

Iranians vote amid concern about US aggression and falling living standards

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Iranian voters go to the polls today to choose a new *majlis* or parliament in a stunted election in which more than 2,000 candidates have been disqualified from standing. Official campaigning lasted just one week and debate has been narrowly confined to differences between the “conservatives” and “reformers”—competing wings of the existing political establishment.

The “victory” of conservatives is a forgone conclusion as most prominent reformers were excluded in the vetting process carried out by the Interior Ministry and the unelected, 12-member Guardian Council appointed by the country’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Reformers grouped around former President Mohammad Khatami and the allied National Confidence Party of cleric Mehdi Karroubi have candidates in less than half of the 290 seats and are only expected to win around 50.

The conservative camp, however, is divided between supporters and critics of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. All describe themselves as “principalists”—hard-line defenders of the theocratic state established after the 1979 Iranian revolution—and oppose the limited democratic reforms and accommodation with the major powers advocated by Khamenei and his allies. Figures like former top nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani and current Tehran mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf have been increasingly critical of Ahmadinejad’s populist rhetoric, both in the confrontation with Washington over Iran’s nuclear programs and on economic politics that have helped fuel skyrocketing inflation.

The Bush administration’s threats of military action against Iran are a major factor in the election. Khamenei and his supporters have exploited Washington’s aggressive stance to justify the marginalisation of the reformers and brand any, even limited, criticism of the regime as tantamount to treason. In comments on Wednesday, Khamenei urged voters to support “whoever our enemies do not want to be in parliament”. Anyone “who our enemies want” in parliament, he said, “will only implement the enemy’s agenda”.

The remarks followed sharp attacks on two leading reformers. Khatami’s brother was denounced for meeting with the German ambassador prior to the latest round of UN Security Council sanctions on Iran and Nouredine Pir Mouzaem was condemned for giving an interview on US-funded Voice of America television critical of the disqualification of candidates. Announcing an official investigation into Mouzaem’s interview, Intelligence Minister Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejeie declared that “this has

definitely been treason and an appalling act”.

The other issue dominating the election is the economy and widespread disaffection over the rising cost of living. The year-on-year inflation figure hit 19.2 percent in February and the cost of essential items, including food and housing, has risen sharply. In a bid to appease popular anger, the government has lowered tariffs on some imported goods, begun distributing eggs, chicken, and meat at lower prices, and plans to ease petrol rationing to allow more people to travel during the Iranian New Year on March 20.

While Ahmadinejad blames UN sanctions for the price rises, his critics point to his populist policies, including handouts during his frequent visits to drum up support in regional areas, the lowering of interest rates and high public spending. Former Ahmadinejad loyalist and adviser Mohammad Khoshchehreh recently accused the president of failing to have any economic plans. “He wants to run the country with charity projects, like giving out loans,” he said. All the factions appeal to voters by hypocritically declaring, “we feel your pain”, but their economic prescriptions will only deepen the divide between rich and poor.

Despite the sometimes bitter exchanges, the political differences between the factions are narrow. All defend the current theocratic state and the capitalist economy on which it rests. Their tactical disagreements represent the interests of competing layers of the Iranian capitalist class. Significantly, none of the reformers have publicly opposed the arrest of more than 40 left-wing students in December and January.

The conservatives are linked to layers of the Shiite clergy and the state apparatus, particularly the armed forces and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), whose privileges, power and substantial business interests depend on the maintenance of the status quo. The reformers, on the other hand, have been pressing for an easing of tensions with the major powers and limited democratic reforms in order to integrate the Iranian economy more closely into globalised production processes and attract foreign investment.

Khatami won the presidency in 1997 by appealing to widespread sentiment, particularly among young people, for democratic rights, jobs and improved living standards. During his eight years in office, however, the reformers suffered a dramatic decline in support. Khatami’s administration repeatedly compromised and backed down in the face of vicious crackdowns by religious hardliners on oppositionists and the liberal press. His attempts to reach an accommodation with the Western powers were stymied

by Washington and his pro-market policies only heightened the social crisis confronting working people.

