



Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara

AN EXAMINATION OF MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD'S ELECTORAL DISCOURSE

Naseraddin Alizadeh





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Prepared by : Hakkı Uygur
Content Editor : Serhan Afacan
Editor : Sara Kök
Graphic Design : Hüseyin Kurt

Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara

Oğuzlar, 1397. St, 06520, Çankaya, Ankara / Türkiye Phone: +90 (312) 284 55 02-03 | Fax: +90 (312) 284 55 04
e-mail : info@iramcenter.org | www.iramcenter.org



An Examination of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Electoral Discourse: Shifts in His Discursive Practices in the Election Campaigns of 2005, 2009 and 2017

About the Author:

Naseraddin Alizadeh

Naseraddin Alizadeh completed his undergraduate studies in physics at Tabriz University in Iran and gained his MA degree in economics at Allameh Tabatabai University with his thesis entitled "The Socio-economic Determinants of Public Health in Iran". He is currently pursuing his PhD degree in economics at Ankara University in Turkey. Alizadeh's PhD research focuses on the political economy of income inequality in Iran. He is the editor and writer of *Student Movement in Azerbaijan* and *The Challenge of Identity in Azerbaijan* as he has also co-authored *Social Cleavages in Iran*. Alizadeh also participated in a research project about the socioeconomic determinants of addiction in Sistan and Baluchestan province of Iran and conducted a research project concerning the determinants of nutrition health in Iran. Alizadeh's analyses appeared in BBC Persian and Radiozamaneh among others. His research interests include political economy, rent-seeking studies, nationalism, historiography, and ethnic studies in Iran and the rest of the Middle East.

Summary

This study examines the changes in the electoral discourse of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the presidential elections of 2005, 2009 and 2017. Grounded theory and semiotic theory were adopted to construct concepts from code and sign clusters. The results reveal striking changes in the concepts that form the main axis of the three examined campaigns. In 2005, Ahmadinejad underlined such dualities as the poor and the rich on one hand and the Islamic revolutionary values and distorted antirevolutionary ones on the other. In 2009, however, his rhetoric not only became more aggressive against his rivals but also included strikingly nationalist elements. The studies visuals of his 2009 campaign reveal that he emphasized numerous secular nationalist values rather than Islamic revolutionary ideals. Furthermore, he and his teams continued the same discursive pattern in 2017 and repeatedly used such secular sources of political legitimation as the will of the people and the myths from the ancient Iranian history.

Keywords: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Discursive Practices, Presidential Elections, Islamic Revolution, Revolutionary Values, Nationalism, Ancient Iran

ÖZET

Bu çalışma Mahmud Ahmedinejad'ın 2009, 2005 ve 2017 cumhurbaşkanlığı seçim kampanyalarındaki söylemsel değişimleri incelemektedir. Çalışmada elde edilen bulgular analiz edilirken temellendirilmiş kuram ve semiyotik kuramdan yararlanılmıştır. Sonuçlar, Ahmedinejad'ın söz konusu üç kampanyada çarpıcı derecede değişik kavramlar kullandığını göstermektedir. Ahmedinejad, 2005 yılı cumhurbaşkanlığı seçim kampanyasında yoksullar ve zenginler ve İslami devrim değerleri ve bozuk karşı devrimci değerler gibi ikilikleri öne çıkarmıştır. 2009 yılına gelindiğinde ise Ahmedinejad'ın söyleminin rakiplerine karşı daha sertleşmekle kalmayıp önemli ölçüde milliyetçi kavramları da içerdiği görülmektedir. Çalışmada incelenen görsel materyaller Ahmedinejad'ın bu kampanyalarda devrimci ideallerden ziyade, çok sayıda seküler-milliyetçilik kavram kullandığını ortaya koymaktadır. Ahmedinejad ve ekibi 2017 seçim kampanyalarında da aynı söylem çizgisini sürdürmüş ve halk iradesi ve antik İran tarihinin mitleri gibi seküler siyasi meşruiyet kaynaklarını sıklıkla dillendirmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Mahmud Ahmedinejad, Söylem Araçları, Cumhurbaşkanlığı Seçimleri, İslam Devrimi, Devrim Değerleri, Milliyetçilik, Antik İran

خلاصه

این پژوهش به بررسی تغییر در گفتمانهای انتخاباتی احمدی نژاد در دوران رقابتهای انتخابات ریاست جمهوری سالهای ۸۴، ۸۸ و ۹۶ می پردازد. در این تحقیق با استفاده از دو نظریه "داده بنیاد" و "نشانه شناسی" به بساخت مفاهیم از خوشه های کدها و علائم می پردازیم. نتایج تحقیق نشان می دهد که تغییر چشمگیری در مفاهیم مطرح شده در سه دوران مورد بررسی صورت گرفته است. احمدی نژاد در مبارزات انتخاباتی سال ۸۴ برای بسیج توده ها بر علیه دو دولت قبلی، از یک طرف بر تضادهای طبقاتی میان ثروتمندان و فقیران تأکید و از طرف دیگر بر ارزشهای انقلاب اسلامی و نوعی از تفکر ضد انقلابی تکیه کرد. در سال ۸۸ اما دو تغییر مهم در گفتمانهای انتخاباتی وی روی داد که یکی استفاده از زبان پرخاشگرانه تر بر علیه رقبای انتخاباتی و دیگری بهره گیری از نشانه های ملی گرایانه بود. ویدئوی مورد مطالعه در این پژوهش استفاده بسیار گسترده از علایم سکولار و ملی گرایانه و عدم اشاره صریح به نشانه های مرتبط با ایده آل های انقلاب اسلامی را آشکار می سازد. علاوه بر این، در انتخابات ۹۶ جناح احمدی نژاد در پی معرفی منابع جدید مشروعیت سیاسی شامل اراده عمومی و روایت های اسطوره ای فارس محور از تاریخ "ایران باستان" بود.

کلمه های کلیدی: محمود احمدی نژاد، رفتارهای گفتمانی، انتخابات ریاست جمهوری، انقلاب اسلامی، ارزشهای انقلاب، ملی گرایی، ایران باستان.



Introduction

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's registration in the presidential election of Iran in 2017 triggered controversies about his political future. Although his faction's decision caught the eyes of the non-official media, less attention has been devoted to the changes in his opinions and agenda. The language and terms used in his ads and speeches involve codes and signs of the contradicting discourses which have shaped policy and identity in the contemporary Iran. These discourses result from different reconstructions of self-image and can signal creeping changes in the mind set of insiders who are fluctuating between Islamic conservatism and radicalism. Considering the vital role of ideology in the Islamic Republic of Iran such radical changes can bring about unpredicted reflections of system and push another insider to outsiders' circle. All of these factors, along with his faction's attempts to regain office or at least affect the political decision-making process through challenging established institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran make his case important. Furthermore, exploitation of nationalist codes to get support of a section of the society, can signal changing demands in the 'election market' and a shift in values of the new generation.

