

THE ROLE OF WESTERN MEDIA IN THE OPPOSITION MOVEMENT IN IRAN

*Amina Khan**

The Iranian presidential elections on June 12, 2009, saw the incumbent President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, secure a second four-year term in office. However, his success was met with suspicion and criticism within and outside Iran. To a large extent, the manner in which the media depicted the elections had a lot to do with that. Many in Iran as well as the international community questioned the legality of the polls as a result of the media's characterization of the elections as unfair and rigged.

As a result, people came out on the streets in support of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the Opposition leader, whom a selection of the media declared victorious. Street protests led to clashes between authorities and supporters of Mousavi, who questioned the transparency and legitimacy of the election results. That led to further violence, injuries and deaths. As a result, the Iranian Opposition movement was created.

Led by Mousavi, the movement was originally political in nature, striving for regime change. However, the manner in which the international media (print and broadcast) covered the events that took place after the elections, helped transform it into a social one integrating different walks of life.

Thus, the media's portrayal and coverage of the elections was instrumental in the creation of the 'Green Way of Hope' movement, led by Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the main Opposition leader.

Background

Since the fall of the Shah of Iran from power and the historic Islamic Revolution in 1979, relations between Iran and the West have been edgy at best. Whether it was the hostage drama in its Embassy in Tehran or meddling in Iran's domestic affairs, relations between Iran and the U.S. in particular, have been hostile.

With the elections of 2005 which brought Ahmadinejad to power, relations between Iran and the West further worsened. Although popular among the masses inside Iran, he has little support in the West primarily due to his stark opposition to and criticism of the West on several key issues. His criticism of the West and Israel in particular, recognition and

* *The writer is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.*

support of Hamas as well as Iran's controversial nuclear programme led to further estrangement between the two sides.

The 'Green Way of Hope'

Leading up to the 2009 presidential elections in Iran, it was no surprise that the West had pinned their hopes on Mir-Hossein Mousavi – the 'reformist' and pragmatic leader – as Iran's new president. Extensive international media coverage also highlighted Mousavi as the most popular and likely candidate to win among Ahmadinejad and the other two candidates, namely, Mohsen Rezaee and Mehdi Karroubi. Despite Ahmadinejad's strong internal support base, the international media created a highly exaggerated and 'larger than life' support base for Mousavi. That led many to erroneously believe that he had been elected as the new president of Iran.

While the media focused on Ahmadinejad's anti-West views and in particular his policy towards Iran's nuclear assets, the media did not really highlight Mousavi's background. In fact, the media played down Mousavi's views on Iran's nuclear programme, Israel, the Palestinian issue and Hamas as practically no reports were seen in the media about Mousavi's views or his performance as prime minister from 1981 till 1989. Also, the fact that Iran's nuclear programme had in fact developed during Mousavi's years in office as prime minister was avoided.

All that the media did was to glorify Mousavi's image as the new face of Iran, a moderate and dynamic change for Iran, compared to Ahmadinejad whom the media portrayed as being responsible for Iran's isolation from the international community. However, the media overlooked the fact that Mousavi shared similar views with Ahmadinejad on key issues such as Iran's nuclear programme and policy towards Israel.

Therefore, despite hopes that Iran would witness a change in regime with a new putative leader, the re-election of Ahmadinejad came as more of a shock and less of a surprise to the West. The media's highly questionable coverage of the issue had much to do with that. The media's flawed, inconsistent and exaggerated portrayal of Mousavi's support base led many (inside Iran as well as in the West) to question the results of the election, terming them as rigged and fraudulent. In fact, within a few hours after the polls were closed, media reports started circulating about Mousavi's success.

Although there have been claims that the Iranian government did not allow media coverage of the elections, prior to the presidential elections in

Iran, an opinion poll was conducted by Terror Free Tomorrow, the New America Foundation and KA Europe SPRL that claimed that their research found that president Ahmadinejad was “leading by a substantial margin.”¹

The media’s depiction of the elections played a critical role in convincing people to believe that the elections were flawed. Despite the fact that there was no way of legally verifying the claim of election fraud, the media did not hesitate in characterizing the elections as rigged, declaring Mousavi’s triumph and Ahmadinejad’s defeat.

