



The Iranian Protests: No Clarity amidst Confusion

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Iran is among a handful of the Muslim countries that has developed the tradition for a smooth transfer of power. However, the current crisis is likely to generate far-reaching implications for Iranian politics. The huge demonstrations last week suggest significant resistance to Ahmadinejad's rule, which is broadly considered to be very conservative. By inference, one can allude that a sizeable minority in Iran sought a greater relaxation of state intervention in the social and individual space, in addition to a greater degree of plurality. A number of uncannily similar observations rang out jarringly in Iran over the past week, somewhat akin to a variety of contentious political processes worldwide in recent memory.

Dominant Western political leaders routinely act as the extra-democratic legitimising force on electoral contests in the third world, especially where authoritarianism or non-democratic regimes are in power. Much of the gravity of recent crises in the developing world is sustained and even aggravated by Western political leadership, often culminating in the outright rejection of election results. In some cases, some of these elections are genuinely fraudulent. In others, reality was somewhat more nuanced.

In the case of Iran, the credibility of the election was questioned by the governments of Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Australia, Canada, Norway, Israel, Japan and some others. The French president labelled the election as 'fraud', while the British and American leaderships employed cautious diplomatic words like 'concerned', signalling a less than emphatic position in favour of the protesters. The leadership in the Czech Republic even demanded an inquiry over the election results. However, governments of another circle that included Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Belorussia, China, India, Lebanon, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Qatar, Syria, Yemen, North Korea, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Venezuela endorsed the results. But as we have come to recognise in this age of first-world owned cable networks, it was the first rung of countries whose leaders' opinions were regularly reflected in the media.

The post-election crisis created an opportunity for dissident Iranian expatriates in Europe and the United States to sexy up the event and makes it politically sensual. Commentators on CNN and BBC sometimes even relied on unsubstantiated twitter messages, dreamt up imaginative storylines and event-analysis that portrayed the Iranian regime as an evil monster. However, others sought a more balanced view in the absence of in-situ access and journalistic rigour, arguing that the protests may not have been anti-establishment, but rather, a manifestation of the demand for greater electoral reform and dissatisfaction with economic performance of Ahmadinejad. Some analysts also pointed out that the demonstration did not necessarily suggest the popularity of Moussavi, neither did it deny the solid popularity of Ahmadinejad.

While the vote counting was still on, both Moussavi and Ahmadinejad claimed victory in election. However, the final results of the election announced that out of about 41 million voters, close to 39 million (38,755,802 or 98.95 per cent) of the valid votes were cast. Of the top two candidates, Ahmadinejad received more than 24.5 million (24,527,516 or 62.63 per cent), while Moussavi garnered slightly above 13 million (13,216,411 or 33.75 per cent) votes. And out of 234,812 overseas votes, Ahmadinejad received 78,300 while Moussavi won an impressive 111,792 votes. The interior ministry declared Ahmadinejad as the winner with in excess of an 11 million-vote margin. Moussavi claimed in a news conference that the election was rigged. Encouraged by Moussavi's claim, his supporters took to the street in thousands and some resorted to violence. This echoed protests in Western capitals such as Paris, Berlin, London, Rome,

Sydney, Vienna and Washington, with placards “where is my vote,” “down with dictator,” and “give my vote back.” Moussavi rejected an offer of a partial recount and instead claimed on an Arab TV network that the vote rigging was planned two months earlier, and that for the people’s rights, he was willing to embrace martyrdom.

A series of questions emerged out of the crisis. The most important of all was – what if there was little or no substantive electoral fraud and Ahmadinejad indeed won the election? This is a legitimate question because even if Moussavi appeared to be popular during election campaign, Ahmadinejad is said to have commanded a solid popularity among the vast rural voters, and even in the southern part of the capital Tehran. Out of 30 unofficial opinion polls during March 5 to June 11, the support for Ahmadinejad was found to be solid in most cases. For instance, the Iranian Students Polling Association (ISPA) in its June 10 nationwide survey found Ahmadinejad 47 against Moussavi 31 per cent, and on 29 May the same survey revealed 54.8 for Ahmadinejad and 21.3 against Moussavi. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) in June 7 poll found that in 30 major cities, Ahmadinejad was leading by 62.7 percent over his rival Moussavi who recorded 25.7 per cent. In addition, an earlier poll financed by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and conducted from May 11-20 by Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion, found that Ahmadinejad was leading by 34% over Moussavi who could only muster 14%. The poll was quoted by Reuters, Khaleej Times and Jim Muir of BBC News. These pre-election poll results question the validity of the alleged election fraud.

Iran’s current travails are not tied to the Jun 12 election. They began earlier and are symptomatic of the greater degree of democratisation the post-1979 Islamic system of government was supposed to engender. The hard reality of an increasing number of unemployed graduates in Iran, coupled with double-digit inflation and the widespread reach of virtual interface communication technologies should force the Iranian authorities to rethink the nature of state-society relations it should foster.

The consensus over the religious space appears divided. As Iran is often implicated for regional troubles, certain foreign elements may also find avenues to exacerbate disgruntled Iranian youth and society to create instability inside Iran. Regardless whether the latter prospect is true or not, Iran’s problems are more fundamental. China appeared to exorcise the ghost of Tiananmen with double-digit growth. Double-digit inflation presents a more challenging starting point for Iran. The bigger question of the Islamic state’s ability to accommodate modern, diverse and even contentious politics, flummoxes even more.

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