Iran has its own particular polity and political order. The President, as the second most important official status in the system after the Supreme Leader, is elected for four years from a list of candidates admitted by the Guardian Council. Prior to the presidential

election of 2005, five different presidents had been elected but only three of them could complete their normal terms. Both Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Khatami (1997-2005) held the office for two terms after 1989 constitutional referendum through which authority of abolished Prime Minister post were given to the President. Winning the presidential election of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad succeeded to become the sixth president of Iran. He was re-elected in the controversial elections of 2009 to take office for another four years. His acerbic language toward other candidates in 2005 and 2009, incompatibility with the Supreme Leader and his appointees in the judicial and military institutions and registration in the 2017 presidential election, despite indirect opposition of the Supreme Leader was accompanied with an evolution in his electoral discourse (here discourse is used in a loose sense to refer to the 'reconstruction of truth' in a particular way and in the mutual connection with power and subjectivity). This study aims to pursue shifts in utilized discourses and propaganda of Ahmadinejad's political faction during the three presidential campaigns of 2005, 2009 and 2017. Results can reveal how opportunism, challenges among different narratives of self, Iran and Islam and political deadlocks cause discursive contradictions in the political sphere of Iran. Furthermore, this study depicts Ahmadinejad's faction's endeavors to find new sources of legitimacy; a path that started from Islamic revolutionary values in 2005, and ended with a secular

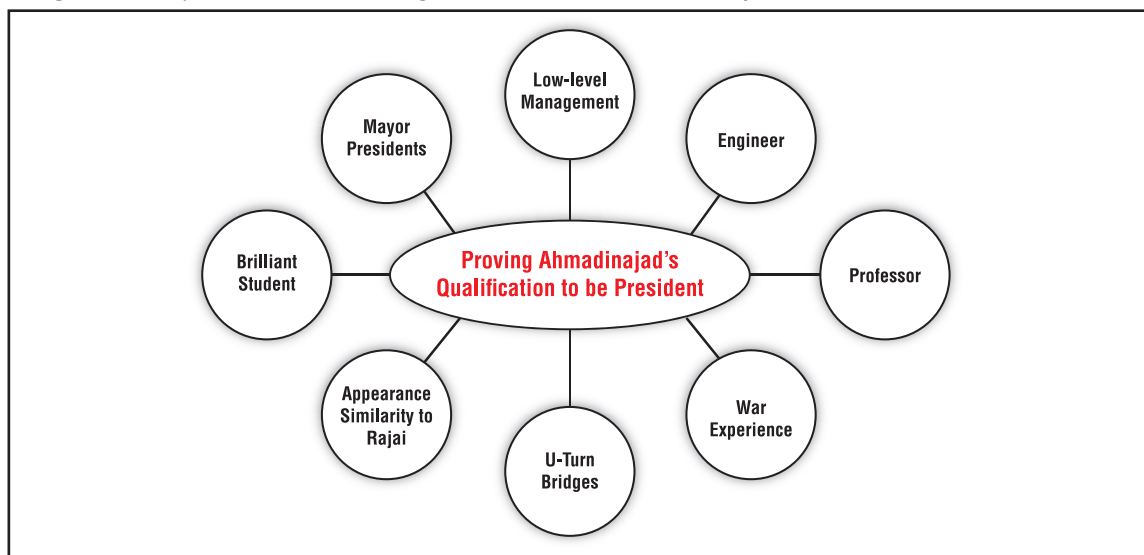
nationalist world view in 2017. Grounded Theory and Semiotic Theory were used to avoid prejudices and biased analytical presumptions in examining data. Through codifying and categorizing codes and signs these analytical approaches provide devices to extract notions and construct theories from texts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 21-77; Chandler, 2007: 147-171). Studied materials involve campaign videos of Ahmadinejad produced by his own campaign committee and broadcasted by national TV channels of Iran in 2005 and 2009 along with a video made by his faction in National Tree Planting Day in Iran to clarify their points of view prior to the presidential election in 2017. Due to the disqualification of Ahmadinejad and his close associate, Hamid Reza Beghai, in the presidential election of 2017 they were not allowed to broadcast adverts on national TV channels but posted different unofficial videos on YouTube and in the social media.

Presidential Campaign of 2005

Categorization of codes in Ahmadinejad's campaign adverts show that he attempted to prove his qualification to be president, highlighted the gap between the suffering majority and the privileged minority, introduced himself as a humble professor-administrator who devoted his life to defend the rights of the poor and depicted himself as the herald of the overlooked goals of the Islamic Revolution in establishing an egalitarian society.

As demonstrated in Diagram 1 categorization of repeated codes and signs reveal that Ahmadinejad and his team try to approve his qualification to be president, in spite of his limited top-level management experiences. Therefore, one of the focal points of the advertising video in 2005 is the two-year period that Ahmadinejad was mayor of Tehran. Mentioning the existence of mayor turned presidents in other countries Ahmadinejad claims that in his opinion mayors can be more successful in this regard. These statements bring to mind politicians like Jacques Chirac and Erdoğan who were in office in France and Turkey and were well known in Iran at the time. Ahmadinejad's team was aware about his limited experience and tried to turn this potential weak point into his strength. Doing so, they concentrated on his skills as an engineer, familiarity with bureaucratic shortcomings in small cities and remote provinces, his career as a university professor, his experiences in the Iran-Iraq war, and details like his ingenuity as a pupil in solving a math problem in class or his familiarity with trigonometry. Even when his appearance is analogized with Rajai, the second president of Iran who was killed in an explosion in the early years of the Islamic Revolution, the film intends to show that a person with an untidy look can be a popular president. Several projects like U-turn bridges in Tehran, metro lines and highways which were launched during his two-year term as the mayor of Tehran were underlined as endeavors which aim to represent a successful technocrat image for Ahmadinejad.

