

# Scrabble the Face of Your Opponent: Iranian Blogger's Endeavour to Discursively Undermine Ahmadi Nejad's legitimacy

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Since Ahmadi Nejad's first election in 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadi Nejad has never been darling of the Iranian middle class. This problem escalated after the contested June 2009 election which followed by a cross country turmoil. Facing a massive crackdown, the opposition movement tried to challenge Ahmadi Nejad discursively on the Internet. One of the approaches opposition bloggers adopted was to scorn Ahmadi Nejad's appearance. Putting the issue in the broader arena of the Iranian culture in which the visual appearance of the nobility has always been a crucial criterion to lead Ahmadi Nejad to the throne, this study explores the endeavors by the Iranian bloggers to put Ahmadi Nejad's physical –and particularly facial- features to the forefront and criticize him as an inept person to stay incumbent. Base on the fact that in the ancient Iran a prince with any kind of scars on his face was delegitimized to become king, the researchers call this endeavor "scrabbling" the face of the opponent. The researcher's qualitative analysis have shown that Iranian bloggers have managed to "scrabble" the Face of Ahmadi Nejad in many different ways and in response, his proponents who are aware of damage of this discursive attack within the Iranian context, tried to "heal" Ahmadi Nejad's face.

**Key words:** Ahmadi nejad, visual culture, June 2009 election, Iran, Iranian bloggers.

## INTRODUCTION

The start of the Ahmadi Nejad presidency in 2005 coincided with important shifts in the position, resources, and alliances of each of the Islamic Republic's factions [1 p401]. Ahmadi Nejad was the elected candidate of the poor [2] and less educated masses [3]. Therefore, Ahmadi Nejad has always been subject to criticism by the educated middle class. June 2009 presidential election in Iran marked a significant change in the political history of the Iran. Some hours after the announcement of the result of the election, unrests erupted on the streets of Tehran, which followed by massive protests in Tehran and other major cities of Iran. Ahmadi Nejad's administration harshly reacted and as a result of clash between protesters and police and pro-government

groups, tens of people were killed.

These events widened the gap between Ahmadi Nejad and people, especially educated middle class people. Therefore, they tried to defy Ahmadi Nejad. But, the events after the election and following arrests and trials showed that open opposition was highly costly. So, opponents tried to confront him discursively. This could be done through some ways. Sending videos of the demonstrations to foreign media, preparing reports for opposition websites, shouting Allah-o-Akbar (God is Great) on the roofs, writing graffiti, writing slogans on the bank notes, etc. Blogging were among many ways they chose to defy Ahmadi Nejad.

Weblogs need a primary technical knowledge [4,5] and they are cheap and-in some respects-safe. In a country with more than 46 million internet users<sup>1</sup>, a large number

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm> (3/12/2013)

of bloggers opposed the mainstream ideology of the governments since the early days of the introduction of weblogs to Iran. In April 2003 Iran became the first government to take direct action against bloggers [6]. In 2004 more than 20 bloggers were sent to jail [7]. In response to opposition, the government managed to provide some incentives for more religious youth to enter the main Iranian blogosphere [8] and increased pressure on anti-government cyber-activists. The death of Sattar Beheshti in Cyber Police custody in 2012 was one of the last harsh government responses to activists and bloggers in Iran [9].

Although the recent researches have shown that only the fractions of the Iranian bloggers are belong to opposition [2], this fraction consists a powerful factor in the Iranian political sphere. Bloggers attack the government in different ways. One of the ways they employ to undermine the legitimacy of Mahmoud Ahmadi Nejad, is to criticize his appearance. And, of course the personal appearance has an important place in the Iranian visual culture. Here, the researchers show how flawless physical appearance and face has always been important in the Iranian politics, to show how Iranian bloggers endeavors could be meaningful and effective in “scrabbling” face of Ahmadi Nejad.

