

TEHRAN:

Iranians voted yesterday in a low-key election likely to keep parliament in the grip of conservatives after unelected state bodies barred many reformist foes of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from the race.

But the next assembly might not give Ahmadinejad an easy ride, even if conservatives dominate. They include not just his allies, but critics of his economic policies and politicians looking beyond this election to the presidential poll in 2009.

Reformists favouring more political and social freedom had hoped to capitalise on public discontent about inflation, now at 19%. But the vetting process and a government crackdown on dissent have muted their challenge. They may struggle to keep the 40 or so seats they held in the outgoing 290-seat assembly.



President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at a polling station



grandson of the late Hassan Khomeini casts his ballot at a Khomeini Ayatollah polling station in Jamaran mosque north of Tehran yesterday

Food prices, not foreign policy or Iran's nuclear row with the West, are what most Iranians worry about in the world's fourth-largest oil producer. "I hope this time they do a better job and pay more attention to the economy, the housing problem and inflation," said Soraya Tavasoli, a middle-aged woman backing the conservatives. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has effectively endorsed Ahmadinejad and his government, cast his ballot early and urged others to do the same.

Khamenei usually stays above the political fray, but he was quoted as saying in newspapers on Thursday that Iranians should consider "voting for those who can pave the way for the current government which is active and willing to serve".

His support for Ahmadinejad was relayed by anonymous text messages to mobile phone users on Friday.

Shrugging off reformists' complaints that the system was stacked against them, Ahmadinejad said after voting: "Our revolution means the presence of people ... Parliament belongs to people and it should be a reflection of what they want." Some people ignored requests by the clerical establishment for a high turnout to defy Iran's "enemies" in the West.

"Ahmadinejad's supporters will win again, so why should I bother?" said Farnak, 25, a housewife out shopping.

Reformists, even while arguing the vote is unfair because so many of their candidates are disqualified, have urged Iran's 44mn eligible voters to deny conservatives an easy victory.

Some of those queueing at the Haft-e Tir polling station at a Tehran mosque had heeded that argument. "We have to support reformists. If we don't vote, their opponents will take more seats," said Mohamed Ziafati, 62, a retired teacher. Mehdi Karoubi, leader of the reformist National Trust Party, voiced satisfaction with the voting. "The public turnout has been at a favourable level," he told Iran's state Press TV.

The poll may offer clues to Ahmadinejad's chances of re-election next year, though analysts say he will need to keep the support of Khamenei and other parts of the state apparatus.

The president can rely on loyalists like Hassan Siavashi, 45. "It is my religious duty to vote. I pray God will help Ahmadinejad's group to win," he said before voting in Tehran.

Bibi Zahra, an elderly woman in a black chador, said she had put her trust in her son's choice. "I don't know who I was voting for, he filled in the form for me," she added. Among the most determined voters in Qom, a centre of religious learning south of Tehran, was 105-year-old Hossein Najafi, who arrived at the polling station in a wheelchair.

Conservatives controlled the last parliament and backed Ahmadinejad when he ran for president in 2005. Many have since blamed his economic policies for inflation. Khamenei, not Ahmadinejad or parliament, has the last word on major policy issues such as the international dispute over a nuclear programme which the West suspects has a military component. Tehran says it aims only to generate electricity. Hardliners back Ahmadinejad's defiant nuclear stance, but reformists and moderate conservatives say his fiery speeches have helped prompt three rounds of UN sanctions against Iran.

Polling stations were due to close at 6pm (1430 GMT) but the Interior Ministry said this deadline would be extended.

The turnout in Iran's parliamentary elections on Friday is set to top 60%, far higher than in previous legislative polls, the government spokesman said.

"I predict there will be at least 60% participation," Gholam Hossein Elham told reporters at the Iranian interior ministry.

"We hope the result shows a very good turnout which will strengthen the pillars of the Islamic system and will strengthen ties among different power-centres of the country so that they can respond to people's needs," he added.

Iran's leaders have emphasised the importance of a massive turnout to ensure there is no repeat of the slack turnout in the last parliamentary polls in 2004, when only 51.2% of the electorate voted.

The figure of a 60% this time round had also been quoted in an opinion poll carried out by state news agency IRNA.

"So far it has been a glorious and the people have responded to the supreme leader's (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) call" to vote, Deputy Interior Minister Ali Reza Afshar told state television.

"Observers who have monitored several past elections admit that so far we have an election with a more glorious participation and a healthier process.

"If this trend continues, we will have the maximum turnout," added Afshar, a former top Revolutionary Guards official who is in charge of organising the elections. He did not give any figures.

Polls opened at 8am (0430 GMT) and were due to close at 6pm (1430 GMT), although this is likely to be extended until late in the evening if there is heavy turnout.—Agencies