

‘I am not a speck of dirt, I am a retired teacher’

Ervand Abrahamian writes about the protests in Iran

IRAN has a healthy respect for crowds – and for good reason. Crowds brought about the 1906 constitutional revolution. Crowds prevented the Iranian parliament from submitting to a tsarist ultimatum in 1911. Crowds scuttled the 1919 Anglo-Iranian Agreement, which would have in effect incorporated the country into the British Empire. Crowds prevented General Reza Khan from imitating Ataturk and establishing a republic in 1924 – as a compromise he kept the monarchy but named himself shah. Crowds gave the communist Tudeh Party political clout in the brief period of political pluralism between 1941 and 1953. Crowds in 1951-53 gave Mohammad Mosaddegh, the country’s national hero, the power both to take over the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and to challenge the shah’s unconstitutional control of the armed forces. Crowds – aided by clerics – provided a backdrop to the 1953 military coup organised by the CIA and MI5. Crowds in 1963 began what soon became known as Khomeini’s Islamic Movement. And, of course, crowds played the central role in the drama of the 1979 Islamic Revolution – with the result that the new constitution enshrined the right of cit-

izens to hold peaceful street demonstrations.

It was an awareness of the importance of crowds that prompted the regime to rig the presidential elections last month and thus inadvertently trigger the present crisis. In the months before the elections, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had seemed to be a shoe-in for a second four-year term. He enjoyed easy access to the mass media; his competitors were limited to websites and newspapers that were closed down at any provocation. He had won his first term after running a populist campaign against Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president who for many epitomised the regime’s worst features – nepotism, cronyism and financial corruption. He enjoyed the support of Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, who shared his deep distrust of the West and probably his ambition to pursue a nuclear programme at all costs.

Ahmadinejad also had the backing of much of the military-clerical-commercial complex running the country: the Revolutionary Guards and the affiliated Basij militia with more than three million members; the clerical ‘foundations’, quasi-state organisations that employ hundreds of thous-

ands; and the bazaar merchants with their lucrative contracts with central government. He had placed so many former colleagues from the Guards in key positions that some claimed he had carried out a quiet coup d'état. He had consolidated his support among the evangelicals, known in Iran as the 'principalists', by courting Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, an influential rightwing cleric in Qom who sits on Iran's Assembly of Experts; by often referring to the imminent return of the Mahdi (the Messiah); by generously patronising the Jamkaran shrine where the Mahdi was supposedly last seen; and by claiming he had felt his divine presence when denouncing the US before the UN General Assembly. He had channelled the money from the recent oil bonanza into mosque construction, rural projects, government salaries and even cash handouts. He boasted that he was putting the oil money on people's dining tables. Some American presidents win elections by cutting taxes. Ahmadinejad tried to win by handing out potatoes.

What is more, the reform movement seemed divided and disillusioned. In the 2005 elections, faced with a choice between Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani, many reformers had stayed at home. This time, Mohammad Khatami, the reform president between 1997 and 2005, was poised to run, but then withdrew, leaving the reform field to Mir Hussein Mousavi and Ayatollah Mehdi Karroubi. The former, an architect turned academic, had not been seen in the political arena since 1989: between 1981 and 1989 he had served as Khomeini's prime minister. In 1997, reformers had privately asked him to

run for the presidency but he had deferred to Khatami. Like many members of the intelligentsia in his generation, Mousavi had entered politics fired by a mix of Islamic fervour and Fanonist anti-imperialism. But once the revolution had achieved its main goals – the overthrow of the shah and the declaration of independence from the US – many of these militants gradually came round to the view that the Islamic Republic would wither unless it allowed greater democracy, pluralism and individual rights. The reactionary clergy, they realised, now posed the main obstacle to Iranian modernity. Karroubi, a close associate of Khomeini who had served as the speaker of Parliament, head of the Association of Militant Clergy, and director of the Martyrs Foundation, shared many of these sentiments and in one respect was even more liberal, advocating greater privatisation of the economy. He had run in the 2005 elections, gaining much support in his home region, and after the elections had lodged an official complaint that Revolutionary Guards had manipulated the vote in favour of Ahmadinejad. It was generally suspected that the Guardian Council, which has the authority to vet presidential candidates, permitted Karroubi and Mousavi, as well as Mohsen Rezai, the moderate-conservative former commander of the Revolutionary Guards, to run this time because it was confident that they had little chance.

This confidence was reinforced by a pre-election poll taken by a Washington-based organisation called Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion. The poll found that of 1001 Iranians interviewed by

phone from outside Iran, 34 per cent favoured Ahmadinejad; 14 per cent Mousavi; 50 per cent had not yet made up their minds; 80 per cent wanted the constitution to be altered so that the Supreme Leader would be elected directly by the public; 70 per cent wanted to give the UN greater access to the country's nuclear facilities; and 77 per cent wanted better relations with the US. Apologists for the regime who continue to cite this survey ignore these findings, as well as the significance of the name and location of the polling organisation.

