

## IRAN HARDLINERS TURN TO REFORMIST -DOMINATED SOCIAL MEDIA

**TEHRAN:** After a series of bruising electoral defeats, Iranian conservatives campaigning in this week's presidential poll have belatedly embraced social media—a space long dominated by their reformist rivals. Across Iran's political spectrum, posting on social media has increasingly replaced street campaigning as the crucial way to rally supporters and attack opponents—even if some of the most popular sites such as Twitter remain officially banned.

Hardline Tehran mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf has used Twitter and messaging app Telegram, which has 25 million users in Iran, to release documents accusing his rivals of corruption. When moderate President Hassan Rouhani, who is seeking re-election, vis-

ited the site of a mining disaster last week, conservatives posted a video of his car being attacked by protesters which quickly went viral.

Another conservative candidate, cleric Ebrahim Raisi, has live-streamed his rallies on Instagram and given unprecedented online question-and-answer sessions. It marks a significant shift in a country where conservatives have tended to respect bans on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube-leaving reformists a relatively free run on social media. The bans date back to the 2009 election when Twitter and Facebook were widely used to rally support for reformists and then to organize mass protests when they claimed the result was rigged in favor of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

"The reformist camp always had the upper hand on social media" during 2009 and 2013 elections, journalist Sadra Mohaghegh said. Conservatives finally came round after a massive defeat in urban areas at last year's parliamentary elections, in which reformists scored a clean sweep of Tehran's 30 seats. "Until then the conservatives had not realized the power of social media, but after that they realized they had to join the game," said Mohaghegh, who writes for reformist daily Shargh.

### Online army

Reformists have continued to score hits on social media. When hardliner Ghalibaf claimed he supported female empowerment in the workplace, critics published

documents showing he had called for gender-segregated offices at Tehran municipal offices. But Iran's hardliners have some powerful assistance. Some 18,000 "volunteers" regularly scour the internet for anything deemed subversive, a top judiciary official said in February.

The arrests in March of 12 heads of popular reformist channels on Telegram sent a chill through the online community. Six are still in jail, despite criticism from Rouhani and another lawmaker who blamed the elite Revolutionary Guards and told them to stay out of politics. Rouhani has made civil liberties, including online freedom, a key theme of his campaign. His administration has rolled out high-speed Internet across the country, making it harder for the

authorities to limit access. "The era of one state broadcaster dominating people's minds is over," he said at a campaign rally on Saturday.

"We will set up the communications infrastructure so that each one of you can become the broadcaster with your mobile phones. We will not let Iran become isolated once again." The online mud-slinging has smeared both sides in a bitterly fought contest. But the use of social media has at least boosted voter interest in the election, and officials are keen to see a high turnout in order to buttress the regime's legitimacy. "I think everyone has embraced the competitive campaign atmosphere—it helps build up the hype and enthusiasm," Mohaghegh said.—AFP

## CONSERVATIVE MAYOR GHALIBAF WITHDRAWS FROM IRAN ELECTION

### GHALIBAF CALLS ON HIS SUPPORTERS TO BACK EBRAHIM RAISI

**TEHRAN:** Tehran mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf withdrew from Iran's presidential race yesterday, paving the way for a head-to-head battle between President Hassan Rouhani and his leading hardline challenger in this week's election. Ghalibaf called on his supporters to back conservative cleric and jurist Ebrahim Raisi in Friday's vote, saying it was vital for the "preservation of the interests of the people, the revolution and the country."

Unofficial polls still show Rouhani, a moder-

challenge from the conservatives due to the continued stagnation of the economy. Raisi, a former prosecutor-general and close ally of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has called for a more assertive approach to the West and a focus on building a self-sufficient "resistance economy".

This had been Ghalibaf's third bid for the presidency, having been runner-up to Rouhani in 2013. A former police chief and member of the Revolutionary Guards, he has played on his

damental and crucial decision must be taken for the unity of the revolutionary front," Ghalibaf wrote in a statement announcing his withdrawal. "To protect this great ideal, I ask all of my supporters across the country to offer all of their support to the success of our dear brother Ebrahim Raisi."