Ken Ballen, the head of Terror Free Tomorrow, in an interview to the *BBC* said that although the elections in Iran were “not free and fair”, there was ample “evidence that the results of the elections were legitimate.”² He further expressed the opinion that Ahmadinejad enjoyed a larger and stronger support base compared to Mousavi, whose main supporters “were students” and “highest-income Iranians”. Even among the Azeri ethnic group, to which Mousavi belongs, only 16 per cent were backing Mousavi, whereas 31 per cent said they would back Ahmadinejad.

As a result of the misinformation that the media had circulated through its partial and biased reporting of the elections, mass protests and condemnation of the elections within Iran and abroad followed. Further unrest, violent clashes, injuries and deaths ensued. That spawned an opposition movement led by Mousavi that centred on regime change. However, as a result of the mass protests, violence, arrests and casualties that followed, the magnitude, scale and appeal of the Opposition movement grew.

Consequently, more and more people got involved, including many who were not politically inclined towards Mousavi but were advocates of change in Iran (a new Iran) as well as those affected by the violence. Ahmadinejad won the elections due to his strong internal support base and not because of the media’s portrayal of him, as he enjoys little or no support from the media, whereas Mousavi’s popularity and projection has been primarily due to the foreign media’s positive portrayal and not his support base inside Iran which is much less than that of Ahmadinejad.

Hence, with support and hype from the media, the nature of the movement changed from political to social. Initially, what started as opposition and protests against election fraud turned into a broader movement simply because of different people that got involved in the movement.

Thus, the opposition movement led by Mousavi transformed into the 'Green Way of Hope', a movement as Mousavi states, that is not a political party, but a "grass-roots and social network" striving to uphold democracy and the rule of law,³ by integrating all walks of social life.

Western bias

The fact is that this is not the first time that allegations of fraud have come up in elections; that has happened many times before and is likely to continue happening in future. However, what is important here is the fact that the State in question is Iran, a country that is not politically aligned with the West. When cases of election fraud have taken place in States that are pro-West or supporters of the U.S. in particular, the media coverage of the elections itself, along with the protests, violence and casualties that usually follow, are rarely highlighted in the media.

Comparative cases: elections in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan

The 2004 presidential elections in Ukraine which saw Victor Yushchenko assume office witnessed a similar scenario to that of Ahmadinejad's victory in Iran. Despite protests, arrests and clashes, there was hardly any condemnation from the international community of the freedom of the masses and their democratic rights,⁴ nor was any hype created by the media highlighting the citizens' plight and fight for their rights. Furthermore, there were no demands or the actual practice of a recount as was the case in Iran.

The fact of the matter is that the media, a powerful and highly successful tool, can achieve its respective interests whatever they may be, such as political, social and economic. Two States may act in a similar manner yet receive different responses and reactions due to the manner in which they are portrayed by the media.

Another case for comparison is the recently held election in Kyrgyzstan of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev which, too, was not much different from the elections in Iran and the subsequent events that followed. In fact, the elections in Kyrgyzstan took place amidst similar allegations of rigging, street protests and suppression of the Opposition, as was the case in Iran. However, the reaction from both the media as well as the international community has been in striking contrast to that of Iran.

Whereas there has been outright condemnation, criticism and opposition to the elections in Iran, there has been little or no response to the elections in Kyrgyzstan. Instead of condemning the elections and

measures taken by President Kurmanbek in the elections, the U.S. commended Kyrgyzstan's role in fighting terrorism and in Afghanistan. In other words, the U.S. refrained from commenting on the outcome of the election in order to be able to use the base at Manas.⁵

Although the media did cover the elections in Kyrgyzstan, compared to Iran the response was lukewarm. In fact, very few reports were seen as the media remained fairly silent on the issue, despite the fact that those who questioned the election of President Kuranbeck were detained, harassed, imprisoned and even maimed. In fact, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) declared that elections in Kyrgyzstan "fell short of key standards" and constituted a "disappointment".⁶ "Ballot stuffing" and "multiple voting" along with physical force and the use of tear gas, was applied to thwart members of the Opposition from voting.⁷ Despite the report of OSCE, there has been relative silence and indifference from the West and the response from the international community and the media to both cases (Iran and Kyrgyzstan) has been poles apart.

