

Polling in Iran: Surprising Questions

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Brief Analysis

The difficulties facing Iranians who want to express their opinions freely in print are legion. In an atmosphere where journalists and pollsters are often detained without trial, it is easy to assume that pollsters do not ask important questions and that respondents do not give serious answers. Yet, some very interesting polls are in fact conducted in Iran.

State-Sponsored Polls

In 2001, the Office of Press and Publicity Affairs in Iran's Islamic Culture and Guidance Ministry sponsored a series of polls and published the results in a book, *The Values and Beliefs of Iranians* (in Farsi). The pollsters surveyed 16,724 people in twenty-eight Iranian cities regarding eight subjects: social values; justice; freedom and safety; respect and well-being; political beliefs; political preferences; feelings of friendship and society; and social pressures. Many delicate questions were asked about the government and Iran's state of affairs. On many controversial issues, the pollsters asked not what individual respondents believed, but instead how they thought the majority of the population would respond -- a format that allowed respondents to express strongly anti-regime stances without having to state them as their own personal views. For many questions, the pollsters also provided details about how responses varied depending on the age or social condition of the respondents.

Current State of Affairs

One of the poll questions ran as follows: "Iranians have three different opinions about the country's situation. Some believe that the situation is satisfactory and should be supported. Some believe that the situation could be improved with a few changes. And some believe that the situation is not ameliorable and must be changed fundamentally. Which of the three opinions do you most agree with -- support of the current situation, correction of the current situation, or fundamental change from the core?" Only 10.7% of the respondents said that the current situation was satisfactory. A resounding 66.2% believed the current situation could be improved with a few changes, while the remaining 23.1% felt that fundamental change was needed.

Although these beliefs were consistent for both genders, responses varied depending on age, education, and employment. For example, 31.0% of respondents between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine believed that fundamental change was necessary, but only 20.9% of those fifty and over shared this belief. Among the illiterate, 18.0% responded positively about the current situation while 15.2% believed major change was required; among those with some higher education, the figures were 5.8% and 26.1%, respectively. The corresponding percentages for students were 8.0% and 28.8%; for the unemployed, 9.5% and 28.6%.

This question was posed in two different ways. First, respondents were asked, "In your opinion, which of the three choices do most people support?" Then they were asked, "Which of the three opinions do you most agree with?" A comparison of the resultant data shows that respondents across all age groups were more likely to express their own individual desire for change than to attribute such a desire to society in general. In other words, many respondents

were prepared to tell the pollsters that they personally wanted fundamental change even though most people did not, indicating their willingness to respond honestly.

Freedom of Expression

The polls also included questions about the level of freedom that people felt in expressing their views. For example, respondents were asked, "In your opinion, in the current state of affairs, to what extent could Iranians criticize the current regime without feeling scared or threatened?" Nearly half of the respondents (48%) believed that they could not express such criticism without fear. The prevalence of this feeling was underscored by the fact that responses did not vary significantly by gender, age, education level, occupation, or marital status. Moreover, this fear calls into question the accuracy of the data showing that only 23% supported fundamental change in the country. In a related question, respondents were asked, "In your opinion, currently, how freely can groups or political parties express and fulfill their mission?" Only 32.5% believed that such groups could operate freely with few or no consequences.

Religious Beliefs

Another set of questions focused on religious beliefs and values. One noteworthy question asked, "Religion and faith are one of the best ways of overcoming the obstacles in life.' Do you agree or disagree with this belief?" Only 4.9% and 1.1% of the respondents disagreed or completely disagreed, respectively, while 46.3% and 41.5% agreed and completely agreed, respectively, indicating that religion is in fact an important part of Iranians' lives. Responses to another religion-related question seem at first to contradict this assessment; when asked, "How often do you participate in the Friday Prayer?" 28.6% said rarely and 37.6% said never. Yet, these responses are consistent with traditional Iranian ways of expressing religiosity -- although attending Friday prayer is a significant part of life in many Arab countries, it is not so central in Iran.

Trust and Mistrust

The polls also addressed the levels of trust in Iranian society. One question asked, "To what extent do you trust your immediate family members." Only 39.6% of the respondents expressed complete trust in their immediate families. In response to a similar question, only 5.6% said that they could completely trust their friends. These statistics suggest that many Iranians live in a state of mistrust and fear and may not feel free to speak their minds candidly. Again, this fact should be borne in mind when evaluating the survey results regarding controversial issues.

In addition, respondents were given a list of professions and were asked, "To what extent can you trust the personnel in each line of work?" Surprisingly, 46.7% indicated that the clergy were trustworthy, in contrast to other reports indicating widespread distrust of the clergy. At the top of the list were teachers (80.0% positive answers) and university professors (72.1%), reflecting the longstanding social prestige of educators in Iran. Journalists (30.7% positive answers) were only slightly more trusted than taxi drivers (25.0%); these figures may have been influenced by the fact that the survey was taken after many reform-minded newspapers had been closed, meaning that the remaining journalists were primarily supporters of the regime. At the bottom of the list were merchants (11.3%) and realtors (9.5%).

Polling Today

It is not clear whether such vigorous polling continues today. In September 2002, the Iranian parliament's national security committee commissioned a poll to better understand Iranian attitudes toward the United States. The results indicated that 74% of Iranians over the age of fifteen favored resumption of relations with the United States while 46% felt that U.S. policies on Iran were "to some extent correct." The journalists who conducted this poll -- Abbas Abdi (a member of the mainstream Islamic Iran Participation Front) and Hossein Ali Qazian, both from the Ayandeh Institute -- have received jail terms of eight and nine years, respectively, for "publishing nonscientific research, wrongful analysis of the country's political, economic, social, and cultural situation, and injecting vague, general,

and false information into the country's decisionmaking system." The court also charged the pollsters with selling secret information to Gallup, Zogby, and VM -- corporations that the court claimed were linked to the Central Intelligence Agency.

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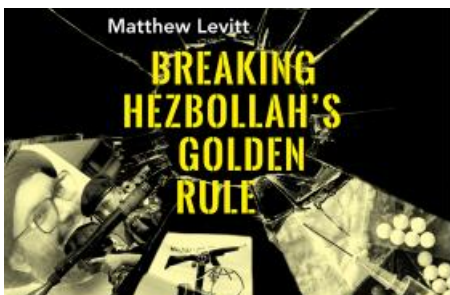
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