

Defeat of Rafsanjani Poses New Dangers

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Every Iranian I have spoken with over the past two months about the June 17 Presidential election, whether political figures, journalists, or ordinary citizens, including those living abroad, was unhesitatingly categorical: Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had served in that position for two terms between 1989-97 would win hands down. Yet, when election day came rolling around, a shock was delivered: Frontrunner Rafsanjani emerged in first place, but with no clear majority, only 21.2% of the vote. In addition, the candidates who came in behind him in early election results, just as predicted in pre-election polls—such as former Parliament speaker Mahdi Karroubi and reformist candidate Mustafa Moin, followed by former police chief Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf—suddenly found their slots juggled, and another man, Tehran mayor Mahmood Ahmadinejad, jumped up to second place with 19.1%. An unprecedented run-off election was announced between the two leading candidates, for June 24. Ahmadinejad won, in a landslide victory.

What happened?

Rafsanjani's candidacy was clearly an institutional decision. Given the failure of reform President Mohammed Seyyed Khatami to implement democratic changes in the system (for which he had received an overwhelming mandate in 1997, and been re-elected in 2001), it was deemed appropriate to opt for a more conservative figure, who had the domestic and international backing required to effect reforms. Khatami had been blocked by the powerful Guardians Council, which vets both electoral candidates and legislative proposals in the Majlis (Parliament). Students demonstrating for reforms found themselves confronted by police and the paramilitary Basiji. In order to force through real changes, Khatami, according to Tehran sources, would have had to mobilize the masses behind him onto the streets, something which could have carried the risk of social confrontation, and even civil strife.

Rafsanjani's Broad Power Base

Ironically, although he is not in the reform camp, and indeed is disliked by the reformists, Rafsanjani is seen as someone who would be capable of implementing change. Why? Simply because he represents a power base which is broader and stronger than that of Khatami. Rafsanjani was, as noted, President for eight years. Immediately after the cata-

strophic 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, which cost both nations millions of casualties, President Rafsanjani led an ambitious reconstruction effort, which involved launching numerous infrastructure projects. After his second term, when he could not by law run again, he became the head of the Expediency Council, an important institution tasked with mediating between the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and a majority reformist parliament, whenever a conflict arose. This Rafsanjani did, managing in several critical junctures to find negotiated solutions and prevent civil strife.

As Iranian sources note, Rafsanjani also has a base of support in the religious institution, the Hawza, based in the holy city of Qom. And he has an economic power base inside the country.

Most important, Rafsanjani has a wide, high-level network of international contacts, including connections inside the United States. One of his leading campaign themes was the need to improve relations with the United States, even to the point of reaching normalization. In a CNN interview, he said, "I am going for a policy of relaxation and detente and this is a policy that I will apply to the United States as well." He continued to demand that the United States make the first move, for example, by releasing frozen Iranian assets.

When he placed his ballot in the ballot box, in front of international television cameras, Rafsanjani made a cryptic remark, to the effect that, since the U.S. posture has shifted recently, there was reason to believe that relations between Washington and Tehran could be improved. It is not clear what Rafsanjani was referring to, but the remark, more than a campaign promise, hinted that some such understanding had been reached, with some, as-yet publicly unidentified U.S. circles, to move towards a rapprochement. Lyndon LaRouche, when informed of the results of what became the first round, hypothesized that the sudden emergence of arch-conservative Ahmadinejad represented a countermove by neo-conservative forces allied to those inside the United States, to thwart any such move towards reconciliation by a Rafsanjani Presidency.

LaRouche's hypothesis was confirmed in spades on June 24, by a *Financial Times* article entitled, "U.S. hawks rooting for hardline Iranian candidate." The paper cited Brookings Institution analyst Ken Pollack, who said that the Administration was deeply divided, with the "hawks," like Vice President Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, supporting Ahmadinejad, against Rafsanjani, whom they see as splitting the United States from Europe on Iran. The hawks also favor the fundamentalist Ahmadinejad, in hopes that his regime would "more likely precipitate the collapse of the Islamic regime through popular unrest than the 'Chinese model' of social pacification likely to be embraced by Mr. Rafsanjani."

Foul Play and Economic Woes

As soon as the results of the June 17 vote had been announced, the reform camp cried foul play, alleging vote rig-

ging. Karroubi, who was given third place behind Ahmadinejad, addressed a letter to the Supreme Leader, listing his charges of voter manipulation, and demanding assurances that military groups not be allowed to influence the run-off vote. (The groups are the Revolutionary Guards and the Basiji, whom many accused of having intimidated voters.) The party of leading reformist candidate Moin, who ended up in fifth place, also said the vote had been rigged. The Intelligence Ministry dismissed the charges.