The Death of Neda Soltan

The manner in which the media depicted and portrayed the tragic death of a young protester in the post-poll violence, Neda Soltan, also played a pivotal role in transforming the Opposition movement in Iran from political to social. Although uncertainty surrounds the actual cause of the unfortunate death of Neda and one can question whether it was an accident or a targeted killing as there is no evidence to prove either, the media's wrong interpretation and characterization of Neda's death created immense unrest and uproar against the regime, both inside as well outside Iran.

Neda's death, in fact, became a successful tool of propaganda against Ahmadinejad, giving impetus to the overall Opposition movement.

It has to be said that although there is no justification for the loss of any innocent life as is the case with Neda, many innocent people lose their lives daily in Afghanistan, the tribal areas of Pakistan (FATA), Palestine and Iraq, yet there is a different reaction from the media. The unfortunate death of Marwa al-Sherbini, an Egyptian pharmacist in July 2009, serves as an instructive point of comparison. Marwa al-Sherbini was stabbed to death in a German courtroom in front of her husband and three-year-old son by her neighbour.⁸ Known as the "headscarf martyr", Marwa become a national symbol of persecution for many in Egypt in protest at the growing Islamophobia in the West.⁹

Neda Soltan and Marwa el-Sherbini, both Muslim and young, suffered similar tragic deaths, yet received different responses in the media. While Neda's death was instantly projected by the media and made the symbol of the Opposition movement in Iran, Marwa el-Sherbini's death received little or no coverage.

Similarly, the death of a young American peace activist, Rachel Corrie, who was killed on March 16, 2003, in Gaza by an Israeli bulldozer, can be used as an instructive example. Although the circumstances that led to Rachel's death differ from both Neda and Marwa's death, Rachel's death was hardly given any importance. Although the year 2009 marked the sixth anniversary of Rachel's death, no one in the media remembers her nor has the U.S. taken the case up with the Israeli government in this regard.

Thus, many have met the same fate as Neda, Marwa and Rachel. The significant difference is that it is the manner in which the media portrays an issue for it to become an issue or a non-issue. However, in Neda's case, the media's portrayal of her death became an instrumental point of change for the movement as people from all walks of life joined the movement as a result of her death. Hence, Neda's demise put an end to the political aspect of the movement and initiated the social aspect of the movement as she became the symbol of the movement.

Hence, it can be said that the international media's depiction of the elections and the events that followed helped transform the movement in Iran from political opposition striving at regime change into a broad social movement as has been exemplified by Mir-Hosseini Mousavi and the formation of his 'Green Way of Hope' movement.

Although it is too soon to say what the future holds for the movement, one is not sure as to the true agenda and motive behind the movement and what it in reality strives for. Whatever the future holds for the movement, if future success is to come to the movement it will come primarily through the media whose role in the growth of the movement has been unprecedented. Thus highlighting the fact that for any movement to succeed, certain tools or elements need to be employed, and in the case of Iran, the media has been an extremely powerful tool as it plays a significant role in forming public opinion and can make a nobody a somebody, a non-issue an issue and an issue a non-issue.

References

- ¹ "Poll hint at plausible Iran vote", *BBC News*, June 16, 2009, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8103292.stm
- ² Worth.F.R, "Mousavi Forms Grass Roots Movements in Iran", August 15, 2009, *The New York Times*.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Eileen, J., "Ukraine's Election: Another U.S.-Engineered Democracy", July/August 2005, *Canadian Dimension*, Vol. 39 Issue 4, pp. 20-21.
- ⁵ Levy.J.C., "Strategic Issues, Not Abuses, Are U.S. Focus in Kyrgyzstan", July 23, 2009, *The New York Times*.
- ⁶ Schwirtz M, "Big Victory by Incumbent Is Questioned in Kyrgyzstan", July 24, 2009, *The New York Times*.
- ⁷ Levy.J.C., op. cit.
- ⁸ Michael M, "Headscarf Martyr Mara Sherbani Mourned in Egypt", July 6, 2009, *The Huffington Post*.
- ⁹ Fathi N, "In a Death Seen Around the World, a Symbol of Iranian Protests", June 22, 2009, *The New York Times*.