

Ahmadinejad Won. Get Over It

by Flynt and Hillary Leverett via gan - Politico *Tuesday, Jun 16 2009, 9:56pm*

international / social/political / other press

Another take on Iranian elections

Without any evidence, many U.S. politicians and “Iran experts” have dismissed Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s re-election Friday, with 62.6 percent of the vote, as fraud.

They ignore the fact that Ahmadinejad’s 62.6 percent of the vote in this year’s election is essentially the same as the 61.69 percent he received in the final count of the 2005 presidential election, when he trounced former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. The shock of the “Iran experts” over Friday’s results is entirely self-generated, based on their preferred assumptions and wishful thinking.

Although Iran’s elections are not free by Western standards, the Islamic Republic has a 30-year history of highly contested and competitive elections at the presidential, parliamentary and local levels. Manipulation has always been there, as it is in many other countries.

But upsets occur — as, most notably, with Mohammed Khatami’s surprise victory in the 1997 presidential election. Moreover, “blowouts” also occur — as in Khatami’s reelection in 2001, Ahmadinejad’s first victory in 2005 and, we would argue, this year.

Like much of the Western media, most American “Iran experts” overstated Mir Hossein Mousavi’s “surge” over the campaign’s final weeks. More important, they were oblivious — as in 2005 — to Ahmadinejad’s effectiveness as a populist politician and campaigner. American “Iran experts” missed how Ahmadinejad was perceived by most Iranians as having won the nationally televised debates with his three opponents — especially his debate with Mousavi.

Before the debates, both Mousavi and Ahmadinejad campaign aides indicated privately that they perceived a surge of support for Mousavi; after the debates, the same aides concluded that Ahmadinejad’s provocatively impressive performance and Mousavi’s desultory one had boosted the incumbent’s standing. Ahmadinejad’s charge that Mousavi was supported by Rafsanjani’s sons — widely perceived in Iranian society as corrupt figures — seemed to play well with voters.

Similarly, Ahmadinejad’s criticism that Mousavi’s reformist supporters, including Khatami, had been willing to suspend Iran’s uranium enrichment program and had won nothing from the West for doing so tapped into popular support for the program — and had the added advantage of being true.

More fundamentally, American “Iran experts” consistently underestimated Ahmadinejad’s base of support. Polling in Iran is notoriously difficult; most polls there are less than fully professional and, hence, produce results of questionable validity. But the one poll conducted before Friday’s election by a Western organization that was transparent about its methodology — a telephone poll carried out by the Washington-based Terror-Free Tomorrow from May 11 to 20 — found Ahmadinejad running 20 points ahead of Mousavi. This poll was conducted before the televised debates in which, as noted above, Ahmadinejad was perceived to have done well while Mousavi did poorly.

American “Iran experts” assumed that “disastrous” economic conditions in Iran would undermine Ahmadinejad’s reelection prospects. But the International Monetary Fund projects that Iran’s economy will actually grow modestly this year (when the economies of most Gulf Arab states are in recession). A significant number of Iranians — including the religiously pious, lower-income groups, civil servants and pensioners — appear to believe that Ahmadinejad’s policies have benefited them.

And, while many Iranians complain about inflation, the TFT poll found that most Iranian voters do not hold Ahmadinejad responsible. The “Iran experts” further argue that the high turnout on June 12 — 82 percent of the electorate — had to favor Mousavi. But this line of analysis reflects nothing more than assumptions.

Some “Iran experts” argue that Mousavi’s Azeri background and “Azeri accent” mean that he was guaranteed to win Iran’s Azeri-majority provinces; since Ahmadinejad did better than Mousavi in these areas, fraud is the only possible explanation.

But Ahmadinejad himself speaks Azeri quite fluently as a consequence of his eight years serving as a popular and successful official in two Azeri-majority provinces; during the campaign, he artfully quoted Azeri and Turkish poetry — in the original — in messages designed to appeal to Iran’s Azeri community. (And we should not forget that the supreme leader is Azeri.) The notion that Mousavi was somehow assured of victory in Azeri-majority provinces is simply not grounded in reality.

