

For Iran's students, election choice is between bad, worse

For many Iranian students, the June 12 presidential election is not a choice between good and bad, but bad and worse, with no prospects of real change even if a new president is elected.

'The candidates are all part of the establishment and whoever wins the race, for us, it's just gonna be deja vu,' said a student at the Isfahan University of Technology in central Iran who asked not to be named to avoid trouble with his dean.

The four candidates for the presidential election are indeed all familiar faces, loyal to the 1979 Islamic revolution and unlikely to bring any real change to the system.

The challengers of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are Mir-Hossein Mousavi, a former prime minister; Mehdi Karroubi, a former parliament speaker; and Mohsen Rezaei, a former commander of the Revolutionary Guards.

'If we want Ahmadinejad out, then we have to choose between one of the so-called reformists (Mousavi and Karroubi),' said Shahin, a civil engineering student who like many of his fellow scholars asked that only one of his names be used. 'For me, it is not a choice between good and bad, but bad and worse.'

Some of the students, however, praised Mousavi and Karroubi for their readiness to talk to students and listen to criticism and complaints while Ahmadinejad and Rezaei prefer to skip that part of campaigning.

'Ahmadinejad apparently prefers to talk to students in the US rather than to students in his own country,' student Hassan Javadi told Karroubi at the University of Isfahan, referring to Ahmadinejad's question-and-answer session in October 2007 at Columbia University in New York.

Karroubi reassured the students in Isfahan that there were 'no red lines' and that they could ask and tell him whatever they wanted.

Mousavi as well told students at the Free University of Arak, also in central Iran, that he would always keep up the dialogue with students and secure their freedom to express their political opinions.

He also voiced harsh opposition toward any 'security approach in universities', including student suspensions and arrests.

'Khatami also wanted to avoid suspensions and arrests of students but when it happened, he said, 'Sorry, the judiciary is independent',' said Kaveh, an arts student in Arak, referring to former reformist president Mohammad Khatami, who failed to fully implement his reformist vision during his 1997-2005 term.

The judiciary in Iran is run by conservative clerics whose independent status is strictly respected by the government and parliament. Several controversial cases related to students and dissidents could not be challenged, therefore, by the president or the legislators.

Most of the students used the candidate visits to meet the presidential hopefuls and voice their opposition to Ahmadinejad.

At the University of Isfahan, the situation temporarily got out of control after some of the students shouted: 'Death to the Taliban, both in Kabul and in Tehran!' Some other students sarcastically shouted, 'Mehdi, come! Please save us from Mahmoud.'

Karroubi and Moussavi promised to implement Islamic democracy in Iran, a vision initially raised by Khatami.

'We are really not sure what any president can really do within the Islamic system in Iran,' said Hessam, a student in Isfahan.

According to the Iranian constitution, not the president but the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has the final say on all political affairs.

'Another problem is that the laws are very ambiguous,' Hessam added. 'A simple criticism can easily be interpreted by the judiciary as an offence to national security.'

There was also speculation among students as well as the media that the supreme leader would prefer for Ahmadinejad to remain president for another four years. Khamenei himself has categorically denied the speculation.

'I only have one vote and I will not tell anyone to vote for any special person,' Khamenei said in March.

'This is an unfair charge which the leader himself has harshly denied,' said Moussavi, who, like Karroubi, rejected the rumours.

Karroubi, however, accused the armed forces, especially the pro-Ahmadinejad Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) of interfering in the elections and possibly trying to manipulate the polls.

'The IRGC should not intimidate the people,' he said. '... We should allow the people to vote freely for their candidate.'

Many students regard the remarks by even the moderate candidates as pre-election rhetoric unlikely to be implemented after victory.

'Changing the rhetoric does not necessarily change the policies as long as the political roots are the same,' literature student Kamran said in Arak. 'I see no real difference between the candidates.'

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