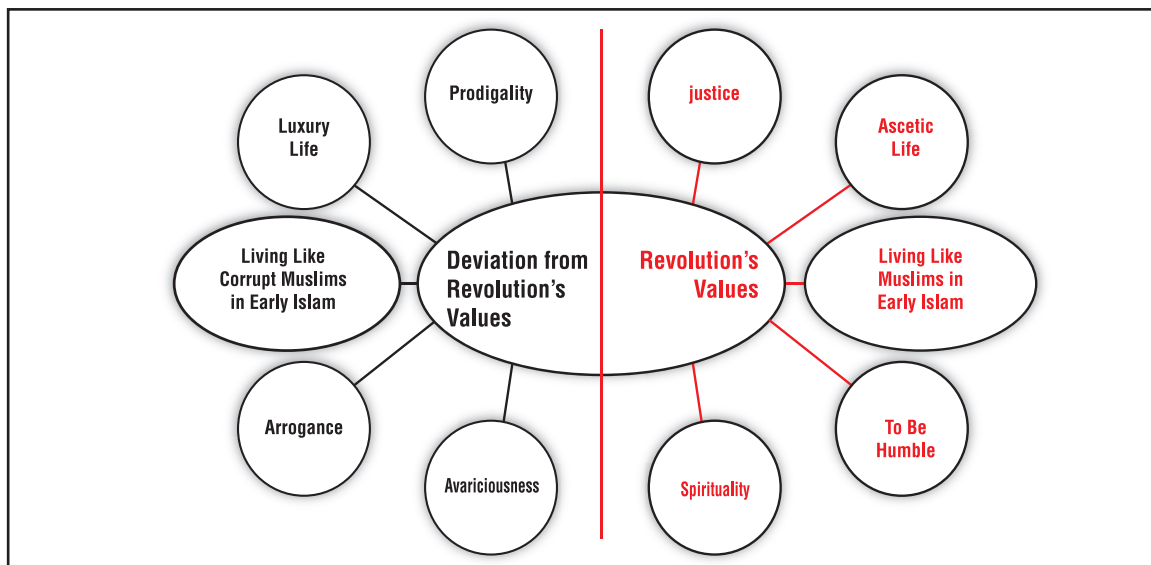
Diagram 1. Repeated Codes and Signs Used to Prove Ahmadinejad's Qualification to Become President



Although reconstruction of Ahmadinejad's image as a successful and humble administrator was significant, it could not capture the attention of the masses. In order to mobilize voters, he drew and propagated dual poles in Iranian policy circles and society. After the Iran-Iraq war Rafsanjani's government (1989-1997) gave priority to contradicting policies including regulation, privatization and interventions in the economy. As a result, corruption, rent-seeking and the gap between different parts of society widened, immigration from periphery to the metropolises accelerated and cultural and political freedoms restricted (Hakimian & Karshenas, 2000; Nili, 1997). Khatami's government (1997-2005) continued a moderated version of Rafsanjani's economic

policies while loosening pressure on cultural activities and civil society institutions (Haji Hosseini & Aram, 2014: 18-20). Rafsanjani's partially neo-classic partially interventionist economic policies and Khatami's semi liberal pluralistic cultural and political goals cast a shadow on the egalitarian, 'anti-imperialist' and Islamist ideals of the 1979 revolution. Ahmadinejad's campaign advert aims to analogize the 1979 revolution with the rise of Islam on one hand and Rafsanjani and Khatami governments' policies with assumed "deviations and corruptions" which took place after the death of the Prophet on the other hand. Diagram 2 demonstrates the repeated codes and signs he exploited to reconstruct two opposing fronts in post-revolutionary Iran.

Diagram 2. Recontstruction of Revolutionary Islamic Values vs Corrupt Antirevolutionary Values in Campaign Ad of Ahmadinejad (2005)



Islamic-revolutionary values were derived from the thoughts of Islamist theorist-activists including Shariati, Ayatollah Khomeyni, Al-Ahmad, Fardid, Navvab Safavi and Motahhari among others. On the other hand, antirevolutionary values as the opposite or distortion of Islamic-Revolutionary ones were reconstructed to blame 'corrupt ethics and moralities' of pre-revolutionary Iran and the West to project society into an ideal future (Taleban, 2010; Khostou, 2011; Ardakani, 2014). The ideal utopic future drew on Islamist's narratives of the Prophet and the Shia Imams' lives while owing many

terms and framings to modern ideologies in general and Marxism in particular (Borujerdi, 1996; Mirsepassi, 2010: 1-3). For instance, M. Abedi (1986) discussing A. Shariati's "Islamic Marxism" claims that he attempted to "utilize certain modern Marxist concepts such as: 'class exploitation', 'class struggle', 'classless society', 'imperialism' etc.-- linking them with teachings of the Shiite leaders such as Imam Ali, Imam Hussein and Abu Zarr Ghafari (whom Shariati called the first 'God-worshipping socialist')" (quoted in: Bayat, 1990; 22). Establishing social justice, elimination of extravagant lifestyles,

eradication of any power and status hierarchy in Muslim society between rulers and ruled, as was found in the early years of Islam, and adoption of an ascetic lifestyle reminiscent of the pioneers of Islam and Shia Imams, were at the heart of ideal future values. Knowing the deep frustration of parts of society, because of the wide gap between promised qualities and what had happened in reality, Ahmadinejad in a fundamentalist manner advocates coming back to the ideals of the early years of the Islamic Revolution and even early Islam. When he criticizes "corrupt qualities" of prior governments his tone is very similar to Islamic fundamentalists who believe there is a unique true narrative of Islam. He takes wise and concrete methods to explain his notions to the masses: his campaign video begins and ends by showing a luxurious house in the Tehran municipality which was the residence of Karbaschian, the ex-mayor of Tehran before Ahmadinejad. Karbaschian had become a symbolic name for Iranian people when his trial for economic corruption was broadcasted over official TV channels in the 1990s. Karbaschian was a high ranked member of the Executives of Construction Party established by technocrats closely linked to the Rafsanjani Cabinet which held the majority of the ministries in the Khatami Government. While the campaign film shows a private pool, Jacuzzi, sauna, glorious chandelier and mirrors in Karbaschian's residence, it does not forget to compare it with the simple life, ordinary house and the old cheap car of Ahmadinejad and mentions that he voluntarily left all of these facilities and has abstained from his salary as the mayor to continue his humble lifestyle. The film shows Ahmadinejad in different situations solving the problems of poor people and opposing wealthy ones who want to gain his permission for their illegal projects. Another part of the film shows Ahmadinejad amongst a massive crowd of people who insist on convincing him to become a candidate in the presidential elections, a scene that recalls a well-known narrative about the role of early Muslims' insisting on Imam Ali, the first Imam of the Shia sect of Islam, accepting the leadership of the Muslim community. Adoption of the word "beytolmal" as an Islamic term to

refer to common goods in different parts of the film also remind Imam Ali's extra attention and severity toward the private use of the properties that belong to the public.

