

Iranian women crucial in Majlis election

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More than 7,000 candidates have registered for the Iranian parliamentary election scheduled to be held on 14 March. Almost 600 of them are women.

The election for the 290-seat Majlis will be crucial in determining the future of the hard-line conservatives who broadly back President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Two powerful coalitions formed by reformists and moderate conservatives are seeking to change the balance of power and undermine Mr Ahmadinejad's chances of being re-elected in 2009.

Women voters could be crucial in tilting the balance against the president.

Reformist promises

Iranian women played a huge role in bringing to power the reformist former President, Mohammad Khatami, for two consecutive terms.

They were also instrumental in the parliamentary elections in 2000, which gave the reformists a sweeping majority in the parliament.

The women's movement in Iran is gaining momentum and these elections may be the first step towards having Ahmadinejad pushed out
Fatemeh Haghighatjoo

There are several indicators suggesting reformists with clear policies on women will get their votes.

Fatemeh Haghighatjoo, an outspoken former MP, says reformist candidates have had to adjust their election campaigns to attract women voters.

"They have vowed to change family laws, Islamic punishment laws and labour laws to ensure more equal treatment of women," she says.

The reformists are also promising to employ more women in managerial jobs, and allow more to stand as election candidates.

Protests

Many women say that since Mr Ahmadinejad came to power, institutionalised discrimination against them has increased. Iranian officials reject these allegations, saying the country follows Islamic laws.

But over the past two years the number of women activists has risen sharply as their frustration has intensified.

Women bloggers, journalists and lawyers have led the fight against the stoning to death of women.

More than 60% of the votes that brought President

Mohammad Khatami to power in 1997 came from women

Thousands of women students have marched across the country condemning violence against women and demanding equal rights.

Many women have been sent to Evin prison for being part of the international campaign, One Million Signatures Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws.

Leading members of the Stop Stoning Forever campaign were among 33 women arrested in March 2007 while protesting against the trial of five women activists.

Bahareh Hedayat, secretary of the powerful student organisation Office to Foster Unity, says students are demanding "academic freedoms and equal rights be included in candidates' policies".

She adds: "Civil society activists have demanded these for long. Now we will make them conditions for our votes."

This may explain why the reformists have chosen a prominent woman, Fatemeh Karrubi, the wife of former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karrubi, as their spokesperson.

Elaheh Koolaee, a former MP and professor of political science at Tehran University, is also an active campaigner for the reformists.

'Gender justice'

Despite such support, the reformists still have a major problem.

They are split into several factions and lost many votes in the 2006 local elections, when many of their supporters stayed at home, angered at their internal quarrels.

Ms Koolaee admits the rift is serious, but says this time the reformists have done their best to pull together more than 25 groups into one alliance.

In fact, the political divisions are so widespread that there are 240 political parties registered by the interior ministry.

Ms Koolaee, who is barred from running because she refused to wear an Islamic chador, or full-body cloak, in parliament, says the reformists will create more "gender justice".

But how much of an electoral force are women if they back the reformist camp?

There are more than 46 million eligible voters in Iran, of which at least half are women.

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Shirin Ebadi

Now almost 65% of university students are women, and they are angered that only 3% get senior and managerial jobs. Reformists have promised to introduce positive discrimination for women.

At present, there are two women in secondary cabinet positions and 11 in parliament.

Ms Haghightatjoo says these women are "more fundamentalist than their male counterparts".

An Islamist who lost her seat in parliament for confronting Iran's judiciary, Ms Haghightatjoo blames Mr Ahmadinejad.

She says his days are numbered: "The women's movement in Iran is gaining momentum and these elections may be the first step towards having Ahmadinejad pushed out."

Disqualifications

Too much optimism may also be misplaced.

The hard-line Guardian Council has already disqualified 2,200 candidates for the forthcoming election, including a large number of reformists.

Mass disqualification of reformists in 2004 elections allowed hardliners to regain control.

The Iranian Nobel Laureate, Shirin Ebadi, believes elections cannot be free while candidates have to be approved by the government's vetting body.

"In previous elections we saw that many people were not approved to take part because they had criticised the government," she told reporters in Madrid last week.

Ms Koolae takes a more positive approach.

She says the reformists will "use all the legal loopholes" to ensure less political meddling. Sceptics prefer to wait and see.

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