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Tehran challenger reaches out to the West



Martin Fletcher in Tehran

A prominent Iranian politician has used an interview with *The Times* to signal that many conservatives are unhappy with President Ahmadinejad's confrontational attitude to the West and that they favour greater dialogue.

In a rare interview with a Western newspaper Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, the Mayor of Tehran and the former Iranian police chief, spoke of the emergence of a political "third movement" in his country that lay somewhere between Mr Ahmadinejad's hardliners and the reformists.

Mr Qalibaf, 46, was speaking on the eve of parliamentary elections today in which "pragmatic" conservatives identified with himself and Ali Larijani, Iran's former nuclear negotiator, are competing against conservatives loyal to Mr Ahmadinejad.

Mr Qalibaf was defeated by Mr Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election, but if his "pragmatic" conservatives do well today analysts expect him to challenge the increasingly unpopular President again in next year's presidential contest.

His decision to talk to a British newspaper was a “signal he wants to have a higher profile in the world appropriate for someone who wants to run for president”, said Barbara Slavin, an Iran expert with the US Institute for Peace in Washington. “As Ahmadinejad runs into trouble on the economy Qalibaf is beginning to present himself as a plausible alternative.”

Mr Qalibaf at no point criticised Mr Ahmadinejad directly, and certainly did not suggest that Iran should change its nuclear policy. Indeed, most Western analysts would still describe him as hardline. However, he did spell out positions on several issues that were at odds with those of the President.

Speaking in Farsi, he repeatedly accused the West of failing to understand Iran or respect its sovereignty but he acknowledged that tensions had worsened and that “there are problems on both sides”. He talked of the need for Iran to “realise that it is living under international rules”. Mr Ahmadinejad has scoffed at the United Nations, which last week approved a third batch of sanctions against Iran.

Mr Qalibaf said that it was wrong to think that there was a “dominant” desire for confrontation and conflict in Iran, adding: “I would like the West to change its attitude to Iran and trust Iran and rest assured that there's an attitude in Iran to advance issues through dialogue.”

A self-styled moderniser, he wanted to know more about David Miliband, the youthful British Foreign Secretary, whom he met at the Davos World Economic Forum in Switzerland in January. “I think there's a new generation of politician emerging in the West,” he remarked.

Asked about Mr Ahmadinejad's statement that Israel “must be wiped off the map”, he replied that “there are different approaches” and recalled that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, had demanded a referendum in the territories of old Palestine. Mr Qalibaf also described himself as a free marketeer, whereas Mr Ahmadinejad's record suggests that he believes strongly in government intervention. He has spent oil revenues so freely that Iran now suffers from rampant inflation.

Mr Qalibaf is a former Revolutionary Guard commander and airline pilot. He is an ambitious man with little love for Mr Ahmadinejad, and has a record as an efficient manager, but it is highly unlikely that he could win the presidency without the support of Ayatollah Khamenei.

A [recent biography of Mr Ahmadinejad by the journalist Kasra Naji](#) claims that the Supreme Leader switched his support from Mr Qalibaf to Mr Ahmadinejad in 2005 after Mr Qalibaf sought to court the moderate vote by appearing in white suits and Ray-Ban glasses and being photographed in aircraft cockpits.