

FOCUS: In Iran, Reformists Hit The Streets In Tight Vote

Dow Jones Newswires, The Wall Street Journal Online

<https://www.zawya.com/pdfstory.cfm?storyid=ZW20090611000005&l=042039090611>

June 10, 2009

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TEHRAN (Dow Jones)--Thousands of demonstrators came out onto the streets of Tehran in support of Mir Hossein Mousavi, the reformist former prime minister seeking to challenge incumbent hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ahead of Iran's June 12 presidential elections.

Men and women, young and old, wearing green -- the Mousavi campaign's signature color -- had gathered in squares throughout the capital waving banners and posters for the man they believe is the strongest rival to Ahmadinejad in Friday's election.

"Ahmadi bye bye," supporters chanted as Ahmadinejad supporters rode by on their motorcycles.

Campaigns by reformist candidates, led by Mousavi, have gathered momentum in recent weeks amid widespread discontent with the president's crackdowns on personal freedoms, inflation-stoking economic policies and failure to turn around the ailing economy.

Mousavi and another high-profile reformist challenger to Ahmadinejad, Mehdi Karroubi, a cleric and ex-parliament speaker, have both promised to end morality police patrols and allow for greater freedom of press, artistic expression and dress.

They are also advocating a more diplomacy-oriented foreign policy focused on rebuilding relations with the international community, caught up in a standoff with the Islamic republic over its nuclear ambitions.

"If we are able to build trust with the West, then it is natural that we can progress," said Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a prominent reformist cleric and close Karroubi ally. "However, we must govern in a way that the Westerners will believe us."

DISENCHANTED

The biggest challenge for both Mousavi and Karroubi will be to maximize turnout among a disenchanted middle class to reduce Ahmadinejad's votes to less than 50% and drag the incumbent president into a second round of elections.

"Our strategy is ... to have two people that can get specific percentages of the votes so that we can bring Mr. Ahmadinejad to a second round. In the second round, we will all unite around whoever reaches it -- either Mr. Mousavi or Mr. Karroubi," Abtahi said.

Ahmadinejad still remains popular in this country of more than 70 million -- and about 46 million eligible voters -- in particular with rural and less

affluent voters, who continue to show support for his populist economic policies and a great deal of national enthusiasm for Iran's nuclear energy program.

"We had test missile runs ... he has given us nuclear development. This is a huge development that raised our standing in the world," said 56-year old Nasrin, a retired high-school biology teacher from northern Tehran.

"Ahmadinejad has made small mistakes, but in exchange he has made huge progress. So we will overlook these mistakes," she said.

Ahmadinejad swept to power in 2005 on a platform of economic justice and oil wealth redistribution that was embraced by the country's lower and middle classes.

Since taking office he has pushed on a populist spending campaign that critics say has severely boosted inflation and left the country's budget for the next Iranian year, ending March 20, 2010, with a fiscal deficit of up to \$44 billion.

At the same time, Iran is grappling with a major slump in crude prices since mid-2008, putting the brakes on Ahmadinejad's spending drive during the first three years of his term.

A rise in morality patrols throughout large cities and crackdowns on dress, cultural activities and private parties have increased the animosity of young, educated urbanites towards the government.

Ahmadinejad has also clashed with many of the country's technocrats, with senior officials frequently being changed throughout various state ministries and institutions.

CONSERVATIVE RIFT

Mousavi's conservative leanings are widely expected to help make this week's elections a tight presidential race.

Having declared himself a "reformist principalist," he is viewed as promoting more conservative-leaning foreign policy goals and seeking to make himself palatable to both moderate conservatives and those ideologically lined with the Islamic left, some analysts say.

As the election campaign has progressed, he has shifted a large part of his focus to garnering the 'undecided' vote in an effort to maximize turnout, particularly in urban regions, the analysts add.

At the same time, Ahmadinejad's presidency has witnessed a deep split within the conservative right, leading many of Iran's 'old guard' conservative technocrats -- concerned about the current government's privatization policies and abrasive foreign policies -- to rally around former Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC, commander Mohsen Rezai as a third candidate for presidency.

Rezai's support base includes high ranking members of the traditional conservative establishment, such as speaker of parliament Ali Larijani and former foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati, both of whom supported opening Iran to foreign investment after the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.

Rezai's platform advocates "pragmatic" economic and political reforms, including less government management in the privatization of Iran's state industries and foreign policy changes that promote international investment.

Still, all three opposition candidates will have difficulty galvanizing support in small towns and rural areas, where Ahmadinejad has maintained a strong support base among Iran's poor and lower income classes, and where voter turnout is usually higher than in urban regions.

POVERTY

The president's frequent visits and cash handouts to rural areas -- including remote regions no other president has visited before -- have also earned him a reputation as a leader who has tasted the pain of poverty and doesn't discriminate against the poor.

"Even if Ahmadinejad has only done a little, at least he did what he said he'd do. Relaxing hejab and social restrictions is not bread, peace or security. It won't put bread in women's mouths," said Fahimeh, a 50-year old manager of a "Sisters" Basij militia unit, at the Shah Abdol Azim shrine in Rey, a predominantly low-income area on the outskirts of southern Tehran.

The president has widespread institutional support from the Basij militia and the IRGC, whose role in the management of the Iranian economy has strengthened during his presidency.

Moreover, he also appears to still have the tacit support of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say in all state affairs.