

# Tough times for political parties as revolution turns 40

Author:

Sat, 2019-02-09 00:29

TEHRAN: Iran's main political parties are on rocky ground as the Islamic republic marks its 40th birthday, with reformists in disarray and conservatives seeking a new identity.

Even though key reformist leaders have been forcibly sidelined, Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a former reformist vice president in the 1990s, still believes gradual change is the only option for his country.

Since mass protests against alleged election-rigging in 2009, his former boss, ex-President Mohammad Khatami, is barred from appearing in the media, and presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi have been under house arrest for the last eight years.

There are also few signs of a new generation emerging to succeed them, not least because Iran's influential Guardian Council has the power to reject any election candidates it deems unqualified, Abtahi told AFP.

"The candidates that can pass the Guardian Council's vetting are low-level," he said. "You can't expect much from them."

The reformists instead pinned their hopes on President Hassan Rouhani, a political moderate who sought conciliation with the West through a landmark nuclear deal in 2015.

Yet their hopes have proven ill-founded. Since the US unilaterally withdrew from that deal last year, Iran's economy has been in a tailspin, adding to popular anger that burst onto the streets in violent protests across dozens of towns and cities a year ago.

"When the demonstrators shouted 'Reformists, conservatives: The game is over,' they were not wrong," said conservative analyst and politician Amir Mohebbian. "The fact is the (political) game has changed."

"Until now, voters would go for the candidate they thought would do the least harm ... but now they have taken as much as they can stand. Now the people want someone who can actually solve their problems."

Mohebbian did not elaborate on potential candidates as jockeying for the next presidential elections, due to take place in 2021, has not yet started. But the decision to back Rouhani has "bankrupted" the reformists, he claimed.

Journalist and activist Ahmad Zeidabadi, who has been arrested several times, goes further, saying the reformists' plans to try to change the very nature of the state "reached a dead end" some time ago because of the system's lack of "flexibility."

And it is not just mainstream political factions who are demanding change.

Ardent supporters of the revolution believe its original values – such as policies in favor of the poor – have been largely forgotten, pointing to widespread allegations of corruption to back their claims.

For decades, the conservatives have been closely associated with the establishment, many of them holding key unelected positions.

But for them to survive the changing political environment, they “must move closer to the people” since the people “don’t trust” them now, Mohebbian said.

Concern over corruption by successive governments has become a “powderkeg,” believes Nader Talebzadeh, a film-maker who advised Ebrahim Raisi, the preferred candidate of ultraconservatives in the 2017 presidential election.



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# Ready to bring down Netanyahu, ex-general stirs hope of change

Author:

Sat, 2019-02-09 00:16

JERUSALEM: Former military chief Benny Gantz has burst onto Israel's political scene as the great hope of the country's shrinking "peace camp" with a message that is anything but dovish.

The retired general, who wants to topple Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in April 9 elections, boasts of killing Palestinian militants and aligns himself with political hard-liners. He fires back at Netanyahu's criticism with scathing counterattacks.

In today's Israel, Gantz's ready-to-rumble rhetoric appears to be the only way to bring down the long-serving Netanyahu. That is turning him into an unlikely source of hope for Israelis who view ending their country's rule over the Palestinians, now in its 51st year, as a priority.

Yossi Beilin, an architect of the 1993 interim peace accords with the Palestinians, said fear of another Netanyahu term is driving much of the support for Gantz. He called Gantz a "black dove" – an imperfect but tolerable alternative to Netanyahu.

"Not that I agree with everything he says, but many of the things he is saying are OK from my point of view," Beilin said.

Opinion polls forecast victory for Netanyahu's Likud Party. But since Gantz's recent maiden political speech, his new "Israel Resilience" party has emerged as No. 2.

The race could swing in the challenger's favor. Netanyahu faces possible indictment in a series of corruption investigations, perhaps before the elections. Meanwhile, Gantz is reportedly exploring mergers with other centrist parties.

Gantz appears to be modeling himself after Ehud Barak and the late Yitzhak Rabin – former military chiefs-turned-prime ministers. Both used military credentials to lead security-obsessed Israel to peace negotiations with the Palestinians.

Wary of being branded a "leftist," considered a put-down by many Israelis, Gantz has said little about his vision of peace with the Palestinians. He dresses his rhetoric in security terms as he tries to win support from Netanyahu's nationalist base.

In his January speech, Gantz bragged about assassinating Ahmed Jabari, a former Hamas military commander whose death in an Israeli airstrike in the Gaza Strip sparked an eight-day war in 2012.

“The heads of the terrorist organizations need to know that Ahmed Jabari was not the first, nor may he be the last,” Gantz warned.

Without giving details, he vowed to “strive for peace” and – if that is impossible – to shape a “new reality.” He said he’d strengthen West Bank settlement blocs and retain control of the Jordan Valley, a strategic section of the occupied West Bank the Palestinians seek as the heartland of a future state.

The UN has said about two-thirds of more than 2,100 Palestinians killed in the 2014 war were civilians.



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# Lebanese father sets himself on fire over unpaid school fees

Author:

Fri, 2019-02-08 22:26

BEIRUT: A Lebanese man set himself on fire in a schoolyard in Bkeftine in northern Lebanon after a dispute over unpaid tuition fees.

George Zureik doused himself in gasoline and set himself alight following a meeting on Thursday with administrators at his daughter's private school. The father of two died before he could be taken to hospital.