Starting from the 1970s, due to a striking increase in oil revenues, Iranian society underwent harsh changes and wide-ranging interventionist policies by the governments of the time. The immediate consequence of these processes was a huge gap between rural and urban populations on the one hand and Tehran and the peripheries on the other. These unbalanced policies caused huge immigration to cities, especially Tehran. The situation was exacerbated by the Iran-Iraq war and Rafsanjani's and Khatami's rent-producing partially neoclassic partially interventionist policies. The process not only led to radical change in social, cultural and economic structures of the periphery but also put pressure on privileged centers like Tehran. The campaign film underlines decentralization as a method for addressing this problem. Ahmadinejad's logic is simple: Tehran's problem can only be solved in the periphery but his formula for solving the problem is deeply affected by a rentier (state's) mentality. In his mind decentralization means more budgets for provinces to cut down immigration, transferring some institutions to different parts of the country in order to reverse the direction of immigration but doesn't involve decentralization of political power or granting more cultural freedom for minorities. In different parts of this film there are scenes where Ahmadinejad and ordinary citizens speak Turkish, the language of the largest ethnic minority group and according to official statistics the most important source of immigrants to Iran for decades (source: Iranian Statistics Center). Although the advertising film depicts ethnic minorities as needy and wretched subjects, devoting some parts of the film to them can be interpreted as a sign of Islamic internationalism in Ahmadinejad's world view.

To sum up, Ahmadinejad's 2005 campaign film concentrates on dualities like the poor versus the rich and Islamic revolutionary ideals versus corrupt realities. His narrative matches with the ideals of a utopic Islamic society reconstructed by Islamist ideologues

of political Islam in Iran and other Muslim countries while it lacks any direct references to secular nationalism. Furthermore, the most important part of the advertising film was devoted to issues like morality and ethics but there is no discussion about issues like macroeconomic policies and international affairs.

Presidential Campaign of 2009

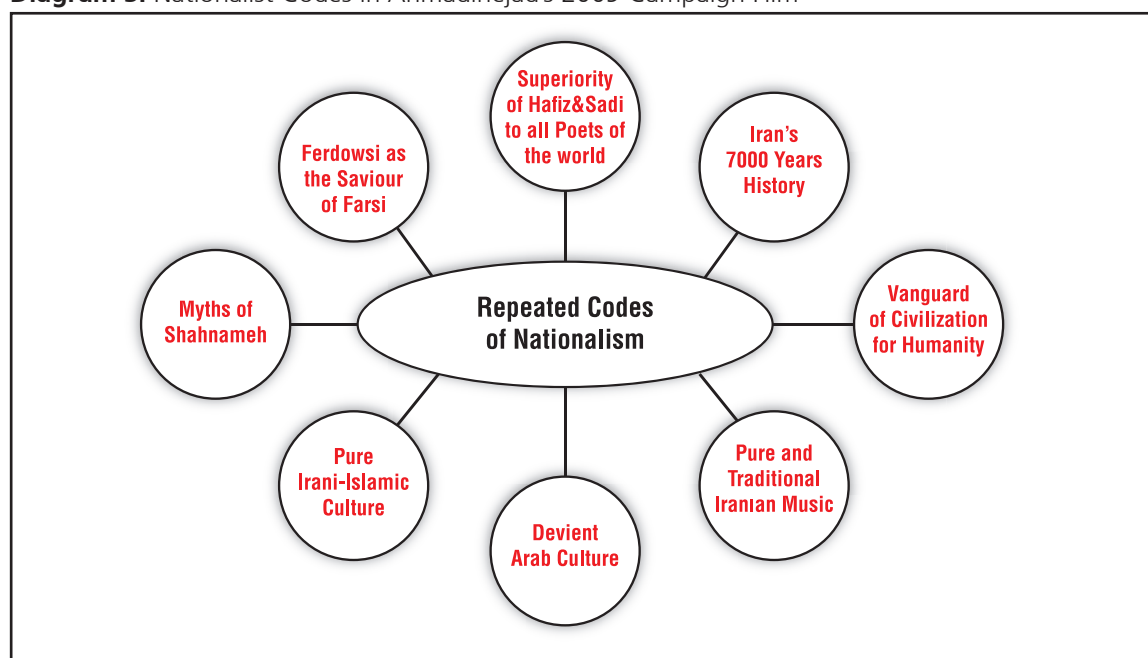
Four years later Ahmadinejad launched his campaign with some continuity but also changes in his discourse. He was no longer an un-known mayor in Tehran; four years of experience in office and his controversial statements in the national and international arena had made him a famous politician. Rather than talking about childhood memories or his management experiences in remote eras, in the 2009 campaign film he speaks about his government's accomplishments in launching satellite-carrying rockets, the birth of the first cloned transgenic goat, development of Iran's nuclear program and his "worldwide popularity" as the president of Iran. These codes go hand in hand with his clearer tones about 'enemies' to induce a feel of national pride in his supporters and serve to depict his campaign rivals as the opponents of the glory of Iran.

Ahmadinejad's advertising video in 2009 repeats codes like the arrest of British Royal Navy personnel in 2007, statements about US's despair in confrontations with Iran, his polemical speeches in the UN referring to the Holocaust and Israel to highlight the image of a foreign enemy and his government's ability in deterring their threats. Furthermore, in shared debates his tone about election rivals was provocative and in his advertising film he implicitly compares them to weeds that must be removed from the nation's yard.

The most important change in the 2009 campaign film is related to codes that call to mind a nationalist reconstruction of history. Nationalism in Iran does not necessarily root in myths or values of Iran as a nation; rather most of the time it should be understood as a synonym for (pan) Persianism (Asgharzadeh, 2007: 139). Diagram 3 depicts repeated codes that show nationalist tendencies in Ahmadinejad's faction.

The notion that Iranians were the vanguard of civilization for humanity, or considering 7000 years of history for the "nation of Iran", implies two important characteristics of secular and racial nationalism. Firstly, nationalist ideologies which are based on factors like race, reconstruct an immemorial

Diagram 3. Nationalist Codes in Ahmadinejad's 2009 Campaign Film



past for the dominant racial group. Usually this interpretation of history tends to prove that the dominant group is the most ancient group in the country or even in the world (Ram, 2000: 71-74). Normally, this kind of reconstruction of the past of an ethnic group causes similar reflections from minorities which in turn triggers rivalry in going further back in time with unending arguments about "who came first and who came later" (Asgharzadeh, 2007: 199). The logic behind this rivalry is simple: those who came first are more superior, more civilized, are the main legitimate owners of the country and late comers are inferior, less and later civilized, which have to accept the superiority of the early inhabitants or return back to the original lands from which they immigrated. Secondly, nation is a modern political phenomenon evolved from events and ideologies that emerged in Europe during the last three centuries. Despite this fact, Iranian nationalist historiography insists that the only exception for this newly born phenomenon is the Iranian nation which has been in existence for millennia (Khaleqi-Motlaq & Matini, 1992:238-241).