With regard to electoral irregularities, the specific criticisms made by Mousavi — such as running out of ballot paper in some precincts and not keeping polls open long enough (even though polls stayed open for at least three hours after the announced closing time) — could not, in themselves, have tipped the outcome so clearly in Ahmadinejad’s favor.

Moreover, these irregularities do not, in themselves, amount to electoral fraud even by American legal standards. And, compared with the U.S. presidential election in Florida in 2000, the flaws in Iran’s electoral process seem less significant.

In the wake of Friday’s election, some “Iran experts” — perhaps feeling burned by their misreading of contemporary political dynamics in the Islamic Republic — argue that we are witnessing a “conservative coup d’état,” aimed at a complete takeover of the Iranian state.

But one could more plausibly suggest that if a “coup” is being attempted, it has been mounted by the losers in Friday’s election. It was Mousavi, after all, who declared victory on Friday even before Iran’s polls closed. And three days before the election, Mousavi supporter Rafsanjani published a letter criticizing the leader’s failure to rein in Ahmadinejad’s resort to “such ugly and sin-infected phenomena as insults, lies and false allegations.” Many Iranians took this letter as an indication that the Mousavi camp was concerned their candidate had fallen behind in the campaign’s closing days.

In light of these developments, many politicians and “Iran experts” argue that the Obama administration cannot now engage the “illegitimate” Ahmadinejad regime. Certainly, the administration should not appear to be trying to “play” in the current controversy in Iran about the election. In this regard, President Barack Obama’s comments on Friday, a few hours before the polls closed in Iran, that “just as has been true in Lebanon, what can be true in Iran as well is that you’re seeing people looking at new possibilities” was extremely maladroit.

From Tehran’s perspective, this observation undercut the credibility of Obama’s acknowledgement, in his Cairo speech earlier this month, of U.S. complicity in overthrowing a democratically elected Iranian government and restoring the shah in 1953.

The Obama administration should vigorously rebut any argument against engaging Tehran following Friday's vote. More broadly, Ahmadinejad's victory may force Obama and his senior advisers to come to terms with the deficiencies and internal contradictions in their approach to Iran. Before the Iranian election, the Obama administration had fallen for the same illusion as many of its predecessors — the illusion that Iranian politics is primarily about personalities and finding the right personality to deal with. That is not how Iranian politics works.

The Islamic Republic is a system with multiple power centers; within that system, there is a strong and enduring consensus about core issues of national security and foreign policy, including Iran's nuclear program and relations with the United States. Any of the four candidates in Friday's election would have continued the nuclear program as Iran's president; none would agree to its suspension.

Any of the four candidates would be interested in a diplomatic opening with the United States, but that opening would need to be comprehensive, respectful of Iran's legitimate national security interests and regional importance, accepting of Iran's right to develop and benefit from the full range of civil nuclear technology — including pursuit of the nuclear fuel cycle — and aimed at genuine rapprochement.

Such an approach would also, in our judgment, be manifestly in the interests of the United States and its allies throughout the Middle East. It is time for the Obama administration to get serious about pursuing this approach — with an Iranian administration headed by the reelected President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

[An interesting issue arises if Ahmadinejad did indeed utilise the G W Bush election-winning 'strategy.'

We note the passionate reaction of the Iranian people to intimations of corruption, compare the cowardly paralysis of the American people when confronting possible crimes and irregularities committed by its leaders!

Perhaps the real story relates to the inability of the American people to (re-)act in their own interests; consider the horrendous TORTURE scandal confronting the nation and the deplorable (criminal) civilian killing record of the U.S. military -- either way Iran comes out on TOP! Ed.]

© 2009 Capitol News Company LLC

<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0609/23745.html>

Cleaves Alternative News. <http://cleaves.lingama.net/news/story-1606.html>