

Bloomberg

By Ladane Nasseri



After blaming trade sanctions for delaying a new Tehran highway last month, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf ordered extra work shifts to meet the deadline.

“We are making all efforts to fully launch this project,” said Qalibaf, who is mayor of the Iranian capital. “Partners have promised to make up for two of the four months delay.”

Qalibaf, who lost to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential vote, has been using the city of 12 million people as a platform to foster a reputation as a politician who gets things done. As another election looms before Ahmadinejad steps down, Qalibaf is poised to translate that support into votes should he run again in June.

With Iran threatened over its nuclear program and grappling with accelerating inflation and oil output that in 2012 fell to its lowest in more than two decades, the stakes are high for the leaders deciding who to promote as the next premier. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, himself seeking a coalition for a chance to serve a third term, on Feb. 2 said stopping Iran from building nuclear arms would be the government’s foremost challenge.

“If Qalibaf is allowed to enter the process, that speaks volumes about what the leadership is thinking,” said Mehrzad Boroujerdi, director of the middle-eastern studies program at Syracuse University in the U.S. “What he can bring is a much more sober and realistic assessment rather than bombastic style of statecraft that we experienced under Ahmadinejad.”

Clerical Blessing

No candidate has yet officially registered to run and all must first get the blessing of the ruling clerics. Other prominent potential runners include Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani, a supporter of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and Ali Akbar Velayati, foreign policy adviser to the cleric.

During Ahmadinejad’s two terms, Iran has become more isolated economically and politically.

Another set of U.S. sanctions will take effect Feb. 6, requiring buyers of Iranian oil to pay in local currency in escrow accounts and barring Iran from repatriating profits. The rial fell from 20,160 against the U.S. dollar on the street market in August to 36,500 in October. It settled at the end of last year, before resuming its slide and weakened to 37,675 yesterday, from 34,000 on Jan. 16. Inflation was about 27 percent in December, up from 22 percent in May, according to the central bank.

The measures by the U.S. and European Union are aimed at pushing Iran to curb its nuclear program, which they say may be a cover for atomic weapons development. Iran maintains the program is for power generation and medical research.

Davos Attendee

Qalibaf, 52 this year, backs a partial liberalization of the economy and has in the past welcomed the possibility of an engagement with U.S. President Barack Obama.

He's a "pragmatic modernizer, not an ideologue," a U.S. diplomat wrote in a 2008 cable released by Wikileaks.org. "At the same time, he is not straying far from conservative ranks inside Iranian politics."

"By no means is he sliding over to the reformist camp," the diplomat wrote.

He attended the 2008 World Economic Forum in Davos, seeking to attract construction investments, and took part in a debate entitled "How Cities Are Aiming for Sustainable Growth" that featured Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, then the Mexico state governor, and Ken Livingstone, the then mayor of London.

"He's a rational player," said Geneive Abdo, a research fellow at the Washington-based Stimson Center, which was set up in 1989 to promote peace. "The U.S. is more comfortable dealing with technocrats and economists who are much less ideological than presidents such as Ahmadinejad."

Pilot Uniform

Qalibaf was born in the north-eastern Khorasan Razavi province from where Khamenei also hails. A former Revolutionary Guards air force commander and an ex-head of the security force, he has a doctorate in geopolitics, according to his website.

With independent opinions polls all but non-existent in Iran, it's hard to tell how popular Qalibaf is compared with when Ahmadinejad triumphed.

Tehran residents remember Qalibaf's 2005 campaign, where he appeared in a series of outfits including pilot uniforms in contrast to his rival's trademark beige sports jacket.

"Qalibaf is not a man of the people," Hooman Majd, author of "The Ayatollahs' Democracy: An Iranian Challenge," said in an interview. "He's a military man and a strong man, but he's not viewed as a man of the people."

After being stung by protests in the second half of Ahmadinejad's tenure, Khamenei may also seek to opt for "somebody who has the personality of a door knob," rather than more independent minds like Qalibaf, Boroujerdi said.

Door Knob

In the meantime, the mayor has been focusing on seeing through urban development projects. His office didn't respond to a telephone call and fax seeking an interview for this story.

Restrictions on importing materials hindered the construction of the multi-level highway between Tehran's west and east that was due to be completed before the end of March, Qalibaf said. He pledged to still inaugurate the project in the first month of the Iranian year, which starts on March 21.

"Importing cranes for the project was one of our issues, which was eventually carried out," Qalibaf said on Jan. 7, according to the state-run Fars news agency.

In his seven years as mayor, residents say he has changed the city with murals, parks and cultural centers and improved its running by constructing tunnels and bridges, extending the metro network and establishing bus lanes.

"He's an exceptional manager," Mani Mortazavi, 65, a medical engineer in Tehran who would vote for Qalibaf should he run, said by telephone from Tehran. "When he says that a project will end on that day he usually meets his deadline."

Changing City

Ahmadinejad, 56, whose two-year stint as Tehran mayor preceded Qalibaf, introduced policies such as public transport passes for seniors and marriage loans. The job is a "staging ground for people with higher ambitions," Boroujerdi said.

Political bickering in recent months engulfed Ahmadinejad who's being turned into a scapegoat by his rivals for the country's economic woes, with the supreme leader in November ordering an end to the public attacks on the president.

Qalibaf has aimed to stay clear of the arguing, even though he hasn't been immune to spats with Ahmadinejad. In 2011, the president's administration prevented Qalibaf from traveling to the U.S. to participate in a ceremony after Tehran had been nominated for an international transportation award.

"He has kept the fighting low as a way not to be in the limelight and perhaps to envision a presidential run," Boroujerdi said. "He is a regime man, but one who has been smart enough to maintain some degree of distance from the present chaos."

That may also help him win the vital favor of Khamenei, Majd said. In 2009, Khamenei backed Ahmadinejad amid the mass protests, ensuring a second term for the president who then went on to challenge his authority.

Khamenei "had this terrible experience with Ahmadinejad," said Abdo at the Stimson Center. "This will be a risk free election. No more Ahmadinejad or similar personality types. There's too much at stake to take risks."