



A session of the Guardian Council in 2020, a constitutional watchdog that decides who can run in the election. Its role has become highly controversial after it disqualified hundreds of relatively moderate candidates in the 2020 parliamentary vote and again key leading figures in the 2021 presidential race.

Manipulation And Public Apathy Mark Iran's Upcoming Elections

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While the approaching parliamentary elections in March fail to generate enthusiasm among Iranians, the media diligently covers what analysts and regime figures say.

This is part of the regime's strategy to stoke anticipation, giving the impression that noteworthy developments might unfold. However, the electorate's disillusionment stems from the heavily manipulated elections of 2020 and 2021, which ushered in one of the most ineffectual parliaments and governments in recent national history.

Analysts in Tehran attribute the public's indifference to the government's insistence on limiting election choices to ultraconservative candidates, combined with the political system's inability to address a multitude of crises.

This ambivalence is akin to perceiving the elections as transpiring in a different realm. The people's sentiment is perhaps best captured by the Persian proverb, which roughly translates to "If the pot is not boiling for me, let them cook whatever filthy beast they want to cook."

In their daily efforts to "heat up the stove," the media seized the opportunity on Sunday to bring familiar names to the forefront. Speculation emerged that Ali Motahari, a controversial conservative former legislator known for cautiously criticizing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, might contend for a parliamentary seat. **Etemad Online wrote that Motahari is one of the nearly 30,000 people** who have taken part in early candidate registration.

Ali Motahari, a conservative former legislator

Another round of conjecture circled on Sunday, this time involving former Majles Speaker Ali Larijani as a potential candidate. After weeks of oscillating reports regarding his intentions, a political figure close to Larijani, Behrouz Nemati, **revealed that Larijani himself wouldn't run**, but he intends to endorse a slate of like-minded candidates.

Larijani's reluctance to participate in the elections, following his highly questionable disqualification in the 2021 presidential race, was evident. However, if he were to run for a position, it would likely be for Iran's presidency, given his prior leadership of the Parliament. The role of Speaker, once easily attainable due to Khamenei's support, now poses a greater challenge for him.

Notwithstanding, Nemati called on the public to turn out in significant numbers to contribute to a high-turnout election, thereby bolstering the regime's legitimacy, which has been eroded, particularly after the 2022 nationwide protests.

On the same day, **former reformist President Mohammad Khatami was quoted** as having said that the country's leaders call on the reformists to participate in the upcoming elections but they take every step to make sure that reformists are not allowed to run. Khatami, who was meeting with leading reformists, referred to media attacks from hardliners targeting his recent calls for reforms to save the regime.

Discussing the verbal assaults from the hardline daily Kayhan and other ultraconservative figures, Khatami observed, "The government now interprets suggestions for reform as some kind of deviation."

Meanwhile, Mohammad-Reza Aref, a former vice-president under Khatami's leadership, is expected to run, despite his past perceived inactivity in the parliament. Shunned by other reformists for his aloof behavior when he was the leader of the reform caucus in the parliament, now Aref can hardly be categorized as a reformist.

Although certain media outlets **prematurely assess the composition of the forthcoming parliament**, most politicians recognize that unless Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei alters his stance within the next five months, there will likely be limited room for moderate or reformist candidates.

The government may attempt to portray certain figures in the next parliament as less hardline or even persuade select individuals within the ultraconservative camp to make occasional controversial statements, simulating diversity and drawing attention.

The depth of disillusionment regarding a free and equitable election is so pronounced that even figures like Mohammad Javad Bahonar, formerly regarded as a hardline conservative, **lament that the regime no longer views them as insiders**. As the regime fans the flames of anticipation, few authentic politicians would willingly become fuel for the fire.

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