

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

The Loser in Iran Was the Western Media ^[1]

AMMAN, JORDAN - JUNE 28, 2005

This op-ed piece was originally published on the Daily Star on June 28, 2005. The Daily Star is published in Beirut, and it is the "insert" paper that comes folded inside every copy of the International Herald Tribune published in the Middle East (except Ha'aretz in Israel). -- the Editor

So Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani is not Iran's new president. That result must come as a particular surprise to anyone who tried to follow the campaign by light of the Western media.

As recently as last Thursday - the day before the run-off vote between Rafsanjani and his rival, Tehran mayor Mahmood Ahmadinejad - reputable polls gave the latter a clear lead. Yet headlines in the International Herald Tribune continued to describe Rafsanjani as the "front-runner." In the run-up to the first round of voting on June 17, his campaign was the focus of most election coverage in the Western media. CNN's interview with Rafsanjani during the campaign treated him as a president-in-waiting.

So what happened, exactly? Was the election actually much freer than most Western observers were willing to credit? Or, on the other hand, if it was fixed from the beginning, then we of the Western media were obviously woefully ill-informed about Iranian politics, particularly with regards to exactly who fixes elections and to what end.

The answer may be much simpler, if no less embarrassing: Granted how little most of us outsiders know about the politics of the Islamic Republic, it was probably just easiest to focus on Rafsanjani because he, alone among the candidates, was a familiar figure to Western journalists.

That quality made him easy to write about, and easy to cover; it made it especially easy for us to assume that he would win. It was also relatively easy to assume that Rafsanjani's candidacy represented a bid by conservatives to reclaim the presidency, which they lost eight years ago to the reform-minded Mohammad Khatami. Rafsanjani, after all, was Khatami's predecessor.

Rafsanjani ran as a moderate reformer, a position that, granted his history, most in the West found difficult to credit. It was only in the final few days of the campaign that some reporters began noticing that Iranians, too, seemed to find his new-found liberalism a bit difficult to believe. With Rafsanjani the Iranian system's consummate insider, it was easy to dismiss his moderate platform as a pose and to assume that the results had been fixed in his favor, particularly since he was standing against a field of candidates most outsiders had never heard of.

Yet, when the first round of voting produced no clear majority for a single candidate, thereby forcing a runoff, media coverage focused more on the fact that no previous Iranian campaign had gone to a second round. "Historic" and "unprecedented" were common terms used in the press. Rarely asked was how the Western pundits and reporters could have been so wrong. Rafsanjani did, indeed, top the first round of voting, but with barely 20 percent of the total in a seven-candidate field.

More surprisingly, the second-place candidate was not the reformer Mustafa Moin, who came in fifth, but Ahmadinejad, a candidate generally described as being so hard-line that, by comparison, Rafsanjani's status as a reformer was hardly open to question.

Prior to the election Moin was often seen in the West as Rafsanjani's main competition. The assumption in that narrative was that Rafsanjani represented the conservative old guard. Moin, a former cabinet minister who was initially barred from standing by Iran's Council of Guardians (the body that approves potential candidates for Parliament and the presidency), was seen as the obvious successor to Khatami. That might have been true, but it ignored the fact that there is more than one type of "reform." Reform can mean loosening restrictions on how people dress and behave in public and private. But it can also mean tackling corruption and cronyism - which was the vein of popular anger into which Ahmadinejad tapped.

None of this is meant as commentary on the fairness or unfairness of the Iranian electoral system. Nor is this to pass judgment on the claims of electoral fraud made by some of the candidates defeated in the first round; or to debate the effect President George W. Bush's criticism of the vote may have had on turnout (anecdotal evidence suggested it may have increased it).

The simple fact is that Iran is a society in transition - to what is not exactly clear, but in transition nonetheless. Eight years ago the unexpected election of Mohammed Khatami seemed to promise an era of reform. We in the West did not know exactly what to make of Khatami back then, and we seem equally unsure of Ahmadinejad today.

Perhaps, though, we have learned a lesson about not assuming that outcomes in certain situations are preordained.

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