should not misunderstand the results of the runoff election as a mandate.

Although Ahmadinejad campaigned on a populist platform based on Islamic and Iranian nationalism, the implications of his win may not be drastic. He will be faced with the political realities of commanding an oil economy, the unnecessary crippling impact of hostile relations with the United States, and the difficulties in guarding Iran from an international community concerned about the direction of its nuclear development.

The new President has spoken of wholesale change in key government ministries, including the oil and foreign ministries. But to purge these technocrats would be unwise, as the hard-line base that supported Ahmadinejad, primarily the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij, are built for conflict not national development. The Conservatives simply do not have the technocratic manpower to staff key ministry positions. The business elite, intelligentsia and technocrats, who all supported Rafsanjani, will have to be co-opted if Ahmadinejad intends to achieve domestic development.

Iran's leadership claims its legitimacy rests on divine sovereignty, yet it has established mechanisms for popular participation in decision-making. This paradox has at once ensured the Islamic Republic's survival and produced gridlock in the national discourse, as decisions over nuclear technology may soon demonstrate. Ahmadinejad's presidency would not necessarily break this impasse and may actually aggravate contradictions and conflicts within the system. As much as the new President may want to address the domestic economic problems of corruption and unemployment, he has to take immediate actions to diffuse the nuclear stand-off with Washington and its European allies. This is the most serious foreign policy crises for the Islamic Republic since its war with Iraq.

Meanwhile, most Iranians realize what their leaders have not yet explicitly admitted that their government cannot relate to them or tackle their concerns as long as it is run by both the elected representatives of the people and the unelected representatives of God on earth.

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