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COMMENTS

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

Land reform in Iran like many other topics in economic development is a contentious issue and Majd's approach to it contributes only to making his comment (Majd, 1992) and original article (Majd, 1987) a juxtaposition of quotations and observations that do not take the reader any further in analysing this important topic. I wish to take this opportunity to respond to his comments and to stimulate further thinking on the key elements of this debate.

While apologising to *Foreign Affairs* for having inadvertently deleted Rouleau (1980) from my note, I aimed at analysing "Majd's observations by reviewing his study as well as the sources cited in it" (Ahmadi-Esfahani, 1990, p.166). This is why all my references including Rouleau (1980), with the exception of Katouzian (1978) and Lambton (1969), are cited in Majd (1987) and the two sets of references are mutually inclusive. In my reply, then, I will concentrate on those issues that are within the scope of my note and the comment of Majd (1992).

In an attempt to reject my criticism that he has been selective and has missed important information on land reform, subsequent government policy and general state of Iranian agriculture, Majd provides four additional citations of his own, three of which have been published in 1989 and 1991 (see Majd, 1992, p.687). These sources are irrelevant as they fall outside the above sets of references. To maintain consistency in the debate, Majd should have provided additional information from the sources under discussion.

With respect to the rural destruction thesis, Majd claims that this thesis was popular in the seventies and the early eighties and has now been rejected. This is incorrect as, for example, Araghi used the same thesis to refute Majd's main finding (Araghi, 1989). In passing, it appears that I am not the first commentator who has been accused by Majd of 'misinterpreting and/or misrepresenting' his results. Replying to Araghi's comment on his 1987 article, Majd suggests that "the perpetuation of the issues raised by Araghi served only to mislead or obscure the important lessons from Iran's land reform" (Majd, 1989, p.1051). More importantly, various theses/hypotheses may be rejected by a certain set of data but accepted under another set of circumstances. The rural destruction thesis is still a plausible thesis and does explain the transformation of agriculture and the process of industrialisation in less developed countries remarkably well. We cannot afford to discard this robust thesis simply because Majd or any other 'land reform expert' dislikes it.

Further, Majd claims that the regional reports on land reform recently published by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran provide additional evidence that land reform has been extensive. These reports are also irrelevant as they have not been cited in Majd's 1987 article. More fundamentally, the context within which these reports are made public is unclear. This is particularly important in view of the fact that massive land seizures by former landlords after the 1979 uprising and the resistance of the Islamic government to legislate a land reform law have resulted in the re-emergence of land question as a fundamental problem of economic and political significance.

Majd, then, cites Hooglund (1982) suggesting that 92 per cent of Iranian peasants received land via land reform. In the absence of specific page numbers, I failed to get this figure confirmed and the context within which it has been presented. It is interesting to note, however, that Majd has cited the same source supporting the opposite view that land reform

was limited (Majd, 1987, p.843). This sudden change of stance between these two contradictory positions is rather perplexing. Similarly, he argues that both Hooglund (1982) and Lambton (1969) have characterised Iran's land reform as 'impressive' or 'one of the most important events'. These characteristics may be consistent with both a limited and an extensive land reform and do not necessarily imply that the reform has given land to 'all of Iran's 1.8 million sharecropper peasants', as claimed by Majd (1987). These 'new' pieces of information do not salvage his main finding as they are too ambiguous to be of much use.

Attempting to justify the approach by Salmanzadeh and Jones (1979) and citing himself again, Majd claims that Iran's land reform has been the most radical land reform implemented by a non-revolutionary state in the twentieth century (see Majd, 1992, p.689). My main arguments against this implausible and sweeping conclusion as stated in my note (Ahmadi-Esfahani, 1990) are as follows: First Majd's figures are erroneous because he has failed to take into account population growth influencing the number of agricultural and landless households. Second, the sample used by Salmanzadeh and Jones (1979) is too small and unrepresentative to be extrapolated to the whole country. Third, substantial segments of land were taken back from the peasants to establish farm corporations, large agribusiness ventures and other forms of capitalist agriculture. None of these forms of agricultural production and their impact on the land tenure system, however, has been discussed in Majd (1987) or in his comment.