Ahmadinejad also talks about pure Iranic-Islamic culture and pure Iranian music. Purity is central for nationalist and racist narratives and combination as the opposite of purity is undesirable. Here purity means unmixed with "other" things that are thought to be inferior, non-authentic or unclean (Sussman, 2014). Contrary to nationalism, the world views that give priority to race have a long history and there are many instances of texts which praise pure blood, culture, lineage and religion. For example, Ferdowsi praises pure blood in *Shahnameh* and as Davis (2006: 41-42) argues, in *Shahnameh's* verses the lives of figures with one non-Iranian parent inevitably end tragically. Purity also bears close relation with an immemorial antiquity; they who come first inevitably are pure while the followers imitate the pioneers and as a result can't be original. The word "pure Iranic-Islamic" also resulted from decades of arguments among secular nationalists on one hand and between secular nationalists and Islamists on the other hand. For those

secular nationalists who believe in purity, the history of Iran starts from 2500 years ago when so-called Aryan monarchies appeared in the region. For them Achaemenids are the symbolic and glorious start point and the history of the pre-Achaemenids era including the two thousand years history of Elmites is held in silence (Abdi, 2012). Although, finding a proper starting point is important for secular nationalists, the most significant challenge appears when they reach to the Islamic era where due to the existence of various textual sources the purity myth cannot survive easily. Nationalist historiography has special tactics to solve this dilemma which will be argued in coming paragraphs. This set of intertwined tactics include 'Persianizing' Islamic, Sunni, Arab and Turkish history, boycotting some parts of the Islamic past in the region through huge jumps and providing arbitrary biased narrative from history. In addition to the aforementioned approach there is an alternative tactic that intends to co-opt Islamic reality into nationalist historiography. Proponents of this approach are in a spectrum from seculars to Islamists. Doing so, they intend to find Persian roots for Islamic elements or introduce an Iranic version of Islam in order to embed it in to the mega narrative of nationalist historiography (Vejdani, 2014:59-95). The 'Iranic-Islamic' term is key for these groups and they reprove secular nationalists for overlooking the long Islamic era in a country with an Islamic reality (e.g. see Motahhari, 1980). Ahmadinejad's careless and vague use of terms shows a lack of familiarity with the subject and his fluctuation between secular nationalism and Islamist internationalism.

Other important codes appear when he talks about the role of Ferdowsi in reviving the Persian languages and Iranic-Islamic culture. In this regard his arguments completely match with rightist nationalist discourse when he claims that the Arabs' deviant culture intended to abolish anything which bears any sign of Iranian culture but Ferdowsi resisting against the offensive culture succeeded to stand against them to glorify the name of Iran and Iranians (Saad, 1996).

Having assumed such an ancient, glorious, pure and brilliant history for Iran, Ahmadinejad comes to the conclusion that the Iranian nation holds the capacity to manage the world. He also asserts that “we are here to establish the promised social justice”. These claims reveal that besides assuming a unique past he believes in a determined special role for the Iranian nation in the future. This kind of worldview implies a kind of messianic belief about the role he considers for himself and the Iranian nation. The most important problem arises when he and many other Iranians compare this ideal Iran and its messianic duty with the reality of Iran. Finding a scapegoat is the easiest way to fill this schizophrenic gap between fantasy and reality (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011: 466-472). Iranian historiography provides dozens of pretexts including domination of Arabs, Turks, Mongols, Greeks and Islam to justify perceived repeated losses of Iranians in history. Comparing the campaign films of 2005 and 2009 show that attaching a messianic role for himself and Iran exist in both cases albeit with different narratives. In 2005 Ahmadinejad appears as a humble mayor with a duty to revive forgotten ideals of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the Iranian nation have a duty to establish a society similar to the Islamic society described in the early years of Islam; however, in 2009 as an incumbent President he defines a more secular role for himself and the Iranian nation alongside a leading role in the past and future of humanity.

In 2005 Ahmadinejad drew support from two opposing fronts with huge ideological differences and despite the government in Tehran having restricted authority he attempted to blame the Khatami and Rafsanjani governments as the main source of problems. This strategy helped him to appear as the opposition to the system inside the regime without challenging other important sources of power. In 2009 Ahmadinejad continued to put on insider opposition mask while “he held the second highest status in the system and had been in the office for four years. During his first term, Supreme Leader as the head of state of Iran and heads of judicial and military system as

the appointees of Supreme Leader, majority of Iranian parliament and official media were supporting his government.” In the 2009 campaign, Ahmadinejad related other candidate’s critiques to his entrance to the ‘forbidden zone’, talked about power and wealth circles in the country and in a scene rejecting the use of special bus lanes in a traffic jam quipped that there are privileged groups which can use ‘exclusive lanes’. The film asserts that if Ahmadinejad succeeds in remaining in power, he will abolish power and wealth circles and “will rescue the revolution.”