### Appearance and Politics in the Iranian Visual Culture

The love for beauty is not something special to the Iranian culture. But, the Iranian culture has always emphasized on the physical attractiveness, politically. The Iranian's historical love to beauty has always had an important role in every aspect of their lives. This of course, had – and has - political implications. Those who wanted to rule the country, must had suitable appearances. Julius Young [10 p.54] claimed that “Darius” king of Persia (550 BC- 486 BC) “was physically the best case to be the king”. Pir Nia [11 p22] praises Xrexes (519 BC-465 BC) as a “dashing” king. Shabani [12 p12] also draws his attention to the physical appearance of Xrexes: “Xrexes was a tall handsome, graceful and attractive man”. On some of the coins belonging to the Era of Ardeshir (I) the Sassanid king who ruled from 224 AD to 240 AD, it was thought that “The Mazda worshiper, Ardeshir, great king of Persia has his face from the God” [13 p9]. Also, because of a small flaw in his body, Zham, the second son of Kavadh, great king of Sassanid dynasty, lost the chance of immediacy despite his loyalty [14 p475]. Quoting from Haghghat [15 p28] calls Lotfali Khan Zand (1769-1794) the “curio of the time”. In the medieval Iran, a flaw in the body of the ruler could seriously undermine his legitimacy [16].

The importance of physical appearance for Iranians not only has not diminished by the Iranian modernization process, but also has taken new bust. Today, cosmetics are “widely” used in Iran [17 p159]. In 2010, Iranians were the seventh largest consumers of cosmetics in the world. Iranians, especially those belonging to the middle

and upper classes, attach great importance to appearance. Cosmetic surgeries, such as nose jobs and cheek and chin lifting, are popular among Iranian women. Iran in fact has become known as one of the nose-job capitals of the world [18] with the highest rate of nose surgery in the world [19]. Recently, *Tose'e Mohandes'i Bazaargostaran Ati*<sup>2</sup> found that 14 million Iranians collectively spend upwards of \$2 billion annually on various beauty products, accounting for 29 percent of the \$7.2 billion cosmetics market in the Middle East, second only to Saudi Arabia [20]. Moreover, the demand for rhinoplasty is ever increasing in Iran [21 p75]. Malocclusion treatment is also rampant among Iranians. According to Khaneh *et al.* [22 p38], about 84 percent of Iranians believe they need orthodontic treatment. Liposuction surgery is also welcome in Iran. Overall, considering the number of people who leave themselves to cosmetic surgery in relation to the whole population of the country, Iran is first rank in this kind of surgery in the world [23 p318]. The Iranian cosmetic surgery industry has expanded to meet the demand of the Iranians and this expansion has helped the reduction of costs [24 p25] which means that these kinds of surgeries will increase by the coming years.

Of course, people who care so much about their appearance will consciously or unconsciously scrutinize the appearance of the others. Perhaps, for some people the physical appearance of a person replaces some other factors such as loyalty, good conduct and knowledge. This is an important factor that will attract attention of politicians, both for promoting themselves or degrading rivals. This is the case for Mahmoud Ahmadi Nejad. Iranian bloggers have tried to prove that Ahmadi Nejad is ugly to undermine his political legitimacy. Therefore, we have an Iranian deep rooted culture in which the leader must/or at least is preferable when he is handsome, and the endeavor of the Iranian bloggers is to prove that Ahmadi Nejad is not.

### Research Question

Is there any endeavor on part of the Iranian bloggers to “scrabble” the face of Ahmadi Nejad?

If yes, how do they do it?

And, is there any endeavor from the side of Ahmadi Nejad and his proponents to “heal” his face?

### METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative analysis. In order to determine what kind of approaches Iranian opposition bloggers adopt to culturally, discursively, and hence, politically undermine legitimacy of Ahmadi Nejad, three main Iranian blog providers were selected; Persianblog, Blogfa, and Blogspot. Google provides a tool for users to search

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keywords in a specific domain. This tool was used to search only in the blogs that were created within these three domains. The domain blogspot was filtered in Iran, so the researchers had to use circumvention tools. First of all, the researchers found a positive answer to the Q1; there are endeavors on part of the Iranian bloggers to “scrabble” the face of Ahmadi Nejad. By reviewing comments made by the Iranian bloggers, the researchers shaped their categories. So, rather than making pre-designed categories and impose them on the material, the researchers let the material to speak for themselves and reveal 5 categories:

“The Dwarfish Ahmadi Nejad”, “The Ugly Ahmadi Nejad”, “The Simian Ahmadi Nejad”, “The Voyeur Ahmadi Nejad”, and “The Disguised Ahmadi Nejad”. The researchers could also find a trend in pro-Ahmadi Nejad weblogs to help in “Healing Ahmadi Nejad’s Face”. Based on the rule of saturation of categories, the researchers stopped more searching as no further category was made by searching more weblogs.

## RESULTS

The overall results of this study show that the Iranian opposition bloggers are very active in undermining the visual appearance of Ahmadi Nejad on the Internet and they could somehow push the proponent of Ahmadi Nejad to backfire this criticism not by trying to scrabble the face of opposition leaders or emphasizing the beauty of Ahmadi Nejad, but by trying to denounce the importance of appearance in politics. In some cases, this discourse even provoked Ahmadi Nejad to respond. The following show how each sub-discourse in this discourse is depicted by the opposition bloggers.

### The Dwarfish Ahmadi Nejad

As is clarified in the method section, the first category of this general discourse is “The Dwarfish Ahmadi Nejad”. Mahmoud Ahmadi Nejad’s height is given at only five feet and two inches which is decidedly short [25]. Proportional height has always been an important factor of competence for the rulers in the Iranian culture. Smart Iranian bloggers know this and widely brought this to the foreground. Examples are:

- In your opinion, what would be the epithet of Ahmadi Nejad if he lived during the Qajar era? Thief-o-Dowlah, usurper-o-dowlah, dwarf-o-dowlah.
- This Mr. Bollinger should be taken as a cute person. By inviting this dwarf of the Iranian politics, firstly, Ahmadi Nejad tried to take an intellectual posture.
- Yesterday, the most interesting slogans of people were about oil and this dwarfish dictator!
- Absolutely, the present situation is not only the

consequences of the deeds of the current president and predecessors and also all of us are guilty as well, but this political and physical dwarf has made things even more egregious.

- Even the grandmother of Leila felt this (high) inflation, but this dwarf did not.
- We should tell them that if the propaganda could have any use, they could make this liar dwarf a beloved of the hearts.
- In a world in which a dwarf dictator named Ahmadi Nejad and his supporters have stigmatized the reputation of our nation, the name of Khatami is still expressed with respect, righteousness, and rationality.
- Among one hundred of the Iranian politicians of his time, Mosadegh was the tallest and best in statesmanship, but, among today’s one hundred Iranian politicians, Ahmadi Nejad is one of the most dwarfs and least talent.

### The Ugly Ahmadi Nejad

As mentioned above, the Iranian culture is the culture of beauty. The beauty is not known only as a physical feature but also as a merit. Therefore, Iranian dissident bloggers have frequently managed to undermine Ahmadi Nejad’s legitimacy by demonizing Ahmadi Nejad’s face. Examples are:

