

Iranian Presidential Candidates Hold First Debate

From VOA Learning English, this is In the News.

Iranian voters are considering which candidate to support in the presidential election on June 14th. The eight approved candidates met Friday in the first of three planned debates. They took turns answering questions about Iran's economy. Recent government reports say inflation is rising at a rate of over 12 percent a year. The unemployment rate is over 13 percent.

The two leading candidates appear to be Saeed Jalili, Iran's chief security official, and the mayor of Tehran, Mohammed Bagher Ghalibaf. Some observers say Mr. Jalili is the likely favorite. He has worked in the office of the country's top leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He is also lead negotiator in nuclear talks with western nations. The United Nations Security Council has passed resolutions against Iran for failing to obey limits on its nuclear program. Iranian oil exports have dropped by almost 50 percent as a result of foreign opposition to the nuclear activities.

Mayor Ghalibaf has been a popular leader. He was able to complete major transportation projects in a weak economy by joining with Chinese companies. He formerly served in the Iran-Iraq war and as national police chief. Earlier this month, rights groups released a recording of his comments about dissidents. He is heard claiming that he ordered police to fire on students during demonstrations.

week, the Guardian Council barred more than 600 other declared candidates for president from the ballot. The Council is made up of religious and legal experts. Six of its 12 members are appointed by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.

The group blocked former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and all thirty women candidates from appearing on the 2013 presidential ballot. Last week, American Secretary of State John Kerry criticized the restrictions.

“That is hardly an election by standards which most people in most countries judge free, fair, open, accessible, accountable elections.”

On Tuesday, the Committee to Protect Journalists condemned what it called efforts to deny Iranian citizens information before the elections. The following day, United Nations special representative Maina Kiai urged Iran to release more than 40 reporters from jail. His comments came as the Iranian news agency Mehr reported that Iran’s culture minister plans more restrictions on foreign reporters.

Separately, UN officials said that barring all women candidates violated the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Last weekend, exiled Iranians met at Sweden's parliament building in Stockholm. The opposition group condemned an election process the exiles called "an insult to Iranians." The gathering was organized by the coalition called United for Democracy in Iran or UDI. Iran's state-operated media described the UDI call for free elections as an excuse for military intervention in Iran.

And that's In The News. I'm Steve Ember.