

# Ahmadinejad under fire in lead up to Iran's parliamentary election

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The election for the Iranian parliament due on March 14 is shaping up as a contest over President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his policies. While the differences within ruling circles are narrowly circumscribed, Ahmadinejad's opponents are seeking to make an appeal to broader popular discontent, particularly over rising prices, high unemployment and widespread corruption.

Ahmadinejad himself is not up for re-election, but a presidential election is due in 2009. His supporters confront a challenge from two broad factions—the so-called reformers grouped around former president Mohammad Khatami, and rival conservatives who have become increasingly critical of Ahmadinejad's economic policies and strident stance on Iran's nuclear programs.

Many “reformers” have been disqualified by the anti-democratic requirements for candidacy, which include proven loyalty to the Shiite theocratic state. Under these rules, more than 2,000 candidates, mainly liberals, have been excluded over the past two weeks after vetting by the Interior Ministry. Further disqualifications are likely as the process is reviewed by the Guardian Council, which is dominated by conservative factions. A final list of candidates is to be published on March 4, with the official campaign limited to just one week.

Khatami described the disqualifications as “a catastrophe ... which I believe jeopardises the [1979] revolution, the system and the wellbeing of society.” One of Khatami's chief allies, former vice president Mohammad Reza Aref, has pulled out, despite being approved, saying he sees no point in running in the election. According to one estimate, reformist candidates are currently approved in only about 10 percent of the 290 seats, ensuring the faction will

remain a weak parliamentary minority.

This blatant political discrimination against the “reformers” has evoked no protests, however. The faction, which advocates mild democratic reforms, pro-market restructuring and conciliation with the major Western powers, suffered a devastating decline in support during Khatami's eight years in office. His administration repeatedly compromised and retreated in the face of vicious crackdowns by religious hard-liners on oppositionists and liberal newspapers. His economic policies only widened the gulf between rich and poor, producing deep resentment among the urban and rural poor.

Ahmadinejad, a virtual political unknown, won the 2005 presidential election by making right-wing populist promises to lift living standards and identifying himself with opposition to the US bullying of Iran over its nuclear programs. In the second round, he defeated the strongly favoured conservative candidate, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who, as part of Iran's political-clerical establishment, has amassed a huge personal fortune. The top reformist candidate, Mustafa Moin, came a distant fifth in the first round of balloting.

Ahmadinejad, however, has proven incapable of addressing the economic and social crisis facing working people. His spending on limited subsidies and projects has led only to soaring inflation, which currently stands at 17.5 percent. Rising food prices and housing problems have produced widespread discontent, which has been compounded by last year's decision to impose petrol rationing to cut the cost of government subsidies. Ahmadinejad told state TV in December that he had plans to fight inflation, but provided no details and submitted a budget last month that increases spending by around 20 percent.

Lack of investment in infrastructure, which has been compounded by US-led economic sanctions, has limited production from the country's huge natural gas reserves. As a result, Iran imports gas from neighbouring Turkmenistan, which last month cut off supplies after Tehran refused to pay market prices. Amid a bitterly cold winter, measures to slash gas consumption have provoked protests. Last month, angry crowds demonstrating against gas shortages clashed with local militia in the northern cities of Ghaem-Shahr and Sari.

Unemployment is also rife. Officially, the jobless rate is about 10 percent but local economic commentators put the actual level much higher and accuse the government of "data management". With two-thirds of the population under 30, some 750,000 people enter the labour market every year. Many university graduates are unemployed. According to the *Financial Times*, some economists suggest that a quarter of Iran's potential workforce of 21 million is either unemployed or underemployed.

As discontent has grown, Ahmadinejad has seized on Washington's aggressive stance over Iran's nuclear programs to whip up nationalist sentiment. He has also deliberately stirred up anti-Semitism by encouraging Holocaust deniers and making inflammatory calls for Israel to be erased. Sections of the ruling clerical elite have been increasingly concerned that Ahmadinejad has played directly into the hands of the Bush administration and encouraged US military strikes. With Bush in his last year in office, more pragmatic Iranian conservatives are positioning themselves to challenge Ahmadinejad for the presidency next year.

Ali Larijani is emerging as a major contender. He resigned as Iran's top nuclear negotiator last year amid disagreements with Ahmadinejad over the tactics to be pursued to avoid further UN Security Council sanctions. Larijani continues to serve on the country's powerful National Security Council, as a representative of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, who holds the ultimate power over military and foreign policy. After his resignation, Larijani went as a special envoy to Egypt in December, undoubtedly with Khamenei's approval, to thaw diplomatic relations that have been frozen for 28 years.

Larijani has cautiously criticised Ahmadinejad's economic policies. "Development ... cannot be

achieved by handing out money and pushing liquidity growth which only creates inflation," he declared recently. His comments come amid other signs that Khamenei himself is disgruntled with Ahmadinejad. The supreme leader recently overruled the president and insisted that gas should be supplied to remote rural areas regardless of the cost. In an unusual move, the parliamentary speaker released Khamenei's correspondence on the issue, making the rebuke a public one.

Another possible conservative contender for the presidency is the mayor of Tehran, Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, who also ran in 2005. At last month's Davos economic summit, Qalibaf indicated that he would be "more open" to the world and foreign investment so as to reduce unemployment. He did not directly criticise Ahmadinejad's policies but declared that he had differences with the current president over economic relations. No doubt with an eye to the next US president, Qalibaf hinted at a possible olive branch, saying: "If the United States can change its unilateral approach and replace it with a bilateral approach, then we can have dialogue."

Rafasanjani, who topped the simultaneous poll for the powerful Assembly of Experts, is also a likely candidate for the 2009 presidential election.

All of Ahmadinejad's rivals will be following the parliamentary election in March closely. Ahmadinejad's supporters suffered a serious setback in the last local elections held in December 2006, winning only 3 out of 15 council seats in Tehran and around 20 percent of 113,000 posts in cities, towns and villages across the country.

More fundamentally, however, the election points to a deepening frustration with all factions of a political-clerical establishment that has ruthlessly stamped out any threat to capitalist rule. Rafasanjani, Khatami and Ahmadinejad have all been tested out. Whatever their tactical differences, each has defended the interests of the wealthy elites who have benefited at the expense of the vast majority of working people.



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