Once the actual electoral campaign – by law restricted to just ten days – got started, the race became much tighter. A similarly dramatic shift in public opinion also occurred in 1997. Then the general expectation had been that the well-known conservative candidate would win an easy victory over Khatami, the little known reformer. Yet the latter's campaign had suddenly caught fire: 80 per cent of the electorate came out to vote, and more than 70 per cent supported him. Such volatility is understandable in a country which doesn't have any deep-rooted political parties.

This time three major factors converged to produce a shift in public opinion. The first was the series of six prime-time televised debates, which were watched by almost every household in the country. These debates galvanised the whole electorate. Instead of attacking each other, the challengers focused their fire on Ahmadinejad, concentrating on his economic record. They took turns in showing that reliable statistics – in sharp contrast to those produced by the president – put inflation at 25

per cent, unemployment at 30 per cent, and the number of those living in poverty at a record high. Ahmadinejad tried to change the subject, harping on Rafsanjani's wealth and falsely accusing Mousavi's wife of pulling strings to obtain her doctorate. This angered women and reminded viewers that four of Ahmadinejad's own ministers had claimed phony foreign degrees.

Ahmadinejad was also sharply criticised for damaging national 'honour' – through, for example, his denial of the Holocaust – and for pursuing adventurist foreign policies that isolated Iran and jeopardised its security. His opponents all favoured better relations with the outside world. Ahmadinejad had won the 2005 election by running not only against Rafsanjani but against Bush. This time he had neither. Instead he had to contend with Obama, who had removed the main stumbling-block to negotiations – the prerequisite that Iran should stop all uranium enrichment. He had accepted the right of Iran to have a nuclear programme. He had stopped all talk of 'regime change'. He had apologised for the 1953 coup. He had ended the irritating practice of differentiating between the Iranian government and the Iranian people, and addressed himself to the 'Islamic Republic of Iran'. And he had offered to end economic sanctions if Iran would give verifiable guarantees that it would not build nuclear weapons. For many Iranians, foreign relations were tied to domestic bread-and-butter questions. It was clear that there would not be jobs for the ever increasing number of high school and college graduates unless the country's vast untapped gas and oil reserves were de-

veloped. It was equally clear that these reserves would not be developed unless relations with the West – and especially the US – improved. Karroubi made fun of Ahmadinejad for boasting that the Iranian educational system was so good that a high school pupil had achieved nuclear fusion in her basement. At one point Ahmadinejad lost his cool and called Karroubi a ‘Hitler’.

The second factor was Mousavi’s ability to challenge Ahmadinejad on his own turf. Once Mousavi had returned to the limelight, he was quick to remind the public that he had been Khomeini’s prime minister in the ‘heroic days’ of war and revolution. Besides his reputation as a competent administrator, he had nationalised a host of industries, launched a rural construction programme, drafted a progressive labour law, advocated land reform, and introduced wartime price controls and rationing, thereby, for the first and probably only time in Iranian history, narrowing the income gap between rich and poor. He wasn’t just a populist talking ecstatically about the good old days: he had been a key figure in those days. His Mir title also helped – ‘Mir’ is the Azeri version of ‘Sayyed’ and signifies descent from the Prophet and the 12 Imams. An impressive number of organisations and personalities prominent in the early days of the revolution threw their weight behind him. They included the labour unions; the Association of Qom Seminary Teachers; the Association of Militant Clerics; the Mujahedin Organisation of the Islamic Revolution; Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, at one time the designated Supreme Leader; Ayatollah Taheri, the senior cleric in Isfahan;

Hojjat al-Islam Khoeni, the mentor of the students who took over the US Embassy; Hojjat al-Islam Mohtashemi, Khomeini’s main troubleshooter in Lebanon when the Revolutionary Guard presided over the creation of Lebanese Hizbullah; and relatives of Revolutionary Guards martyred in the Iraqi war. Meanwhile, Ahmadinejad’s own populist credentials were tarnished when a member of his inner circle told the press that he had placed many family members and associates in high positions. To woo secular nationalists and the old left, Mousavi brandished on his campaign trail a large portrait of Mossadegh – anathema to the rightwing clerics.

The third factor was the women’s movement. Mousavi’s wife, Zahra Rahnavard, a scholar and artist who is a prominent champion of women’s rights, entered the fray and campaigned alongside her husband – the first time this had happened in Iranian history. This galvanised the women’s movement – especially the One Million Women Campaign, which takes in a wide spectrum from Islamic feminists to liberal nationalists to leftist and even Marxist activists. The women’s movement had been crucial to Khatami’s victories. It was poised to be just as important to Mousavi.