### Fight has just begun

He launched brutal tirades against Rouhani and his reformist allies in the televised debates, accusing them of corruption and failing to support the poor. "The expectation of us and the people is that this decision sets the stage for a new era of economic transformation that, by cutting off the four-percenters from the economy, will lead to youth employment and support for the underprivileged and poor in Iran. "The fight has just begun," he said.

Rouhani's government signed a 2015 nuclear deal with world powers that ended some sanctions in exchange for curbs to Iran's nuclear program. But it has struggled to attract the large-scale foreign investments Rouhani had promised when the deal came into force, and which he said were necessary to reduce unemployment and kick-start the economy. Raisi is currently the head of the powerful Imam Reza shrine and charitable foundation in the holy city of Mashhad who has attracted support from traditional conservatives, and is seen as the favored candidate of the security establishment.

Three other candidates-reformists Eshaq Jahangiri and Mostafa Hashemataba, and conservative Mostafa Mirsalim—are also standing in the election, though they are considered relatively marginal figures who may also withdraw before the vote. Iran's elections are similar to the French system in which a second round run-off is held between the top two candidates unless one wins 50 percent or more in the first round. Rouhani squeaked through in the first round of 2013 with 50.7 percent of the vote.—AFP



**TEHRAN:** In this file photo, Tehran's mayor and conservative presidential candidate Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, center right, listens to a cleric on his arrival to attend a campaign rally in Tehran, Iran.—AP

ate cleric who has sought to improve civil liberties and rebuild ties with the West, as the front-runner. But he has faced a harder-than-expected

tough-guy image in the past, but this year targeted his campaign against the wealthy elite, whom he dubbed the "four-percenters." "A fun-

## SYRIA REGIME NEARS TOTAL RECAPTURE OF DAMASCUS

**BEIRUT:** Syria's regime is close to cementing its control over the entire capital under local deals with rebels after a six-year war that has ravaged suburbs of Damascus and caused population displacements. Rebels have evacuated some of the last Damascus districts under their control, shattering their dream of one day seizing the capital and toppling a five-decade-old regime.

Over 2,000 civilians and rebels evacuated the Qabun district on Sunday, after similar departures from the Barzeh and Tishrin neighborhoods earlier last week. "With the seizure of these three neighborhoods, the regime now controls almost all the capital," said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group. In the east of the capital, "the rebels now only hold a part of the Jobar district, most of which is destroyed," he said.

In the south, the Tadamun and Hajar al-Aswad neighborhoods as well as the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmuk are now mostly controlled by jihadists including the Islamic State group, he said. The so-called reconciliation deals that led to the latest evacuations from the capital have dealt a heavy blow to the armed opposition, following their defeat in the northern city of Aleppo in December. "With Aleppo retaken and Damascus about to be, the rebels no longer present a political or military alternative," said Syria expert Fabrice Balanche.

"The regime is therefore not under any threat and doesn't need to make any concessions," added Balanche, a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute think-tank. For President Bashar al-Assad, regaining control of the capital was vital to retain power after anti-government protests that began in 2011 before spiraling into civil war.

### Regime success

His fortunes have sharply reversed since July 2012, when thousands of rebels seized several of the capital's neighborhoods before a two-week counter-offensive by elite regime troops repelled them. More recently, in March, rebel groups and jihadists from former Al-Qaeda affiliate Fateh al-Sham Front briefly entered Abbassid Square near the city centre in a surprise assault from Jobar,

before being pushed back days later. But the capital, with its approximately 1.6 million inhabitants, has largely been insulated from the civil war and has endured far less destruction than other major hubs such as Aleppo and the city of Homs in northern Syria. "The regime was reinforced by Russian and Iranian foreign troops at the expense of a defenseless people," said Mohammed Alloush, head of Jaish al-Islam, the most powerful rebel faction in the opposition-held Eastern Ghouta area outside Damascus. He said the population displacements caused by the local reconciliation deals amounted to "crimes against humanity".

