

Ahmadinejad presents new cabinet to parliament for approval

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Sunday presented his new 21-member cabinet, which includes three women, to parliament for approval.

Parliament has to evaluate the nominations within the next three days and approve them before Ahmadinejad's government can start its four-year tenure.

There are 14 new ministers in the cabinet. For the first time in the 30-year history of the Islamic republic, there are also three women among the nominees.

Ahmadinejad gave a short biography of the appointees and asked parliament to approve what he called a selection of scholars whose sole aim is to serve the nation.

He said the new government was committed to preserving justice and national dignity, and would be decisive in confronting any pressure from the West.

Several members of parliament voiced their criticism against the new ministers, terming them as inexperienced and only chosen due to their obedience to the president.

Ahmadinejad rejected the charges and said that he chose his cabinet according to their technical qualifications and management skills.

The opposition has several times accused Ahmadinejad of preferring ministers who were ideologically close to him, rather than giving priority to their qualifications.

'This is not true, my main aim is to have a group which brings the country forward,' Ahmadinejad said.

The president also rejected criticism over frequent changes of ministers and said 'from time to time the country just needs fresh forces'.

Responding to criticism of his nomination of the three women, Ahmadinejad said he was proud to have included women in his cabinet and was certain that all three would play an effective role in the government.

'Women form 50 percent of our total (70 million) population and appointing women as ministers gives these women, and especially all those female graduates, a perspective and hope that they can reach the highest posts in this country,' he said.

'The nomination of the three women is a message by the revolution and a model for future generations,' the president added.

The three female ministers are former parliamentarians Marzieh Vahid-Dastjerdi and Fatemeh Ajorlou for the ministries of health and social welfare respectively, and Susan Keshavarz, who has been tapped for promotion from deputy to minister of education.

As all three are conservatives, on the same wavelength as the president and have no record of

involvement in women's rights activities in Iran, observers believe that Ahmadinejad nominated them to soften his image as an Islamic hardliner.

The new ministers are expected to present their programmes and reply to critics in parliament Monday.

Ahmadinejad's re-election is still disputed due to alleged fraud in the June 12 presidential election. Widespread protests following the election led to mass arrests and the deaths of more than 20 demonstrators.

The 290-member parliament is dominated by conservatives, but the pro-Ahmadinejad wing in the legislative power has gradually shrunk, especially after the president refused to consult the deputies before selecting his new ministers.

According to reports, parliament is expected to reject at least five appointees, including the president's choice for the Ministry of Oil, which oversees the country's main income source.

On Saturday, just before the parliamentary session, new Chief Judge Sadeq Amoli-Larijani dismissed hardline Tehran prosecutor Saeid Mortazavi, who is said to have been close to Ahmadinejad.

Mortazavi was one of the most notorious officials in the judiciary involved in the prosecution of several dissidents and chief editors, and is a well-known opponent of the country's reformist wings.

Mortazavi was also linked to the mysterious death of Iranian-Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi in 2003 and was in charge of closing down several reformist newspapers in the last 10 years.

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