BY THE LAST DAYS of the campaign, good-natured crowds were pouring into the cities, threatening to turn the world upside down, and most serious of all, mocking those on high – Ahmadinejad was pictured with Pinocchio’s nose. The government appeared to be losing control of the streets. The Washington polling agency

that had expected an easy Ahmadinejad victory admitted that its predictions were probably out of date. Eyewitnesses reported that the election had turned into a 'real race', that the demonstrations were 'rattling' the government and that the Revolutionary Guards were fearful of a 'velvet revolution'. Some polls taken by the opposition predicted a victory for Mousavi. Even if these polls were too optimistic, they did indicate that Ahmadinejad's lead had been drastically cut – perhaps to the point where he would not win the required 50 per cent in the first round and would therefore have to compete against his main opponent in a second round, as required by the constitution.

A second round would have posed a serious threat: it would have led to more campaigning and more unruly street demonstrations. It would have accentuated the shift in public opinion. And it would have strengthened Mousavi – Karroubi had made it clear that he would endorse him in a second round. It was generally thought that Ahmadinejad wouldn't be able to improve on the number of votes he gained in the first round and so would enter any second round at a clear disadvantage. To preempt this, the Interior Ministry, which was running the election and was headed by a millionaire friend of Ahmadinejad, acted decisively, giving Ahmadinejad not just a majority but such a resounding one that dwarfed the votes gained by his opponents. The minister purged unreliable civil servants from the electoral commission – some even claimed that Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi had issued a fatwa allowing the faithful to miscount votes. He restricted the number

of permits issued to poll observers; prevented some of them entering the 45,000 polling stations; set up more than 14,000 mobile electoral trucks (making the vote easy to fiddle); printed far more ballot papers than there were eligible voters; cut off communications to Mousavi and Karroubi's headquarters on the day of the elections (Mousavi's offices in Qom were torched in a mysterious attack); and, as a clincher, at the end of election day, broke precedent by not having the ballots tabulated on the spot but instead rushed to the ministry where they were 'counted' by his aides.

Within hours of the polls closing, the interior minister declared Ahmadinejad to be the winner with 66 per cent of the vote. Mousavi, he said, had won only 33 per cent. The minister also declared that a record number – 85 per cent of the electorate – had voted. Congratulating the nation on the victory, Khamenei described the result as 'divinely inspired'. Three days later, the ministry issued more detailed statistics with provincial breakdowns: Ahmadinejad had won 24.5 million votes, Mousavi 13.2 million, Rezaei 678,240 and Karroubi 333,635. According to Chatham House, there are serious problems with these statistics. In two provinces, more than 100 per cent of eligible voters voted. Karroubi, who received more than five million votes in 2005, got fewer than 340,000 this time, and lost even in his home province. For Ahmadinejad to have won more than 24 million votes, Chatham House found, he would have had to keep all the votes he got in 2005, win over those who had voted for Rafsanjani on that occasion, all of those who had stayed at

home, and, on top of that, up to 44 per cent of the voters who backed reform candidates.

This decisive 'victory' was intended to put an end to street demonstrations, but it had the opposite effect, outraging many who felt not only cheated but insulted – especially when Ahmadinejad described those who questioned the results as 'specks of dirt'. There were vociferous protests in many parts of the country and Mousavi and Karroubi called for a silent rally to be held at Azadi (Freedom) Square in Tehran on Monday, 15 June. The call was heeded by around a million people – the conservative mayor of the capital put the number at three million. The scene was reminiscent of the rallies held in the same square during the 1979 revolution. As in 1979, the security forces were kept away to prevent clashes. The rally drew all kinds of protester: old and young, professionals and workers, bazaaris and students, men and women with sunglasses and headscarves as well those with the full-length chador. Lines of protesters nine kilometres long converged on the square from the northern, better-off districts as well as from the southern, working-class ones. Volunteers, many of them election workers, gave the procession a semblance of organisation. Students marched from Revolution Square, near the university campus, to Freedom Square under a banner reading 'From Revolution to Freedom'. Others – many wearing green, the colour of Shia Islam, displayed banners saying 'What Happened to My Vote?' or 'Ahmadinejad, you could not see our votes but you could see the divine light' – an allusion to the president's supposed experience at the UN. An old man

carried a sign saying: 'I am not a speck of dirt, I am a retired teacher.' Eyewitness accounts agree that feeling was not so much against the Islamic Republic as against the stifling of the reform movement. It was a mass protest against vote-rigging. Exiled groups, not surprisingly, hailed these scenes as amounting to a revolutionary challenge to the Islamic Republic – an interpretation peddled, for different reasons, by the regime. However one interprets it, it was the largest rally held in Tehran since the height of the Islamic Revolution. Similar rallies were also held in many provincial capitals, notably Isfahan and Shiraz.