"The regime now plans to swallow up Jobar in the next phase before setting its sights on Eastern Ghouta," Alloush said. He said the evacuations were a "betrayal" after backers of the regime and rebels signed a deal in the Kazakh capital earlier this month aimed at paving the way towards a lasting ceasefire in Syria.

On May 4, regime allies Russia

and Iran and rebel backer Turkey inked a deal to introduce so-called "de-escalation zones" in the country. Under the deal, four zones are to be created in the northwestern province of Idlib, parts of the central province of Homs, the south, and the opposition enclave of Eastern Ghouta near Damascus. The capital is not included in the plan.

### Rebel offensive doomed

The regime has long touted "reconciliation deals" as the best way to end the conflict and views the latest evacuations as a success. "It's a turning point in the conflict," said government advisor on national reconciliation Ahmad Munir Mohammed. "It's a victory for the Syrian state," he added. "Reconciliation is a defeat for those waging war against Syria." He denied that the deals were changing the country's demographics.

"Those who wanted to regularize their status (with the regime) stayed, and those who left did so at their request," he said. Syria analyst

Joshua Landis said the evacuations underlined that "the suburbs of Damascus cannot hold out against the regime". He said the intervention of the Lebanese movement Hezbollah in support of the Assad regime in 2013 "doomed the Damascus rebel offensive" by severing supply routes from neighboring Lebanon. "The regime and its allies cut the legs out from underneath the Damascus rebels," said Landis, director of the Centre for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

Aron Lund, a fellow at The Century Foundation, said the army taking control of the three Damascus districts would weaken the armed opposition in Eastern Ghouta. "The long-term situation of the rebels there looks very bleak," he said. "Qabun, Barzeh and Tishrin, which are now being retaken by the army, have contained smuggling tunnels that supplied Eastern Ghouta," he said. "Without those tunnels, the Ghouta rebels will be weakened and the government will have more leverage over them."—AFP



**DAMASCUS:** Syrian civilians and rebels, who were evacuated from the Qabun district in northeast Damascus, arrive at a temporary camp in the northern countryside of Idlib province.—AFP



**MOSUL:** Iraqis sell goods in Mosul's neighborhood of al-Jadida as civilians gradually return to the area after Iraqi forces recapture the district from Islamic State group fighters.—AFP

## RESCUED HUMAN SHIELDS TELL OF MOSUL HORROR

**HAMMAM AL-ALIL, Iraq:** Fear and hunger are driving an ever-growing number of Iraqi civilians into a camp in Hammam al-Alil, where they share harrowing tales of deadly violence and jihadist tyranny in Mosul. Some arrive at the displacement camp, the largest in the Mosul area, on foot, but most of them are crammed into buses and trucks, relieved and exhausted. Half a million people are currently displaced as a result of the massive seven-month-old offensive to retake Iraq's second city from the Islamic State group.

Thursday saw what the Norwegian Refugee Council said was the biggest single-day displacement since the start of the operation, with around 20,000 fleeing neighborhoods of west Mosul. "I feel safe, I did not think I would get out of there alive," said Shams Hassan, a woman in her forties who reached the Hammam al-Alil camp on Friday with 16 members of her family. She is from the Al-Faruq neighborhood of Mosul's Old City and lost track of the number of times she and her relatives had to change houses and neighborhoods in recent months. "They always wanted us to be in front of them to use us as human shields. They would come to tell us to change houses," she said. "We would find ourselves in the middle of shelling and car bombs. One of the houses we lived in was struck by a mortar round, it collapsed on us and I was wounded by shrapnel. I had to be carried," she said. A large population remains in Mosul's Old City, where IS appears to have concentrated most of its remaining resources. Some estimates put the number of civilians still trapped in west Mosul at 250,000.

