The Statistics and Politics of Land Reform in Iran: A Comment

I have stated in an article that land reform in Iran (1962-71) gave land on highly favourable terms to all of Iran’s 1.8 million sharecropping tenants and thus resulted in a massive transfer of wealth and a far reaching socio-economic transformation (Majd, 1987). Ahmadi-Esfahani takes issue with this result and criticises that I have “used logically inconsistent and statistically biased estimates” to arrive at this result, and calls my exercise “a perfect example of logical and statistical tautology” (Ahmadi-Esfahani, 1990, pp. 166, 172). He also criticises that I have “missed some rather important information on land reform, subsequent government policy, and general state of Iranian agriculture”. Finally, Ahmadi-Esfahani concludes that since my study is marred by flawed reasoning and inconsistent data, “land reform in Iran was much less comprehensive than it has been portrayed by Majd”. He also states that the number of peasants who received land “is not known and may never be known”.

My response to these arguments are as follows. First I will consider the allegation that I have ‘missed’ important information on agricultural policy and the state of the Iranian agriculture. Next, I will briefly refer to the ‘rural destruction and destitution thesis’ advocated by Ahmadi-Esfahani. In a literature review it will then be shown that several of the writers whom Ahmadi-Esfahani has cited in support of his view that land reform was limited (in particular Lambton and Hooglund) have argued the very opposite. Next, it will be shown that in his attempt to portray Iran’s land reform and rural statistics as ‘inconsistent’, Ahmadi-Esfahani has misrepresented and misidentified the sources of the data.

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Ahmadi-Esfahani’s criticism that I have neglected important information on agricultural policy and the performance of Iran’s agriculture is totally without basis. I have discussed agricultural policy and performance at the macro economic level, including a comparison of Iran with other oil exporters (Majd, 1983, 1989 a, 1989 b, 1991 a), and have also addressed the issue of agricultural protection and price policy at the micro economic level (Majd, 1991 b). Concerning the ‘rural destruction and destitution thesis’, Ahmadi-Esfahani (1990, p. 171) states that "land reform provided a portion of peasants with land ..., some of whom were taken over by big companies engaged in large-scale capitalist agriculture. The reform, along with massive importing of agricultural goods, especially wheat from the United States, and the absence or inadequacy of protective tariffs contributed to the ruin of countless small farmers, aggravated rural unemployment, and swelled migration to the cities."

I would like to address two points concerning the above passage. The above view was popular in the seventies and the early eighties. With new research a substantial reinterpretation has taken place, and the rural destruction, destitution and depopulation thesis has been rejected (Majd 1983, 1989 b, 1992; Hakimian, 1988; Mojtahed and Esfahani, 1989; Karshenas, 1990). Secondly, the above passage and the portions that follow can be traced to an article by Rouleau (1980, pp. 3-4) that was published in Foreign Affairs, which Ahmadi-Esfahani has failed to acknowledge in his paper.

That land reform in Iran was extensive is no longer under serious debate (Ashraf, 1991).
Moreover, with the publication of the regional reports on land reform by the Islamic government, even the Islamic Republic has conceded this fact. I have stated that 1.8 million peasants received land under land reform, and the consensus is that between 1.7 to 1.9 million peasants benefited. A study that has been highly critical of land reform (Amid, 1990, pp. 102-103) estimated that 1.94 million peasants received land and conceded that the data indicated "that by the end of land reform all sharecroppers and fixed-rent tenants must have become peasant proprietors" (emphasis in the original). Abrahamian (1980, p. 23), the Marxist historian and definitely not an admirer of the Pahlavis, conceded that "most important of all, (land reform) transferred land to 1,638,000 peasant families." Azkia (1981) stated that 1.7 million had benefited from land reform. Suzuki (1981) estimated that 1.9 million peasants had received land. Hooglund (1982) whose work is repeatedly cited by the author in support of his contention that land reform was limited, actually stated that 1.92 million peasants (by his count 92 per cent of the total) had received land and he characterised the scope of Iran’s land reform as ‘impressive’. In addition, Ahmadi-Esfahani’s reference to Lambton’s 1969 work to support his argument that land reform was limited is most surprising. Lambton who has described land reform as ‘one of the most important events’ in the history of Iran since the 1906 Constitution (Lambton, 1969, p. 5) is full of praise for the positive results of the reform.