Concerning the alleged 'misrepresentation of census results', I have clearly acknowledged the fact that both my tables stem from the data reported by Majd and his calculations derived from census results. Thus if there are any errors in their presentation, they are his, not mine. Majd still insists that figures such as 1,818,000, 684,000 or 786,000 cannot be found in the original sources. The figure 1,818,000 is the difference between 2,442,000 and 624,000, both of which emanate from census results (see Majd, 1987, p.844). The latter two figures, as noted in the footnotes to my Table I (Ahmadi-Esfahani, 1990, p.167), also represent the differences between various census results (see Majd, 1987, p.844). These figures do not appear to have been precisely reported in the original sources as they are estimated from the figures reported in those sources. Since Majd has not employed any formal analysis of census or land reform data on the basis of any rigorous sampling procedures or modelling approaches, all these and other exercises undertaken by him or by me or by others basically represent the same information and there is only one source of data, that is, census results. Majd also claims that I have presented RASI as a government publication. Nowhere in my note have I indicated so. My main conclusion, as stated in my note, was that "the seemingly alternative sources of data appear to be exactly the same" (Ahmadi-Esfahani, 1990, p.172) and I believe that Majd's additional 'number crunching' reported in his comment provides further evidence to support that conclusion. My analysis was never meant to 'discredit Iran's rural statistics' but to show that Majd's figures and approaches are contradictory, inconsistent and erroneous.

As argued there, Majd's analysis on the basis of 'facts' only is misleading. New developments in Iranian agriculture after the collapse of the Shah's regime do underscore the importance of land reform as a pivotal policy issue and as a key component of economic development. This observation is consistent with that made by de Janvry (1981) and would seriously question the plausibility of Majd's main finding.

My review of Majd's article was also meant to show that his conclusion regarding the

relationship between land reform, development of capitalism and political stability in Iran is unwarranted. In his comment, he does not take issue with this observation. However, he claims that other writers cited by me have expressed views that are opposite to that of mine. I just failed to see how the quotations from Yeganeh (1985) are related to political 'instability' or, for that matter, 'stability' (see Majd, 1992, p.688). This line of reasoning is perfectly consistent with the superficial treatment of the politics of land reform in his original article (see Majd, 1987). I wish he had taken the time to analyse these quotations.

My 1990 review identified and discussed a number of false implications and conclusions which materialised in Majd (1987). This reply reinforces those observations and expands upon them. For example, on the one hand, he concludes that 'land reform brought prosperity to rural Iran' (see Majd, 1992, pp.690-691) and, on the other, he suggests that land reform resulted in political instability and the collapse of 'a monarchical system' (Majd, 1987, p.843). This is clearly an inconsistent and incorrect inference. Similarly, rejecting my examples of successful land distribution policies in China, Cuba and Russia, he makes another incorrect inference that the sweeping changes currently taking place in Russia stem from the failure of land reform policy in that country. A bias against Marxism may be responsible for such a conclusion.

There is an additional observation which, although minor, is particularly close to my heart and is remarkably striking. With reference to the regional reports published by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Majd claims that "Interestingly, included among these regions is the province of Esfahan, Ahmadi-Esfahani's home province" (see Majd, 1992, p.688). Even if it were true, this reference to my alleged 'home province' is utterly irrelevant. This is, however, an incorrect inference from my hyphenated surname only. I have never lived in Esfahan and I was born and raised in Shiraz, the capital city of the province of Fars in the South of Esfahan.

The nature of the perplexity should by now be clear and would require no further elaboration. As is said in *The Panchatantra*:

"The firefly seems a fire, the sky looks flat;
Yet sky and fly are neither this nor that.
The true seems often false, the false often true;
Appearances deceive, so think it through."

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The exchange on this subject is closed (Ed.).

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