Ahmadinejad won the 2005 election, defeating the favoured conservative candidate, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, by making demagogic pledges to lift living standards and opposing Washington's bullying of Iran over its nuclear programs. However, as the economic crisis has continued and deepened, Ahmadinejad's popularity has slid. In December 2006 local council elections, his supporters suffered a serious setback, winning only 3 of 15 council seats in Tehran, where Ahmadinejad had been the mayor.

As popular hostility has deepened, former conservative allies have distanced themselves from Ahmadinejad. Economic analyst Amir Hossain Rasael told the *Washington Post*: "We are making record profits, but the economy is in its worst state ever. The president changed all government managers with inexperienced young people. Inflation is far over 20 percent, there are no foreign investments, and prices of housing and food have gone through the roof. Politicians don't want to take the blame for this."

All factions are manoeuvring in preparation for next year's presidential election. If Ahmadinejad's supporters in the United Fundamentalist Front fare badly, his conservative critics in the Inclusive Fundamentalist Coalition such as Ali Larijani, who has close ties to the supreme leader, and Tehran mayor Qalibaf may be encouraged to challenge him. Former President Khatami, who has been actively campaigning for reformers, is also under pressure to stand. The presidency has executive powers, while the parliament has relatively limited authority. Both can be overridden by Khamenei, as the unelected supreme leader.

Amid widespread alienation from the political establishment as a whole, there have been fears in ruling circles that a low voter turnout would undermine the legitimacy of the poll. At the last parliamentary election in 2004, the participation rate dropped to just 50.5 percent, down from the previous 67.4 percent. In Tehran, only 2 million of the 8 million eligible voters went to the polls. Senior officials and the state-run media have been campaigning hard to avoid a repetition of the 2004 turnout.

In a bid to scotch a boycott by reformers, Khamenei publicly denounced all those supporting such a move as being "either fooled or supported by foreign interests". Khatami and other most reformers quickly fell into line and issued statements calling for their supporters to vote. Their refusal to mount a determined challenge to their political rivals is in part conditioned by a concern that Khamenei could exploit a boycott to bar reformist candidates from standing for the presidency next year.

More fundamentally, all the factions fear that any protest movement may rapidly spiral out of control. A significant element of Mohammad Khoshchereh's criticisms of Ahmadinejad is that his populism will only lead to dashed expectations and widespread anger. "People's hope grows like a bubble when politicians give populist promises," he said. "But if these hopes are not materialised, the bubble bursts and the consequences are disastrous."

International media coverage of the Iranian election has been limited and slanted against Ahmadinejad, but occasional interviews have provided some glimpses of popular sentiment.

A shopkeeper in a low-income neighbourhood *folded the Times*: "This parliament didn't do anything for us. They lined their pockets while high prices are suffocating people. Young people can't even get married these days because they can't afford the rent on an apartment."

Maryam Fadaei told Reuters that she felt betrayed by Ahmadinejad and was going to vote for his conservative rivals. "I voted for Ahmadinejad, but nothing changed... I will vote for Qalibaf's group... I want some changes in my life. I feel cheated because I voted for conservatives to have a better life. Did I get it?" She works two jobs—in a factory in the morning and clearing houses in the afternoon—to make ends meet.

Speaking to the BBC, Farhad, an engineer in Tehran, was disgusted with the blatantly discriminatory disqualification of candidates. "I want to vote for democratic and secular candidates. But finding them in the present political system would be a miracle. I think the election will mark another step in Ayatollah Khamenei's attempt to make the political system more uniform and to reinforce his own theocracy..."

"Inflation is out of control and has affected every aspect of life in Iran. International sanctions make the situation worse, especially in healthcare. Vital drugs which used to be imported are now hard to find," he said.

An article in Reuters pointed to widespread disaffection among students. Some had decided not to vote. Others, responding to the government's campaign, said they were going to do their civic duty, but were not enthusiastic about any of the candidates. One activist Ali Nikounesbati told the news agency: "Students have made no move to boycott the election, but the general atmosphere is cold."

Despite the carefully managed character of the election, the deep going frustration, alienation and hostility may yet produce some political surprises. Whatever the immediate outcome, the regime's inability to meet the aspirations of ordinary working people for democratic rights and decent living standards foreshadows sharp political convulsions ahead.



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