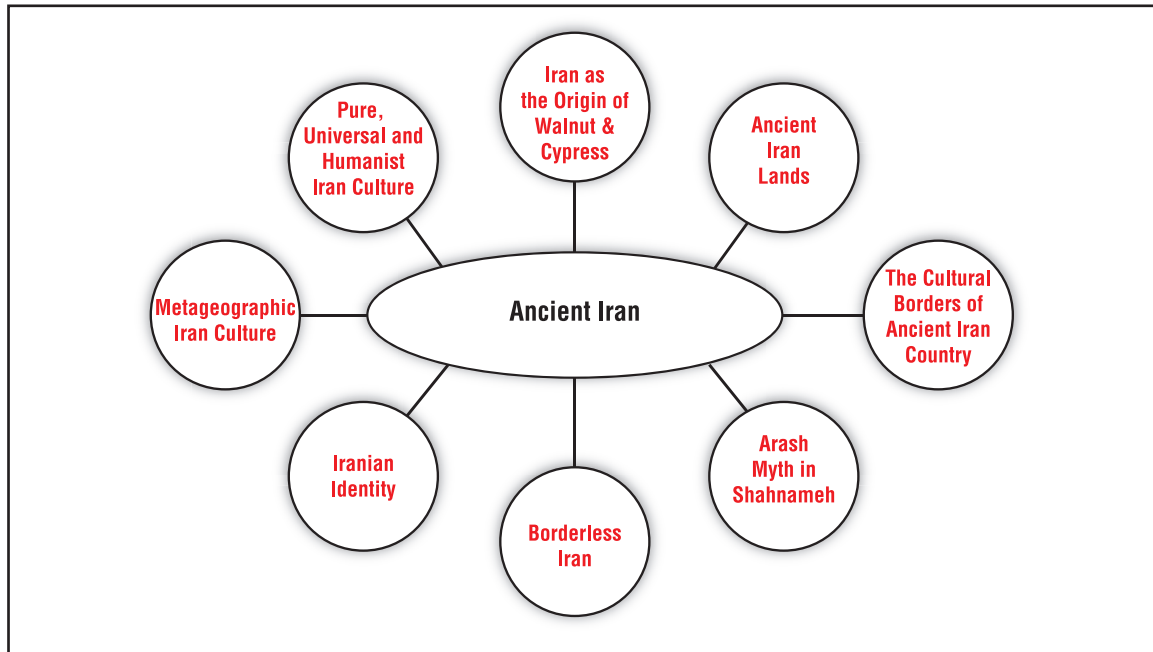
Presidential Election of 2017

Overlooking the ‘advice’ of the Supreme Leader, Ahmadinejad and his deputy, Baghayeri, registered in the 2017 presidential election; however, their disqualification by the appointees of the Supreme Leader in the Guardian Council showed that it was far more than a mere advice. Ahmadinejad chose National Tree Planting Day in March to show his support for the participation of Baghayeri, in the 2017 presidential race but his registration in the presidential election revealed that Baghayeri was only a shadow candidate. Since the video of National Tree Planting Day could not be broadcast by national media they decided to post it on YouTube, social media and websites. This video and tens of other videos that have been shared by his faction, show striking shifts in their discourse. As demonstrated in Diagram 4 Ahmadinejad, Baghayeri and Mashaei (The Chief of Staff between 2009-2013) begin their unofficial advertising film with

codes that point out to the ancient mythic Iran. Mashaei was one week Vice President of Ahmadinejad in 2009 until Supreme Leader's order made Ahmadinejad to remove him and more importantly he is a figure well-known for secular nationalist points of views and shadow spiritual-ideological leadership of Ahmadinejad's faction. To link their propaganda video with National Tree Planting Day they start speeches by Persianizing or Iranizing trees: They claim that the 'origin' of walnut and cypress trees are the "ancient lands of Iran" and go beyond to assert that where these trees grow is inside the "cultural borders of ancient Iran". The mentioned code cluster reflects the difficulties that nationalist historians of Iran alongside Aryanist orientalists encounter when they intend to provide a continuous and majestic narrative from the 'past of Iran'. Overlooking the credibility of the aforementioned claims, these codes depict that even to be the origin of a tree which can grow in many climates can trigger a sense of superiority in nationalists. Regarding environmental issues a politician can be proud of maintaining the flora and fauna in his country; however, being part of a widespread environmental crisis in Iran, Ahmadinejad's faction prefers to be honored for an issue that they and 'ancient Iranians' can have no effect upon. The code word 'origin' likewise 'purity' are reminiscent of 'irredentism'; it implies that the borders of ancient Iran can be extended to geographies in which these allegedly Iranian trees grow. Nationalist historians and Aryan orientalists have had their various tactics to deal with 'ruptures' in the 'history of Iran' but politicians and ordinary people normally use stereotypes to articulate their thoughts and feelings (Vejdani, 2014:59-95). For instance, in the mid of an aggressive discussion about the 'true-ancient name' of the Persian/Arab Gulf, Arjomand, a well-known actor, stated similar claims about fauna asserting that even the fish in the gulf speak Persian and as a result it belongs to Persians. Aryanist orientalists use the word 'Persia' when referring to different empires and reigns including Turks, Mongols etc. which dominated parts or the whole of today's Iran. This is comparable to the orientalists in the past who used to call the Ottoman State Turchia or other names that emphasize Turkish ethnicity and today's

Turkey, but it would be strange to find current literature using such terminology. On the contrary, despite the fact that the word 'Persia' has not been used in any era by inhabitants of the region and even the Pahlavi Regime officially request all embassies to use the word Iran in their correspondence, orientalists continue to use the word Persian in order to refer to Mongol Ilkhanids, Turkish Seljuks or even the Islamic Republic of Iran. A majority of orientalists emphasize the superiority of "Persian culture" over others and endeavor to find Persian effects or origins in the political, cultural and social life of other nations. Despite such claims when it comes to change in languages, adopting huge tactical shifts they ironically theorize about "Turkification" or "Arabization" of 'superior Arians'. On the contrary, the term 'Persification' is absent in any scholarly work, moreover there is no serious research to deal with Persification of non-Persians even in the Pahlavi era (one can make a similar observation about the wide use of Pan-Turkism, Pan-Turanism, Pan-Arabism, compared to the relatively rare use of Pan-Iranism and lack of any word to refer to Pan-Persianism). More ironically, to these scholars the presence of the Persian language in any corner of the world, from Central Asia and India to the Balkans, attests to the superiority of Aryan Persians. Meanwhile the existence of millions of Turks and Arabs as citizens of Iran are conceived as the assimilation of 'original' Aryans within inferior non-Persians. In other words, they believe Persians influenced others and simultaneously were assimilated by these influenced non-Persians. Being aware of the gap between their ideologies and reality both Aryanist orientalists and nationalist historians of Iran have developed specific complementary conceptualizations. All these concepts and methods suffer from methodological shortcomings like 'amnesia' and 'anachronism' (Matin-Asgari, 2012: 173-183). "Cultural Iran" is one of these concepts which can help orientalists and historians to dispose of ruptures (Mozaffari, A., 2015: 848-852; Mansouri, J. Etal, 2010: 7-15). Ahmadinejad through relating trees to the territory of ancient Iran showed that this method has the flexibility to extended 'cultural Iran' to 'climatic Iran'. Ahmadinejad claims that anywhere walnut and cypress exist used

Diagram 4. Reconstructiong Image of Ancient Iran by Ahmadinejad's Faction, March 2017



to be the lands of ancient Iran and in order to match his imagination with reality, in the manner of Aryanist orientalist and nationalist historians, delineates that this territory is not geographical, rather it is cultural (Pahlavan, 1974 quoted in Nabavi, 2003: 95). Therefore, depending on the situation trees, stones, fish, myths, ideas, language and any other elements perceived to have pure Persian origins can be used to demark the boundaries of Iran. As a result, Ahmadinejad's 'climatic Iran border' can extend the boundaries of "cultural Iran" to five continents.

Linking tree planting to pure, great, ancient Iran's border continues by discussing the legendary story of Arash, a mythic bow-man in Shahnameh who fired an arrow to determine the borders of Iran and Turan. Ahmadinejad adds that because the arrow landed on a walnut tree which can be found all around the world "Iran is borderless". In other words, Ahmadinejad's faction goes far beyond the mythologies by claiming that all the world is part of [cultural] ancient Iran. Beyond the borderless scope of Ahmadinejad's faction's imagination, exploiting Shahnameh's legends is an important change. He made his way into power with pure "revolutionary- Islamist" internationalist discourse in 2005 developing

a simple propaganda which divided society into a cruel wealthy minority and the suffering masses. This simple discourse was reachable for ordinary people from all walks of life; however, he introduced secular nationalist elements in his propaganda in 2009 and on the eve of the presidential election of 2017 romantic secular nationalism was the main theme of his discourse. More ironically, once advocating for the ordinary and vulnerable masses, in 2017 Ahmadinejad exploited Shahnameh (the book of kings), a book devoted to propagate the history and glory of ancient Iran's kings and heroes, to convey his messages. This striking change can be interpreted as either a sign of deep changes in the mindset of Ahmadinejad's faction or opportunistic behavior to exploit perceived changes in the ideals of Iranian society. Ahmadinejad claims Iranian culture which is rooted in Shahnameh is divine, humanist, pure and universal; however, it overlooks the facts that Shahnameh is not story of ordinary people, rather it propagates the glory of kings, narrates bloodshed and war against Aniranians (the people which are not Iranian including Turks, Arabs, Heptalians, Indians etc.) and has a sexist language. As a result, the reconstructed image of Iranian culture based on Shahnameh cannot

An Examination of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Electoral Discourse

be "metageographical" and has great differences with the culture of ordinary people today.