Zureik is believed to have asked the school for documents to transfer his daughter to a semi-free public institution, but was refused because of outstanding tuition fees.

He had previously transferred his other daughter from the same school to a public facility.

Zureik's death sparked angry responses on social media with many comments critical of high school fees and Lebanon's worsening economic situation.

MPs from North Lebanon joined the online protests, describing Zureik as "a martyr of taxes and the high cost of living."

MP Sami Gemayel said Zureik was "a martyr to irresponsibility and lack of accountability," while MP Michel Moawad said: "His suicide is an unprecedented Lebanese tragedy that reflects the worsening economic and social conditions in the country."

The school administration denied responsibility for the incident and said in a statement that "due to the deceased father's economic situation, the school had shown sympathy since his two children enrolled in 2014/2015 and exempted him from paying fees except for transportation, stationary and extracurricular activities."

However, Lebanon's Ministry of Education has announced an investigation into the circumstances of the incident.

Education Minister Akram Shahib said that public schools in the country this year have accepted thousands of students who were transferred from private schools because of the tough economic conditions.

The minister said he will ensure Zureik's children continue their education and will provide them with the necessary scholarships.

"I hope that this painful incident will be an incentive for the government to make improving the difficult economic and living conditions a priority," he said.

Economist Louis Hobeika described the incident as “a sad situation.”

“The Ministry of Labor has estimated the unemployment rate in Lebanon at 25 percent – and it might be higher,” he said.

“We have noticed a fall in the number of parents who can pay university tuition fees, prompting students to work at restaurants and other places. But the problem with schools is that parents are the only ones who can pay for their children’s tuition.”



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## [Palestinian chief negotiator Erekat says will not attend Warsaw conference](#)

Fri, 2019-02-08 18:44

WASHINGTON: Palestinian officials will not attend next week’s US conference hosted by Poland, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said on Friday after a US official said they had been invited.

“Regarding statements that we have been invited, we can say that only today there was some contact from the Polish side,” Erekat said on Twitter. “Our position remains clear: We are not going to attend this conference and reiterate that we have not mandated anyone to talk on behalf of Palestine.”

Earlier, a senior US official said that Palestinian officials had been invited to a US conference on the Middle East hosted by Poland next week where White House senior adviser Jared Kushner will discuss plans for peace between the Palestinians and Israelis.

The senior administration official told reporters the event was “not a negotiation but a discussion” on Middle East peace.

“As noted we have asked the Palestinian Authority to send representatives to this event,” the official said.

Kushner, who is US President Donald Trump’s son-in-law, will also take part, the official said, and he “will discuss the administration’s efforts to advance peace between Israel and the Palestinians and also take questions from the audience.”

“We would very much welcome the Palestinian Authority’s perspectives during the discussion, but I do want to emphasize this is not a negotiation but a discussion, and we look forward to fostering a constructive conversation in

Warsaw,” he added.

The State Department has said more than 40 countries will attend the conference in Warsaw from Feb. 12 to 14.

Kushner has been working on a peace plan for more than a year. The Warsaw event will be one of the first occasions where he will discuss the plan publicly, although he is not expected to reveal any details.



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## [Sudan protesters rally against death of teacher in custody](#)

Author:

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Fri, 2019-02-08 14:26

KHARTOUM: Sudanese protesters rallied after Friday prayers in an eastern town against the death in custody of a teacher arrested in connection with anti-government demonstrations sweeping the country, witnesses said.

An investigator on Thursday confirmed that teacher Ahmed al-Kheir, 36, had died from wounds sustained while in detention after he was arrested last week by security agents in the eastern town of Khashm El-Girba.

Kheir, a member of Sudan's Islamist Popular Congress Party, was detained for allegedly organising anti-government protests, a relative told AFP.

On Friday, crowds of protesters in Khashm El-Girba staged a rally after the weekly Muslim prayers to protest his death.

"We will give our blood to keep you alive," chanted the protesters, who emerged from several mosques after prayers and held a march, a witness told AFP by telephone.

Kheir was arrested by agents of the country's powerful National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), his uncle Ahmed Abdelwahad told AFP as the family took his body from a mortuary.

"We have asked the chief of NISS in Kassala to bring the security agents who interrogated Kheir in Khashm El-Girba," Amer Ibrahim, the head of an investigative committee at the prosecutor's office, told reporters on Thursday, indicating he had died in detention.

"The man had wounds on the back, legs and other parts of his body that led to his death," Ibrahim said.

Deadly protests have rocked Sudan since December 19, with demonstrators holding nationwide rallies calling on President Omar Al-Bashir to resign. Officials say 30 people have died in the violence, while rights group Human Rights Watch says at least 51 people have been killed.

Demonstrators on Friday also staged rallies in a district of Khartoum and in Omdurman, the twin city of the capital, witnesses said.

Police fired tear gas as protesters rallied chanting "freedom, freedom" outside a mosque in Omdurman run by the main opposition Umma party, witnesses said.

Police dispersed the protesters and some tear gas canisters hit the compound of the mosque, a witness said.

Police and security officials were not immediately available for comment. Umma's head, former premier Sadiq Al-Mahdi, has thrown his weight behind the protests and called on Bashir to step down.

Bashir, who has refused to resign, swept to power in a 1989 Islamist-backed coup that ousted Mahdi's elected government.

Protests first erupted after a government decision to triple the price of bread but soon escalated into rallies against Bashir's three-decade-old rule.



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