- After broadcasting the Yusef (TV) series, the researchers found that despite many physical differences between Yusef and Ahmadi Nejad, they share many similarities as well.
- A lor (an irony for naïve person) asked Ahmadi Nejad; is it your real face or you are just joking?
- A young boy asked the Iranian president if he could have his coat and the president approved and gifted his coat to him, and said how people can make jest of me now. Half of the jokes were designed on my coat and another half were on my good looking face. But, no problem, I have bought a dozen of these coats from the Russian bazaar (refers to second hand market).
- (A Christian girl) sat before altar and said; Ah my lord! You gave me everything; I only want another thing which is a handsome husband. Then Ahmadi Nejad came out of altar while saying; Oh, Jesus, do not push me, I will go by myself!
- I dreamed the king Xrexes of ancient Persia, irritated by the movie 300 has come to life again and was going to gather an army in order to attack Hollywood. He suddenly saw a poster of Ahmadi Nejad, he stepped back and asked; Mr. Balouch, who is this man? I said this is our today’s ruler. He beat himself in the head and fell on the floor. Before dying again he said; No problem with the pride of the past. Just try to save your today’s honor.
- Genghis Khan killed every person who was taller than him. I think this Ahmadi Nejad would kill every person who is more beautiful than him.

- Lankarani to Ahmadi Nejad; Ah, you more handsome than angels, do not go to the street alone because the reformists are thieves and they will rob your coat.
- But, because of his ugly face and hateful behavior, we do not perceive Ahmadi Nejad as one of us. We do not want this administration because it is accused of fraud, deception and betrayal.
- Yesterday when I was making my way to home I saw young boys who were distributing Mousavi's posters among people. I asked them why they support Mousavi? They responded with no disingenuousness that they cannot tolerate the face of Ahmadi Nejad anymore.
- I hate three things – Ahmadi Nejad- his aura- and his face.

### **The Simian Ahmadi Nejad**

This is the most rampant method the Iranian opposition bloggers have employed to scabble the face of Ahmadi Nejad. In the Iranian and Persian culture, pigs, dogs and apes are the most hated animals. These animals are associated with hedonism, lust and perversion. The Iranian bloggers have proved their talent in associating Ahmadi Nejad's face with monkeys. Examples are:

- The Public Committee of Protection of Votes has announced; Dear compatriots, please kindly do not write terms like stupid, monkey, baboon and terms like these on your ballots because they will be read as "Ahmadi Nejad" and will be counted as his votes.
- When a person is invited to somewhere, he is treated friendly, but (in the University of Colombia) and in the case of this monkey everything was reversed, this monkey who has become our president has completely understood that hanging, torture, and hirelings have no use here anymore.
- The more ugly the monkey is, the more jig is in its dance. Today, we are really grappling with people who's symbol is this ugly faced and ugly mood ape.
- You called intellectuals goat kids. Since you mentioned kids of goats, I wish you had sent regards to the monkey as well.
- The fact that they try to count this dwarf anthropoid preacher as the president of Iran pressures the heart of every Iranian intellectual. But, when some wrong intellectuals and other –apparently- well educated political people try to elaborate on the methods of this baboon, even the heart of stones get pain from this stupidity.
- He destroyed every free press in Iran but still insists that this is a free country. The God donated him an ugly face which is like a monkey has been born from a hyena.
- The monkeys of India are jealous of your face and your nature is evil. You have the aura of stupidity around you Ahmadi Nejad.
- You have really said the truth. The modus operandi of this monkey is the denial of everything.

- Two years ago, a phony political activist told me that this baboon will be the last in the election. In the second round, he told me that we should not let this fascist to be elected and after his election he said they resorted to fraud.
- We love the TV so much because it shows many animals, previously the TV showed sharks and cats and now it shows that lizard or this baboon who lies to people like a horse.
- The poor monkey. You merit that Ahmadi Nejad. Ahmadi Nejad is an echo of bad culture and vampire (identity) of you the Persians.
- It is said that when Ahmadi Nejad was born and this smiley monkey opened his eyes, a person said who is this creature whose ugly face has abashed his father?
- This is the shame of every Persian citizen that after thousands of years of glorious civilization of Cyrus and Darius, this monkey now seats on the throne. Ah, my lord, how we would have this fate if we have had reason?
- A person asked Ahmadi Nejad; do not you want to make a change in your face? He replied; No because my contract to Chitoz will not expire before two years.

