

# Iran's Presidential Elections, Islamic Populism and Liberation Theology

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In Iran's presidential elections, on June 12, 2009, the incumbent president Mahmud Ahmadinejad won a landslide victory. His main contender Mir-Hossein Mousavi could only secure about one third of the votes. The following is an explanation of what has happened and why Ahmadinejad has gained popularity to be reelected despite the Western media showing him differently.

## Iran's Presidential Elections 2009

A day before the election, the Iranian political activist Nasser Zarafshan said "a Ukraine-type velvet revolution" is in the cards to be played by the West in order to dominate Iran. A well financed high-tech campaign using YouTube, Facebook and twitter on the Internet and text messaging communication was underway in Iran. Yet, these means of communication are only known to a small fraction of Iran's population. In addition, thousands of expensive posters, CDs, and other items prepared by pro-Mousavi green camp quickly flooded the streets of Tehran. The Western Media and especially the Farsi Language television programs such as the Persian BBC and Voice of America had potent impacts on the so called "reformists" or the neoliberal candidates' supporters, but not Ahmadinejad's constituencies that are masses not affected by such modern propagandas. The Western media boasted Mousavi's image without knowing much about who he was. Obviously, he could not be painted as "Iran's Gandhi" as some Western reporters ridiculously touted. Mousavi is not a charismatic leader and does not have an impressive record. In fact he was an Islamic fanatic when he became prime minister. He helped to shut down the Iranian universities for three years in order to launch the so called "Cultural Revolution". Also, during his repressive premiership, thousands of Iranian political prisoners were executed. He has been out of politics for about 20 years and has not been socially active. He does not have broad view of what is happening in the world and especially in the neighboring countries.

In this election, behind the scene, the former president Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani was the key architect of Mousavi's election campaign and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei backed Ahmadinejad. Rafsanjani wishes to dominate the Islamic regime's political structure replacing the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who is at the top echelon of the clerical regime. Rafsanjani is very wealthy and is the most favorite cleric by the West. He does not seem to mind letting the West control Iran's oil resources in exchange for ruling Iran by himself. In the past, people have called him "King Akbar". In such situation, if he succeeds, the Islamic Republic could be turned into a Persian Gulf type monarchy or sheikhdom instead of a Western democracy as is dreamed by some Iranian political elites. However, Rafsanjani has been under pressure because of his corruption in arms purchases during Iran-Iraq war and the money he and his family members received to give oil contracts to the French oil

company Total and his roles in ordering political assassinations of many of dissidents at home and abroad. Before the elections, Mousavi's campaign spent conspicuously in the city of Tehran under the banner of Green color. Where he got the money from is an unanswered question.

The Presidential candidates in Iran are vetted by a twelve member body that is called Council of Guardian. In this election only three candidates from within the Islamic regime were selected by the Guardian Council to contest Ahmadinejad; the other nominees were not allowed to run. In the election, the incumbent President faced the last Iranian prime minister, Mir-Hossein Mousavi; a cleric and a former Parliament speaker, Mehdi Karroubi; and a former senior military commander, Mohsen Rezaei. However, none of the three contenders were delivering any new agenda on how to deal with the countries' problems; they only criticized what the incumbent president had not done well in their view. Nearly 40 million Iranians or 85% of the eligible voters participated in the election. This was the highest turnout in ten presidential elections held in Iran. The official results as announced on June 14 by the Interior Ministry were: Ahmadinejad 24.5 million (63.62%), Mousavi 13.2 million (33.75%), Rezaei 0.67 million (1.73%), and Karroubi 0.33 million (0.85%) of the votes. The invalid votes canceled were 0.40 million (1.4%). The Spokesman for the Interior Ministry Ali Asghar Sharifi-Rad said the results were accurate and the representatives of all candidates had been present at the polling stations and signed off the final tallies.

### **Disputing the Election Results**

Surprisingly, some well known Iranians became tools of Western media propaganda during and after the elections. An Iranian professor at Columbia University, an Iranian academic in the Hoover Institution, and a well known Iranian filmmaker residing in France were among many who jumped the bandwagon to claim the election was rigged. None of them showed any credible evidence to prove how a candidate who had more than 10 million votes compared to his main contender was not legitimately elected. Many filled the media with false claims, saying genuine results could not be declared as fast as they had been by the Iranian media. They misled the public because in reality about 3 hours after the poles were closed, Iranian media started announcing the election results of only 20% of the votes counted, and that was followed with more up-to-date data until the final tallies were announced at a later time. At the end, the announced results in favor of the incumbent were close to what had been predicted by several respected polling agencies (for example see The Washington Post June 15) in the runoff to the elections.

