A Stunning Election? Maybe Not

Ali Akbar Mahdi

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the Islamic Republic of Iran's seventh president was a surprise for everyone but his campaign staff and immediate supporters. Most reformists attributed his success to organized support and campaign machinations received from the organized forces of the Basij (mobilized forces), Pasdaran (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), Bonyads (various economic and welfare foundations controlled by the conservatives), and Friday Prayer Leaders in local mosques.

For conservatives, Ahmadinejad's victory was the result of his sound programs addressing problems of mismanagement, corruption, and economic inequality. Moreover, to them, the election proved that the values upon which the Islamic Republic was established are still relevant and the majority of Iranians would like to see the original message of the Revolution reaffirmed.

Although by fielding several candidates the conservatives appeared divided, they came to the game with energy, organization, network, and a set of unified principles. They appeared content with at least three of their four candidates (Ali Larjani, Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, and Mahmoud Ahmadi-nejad) and watched each during the campaign process, noting the electorate's reaction to their personalities and messages. They adjusted their support to these reactions and moved quickly at the end to invest their energy and support in the candidate they thought would be the most attractive—Ahmadinejad.

These flexible campaign tactics paid off handsomely. Reportedly, three days prior to Election Day, the conservatives' support was transferred from Qalibaf to Ahmadinejad, whose campaign slogans emphasized economic rather than political issues. The conservatives also concentrated their efforts in rural areas and small towns. With their organized network, they were able to give Ahmadinejad enough support to push him into the second round, though reportedly with a degree of machination and electoral manipulation, especially in the two provinces of Tehran and Isfahan.

Clueless about these maneuvers and keen on a quick explanation of these developments to their audiences, Western journalists and pundits, as well as many of their Middle Eastern counterparts, saw the election results as a revolt of the poor masses against the rich. Ahmadinejad's victory was viewed as a successful campaign representing him as a Robin Hood fighting against a rich and corrupt establishment candidate, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Was this the case? Only partially so. Here are some factors contributing to the complicated realities of this election and to the complexities of Iranian politics and society:

1. Reformists failed both to read their competitors' hands correctly and to develop a unified and comprehensive strategy to defeat them. The fact that the conservatives had not been able to agree on one candidate for the first round gave the reformists the impression that their own candidate, Mostafa Moin, could garner the necessary votes to advance to the elections second round. Assured that they had the right message, the reformists focused on the urban population and ran an emotional and appealing campaign with the message of reconstruction of the country on the basis of nationalism, democracy, and human rights. This was a highly abstract message, far removed from the concrete social problems confronted by the rural and urban poor. Besides, the reformists did not have adequate organization and network in these areas to deliver their message. In the second round of the election, they further confused the electorate by supporting Rafsanjani—a person whose policies they had criticized during their tenure in power.

2. Although the opposition campaign to boycott the election did not have a decisive role in the election, it did contribute to a lower level of support for reformist candidates, especially during the first round. In this round 62.6% of eligible voters participated, 17.16% less than 79.92% for the 1997 presidential election that brought Mohammad Khatami to power. In terms of numbers, more people voted in the 1997 election (29,145,745) than in the 2005 election (28,317,089) despite the fact that the number of eligible voters was almost 10 million more in this latest election. If we take into account the increased percentage of nullified vote in this round (which is incidentally one of the highest in the history of elections on Iran, rising from 1.8% in the 8th presidential election to over 4%), we can conclude that more than a fifth of eligible votes that voted in the 1997 election either abstained or voted for none of the officially approved candidates. This boycott did have an influence on the first round and it could have changed the outcome, if we assume these votes were primarily for reformist candidates. This is not a particularly off the mark assumption if, for instance, we take into account the effect of the boycott on students, who were a major force in the election of President Khatami in the past two elections.

3. The conservatives introduced three candidates and continued to support all three throughout the first round until it became clear to them that Ahmadinejad had the least of negatives working against him. A last minute shift by clerics influential in rural and small towns and the conservative establishment helped Ahmadinejad to advance to the second round.

4. Once in the run-off, Ahmadinejad easily succeeded due to several factors. First, the reformists were not unified in their support for Rafsanjani. Second, Rafsanjani was a candidate with a baggage full of negatives (old age, corruption, Machiavellianism, an old guard presumably sitting on the top of a financial empire, his presumed role in past cultural repression and murder of dissidents, etc.). These negatives all worked in the favor of Ahmadinejad who has been as much a part of the establishment as Rafsanjani, but an invisible one. Third, Ahmadinejad's campaign style, very simple and modest on the surface, registered better with morally conscious voters who did not appreciate the highly commercialized and modern campaign advertising techniques used by Qalibaf, reformist Mostafa Moin, and Rafsanjani. Finally, Ahmadinejad's cultivated reputation for being against waste and cumbersome bureaucratic rules proved attractive to some businesses and male upper middle class managers.

The above show that Ahmadinejad did much more than just portray himself as a supporter of the poor. To show that he is neither a champion of poor against the rich nor received all his support from the poor the following facts also need to be considered:

1. Ahmadinejad received around or above 65 percent of the vote in the well-to-do provinces of Gazvin, Isfahan, Yazd, Gilan, Qom, Western Azerbaijan, and Mazandaran. He did receive over 70 percent of the vote in Chahar Mahal and Bakhtarni, but did not do as well (in low 50s or even below 50 percent) in some other poorer provinces such as Ilam, Bushehr, Sistan and Baluchestan, Khorasan, and Lorestan.

2. In border provinces such as Kordestan, continued on page 5
Kermanshah, Western and Eastern Azerbaijan, Sistan, Baluchestan, and Khuzestan, ethnicity was the most important variable explaining electoral behavior. In none of the above provinces Ahmadinejad received the highest percentage of vote in the first round. In the second round, Rafsanjani won in Sistan and Baluchestan, and although Ahmadinejad won in both Kermanshah and Kordestan, the vote for him was below 50 percent (with both provinces registering relatively high percentages of nullified votes and low voter turnout – 25 percent in Kordestan and 51 percent in Kermanshah). In West and East Azerbaijan, Ahmadinejad won handily in the second round but with low voter turnouts of 46 percent in East Azerbaijan and 37 percent in West Azerbaijan.

3. In the first round, in more than half of the provinces, particularly in poorer ones, Hojattol-e-Mehdi Karrubi, who had promised additional monthly income of 50,000 rials to all Iranians over 18 years of age, had higher votes than Ahmadinejad.

4. In the run-off, Ahmadinejad received the conservative vote from all social classes, not just the lower classes.

5. Ahmadinejad’s votes in the run-off crisscrossed all social categories. Many people within the same family voted for different candidates, even in affluent Tehran.

6. The conservative success of Ahmadinejad’s victory was not replicated in several mid-term parliamentary elections that coincided with the presidential election, including in Tehran.

The above show that Iran is a much more complicated place than it is depicted by the Western media and the Iranian people are much more diverse in their views and interests than represented in analyses of Iran. The poor certainly helped Ahmadinejad to come to power and he was an astute campaigner to utilize his humble past and simple lifestyle to his advantage, but he is neither the champion of poor nor can he be independent of the large, wealthy, and powerful establishments that supported his rise to power. The conservatives, after all, are as guilty as the reformists for ignoring the poor. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Iranian economy has literally been run by the bazaar merchants, conservative-run economic and welfare foundations (bonyads), centrist technocrats, and the newly-rich class who are mostly sons (Agbazadeh-ha) and relatives of various state-connected clerics. Ahmadinejad has risen to power because of, and not despite of, this establishment.

Ali Akbar Mahdi is a professor of sociolog at the Ohio Wesleyan University