There are other examples where Ahmadi-Esfahani has cited an author to support his argument, yet the cited author has expressed a viewpoint that is opposite to that of Ahmadi-Esfahani. For example, Ahmadi-Esfahani claims that land reform resulted in political stability. In contrast, Yeganeh (1985) whose work is repeatedly cited by the author, has this to say on land reform and political stability in the same article: "The new land reform policies eliminated the old landowning class ... and eroded the social and political foundations of the state" (Yeganeh, 1985, p. 79). Later on, it is added that "with the loss of support from the traditional landowning class, the new urban and upper classes could not by themselves preserve the status quo in the face of Islamic uprisings and upheavals (Yeganeh, 1985, p. 79)."

While incorporating the peasant proprietors in my 1987 study, I combined the approach by Salmanzadeh and Jones (1979) with the official land reform statistics and various census results to conclude that land reform gave land to all of Iran’s sharecroppers and tenants. Ahmadi-Esfahani has criticised this approach on the grounds that the productive and well-watered plain of northern Khuzestan is ‘unrepresentative’ of Iran and consequently the sample is biased. It needs to be stressed that the issue under consideration is not the relative abundance of water from the Dez Irrigation Project which stands as a monument to Iran’s agricultural development during 1962-78. It is rather the implementation of the land reform law. Why should northern Khuzestan be selected for such a vigorous enforcement of the law? Or why should the implementation in Gilan (Suzuki, 1981) be more rigorous than elsewhere? Ironically, if, as the author claims, land reform sought to protect the landlords and promote capitalism, the implementation in the Dezful region should have been far less vigorous. That the implementation of land reform in Khuzestan was no different from that of the other provinces has been confirmed by the regional studies published by the Islamic government. Interestingly, included among these regions is the province of Esfahan, Ahmadi-Esfahani’s home province. These provinces (including Khuzestan) cover nearly
one-half of the country’s land area. Consequently, it is difficult to label them as ‘unrepre-
sentative’. Apart from these provincial reports on land reform, Ahmadi-Esfahani has also
overlooked numerous village level studies documenting that a massive land reform had
taken place in those villages. The list is long and the following is an incomplete one: Miller
(1964), Safinejad (1966), Craig (1978), Mahdavy (1982/83), Moghadam (1982), Suzuki
(1981), and Iranian Studies (1983). Even studies that were highly critical of land reform
(e.g., Miller, 1964; Craig, 1978) readily conceded that land reform had transferred the
ownership of the land cultivated by peasants to the peasants.

I have discussed in another article (Majd, 1992) the results of land reform in the Provinces
of Fars, Hamedan, Markazi, Esfahan, Lorestan and Bakhtaran (formerly Kermanshahan).
The information on the number of peasants receiving land, the amount of land received by
the peasants and the land maintained by the landlords is based on land reform files pertaining
to each village. Moreover, the reports discuss at some length the problem of the inclusion
of many peasants in more than one phase of land reform and the resulting potential problem
of multiple counting, and how the issue was addressed. In particular, in order to eliminate
multiple counting, in every village affected by land reform the identity of each recipient of
land during each phase is recorded from the land reform records. I have noted (Majd, 1992)
that my estimate of the number of peasant beneficiaries and the amount of land transferred
to peasants has been fully vindicated. Moreover, the reports show that 70 per cent of the
agricultural land was transferred to the peasants during the three phases of land reform.
When added to the land already owned by peasant farmers, over 90 per cent of the agricultural
land was in peasants’ hands by the completion of land reform. This was not only a major
land reform, it is possibly the most radical land reform to be implemented by a non-
revolutionary state during the twentieth century.

MISREPRESENTATION OF CENSUS RESULTS

Ahmadi-Esfahani identifies major inconsistencies in the data. In his attempt to show that
the data are inconsistent, Ahmadi-Esfahani misidentifies the very sources of the data that
he criticises. Secondly, the statistics that he claims are from the census data are not contained
in these (or any other) censuses. To begin with, in Table I of his paper (Ahmadi-Esfahani,
1990, p. 167), he claims that the figure of 1.818 million sharecroppers and tenants given in
my article is the figure given in the 1960 census. I would like to strongly stress that the
figure of 1.818 million is not contained in the 1960 census. This figure is my estimate of the
number of sharecroppers and renters. It is based on the difference between the number of
agricultural households, 2,442 million and the number of owner occupied holdings, 624,000.
As described in my article (Majd, 1987, p. 844), the number of sharecropping and tenant
holdings that was given in the 1960 census was 1,253 million (1.129 million sharecroppers
and rentals plus 124,000 part tenant-part owners). However, I argued that this 1.25 million
sharecropping and rental holdings under-estimated the number of agricultural sharecroppers
and tenants because some studies had indicated that a substantial number of small farmers
had been misclassified as rural landless under the census. The misclassified farmers were
possibly as high as 600,000. Since all of this is clearly described in my article, I can only
conclude that Ahmadi-Esfahani’s ‘analysis’ constitutes misrepresentation. The author’s
purpose is to discredit Iran’s rural statistics: the total of 1.818 million renters plus 624,000
owner occupiers plus 1.284 million ‘landless’ households well exceeds the total of 3,218
million rural households reported by the 1960 census. In contrast to Ahmadi-Esfahani's assertion, the actual figures given by the 1960 census are 2,442 million agricultural households (bahre-bardar) and 776,000 non-agricultural households, yielding a total of 3,218 million rural households.