Government spokesmen tried to control the damage by arguing that the opposition might have some support in the cities but that Ahmadinejad had carried the countryside. This argument was soon picked up by Western policymakers – especially State Department diplomats – who had argued in favour of striking a 'grand bargain' with Iran in the fashion of Nixon in China, and were worried that a potential rapprochement would be sabotaged by the unrest. But the few reliable accounts we have from the countryside dismiss the notion that Ahmadinejad has a strong rural base. Although the Islamic Republic is strongly supported in the countryside, many people there – rural inhabitants constitute only 35 per cent of the country's population – dislike Ahmadinejad because of his broken promises, and because he funnelled benefits to Revolutionary Guards and Basijis, and those with connections to the clerical foundations. Eric Hoogland, who has studied rural Iran for many years and cannot be described as

an opponent of the Islamic Republic, has claimed that in the region he knows well outside Shiraz – a region that should be Ahmadinejad’s heartland since it is Shia and Persian-speaking – only between 20 and 25 per cent supported him. Outrage when the interior ministry took away the ballot boxes before the votes could be counted turned into open anger and protests when the election results were announced.

Shaken by the 15 June rallies, the regime launched a massive crackdown, the full extent of which remains unknown. It banned all demonstrations, threatened to execute anyone participating in or calling for such protests, and sent out tens of thousands of Revolutionary Guards and Basijis armed with assault weapons as well as motorbikes, knives and truncheons. It sent vigilantes into university dormitories. At least 20 people were killed in the clashes and more than 4000 associates of Mousavi and Karroubi were arrested – their main strategists and campaigners, as well as journalists sympathetic to the opposition. It jammed foreign broadcasts, shut down newspapers and websites, disrupted telecommunications and expelled many foreign journalists – others were confined to their offices, and some were jailed. It broke into private homes and arrested those suspected of shouting ‘God is great’ from their rooftops. It launched a media campaign claiming that the opposition was inspired, financed and organised by a sinister ‘foreign hand’: Britain, and the BBC, tended to be singled out here. (The regime put less blame on the US probably in order to dangle the possibility of future negotiations.) It also tortured prisoners, in-

cluding prominent figures, who were made to confess before TV cameras that they had participated in a Western plot to launch a velvet revolution. As a sop to public opinion, Khamenei asked the Guardian Council – 12 conservative judges – to investigate complaints of electoral irregularities. The Guardian Council found a discrepancy of three million votes, but concluded that this would not have made much of a dent in Ahmadinejad’s 11 million lead. States that orchestrate 99.5 per cent support for their candidate in elections can always claim that 10 or 20 per cent here or there will not make much of a difference, but Iran has a tradition of relatively competitive, if controlled elections. Mousavi and Karroubi, endorsed by many prominent clerics, rejected this verdict, called for new elections, and even declared the presidency of Ahmadinejad to be illegitimate.

THE REGIME appears to have weathered the storm, at least for the time being. The revolt has not turned into a revolution, even though these events have much in common with those of 1979 – similar rallies, similar slogans (‘God is great’), similar tactics and similar griping about ‘foreign interference’. But there are major differences: the monarchy had almost no support, but the republic has a solid base – the 25 per cent of the population who consider themselves true believers. The shah had lost the allegiance of the armed forces. The republic is fully equipped with three million Revolutionary Guards and Basijis, trained to deal with civil disturbances. The monarchy had been challenged by a mass

revolutionary movement. The Islamic Republic faces a mass reform movement that wants to strengthen its democratic features at the expense of its theocratic ones.

The crisis has created two long-term dangers for the regime. First, the presidency continues to be held by a demagogic politician who does not shy away from confronting the US, and who seems to have little grasp of his limits. He claims Iran is a major power – maybe even a superpower – and dismisses the US as a spent force that ‘can’t do a damn thing’. It’s not for nothing that the other candidates consider him a dangerous adventurist. Nuclear negotiations are unlikely to go anywhere. On the contrary, they are likely to degenerate into acrimony, leaving the US in a much stronger and Iran in a much weaker position than ever before. Not surprisingly, the Israeli government cheered Ahmadinejad’s victory – a Mousavi victory would have been an obstacle to a possible Israeli strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities. Second, the crushing of the reform movement has closed off avenues for change, and dampened hopes for peaceful evolution. By denouncing children of the revolution as foreign-paid ‘counter-revolutionaries’, Khamenei, Ahmedinejad and their allies have alienated a considerable proportion of the population – maybe even the majority – and could end up transforming reformists into revolutionaries. By moving away from democracy towards theocracy, the regime has removed an important component of its original legitimacy. Some would argue the country has ceased to be a republic and has become a military-backed theocracy – a Shia imamate equiv-

alent to the medieval Sunni caliphates. □