
The independent media pronounces

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By Rajiva Wijesinha rarely watch television in Colombo, but in the ghastly hotel rooms of Geneva, where even setting up a laptop is complicated, I often have recourse to the wretched thing. Needless to say, my preferred poison is British, which means usually BBC World, because most small hotels offer little else in English.

So, going to sleep on Friday night, I was quite convinced that I would wake up the next morning to find that Mr Moussavi had been elected President of Iraq. The BBC thought this was sure to happen, given the surge in his popularity it had detected over the preceding weeks, and they found various Iranian academics to confirm this prediction. Some were even confident that Mr Moussavi would win without any need of a runoff. So I was astonished to find next morning that Mr Ahmadinejad was well ahead, and by the time I came back from my tasteless breakfast he seemed to have won. I have no doubt that now there will be confident assertions that the vote was rigged, but I suspect few people will buy that argument, given too what seems the massive scale of his victory. After all, we have been here before. The last time I had to spend time in Geneva, the BBC was confidently predicting that there would be a hung parliament in India. They were even convinced that the balance of power would be held by Jayalalitha. And that time round, they did not dare, when they were found to have been wrong, to claim that the election had been rigged, whereas the Indian voters had really wanted instability, just as the BBC did. For that, sadly, seems to be the reason for these preposterously inaccurate predictions, that for the BBC, as perhaps for all media organizations the world over, the wish is father of the thought. Whilst however it assumes that in other parts of the world the media is necessarily trammelled, it assumes that it is exempt from this feature, and is truly independent. In one sense of course it is independent, compared to media outlets that are owned by the state, or that are the tools of individuals who have obvious political agendas. On the very day that Mr Ahmadienjad's victory was proclaimed, I read a stimulating article in the 'International Herald Tribune' about how Fox News might be responsible for right wing extremist violence through its relentless denigration of a Democratic government in Washington (incidentally, reminiscent of the distortions practised against Sri Lanka, one charge was that 'the Federal Emergency Management Agency might be building concentration camps as part of the Obama administration's "totalitarian" agenda'). But this very 'Herald Tribune' had four pieces which all dealt with Iran on the basis of preconceptions that were wrong or prejudiced or both. A couple indicated that Mr Moussavi's victory was almost certain, the other two suggested that Mr Ahmadinejad could only win through fraud. One even claimed that 'most analysts concluded that the 2005 election was manipulated to produce Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidential victory' while an editorial taken from 'The Boston Globe' declared that 'The street rallies for Mr Moussavi strongly suggest that Iranians want a new deal, a better, freer life - and a positive response to President Obama's diplomatic overtures'. Now I do not blame the IHT for the tosh it sometimes produces, just as I do not think the BBC is necessarily amoral because it sometimes engages in tendentious attacks on people or countries it does not like. We are all products of our predilections, and while it takes great maturity to understand this, maturity alone will not be enough for this to be expressed honestly - media outlets have after all to sound confident and deny all prejudice if they are to be believed, so to grant that their judgments are influenced by their desires would obviously be deemed foolish. Nor is this suppression necessarily hypocritical. My father taught me a long time ago that people believe what they want to believe, and the most important element of this is believing that what they want to believe is objectively correct. Thus you cannot expect Americans or even most Westerners now to understand that the world as a whole does not assume that good relations with America are the only arbiter of all excellence. Certainly Mr Obama is so obviously nice, that it would be nice to work with him positively. However most people also know that Mr Obama is not totally free to do exactly as he wants, and there is an establishment that will strive to hold him in check in terms of what it sees (believing what it wants to believe) as America's best interests (and those of Israel, and those of the world, all three being synonymous). After all, the history of what happened to Mr Khatami, now held up by much of the West as a model of moderation, suggests that it would be wrong to assume America would be positive if you were positive about America. Indeed one of the IHT articles, by a Deputy National Security Adviser in the George Bush Administration, continues with the claim that the Khatami years saw increased repression in Iran. Of course one could blame what that article described as the failure of a 'putative reformer' on American intransigence under Bush (rather than what the article identifies as continuing Iranian intransigence under the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini). One could even, bending over backwards to suggest that America in itself is not necessarily slow to reform its attitudes, point out that the Bush presidency itself cannot be blamed on Americans, since in a fair election in 2000 he would not have been elected - but that is to forget that the rejection of the olive branches Khatami seemed to hold out when he was first elected in 1997 were spurned by President Clinton, not President Bush. In short, countries and their leaders are the prisoners of their preconceptions and it will take a lot to change this. President Obama seems the sort of visionary who might do this, but it will take him a long time and there are already signs that he has to compromise on many matters. Indeed a short paragraph in the same IHT, about him removing the inspector general 'who investigates Americorps and other national service programs' after he found misuse of federal grants, makes one wonder, given all we have read about abuse of public funds by organizations with high connections. The identified abuse in this case was by 'a nonprofit education group led by the Sacramento mayor, Kevin Johnson, and inspector general was criticized by the acting US attorney in Sacramento'. Will all this be investigated further? I have no idea, nor do I have any idea whether it will require further investigation. But I do know that whether it is investigated or not will not depend on the merits of the case, the extent of corruption if there were any. It will depend simply on whether the media is persuaded to investigate further or not, in terms of its own interests or the interests of those it wishes to serve. It is for this reason that I do not agree with all those who tell us that our missions abroad are not doing a good job of presenting the Sri Lankan case. However well we do, we will always be outmanoeuvred by those with more money or influence than we have, and that is why I have enormous sympathy for our representatives abroad

who hardly get a chance to put forward a Sri Lankan viewpoint. This does not mean we should not recognize the merits of those who do well, such as our ambassadors in Rome and in Geneva and in Havana, or our Consul General in Toronto, and I am sure many others, but blaming anyone else for not shining in the media is wrongheaded. The media in Western countries will not give us much of a chance, and we have simply to be thankful to those outlets such as the BBC which at least occasionally allow us a right of reply. What happened with regard to the coverage of both Iran and India suggests that there is a built in desire to see instability and weak governments in non-Western regions. This may not be a conscious desire, in the case of Iran it is subsumed under other prejudices too, but the British performances over India suggest an underlying notion that we cannot do anything about. What we can do is concentrate on building up stability within our countries and within our regions, and make it absolutely clear that we know that there is no independence or objectivity as far as comments on us go, simply a collage of preconceptions, some of them sadly extremely dangerous.