### **The Voyeur Ahmadi Nejad**

The Iranian culture has strict instruction over the behavior and views to the other gender. In the verse 31 of Nur scripture in Quran it has been said "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof". These types of posts on Persian weblogs are mostly visual. They try to follow the trajectory of Ahmadi Nejad's gaze to the body of a woman. Examples include (see Figures 1-5). These images (Figures 1-5) which circulated in Persian language media (including the mentioned blog) became controversial because for many, it shows the face of "hypocrite Ahmadi Nejad."

### **The Disguised Ahmadi Nejad**

Some other bloggers who perceived themselves as a part of the opposition movement have resorted to technical manipulation of Ahmadi Nejad's photos. Although some scholars may think this may mobilize sympathy towards Ahmadi Nejad inside or outside Iran, in fact, this can be an effective method to de-sanctificate the former president of an Islamic government which is overtly or covertly claimed to be the rule of God [26]. After his address to the 2005 UN General Assembly, "Ahmadi Nejad stated that he felt that there was a light around him during his entire address at the podium during which time the world leaders did not blink" [27 p4]. It is obvious that deforming the face of a person who claims to have been surrendered by light can seriously undermine his legitimacy. Examples in this category include (see



**Figure 1.** Ahmadi Nejad greeting a young female teacher.

**Source:** <http://social-m.blogfa.com/post-159.aspx>.

**Note:** Originally from Fars News Agency but has been chosen to be demonstrated in *Che Khabar?* Reprinted with permission.



**Figure 2.** Ahmadi Nejad gazing the body of a woman.

**Source:** <http://is-namakpaash.blogfa.com/8602.aspx>.

**Note:** Originally from Fars News Agency but has been chosen to be demonstrated in *Namakpaash*. Reprinted with permission.

Figures 5-8):

### Healing Ahmadi Nejad's Face

Being consciously or unconsciously aware of the importance of having a flawless face in the Iranian political arena, the proponents of Ahmadi Nejad have managed to heal his scrabbled face in the Iranian

Blogsphere. Intriguingly, they rarely tried to construct a handsome Ahmadi Nejad and majority of their efforts have been designed to undermine the cultural perception that the ruler must have a good physical appearance. Examples follow:

- In this book which has been authored by five Malay theologians who studied in the Qom seminary, has



**Figure 3.** Ahmadi Nejad addressing some female Iranian citizens.

**Source:** *Mojtabaha* ([www.mojtabaha2.blogfa.com/87054.aspx](http://www.mojtabaha2.blogfa.com/87054.aspx)).

**Note:** Reprinted with permission.



**Figure 4.** Chavez's mother hugging Ahmadi Nejad.

**Source:** *Mirza gholi khan Raportchi* (<http://mirzaqoli.persianblog.ir/post/389>).

**Note:** Reprinted with permission.

described Ahmadi Nejad as a humble leader with an oriental face and physique but hardworking, idealist and with a simple life.

- Suppose the Imam of the time emerges and inductee Shoaib Ibn alSalih, as the commander of his army. Some may treat him as what they did to Ahmadi Nejad because based on narratives they are similar in that both of them have no appealing physical appearance. (Those who insult the face of Ahmadi Nejad) are people who did not read the verse of "the best of you is the most pious of you" or maybe they have read it but are unable to

understand it.

- The third advantage is the popular and humble mood of this administration, their advantage is not in their appearance. It is on their same level with people. Be like people and stay among them.
- Some people say that his face is not suitable for presidency but he says instead, my face is suitable for serving people.
- I could not hear any reasonable response from them. Some of them provided some reasons but they were also stupid. For example one of them said he (Ahmadi Nejad)



**Figure 5.** Graffiti of Ahmadi Nejad together with American Singer 'Jennifer Lopez'.  
**Source:** <http://pesaranbad.blogfa.com/post-57.aspx>.  
**Note:** Reprinted with permission.