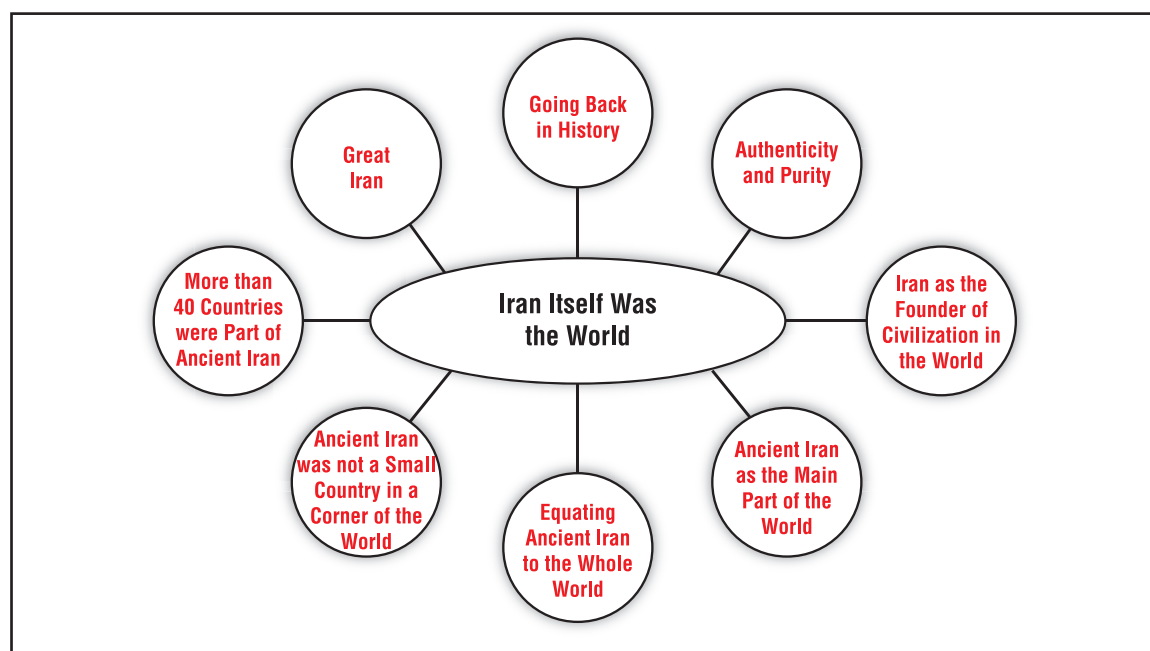
Digram 5 shows a code cluster of Ahmadinejad's factions' travels in the history of the "great ancient Iran". Mashaei believes that to "prove authenticity" we must "go back to history". First of all, he intends to find authenticity or originality which again demonstrates the nationalist fundamentalist mentality of the faction. The new point is his perception about history. Mashaei, the main ideologue of the faction, thinks that like mathematics he can prove historical phenomena and what he needs is to travel in time to find the essence of affairs. It seems that the problem is related to their ignorance about methodology in social sciences in general and historiography in particular. They are a group of engineers that met each other during intelligence missions in the Iran-Iraq war but imagine themselves as ideologues and theoreticians. Mashaei also claims that ancient Iran was the "founder of civilization" in the world and it was not a "small country" in a "corner of the world". The code "founder" again bears close relation with "purity", "authenticity", "originality" and "being immemorial" and serves to reconstruct five images. First of all, Iranians are the first so are superior. Secondly,

there was not any civilization before Iranians to be imitated so 'Iranian civilization' was original and pure. Thirdly, because in their mind Iranians chronologically were the first contributors, others only broadened what Iranians had founded. Fourthly, because Iranians were the founders and 'others' were followers none of the other civilizations can be pure and authentic. Fifthly, today's Iranians can be proud of their first civilized and founding ancestors. Mashaei, like nationalist historians and Aryanist orientalists, underlines the greatness of "ancient Iran". It is common place to equate the borders of so-called historical Iran to the imagined maximum borders of the Achaemenid or Sasanid Empires and forget about other smaller states or even eras when there was not even a territory with the name Iran. In addition to Persianizing tactics, forgetting unfavorable parts of history is another prevalent tactic.

In Mashaei's opinion being small and located in the corner of the world (if we accept there is a center for our spherical planet) are signs of inferiority. For them Iran was great, used to be located in the center of the world, existed before others and gave birth to more than 40 countries.

The third part of the video is devoted to the reconstruction of a secular basis for Islamic concepts and instructions. Their

