

Khamenei supporters win in Iran legislative elections

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Supporters of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad suffered a major defeat in Friday's election to Iran's 290-member parliament. Candidates more closely aligned to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the highest-ranking religious and political authority in Iran, benefited from the decline in support for the president.

The two political alliances seen as closest to Khamenei—the United Front of Conservatives, with 101 seats, and the Islamic Stability Front, with 50 seats—now have a majority in parliament.

The pro-Ahmadinejad parliamentary alliance, Monotheism and Justice, saw its representation fall to just 44 seats. With only a year left in office and weakened support in the new parliament, Ahmadinejad is now seen as a lame duck.

Candidates from the Reformist parliamentary bloc—representing sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie favoring a rapprochement with the United States, as well as more aggressive free market economic policies—were generally denied access to the ballot. They fared poorly where they did stand. Winning just 51 seats, the Reformist camp will have a weaker position in the new parliament than the outgoing one.

No candidates associated with the “Green Movement,” the pro-Western campaign that followed the 2009 re-election of Ahmadinejad to the presidency, were allowed to stand. Several leading Reformist figures that took part in the protests three years ago are still under house arrest.

election expressed, within the narrow confines of official Iranian politics, widespread public opposition to the worsening economic conditions in the country.

The regime also appealed to the population to vote in the election to express unity in the face of escalating war threats from the United States and Israel.

Iran is beset by spiraling inflation, high unemployment, and inadequate and crumbling infrastructure. The tightening of US sanctions and the recent imposition of an oil embargo against Iran by the European Union have made these problems substantially worse.

In response to the economic crisis, the Ahmadinejad government pushed through tough austerity measures, including the removal of price subsidies on oil and food items, which have undermined the president's posturing as a defender of the poor.

While Ahmadinejad's Monotheism and Justice alliance is part of the same Conservative parliamentary bloc as the United Front of Conservatives and the Islamic Stability Front, the three factions represent bitterly divided wings of the Iranian establishment.

The United Front of Conservatives, headed by the current speaker of the parliament, Ali Larijani, represents the wing of the Conservative camp that seeks some accommodation with the US and the European powers over Iran's nuclear program, while maintaining the regime's commitment to the development of civilian nuclear research and power generation.

With an unexpectedly high turnout of 64 percent, the

With close political and personal ties to Khamenei

and other senior figures in the clerical establishment, Larijani is likely to be returned as speaker of the parliament. He is expected to run in next year's presidential poll.

The Islamic Stability Front represents an alliance between a section of the clerical establishment lead by Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi and the powerful Revolutionary Guard Corps.

A former close adviser of Ahmadinejad until the president's split with Khamenei last year, Yazdi has a base of support in the clerical establishment in Qom, one of the main Shiite Muslim religious centers. The Revolutionary Guards, a powerful elite military force backed Ahmadinejad in earlier elections, but appears to have shifted its weight behind Yazdi.

The dispute between the president and the supreme leader came to a head in April 2011, when Khamenei reversed a decision by Ahmadinejad to dismiss the intelligence minister, Heydar Moslehi, amid allegations that he was working to undermine key backers of the president.

The supreme leader then forced the resignation of Esfandiar Mashaei as one of Ahmadinejad's top aides. Mashaei was tipped to contest next year's presidential election in place of Ahmadinejad, who cannot run again due to term limits.

Khamenei publicly rebuked the president at the time, and declared that he would intervene to overrule government decisions "whenever necessary." Since then, Ahmadinejad has been effectively sidelined within his own government.

While the dispute has taken the appearance of a personal power struggle within the Iranian elite, the fight between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad expresses more fundamental conflicts over how to deal with the growing threat of an attack on the country by the United States and its allies in the Middle East, especially Israel.

Using the Iranian nuclear research program as a justification, the Obama administration is employing

economic sanctions, diplomatic broadsides, and the threat of war to destabilize the government in Tehran with the ultimate goal of regime change. Washington has never forgiven Islamic regime for overthrowing Shah Reza Pahlavi in the 1979 revolution, which dealt a blow to US hegemony in the Middle East.

The White House stepped up its saber-rattling against Tehran last week. In an interview with *The Atlantic* magazine, intended to set the tone for talks this week with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Barack Obama repeated his warning that "all options are on the table," and that the US was prepared to use the "military component" against Iran.

"As president of the United States, I don't bluff," Obama told the magazine, adding, "I think both the Iranian and the Israeli governments recognize that when the United States says it is unacceptable for Iran to have a nuclear weapon, we mean what we say."

When asked how the US might react to a unilateral Israeli attack on Iran's alleged nuclear facilities, Obama replied, "I think we in the United States instinctively sympathize with Israel, and I think political support for Israel is bilateral and powerful."

While Ahmadinejad was strongly supported by Khamenei and the business-clerical elite in Iran in the 2005 and the disputed 2009 presidential elections, he is now viewed as something of a liability, undermining the regime's efforts to maintain its nuclear program while fending off the threat of war with the US and Israel.

In addition, the Iranian elite is concerned that Ahmadinejad, with his carefully crafted image as "man of the people" from humble origins, unlike the wealthy merchants and clerics that dominate the regime, will be unable to carry out the deeply unpopular austerity measures.



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