The three candidates who did not have any credible evidence for the alleged rigging asked for annulling the elections from the very beginning. They never wanted a recount because their representatives had been present at the polling stations and had already signed off on the results. They knew the numbers were not on their side as was largely predicted. In the following days, the main contender, Mousavi, brought his supporters to the streets of Tehran, the only major city he had won, to pressure the regime for annulling the results. This did not prevent millions of Iranians from coming out to the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities to express their support for the status quo versus the West campaign to put its most favorite candidate who was Rafsanjani's proxy in power. After a few days of protests in the streets of Tehran in which a number of people were killed; on June 19 in a powerful speech at Tehran University, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei called for an end to street protests and assured the public that the government by no means had betrayed the votes of the nation. He blamed the Zionists and the Western powers, "specially

the malicious British government”, for the post election protests and the riots.

### **Ahmadinejad’s Populism**

In 2005, Ahmadinejad advocated populist economic policies during his presidential campaign, which included “putting oil money on impoverished peoples’ dining table (Sofreh).” As a result, he gained strong grassroots’ support from urban poor and rural dwellers. Ahmadinejad became the first enduring non-cleric president who wanted to pursue the initial goals of the revolution that included economic justice and political sovereignty. When he became president, he implemented some small-scale development projects, including building hospitals, bridges, roads, and schools in the rural areas, financed by the oil money. Ahmadinejad gained support from underprivileged Iranians who favor his economic justice program. He was also supported by those who believe he has promoted Iran’s technological and defense progress. There are about three million impoverished women in Iran who weave carpets in their homes. Ahmadinejad brought a law to give them full insurance. Also, Ahmadinejad initiated distribution of some government-owned enterprises’ shares called “Justice Shares,” to redistribute state wealth to the low income Iranians. Justice shares are mutual fund shares of the state-owned enterprises that are privatized.

The election in Iran depicted a class struggle between those who live comfortably in modern urban centers and want Western style social life versus impoverished people in rural areas and smaller cities who seek better life in the traditional Islamic culture. The former had strong support from the West for social change, while the latter relied on the status quo in the country. The affluent Iranians do not like Ahmadinejad but the urban poor and those in the rural areas love him. As has been reported by the Christian Science Monitor, Ahmadinejad is greeted like a rock star when he visits small cities and rural Iran.

Some university professors and student groups do not like Ahmadinejad because they consider him to be an Islamic fanatic. In December 2005, Abbasali Amir Zanjani, a cleric was appointed the Chancellor of Tehran University. The appointment caused strong backlash from the intellectuals and the university students against the President. Zanjani was finally replaced in February 2008 by an economist Farhad Rahbar. Also, early forced retirement of a number of professors in Tehran University caused wide student protests. Tehran University is the first university established in Iran and has been historically the center of intellectual activism. As a result, Ahmadinejad became unpopular within some circles of Iranian intellectuals. But that has not affected his popularity among the majority of lower-middle class and impoverished Iranians.

### **Radical Islam and Liberation Theology**

Ahmadinejad has been able to make alliance with some countries in Latin America. Latin America’s Catholic Church and radical Islam have something in common. Both religious movements have support of the masses to challenge domination of their countries by the Western imperial powers. There is a similarity between radical Islamists in Iran and the supporters of liberal theologians’ movements in Latin America. They both have common ideology to resist the West hegemony. Liberation theology, originated in Catholic Church, emphasizes effort to bring justice to the poor and oppressed. Liberation theology uses democratic socialism as a political theory to combat poverty. Radical Islam similarly uses political aspects of Islam as a force for creating national liberation and economic justice. Ali Shariati is known to be the first Islamist thinker who merged Islam political ideology and

liberation theology. He was influenced by Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara, but unlike them who rejected religion in supporting national liberation, Shariati tailored Iran's Islamic ideological roots as a means to mobilize masses for national liberation. However, Shariati was against clerical rule. He died mysteriously before the revolution in 1977, widely believed to be a victim of the Shah's secret police (Savak) assassination. He did not live to see the clerics dominating political leadership in Iran.

Ahmadinejad pursues the same brand of Islamic radicalism as Shariati. He has been able to use religion to challenge the hegemony of the West as the liberation theologian leaders have done in Latin America. In this context Ahmadinejad joins similar brand of political figures such as Luiz Lula da Silva of Brazil, Hugo Chavez Venezuela, Ecuador's President Rafael Correa, and Bolivian President Evo Morales who enjoy popularity among the Roman Catholic Church followers. However, there is an important distinction between the Islamic Republic and the Latin American governments. The Islamic Republic is a quasi-theocracy run by the clerics, while the Latin American countries are secular republics that are only supported by the Church. In the past, some Muslim political leaders have advocated Islamic Socialism. Examples are: Mohamed Ali Jinnah and Zulfakar Ali Bhutto in Pakistan, and Jamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt. Ahmadinejad too has strived for a socially just Islamic State in Iran. It remains to be seen whether he can succeed.

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