

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مېباد بدین بوم وېر زنده یک تن مېباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Asia times online

Sands shift in Iranian elections

By Shahir Shahidsaless

Iran's former reformist president Mohammad Khatami shocked the reform movement and his closest allies when he announced in March that he would withdraw from the June 12 presidential race. Just a few days before his exit, Mohammad Ali Abtahi - his loyal former vice president - had said it was out of the question.

Following his formal announcement, many analysts inside and outside Iran believed the withdrawal of Khatami, who was prime minister from 1997-2005, would pave the way for hardline President Mahmud Ahmadinejad to be re-elected. Khatami was seen as the only candidate who could potentially challenge the incumbent in any serious and meaningful way.

In a March 17 article, a Wall Street Journal analyst wrote: "His [Khatami's] surprising dropout could hamper reformists' efforts to stop [Ahmadinejad] from being re-elected". The news agency Reuters, echoing this view, reported; "Political analysts say that Khatami's decision ... will only boost the chance of re-election for [the] current president."

Khatami's exit came after Mir Hussein Mousavi, Iran's prime minister during 1981-1998 - the years coinciding with the eight-year war with Iraq - entered the presidential race.

"I am pulling out of the election ... to avoid scattering the votes," Khatami announced in the statement regarding his withdrawal. Khatami is still popular among the youth, especially university students. He is also considered a favorite among intellectuals and progressives of all stripes as well as a large population of female voters.

However, being strongly disliked in the hardliner/traditionalist camp, his presence would have strongly united his opponents. They believe reformists under Khatami's leadership would have conspired to strip the government and the society from its Islamic principles, making way for liberal values.

In comparison, Mousavi has a flawless revolutionary background, displayed strong management skills during the Iran-Iraq war, and enjoys the approval of the founder of the

Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini. Mousavi can also draw support from a broad range of conservatives ("Principalists", as they are called in Iran) who are dismayed with Ahmadinejad.

"Some conservatives that would not vote for me or Ahmadinejad would definitely vote for Mousavi", Khatami told supporters after his departure from the race.

Ahmadinejad has fulfilled his commitments to the powerful network that shaped his rise to power in 2005, including Sepah (The Revolutionary Guards), Basij (an extensive part-time militia organization under Sepah), and radical members of the Guardian Council, a group of theologians and lawyers who oversee elections.

He has successfully confronted aggressive American foreign policy on several fronts, from the nuclear issue to the conflict in Iraq, and he has expanded Iran's influence in Palestine and Lebanon, thereby imposing immense pressure on both Israel and the United States. These steps - especially with respect to the nuclear issue and Palestine - are highly appreciated by the power network [1] in Iran, and the ordinary conservatives on the street.

But there is another side to Ahmadinejad's story that is now seriously under scrutiny by the Principalists. The issue surfaced last month during a heated debate in the Majlis (parliament), over next year's budget. Ahmadinejad's popularity has been in steep decline lately due to the crippling unemployment rate and the official inflation rate nearing 30%.

Despite this, Ahmadinejad has continued to personally make decisions on economic issues such as Central Bank's interest rate. At the height of the inflation he reduced the interest rate to below 10%, as he believes that charging interest is against Islamic laws and should be eliminated gradually, despite the objections of the chairman of the Central Bank and an army of economic planners. The consequences of the move were disastrous. Huge sums of money that left the banks were invested mainly in housing, and speculation helped overheat the housing market. Property prices skyrocketed, and so did the price of almost everything else.

In his first three years of his presidency, thanks to the booming oil market, the country's oil revenues soared to \$200 billion. This represented one-fourth of Iran's total oil income in the last 30 years since the revolution. Yet, Ahmadinejad - whose slogan during his campaign was "bring the oil revenue to people's dinner table" - has so far registered the worst economic record among all the presidents of Iran.

Today, no one can seriously challenge or ignore Ahmadinejad on Iran's political stage, not even the Supreme Leader. He is the man of the Sepah and Basij and has worked extremely well with and for them. But the ever-worsening economic situation is ringing alarm bells. Dissatisfied with Ahmadinejad's disastrous economic performance and increasing social tensions, the power network may become more hesitant to stand behind Ahmadinejad as they did in 2005, especially if there is a plausible alternative.

As mentioned before, Mousavi can attract a significant portion of conservative voters who predominantly come from poor working-class households and are disenchanted with Ahmadinejad's economic performance. This, plus the fact that Mousavi has never been part of the reform movement, can raise him to the position where the Principalists can seriously consider him an alternative.

Now, if we factor in Khatami's commitment to actively support Mousavi "going from city to city" to encourage people to vote for Mousavi, the prospect becomes more encouraging for Ahmadinejad's opponents.

Khatami made a smart and historic decision. By staying in the race, he was exposing himself to the same electoral manipulation that occurred in 2005 and taking the risk of being disqualified by the Guardian Council, whose approval of the candidates' eligibility is required.

In an article published in Iran's Kayhan newspaper, Hussein Shariatmadari, one of the well-known heavyweight opponents of Khatami, wrote that Khatami's withdrawal was due to his concern about being disqualified by the Guardian Council.

Even if Khatami could gain victory, the question would remain how he could run the country under the complex conditions with the Iran-US negotiations on the horizon. The experience of his eight years in office has shown that he is not strong enough to stand up for his principles. He would not confront the powerful Principalists, and, instead, would choose to be silent and submissive, as he repeatedly was during the years of his presidency. Quite rightly, and putting all the facts into perspective, in his departure statement he stated that with his dropout "change and improvement will be more easily achieved and with less cost".

Finally, there is one factor that is often overlooked and that could play an important role in Iran's elections. This factor lies outside Iran's borders and simply put, is the Israeli government. In the next two months, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the ultra-right tone of his Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman towards Iran could affect the outcome of the elections by uniting the conservatives behind the most radical and hard-line candidate. This candidate, of course, is none other than Ahmadinejad.