**Figure 6.** A graffiti of Ahmadi Nejad as a female voter.  
**Source:** *In Laport* (<http://in-laport.blogfa.com/>).  
**Note:** The paper in the image reads; "I voted my brother".  
Reprinted with Permission.



**Figure 7.** A graffiti of Ahmadi Nejad as a smiling ape.  
**Source:** *Hay o Hooy* ([http://hayohouy.blogspot.com/2009/01/blog-post\\_06.html](http://hayohouy.blogspot.com/2009/01/blog-post_06.html)).  
**Note:** Reprinted with Permission.



**Figure 8.** A graffiti of Ahmadi Nejad as a chimpanzee addressing a press conference.  
**Source:** *Democratari* ([http://democratari.blogspot.com/2010/04/blog-post\\_08.html](http://democratari.blogspot.com/2010/04/blog-post_08.html)).  
**Note:** Reprinted with permission.

is ugly and when he goes abroad he will damage the reputation of Iran!!!

- In the past four years in which tens of TVs, magazines

and tribunes have called the president of the country "dwarf", "deceitful", "crooked", "dictator" and where were those ethical preachers who accused Ahmadi Nejad of



**Figure 9.** Ahmadinejad smiling to graffiti of himself.

**Source:** IRNA news agency but was retrieved from *Irooooooni* (<http://www.irooooooni.blogfa.com/8808.aspx>).

**Note:** Reprinted with permission.

unethical strategy during his debate with Mir Hossein Mousavi?

- Of course Ahmadinejad is not guilty for his face, we have dismissed our humanitarian and ethical values. "The human being is valuable only in his manhood".
- Ahmadinejad is the first president who has ever been attacked by cartoonists in this scale. Nevertheless, he treats them patiently, even with those who cartoon him with offensive intentions. He laughs to his cartoon in this photo (see Figure 9).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper follows three major trajectories in the Iranian culture, politics and history and focuses on a point in which these three trajectories collide on Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former president of the Islamic Republic of Iran; (1) It reveals the relationship between "face" and politics in the Iranian culture. (2) It sheds light on the phenomenon of the Iranian blogging and its political implications. (3) It shows how costly street protests were replaced by safer blogging in the Iranian

post-2009 period.

Consciously or unconsciously, the Iranian bloggers took these three paths to construct Ahmadinejad's face in the context of Iranian culture. Following the massive suppression of the demonstrators and as a result of the increase in costs of contesting a fair presidential election by which Ahmadinejad won another 4 years of presidency, the Iranian bloggers have tried to pull the conjunction point into the cyberspace where they enjoy more safety and anonymity.

There, some bloggers have tried to discursively scuffle the face of Ahmadinejad to undermine his political loyalty. They have done this by trying to draw attention of the people to –in their mind- ugly face of Ahmadinejad, by constructing an ugly or dwarf Ahmadinejad, and by showing similarities or resemblances between Ahmadinejad and apes. Also, drawing on the elements of the Iranian culture, some bloggers have tried to construct a voyeur Ahmadinejad by choosing his photos in special situations. And lastly, some bloggers have manipulated Ahmadinejad's picture to undermine his legitimacy as the administrator of a political system which claims to have spiritual legitimacy. On the other

hand, however, proponents of Ahmadi Nejad have responded to this activity, which shows that the Iranian opposition bloggers have been successful –at least partly- in scrabbling his face. The responses of pro-Ahmadi Nejad weblogs are generally passive. They did not try to emphasize on his beauty or to scrabble the face of opposition leaders, namely Mousavi, Karoubi and Khatami. Instead, they managed to heal the face of Ahmadi Nejad by trying to remove emphasize on relationship between beauty and political loyalty. Although some poor people may feel empathy with Ahmadi Nejad by reading these comments, the fact that the Internet is the middle class medium, decreases the effectiveness of pro-Ahmadi Nejad weblogs. Mahmoud Ahmadi Nejad was the last to respond. Ahmadi Nejad was also among those who used surgery and Botox to become more favorable in 2011.

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