



Ahmadinejad's Rivals Seek to Keep 'Small Glow' of Reform Alive

By Ladane Nasseri

March 13 (Bloomberg) -- Pharmacist Simin Rahimzadeh can't vote for her favorite candidates in tomorrow's Iranian parliamentary election. They were all disqualified for, among other offenses, a lack of allegiance to Islam.

She will vote for whoever is left in the Reformists' Coalition, in hopes that President **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's** opponents can gain enough seats to jostle his government's grip on power.

"It's still possible to find valuable candidates," said Rahimzadeh, 55, from northern **Tehran**, whose concerns include women's rights. "It's like a small glow still remaining on the ashes, and we should not let it die."

While Ahmadinejad will retain a strong base of support after the elections, he will probably face more opposition in the parliament, or Majlis, than before. The Reformists' Coalition, which boycotted 2004 elections over disqualifications, is participating this time around. And a group known as "pragmatic idealists," who generally share Ahmadinejad's views on Islam, will still push to alter his handling of the economy and foreign affairs.

"A large number of the conservatives do not believe in Ahmadinejad's economic policies," **Mohammad Reza Khatami**, a brother of the president's predecessor, **Mohammad Khatami**, said in a March 5 interview. "The parliament, especially in economic matters, will limit many of the hard-line policies of the government" by a "non-written accord" between the conservatives and the reformers.

Fuel Shortages, Unemployment

Ahmadinejad's spending, subsidies and price controls have helped give Iran, the world's fourth-largest oil producer, nationwide fuel shortages, a 21 percent youth unemployment rate and the highest inflation in eight years.

Iran's 43 million voters will choose among 4,476 candidates for the 290-seat parliament, the eighth since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Candidates have been vetted by the Guardian Council, a body of six clerics chosen by Supreme Leader **Ayatollah Ali Khamenei** and six jurists picked by the parliament.

In January, the council disqualified more than a third of the candidates, leaving the Reformists' Coalition with 133 out of its proposed 909. Grounds for disqualification included lack of allegiance to Islam, the Islamic Republic's **constitution** or the supreme leader's rule, the Interior Ministry says.

Those barred included a former transportation minister, **Ahmad Khoram**, and **Issa Kalantari**, a former agriculture minister, according to the Coalition. Mohammad Khatami, 64, who as president from 1997 to 2005 encouraged dialogue with the West and pursued economic diversification, called the disqualifications a "catastrophe."

Nuclear Program

Khamenei, 68, has been generally supportive of Ahmadinejad, who has stoked tensions with Western nations since his election three years ago. The president, 51, was praised by the supreme leader last month for his "personal role" in Iran's **nuclear energy program**.

The program, which the U.S. says is designed to produce a nuclear bomb, is in defiance of United Nation orders and on March 3 prompted a third set of Security Council sanctions.

The U.S. says that Iran under Ahmadinejad's presidency has assisted insurgents in Iraq and sponsored the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah movement in Lebanon, which the U.S. and Israel consider a terrorist organization. Iran also denies Israel's right to exist.

Disqualifications

In the run-up to the 2004 elections, most of Khatami's supporters, hit by disqualifications, boycotted the polls in an attempt to discredit the outcome. They were marginalized in Iranian politics, a position that was entrenched by Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 presidential election. More than half the deputies in the outgoing parliament hew closely to the president's ideology, based on 2004 election results.

This time, Khatami's supporters will participate. Mohammad Reza Khatami, who probably would have been disqualified had he run, said the movement hopes to make its presence felt even if it gains only a handful of seats.

Ahmadinejad's allies "have a project to homogenize the regime," he said. "We have a project not to let it happen."

Still, there's no question that the disqualifications have skewed the campaign.

The election `` would be more meaningful if the contest was seen to be a lot more open and competitive, but the eradication of the reformers has affected the integrity of the system," said Anoush Ehteshami, head of the **School of Government and International Affairs** at Durham University in England.

Influential Backing

The president's supporters, running as the United Principlist Front, will field 275 candidates and enjoy influential backing, such as the endorsement last month of **Mohammad Ali Jaafari**, head of the 125,000-strong Revolutionary Guard.

`` We believe we can fulfill the eighth parliament's expertise needs," the UPF said March 10.

The `` pragmatic idealists" are grouped under the Broad Principlist Coalition. Prominent BPC figures include former nuclear negotiator **Ali Larijani** and Tehran Mayor Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, 46, who ran against Ahmadinejad in 2005. Though Qalibaf isn't seeking a seat himself -- he may bid for the presidency again -- a clutch of candidates follow his lead.

`` This government has values that we believe in, such as resisting oppression and facing international powers," **Saeed Aboutaleb**, a lawmaker and BPC candidate, said in an interview. `` But it has absolutely no program to turn these slogans into reality."

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Last Updated: March 12, 2008 16:31 EDT

