

Taxi-Cab Confidential–Tehran-Style: Who is Iran’s Next Political Star?
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The mayor of Tehran is usually a potential candidate for the presidency and next year may see the current office-holder do just that. Why cabbies love him.

Talking to cabbies is a time-worn journalistic technique. But when the area of coverage is Iran, it has merit. Drivers have always been barometers of political trends in Iran’s capital among the middle class. It is said that during the Islamic Republic’s formative years, taxi drivers were loath to discuss politics lest it draw them into trouble. To avoid the risks, they dangled small signs from their rearview mirrors that read, “political debate not permitted.”

Today, those same taxis—in some cases the same remarkably old Iranian-made Peykans—are the venue for the most unabashedly frank political discussions. Conversations almost always gravitate toward the economy and the rising prices of commodities like bread, rice, and milk, a situation exacerbated by subsidy cuts over the last two years, the precipitous devaluation of the Iranian rial last year and by mounting sanctions against the country.

Among the loquacious taxi-driving community, almost no political figure emerges unscathed. Some direct their ire toward President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for inflation and a variety of other perceived sins; others have little but contempt for the former president Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, despite his recent reformist-leaning positions. But one politician does enjoy a certain privileged status among Tehran’s cabbies, even if that means he isn’t the object of outright animosity. That would be the Mayor of Tehran, Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf.

“I’m not voting in the next election,” one taxi driver declared, skeptical of the country’s electoral system. But his resolve came with strings attached: “I’ll only cast my ballot if Qalibaf decides to run for the presidency; in that case, I’ll vote for him.” He may get an opportunity. On Monday, in a conversation with the semi-official Fars News agency, Qalibaf advisor Mohammad Nabi Rudaki said that the mayor’s would be a “certain” presence as a candidate in the Islamic Republic’s 11th presidential election next year. Rudaki explained that the mayor would make an announcement himself later when he wasn’t busy with work. Said the advisor: “He is engaged in important and big matters in the capital.”

As Tehran’s confederation of taxi-drivers as navigate the city’s tangled alleyways and congested thoroughfares, they profess their admiration for the mayor. Indeed, cab rides are a bit like show-and-tell. Qalibaf’s numerous construction projects and reforms are on public display as passengers and cabbies chug toward their destinations. As one taxi driver engages in small talk, we swoop down under a Qalibaf-commissioned bridge and past scores of newly planted sycamores on the Middle East’s longest street, Vali Asr. Among his works-in-progress are the development of parks and green spaces in the hilly Abbas Abad neighborhood, the double-deckering of the Sadr highway and the completion of the decades-old Imam Ali Highway project that will run the entire length of the capital. Several of Qalibaf’s biggest projects will be completed around Iranian election season next year.

As the two-term mayor of Tehran, Qalibaf is pushing Iran’s burgeoning capital in startling new directions. He’s overhauled the city’s public transportation system with a reliable network of buses, accelerated the construction of metro stations, worked toward

expanding a much-needed city-wide sewer system, standardized the city's garbage-collection system, worked to prop up new highways, tunnels, and bridges to ease the flow of traffic, and constructed numerous parks with an aim to expand Tehran's "green space."

The Abbas Abad project, for one, is seeing the transformation of a prodigious plot of land in central Tehran into a lush, park-museum-library recreational complex crisscrossed by several highways. It is designed to be linked together by a series of Gondola lifts and pedestrian bridges. It is scheduled for completion some time next year.

More building is on the way, with some media reports even suggesting that the city's detested Evin prison—where most of Tehran's political prisoners are held—may be on the chopping block, to be replaced by another one of Qalibaf's signature parks at some point in the future. Perhaps as a harbinger, the prison's entrance is now decorated with a well-tended lawn and concrete terraces planted with flowers.

Qalibaf is a former Revolutionary Guard Air Force commander who is said to have played an influential role in the 1982 liberation of Khorramshahr that helped turn the tide in the Iran-Iraq war. He is no rookie in Iranian politics. As Iran's chief of national police, he equipped officers with top-of-the-line Mercedes cop cars, kickstarted Iran's equivalent of the 911 emergency hotline, and computerized documents and form submission for the sprawling department. During the second half of the reformist administration of President Mohammed Khatami—who was in office from 1997 to 2005—Qalibaf led the fight against counterfeit currency and smuggling.

In 2005, the rise to the presidency of another Mayor of Tehran—Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—put a halt to the work of the reformists. Qalibaf had run for the presidency too but came in fourth. Still, he outpolled other prominent politicians, including Ali Larijani, who is now the head of the Iranian parliament.

As mayors of Tehran go, however, Qalibaf, while admired for his "unspeakably good management skills," is not the most beloved among those who occupied that office. "I can say that Qalibaf has certainly been good, though perhaps not as good as [Mayor Gholamhossein] Karbaschi," opines a younger driver, referring to a hugely popular Tehran mayor in the 1990s who similarly worked to expand the city's green space with scores of parks and thousands of trees, and oversaw the construction of crucial highways that Qalibaf and others have since expanded. A staunch supporter of Khatami, Karbaschi was toppled by the corruption charges leveled against him by conservative critics, made memorable by a nationally televised trial in 1998 that saw him sentenced to two-years in prison. Karbaschi and his allies have described it as a smear campaign to curtail his popularity. It is a lesson that all politicians with presidential ambitions must surely take to heart.

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