Diagram 5. Travels of Ahmadinejad in the History of Great Ancient Iran

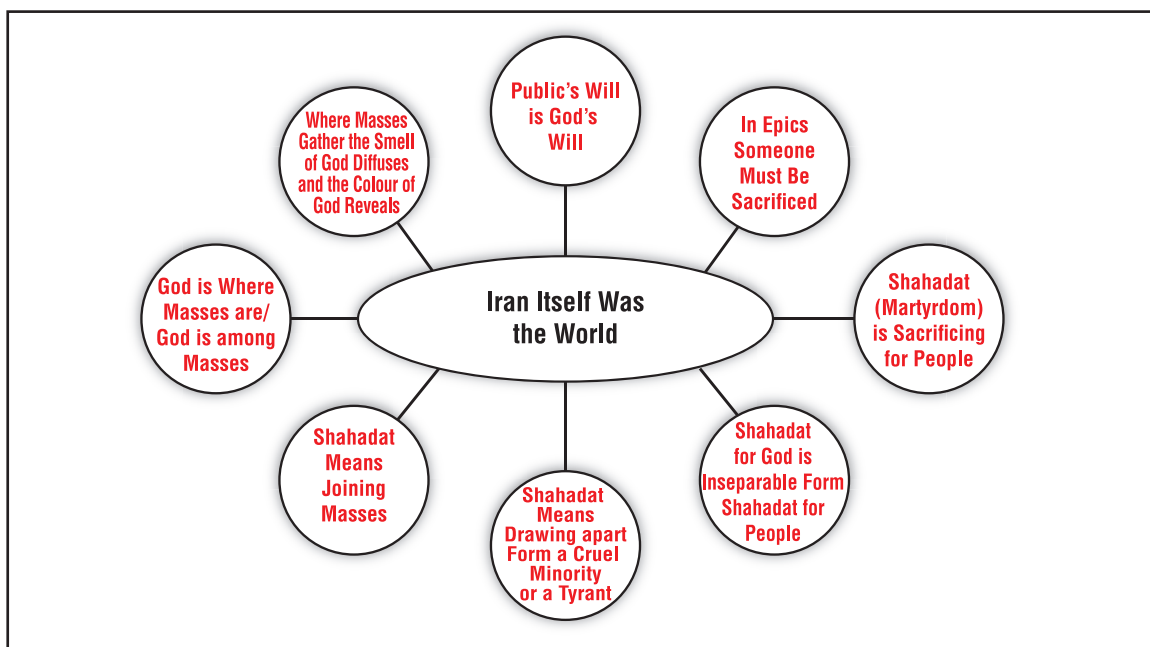


motivation may come from two reasons: firstly, a shift in the faction's worldviews and values could have motivated them to offer a more secular definition of Islamic concepts and secondly, being aware of the influence of traditional and official religious figures and institutions they may intend to introduce new sources of political and religious legitimacy. The new sources of legitimacy can challenge these figures and institutions' monopoly in determining the rules of the political game in Iran. They use discussions about features of epic works in order to bridge the gap between their claims about ancient legendary Iran on one hand and sources of legitimacy on the other. Mashaei points out the main features of an epic work and Baghayi adds that an epic requires someone who is ready to be sacrificed for his people. Their body language shows they assume themselves as the heroes of an epic story and Ahmadinejad and Baghayi are the main candidates to be sacrificed. Mashaei attempts to relate *Shanameh* to the Quran by defining similarities between characters of sacrificed people in epics with "shahids", the Islamic term to refer to one who becomes a martyr for Islam. He asserts that we cannot find any person who has sacrificed her/his life for God while separated from the masses. In other words, he aims to provide a secular-nationalistic meaning for *shahadat* by analogizing being sacrificed for God with

serving people. Mashaei maintains that if we examine the goals and ideals of such a person we will realize that he/she has left a tyrant cruel emperor or a (cruel) minority to join with the masses of people. The tone of speeches and body language show that they strongly identify themselves with characters of epic heroes who separated from a cruel minority to join the masses and are ready to be sacrificed. If so, who is the tyrant and cruel minority and why? In the elections of 2005 and 2009 Ahmadinejad succeeded in reconstructing a front by depicting the circles around Rafsanjani and Khatami as being mainly responsible for the assimilation of revolutionary and equality ideals but after the 2009 elections the power of these circles were restricted. Introducing secular definitions for Islamic concepts implies that they intend to delegitimize Islamic-revolutionary institutions to mobilize the masses and affect their decision-making processes.

Disqualification of Ahmadinejad and Baghayi by the Guardian Council revealed that they were not successful in putting pressure on these institutions and lack of any social reaction demonstrated the limited popularity of their discourse and lack of trust in Ahmadinejad's faction. Ahmadinejad counted on the support of the rural and poor population, the majority of whom had

Diagram 6. The Codes That Reveal The Faction of Ahmadinejad's Attempts to Reconstruct Bases for Islamic Nations and Political Legitimacy



a positive attitude towards Ahmadinejad's direct subsidy policies; but he forgot that they are traditional and religious people with a limited interest in secular issues. It seems Ahmadinejad was confident about the support of the poorest parts of society and he attempted to mobilize the middle class by developing a nationalist-secular discourse. However, the middle class was the major victim of Ahmadinejad's previous political and economic policies and even direct radical statements against revolutionary institutions and the Supreme Leader's appointees, after his disqualification, could not gain their trust.

For his opponents, Ahmadinejad's references to the Quranic verses Ahmadinejad implies a comparison between God's will and that of the people. This point caused harsh reactions from conservative and revolutionary institutions. The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran clarifies that the absolute sovereignty is for God and introducing the public as the source of legitimacy can challenge the established political order and lead to unpredictable consequences for the future of the faction.



Conclusion

By using Grounded Theory and Semiotic Theory this study constructed code clusters from Ahmadinejad's campaign videos in 2005 and 2009 and National Tree Planting Day video released on the eve of the 2017 presidential elections. Code clusters studied

from the three eras attest to noticeable changes in the discourse of the Ahmadinejad faction. Ahmadinejad started his campaign by emphasizing the necessity of returning to the overlooked values and neglected promises of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. He succeeded to mobilize the masses around a reconstructed frontier based on a duality between the privileged minority who had deviated from Islamic revolutionary ideals and the deprived majority which was frustrated by the injustice and distortion in revolutionary values. Lack of any secular codes and the use of Islamic revolutionary rhetoric which can bold once inactive cleavages between the poor and the rich are other significant aspects of the 2005 campaign video. In the 2009 video Ahmadinejad's language became more aggressive towards other candidates and he preferred to decrease ethical instructions and added nationalist codes to his propaganda agenda. The video which was made in 2017 reveals a striking shift in the faction's discourse compared to the campaign video of 2005. This time the faction appeared as a staunch advocator of secular nationalist narratives giving speeches about "great ancient Iran", Shahnameh, the immemorial history of Iran, the excellent role of Iran in the history of humanity, the endless borders of cultural Iran, the authenticity of Iranian culture and Iran as the founder of civilization. They also intended to find new sources for legitimacy based on the public's will instead of God's will on the one hand and secularizing-Persianizing Islamic concepts on the other. There is no hint of Islamic-revolutionary codes in the last video while codes related to epic legendary Iran involve most of the extracted codes. These radical changes can imply either a change in the faction's worldviews or opportunistic policies to mobilize the middle class to affect decision making processes.

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- a) In the 2005 Presidential Elections
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-l7x0kBUcw>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0f5SP9ASh8>
- b) In the 2009 Presidential Elections
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8JCKd-OGPM>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETN2vpTtWLk>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTy_hhPCs1c
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVjZtbNc9BQ>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtplCGu0mgE>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibrmJKwuPdc>
- c) March 2017 (National Tree Planting Day)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhAt1VBPjwk>

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Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara

Oğuzlar Mh. 1397. Sk. No: 14 06520 Çankaya, Balgat, Ankara, Turkey
Phone: +90 312 284 55 02 - 03 Fax: +90 312 284 55 04
e-mail: info@iramcenter.org www.iramcenter.org

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