

International

Reformists likely to sweep Iranian polls

Early turnout was thin in Tehran

TEHRAN, Feb 18: For the first time in two decades, Iranian voters are expected today to give reformists a majority in the powerful parliament that has traditionally been a bastion of conservatism, reports AP.

Iran's 38.7 million voters headed to polling stations set up at mosques and schools to choose between liberals promising social and political reforms and conservatives backed by hard-liners in the ruling clergy.

But turnout was very thin in many polling stations in Tehran in the first 30 minutes after voting began at 9 am (11:30 am BST). Authorities appealed to Iranians in radio broadcasts not to delay casting their votes.

Supreme leader Ali Khamenei, the ultimate power in Islamic Iran and the hard-liners main backer, voted in a mosque near his office in central Tehran, and he too appealed to Iranians not to leave voting to the last minute.

"This is a significant election and I want you to be careful. Elect those who will be helpful to you and to Islam," he told state Tehran radio after he voted.

The hard-liners want Iran to

stick to the ideals of the 1979 Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini that ousted the pro-US Shah and brought the Shi'ite Muslim clergy to power.

Liberals have promised to work toward greater press freedom, and respect rule of law. Some have suggested that Iranians should decide in a national referendum whether or not to establish ties with the United States, a move conservatives strongly oppose.

The hard-liners stand

puzzles many who were born after 1979, when relations between the two nations were severed after radical students took over the US Embassy and held 52 Americans hostage for more than a year.

The conservatives would like to stop all kind of contact with the outside world. They know that the more we know, the more we will dislike them," said Mehdi, a chemical engineering student, standing outside the Tehran University hospital.

They think that people are ignorant and only they are intelligent," said Mehdi, who refused to give his full name for fear of reprisal.

Though there are no opinion polls in Iran, reformists are ex-

pected to do well because of mounting frustration with the restrictions of clerical rule.

Young people complain that 21 years of Islamic rule by Khomeini's followers and successors failed to bear the promised fruit: jobs and prosperity. Instead, youth were barred from mixing freely with the opposite sex, listening to pop and Western music or watching foreign television programmes. Women were told to cover themselves from head to toe and the clergy, in its role as the interpreter of God's will, was deemed above criticism.

More than half of Iran's 62 million people are under the age of 25. About 20 million of them are in high schools and universities that have traditionally been the harbingers of change and the barometers of public discontent.

Drawn by a promise of reforms, Iranians elected President Mohammad Khatami to office in a landslide victory in May 1997.

"People have shown in previous elections that they support the reforms and we are sure in these elections they will do the same," Ahmad Borqani, a reformist candidate said during a recent election rally.

Some of the leading re-



Iranian police guard a polling station while people line up to vote in northern Tehran Friday. Polling stations opened all over Iran at 9:00 a.m. local time to elect a new parliament, in a battle between reformists and conservatives. Of the country's more than 60 million inhabitants, 38.7 million are called on to vote in the sixth general elections since the Islamic Republic was proclaimed in 1979.

— AFP photo

formists have said that if they win a majority in the 290-member Majlis, one of their first acts would be to defeat a pending bill that calls for jail

ing journalists who write articles critical of the ruling clergy. Several newspaper managers have been jailed and their publications closed in recent years but no journalist has been penalised.

The hard-liners also control

the judiciary and other key in-

stitutions such as the radio and

television and the armed forces.

About 5,800 candidates including 424 women are contesting the election — both record numbers. More than 36,000 polling stations have been set up for the polls.

The first results in the election will start coming in Sunday, but final results were not expected until February 25. All votes will be counted by hand.

both have exploded nuclear devices.

Clinton intends to visit India, the world's largest democracy, and Bangladesh next month, but has made no decision on Pakistan. This week Sandy Berger, his assistant for national security affairs, met with several experts on the region at the White House to discuss the pros and cons of a presidential visit.

Clinton said he would base his decision on what would best serve US interests in trying to stop "a nuclear arms race."

Gen. Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's military ruler, urged Clinton earlier this month not to bypass his country, saying a visit would go a long way toward easing tensions with India. The military took control of the nation after an October 12 coup that overthrew the democratically-elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The House members said they were not condoning the replacement of an elected government by a military one, but they said the tension over Kashmir was rising.

We are concerned that a failure to meet with officials of the Pakistani government might set back America's ability to serve as a useful mediating role," they said.

US House members urge Clinton to visit Pakistan for peace

WASHINGTON, Feb 18: Six House members advised President Clinton on Thursday to visit Pakistan in the interest of world peace, reports AP.

They wrote Clinton that his intervention could defuse tensions with India over the disputed territory of Kashmir and might even achieve a settlement.

The six who signed the letter were Reps. David E. Bonior — the second highest ranking Democrat in the House — Tom Campbell, James P. Moran, Major R. Owens, Dale E. Kildee and John F. Tierney.

Clinton, at a news conference Wednesday, left the door open to visiting Pakistan and offered to help mediate the volatile Kashmir dispute.

Because India never has accepted outside intervention, the president's offer to intercede as he has in the Arab-Israeli dispute and in Northern Ireland may be academic.

But asked whether he would be willing, Clinton responded, "Absolutely, I would," and then said, "Unless we are asked by both parties to help, we can't get involved."

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