Next, Ahmadi-Esfahani provides two conflicting figures on the number of landless households allegedly given in the 1966 population census: 684,000 and 339,000. First, Iran's population censuses do not contain information on nor do they address the issue of landless rural households. If they had done so, the controversy about the number of landless households would not have taken place. Consequently, I would like to emphasise that the figure of 684,000 is not given in the 1966 census and appears to be his own. In the footnote to Table I of his paper, he states that the 684,000 is 1.284 million 'minus the error detected by the ISC (600,000)'. Most emphatically, the Iran Statistical Center (ISC) did not 'detect' an error of 600,000. This 600,000 is my estimate of the upper limit of the number of farmers who had been misclassified as landless. Concerning the 339,000 figure, this is the number of landless agricultural wage earners and not the number of landless households. The two are distinct because not all landless households are agricultural wage earners. Many are traders, storekeepers and craftsmen. Moreover, Ahmadi-Esfahani claims that my upper estimate of the number of landless households as 400,000 consists of this 339,000 'plus an arbitrary residual of 61,000'. This is also incorrect.

This figure of 400,000 is based on a suggested revision of the number of rural households found in an article entitled "Rural and Agricultural Statistics of Iran", or RASI for short. This article was published in 1982 in a book of readings. Thus contrary to Ahmadi-Esfahani's portrayal of RASI as a government publication, it was in fact an article. The article reasoned that the number of 3.218 million rural households given in the 1960 census was too high. As reported by the 1966 population census, Iran's rural population in 1966 consisted of 3.068 million households, up from 2.70 million from 1956. This contrasted with the higher figure of 3.218 million reported in the 1960 agricultural census. The source of this inflation was the inclusion of settlements with 5,000-10,000 residents in the 1960 agricultural census. Since in the Iranian census counts a settlement with a population of 5,000 and above was considered 'urban', the agricultural census clearly contained some urban population, the size of which was estimated to be 498,000 households. Subtracting this from 3.218 million yields 2.72 million rural households. Moreover, subtracting the 2.4 million households with land rights leaves 300,000. This is the basis for my estimate that the number of landless rural households in 1960 was at the most 400,000. It is not, as alleged by Ahmadi-Esfahani, 339,000 'plus an arbitrary residual of 61,000'. I would also like to point out that the claim that RASI gives 786,000 landless households is false. The article does not contain any such figure. It does not even address the issue.

Most of the other entries in Table I similarly cannot survive scrutiny. In order not to be labour the point, I will conclude by observing a point that I believe is highly indicative of the problem. Ahmadi-Esfahani even misrepresents the source of the figures on land reform that he gives in Table II of his text. Contrary to his claim, the statistics concerning the number of peasant beneficiaries are not contained in the 1974 agricultural census. That census contains nothing on land reform.

As discussed in recent literature, land reform and subsequent agricultural policy in
support of peasant agriculture resulted in a revitalisation of agriculture and brought prosperity to rural Iran. Thus in contrast to the prediction of the Marxist theory, Iran’s land reform is an important case of a comprehensive and economically successful land reform that was implemented by a non-revolutionary state. As such, Iran’s land reform appears to be in the same category as those of South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. Whether land reform in Iran resulted in political stability, the record is very clear. Moreover, it should also be pointed out that Ahmadi-Esfahani’s ‘scientific’ approach has led him to cite the examples of the Soviet, Cuban and Chinese land reforms as ‘successful’ reforms. In view of its unhappy history since 1917 and the current state of the Russian agriculture, such a conclusion is truly astonishing.

Mohammad Gholi Majd*


REFERENCES


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* Fellow, Middle East Center, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.