### Hanged from posts

Human shields have become a central feature of the vastly outnumbered jihadists' defense and IS has stopped at nothing to deter people from escaping the city. "Those who tried to flee were executed in the streets and their bodies hung from posts," Shams Hassan said. Her mother, who reached Hammam al-Alil a few weeks earlier, sat next to her, her gaze lost in the distance. "Daesh would take our food," the old lady said, using a derogatory Arabic

acronym for the Islamic State group. "They would come with their guns and take our clothes too."

Trapped residents reached by AFP inside the areas still controlled by IS have warned recently that hunger was beginning to kill more people than the intense fighting itself. There is no clean water left to drink and even unclean water is hard to come by. People are boiling paper and cartons to fill their stomachs. "A bottle of oil was 50,000 dinars (around 40 US dollars), a can of tomatoes was 50,000 dinars too. Flour was 5,000 dinars. We ate some of it and got sick," said Shams Hassan.

### Eating grass

"We haven't showered the kids in two months, they have lice," she said. Having moved countless times, they eventually managed to escape when the Iraqi security forces reached their neighborhood and escorted them out through holes that both sides have punched in walls in people's homes to move up and down blocks undetected. "We were walking on broken glass and rubble... my son had to carry me," she said.

At age 72, Ahmed Yunis Dawood dodged sniper fire to leave west Mosul through the neighborhood's water mains. "For five days, I would go out at night to check out the streets," he recounted. In the Hammam al-Alil camp he reached early Sunday, the elderly man found safety but little else. "The people who arrive here have no tent, no bed to sleep in, no food, no water," Dawood said. Aid groups have been delivering assistance in the camps to tens of thousands of civilians daily but the lack of funding, the recent peak in displacement and soaring temperatures are leaving many outside the relief net.

In the dusty chaos engulfing the entrance of the camp, where new arrivals are screened and in most cases subsequently dispatched to other locations, one man cried in despair. "We fled death only to face death here... Take us home, it is better for us," he said. "An air strike will come and we will die together. We were eating grass like cows but at least we were in our homes."—AFP

## AFTER TEARFUL FAREWELL, ISRAEL BROADCASTER ENTERS NEW ERA

**JERUSALEM:** Israel's new public broadcaster went live yesterday after reforms to television and radio stations, seen as integral to the country's history, threatened snap polls and evoked tearful on-air tributes. Radio newscasts began with the same two-hour show as previously, with iconic anchor Aryeh Golan remaining in the chair. "Good morning, at this time the Israeli Broadcasting Corporation sets out on its way," he said in his opening remarks.

But in a reference to layoffs accompanying the reforms, he said, "Our rejoicing, of course, is tinged with sadness for the hundreds of our colleagues from the IBA who were left by the wayside." The number of jobs lost has yet to be confirmed. Many Israelis grew up with only public radio and television run by the former Israeli Broadcasting Authority until private stations began appearing in 1993.

The launch comes after bitter political infighting over the reforms that seek to streamline the former authority's operations. The now-defunct IBA had one television channel and eight radio stations, as will the new corporation. A dispute between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon over how to move ahead with the reforms threatened early elections, before a compromise was reached

in March. Netanyahu has been accused of reneging on a previous agreement by seeking too much control of the new broadcaster, while Kahlon was committed to it and wanted to see through financial reforms. Employees of the old corporation have harshly criticized the way the shutdown was handled. Staff from its main nightly television news program were informed last week its broadcast that day would be its last, drawing emotional on-air tributes.

In a sign of how much the reforms remained in flux, the new corporation was still looking for a boss. The official receiver charged with the IBA breakup on Sunday published an "invitation to apply for the post of temporary managing director". Channel One public TV is due to go on air later Monday.

### Years of reform attempts

For years the government had tried to reform the IBA, the Jewish state's sole broadcaster until 1993, when the first commercial TV channel went on air followed by several commercial radio stations and a second television channel. It was accused of financial mismanagement, bowing to government interference and allowing bloated staffing imposed by strong unions.—AFP