Significantly, Rafsanjani, although finishing in first place, also echoed the charges of foul play. In a statement appealing to citizens for the runoff, he said, "I ask for your help to prevent extremism with your massive participation in the second round." He made reference to a "smear campaign against candidates, the unjust questioning of the achievements of the revolution . . . and certain organized actions to orient the vote. If this continues," he warned, "we do not know where it will lead." He also supported Karroubi's initiatives, saying, "I ask officials to examine the complaints, in particular the complaint of my brother Karroubi."

No doubt, strange things occurred on election day. First, Iranian sources report that the final results were announced by the Guardian Council, and not, as is usually the case, by the Interior Ministry. Then, there was the sudden reshuffling of results, and reports of the military groups' interference.

On June 23, the Iranian authorities announced they had arrested 26 people for violations of electoral law, among them a prominent military figure. They are accused of having distributed CDs and pamphlets containing personal, unsubstantiated attacks against candidates. Thus, foul play did indeed take place.

However, here is another factor to be taken into account. As Democratic advisor James Carville said during Bill Clinton's victorious campaign against George H.W. Bush in 1992, "It's the economy, stupid!" As much as the reformists under Khatami had pushed for social change, in the form of more press freedom, better conditions for women, and so on, they did not prioritize economic policies, to address the dramatic rise in unemployment, especially among the young. Ahmadinejad seized on this weakness, and exploited it to the hilt, with his own achievements as mayor.

The 'Robin Hood' Effect

Among those who cast their votes for Ahmadinejad were masses of poor, especially in southern Tehran. As detailed in a profile published June 20 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and confirmed by Tehran-based sources, Mayor Ahmadinejad taxed high-rise buildings in the capital, in order to generate funds for low-cost popular housing projects. He also refused to live in the luxurious mayoral residence, but sold it instead, in order to finance more housing for the poor. He is also credited with having built a lengthy highway and 23 bridges, to relieve the capital's traffic congestion. These economic achievements earned him the support of the poor, or the "little man," who view him as their representative.

Profiling himself as a Robin Hood, who takes from the rich to give to the poor, Ahmadinejad campaigned strongly against Rafsanjani, accusing him of being a candidate of the rich and the corrupt. In a meeting with members of parliament, the candidate stated: "It has been years that oil revenues are practically in the hands of one family and a political gang. This gang of power and fortune," he went on, "is going to confiscate everything in the country." If elected, he pledged he would "sweep out" this family's control, and nationalize public resources. Elsewhere he has called for reversing privatization and launching a national reconstruction program.

According to the cited *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* profile, the Supreme Leader Khamenei settled on Ahmadinejad as his choice, after earlier favorites, like Qalibaf and former head of Islamic Republic Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) Larijani, disappointed his expectations. The German daily cited reports circulating in Tehran, that just weeks prior to the election, a former deputy minister for the intelligence services, Pour-Mohammadi, gathered together pro-Khamenei forces, to recruit them to vote for Ahmadinejad, and to do whatever need be done, to make sure that there would be no runoff between Rafsanjani and reform candidate Moin.

It is in light of such reports, and considering the official accounts of military interference in the polling, that one must read the warnings issued by several reform parties and figures that, if Rafsanjani were to be defeated, the nation could be taken over by military forces. The Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF), which endorsed Rafsanjani for the runoff, stated: "Now the country faces the danger of direct improvement by military parties." The Islamic Revolution Mujahedeen Organization (IRMO) followed suit, saying that Iran was in danger of fascism. A concern shared by broad layers of the population, is that, Ahmadinejad's election will mean that all political institutions are firmly in the grip of the conservatives (since their takeover of parliament in the last elections). Many deem that such a monopoly of power is not acceptable.

Ahmadinejad is profiled as an extremist hardliner, who served as a commander in the Revolutionary Guard. An account by the Arab news agency *Al Jazeera* said that Ahmadinejad had been among the student organizers who took American hostages at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, during the revolution. He is known to be very close to Khamenei, as well as the military and paramilitary forces.

As for foreign policy implications, it must be noted that Ahmadinejad, who has no foreign policy experience whatsoever, has campaigned heavily using revolution-era rhetoric against the United States. He was quoted in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* saying, "With the United States, we will have relations on that day, when we have exported the Islamic revolution onto their territory." His victory will provide the perfect pretext for an acceleration of hostile actions against Iran, by the neo-cons in the United States.