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## Iranian Pro-Reform Newspapers Silenced

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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TEHRAN, Iran (AP) -- Two reformist newspapers did not appear Thursday as hard-liners reined in the media on the eve of elections in which they are expected to regain control of parliament.

The muzzling of the last big liberal dailies in circulation -- Yas-e-nou and Sharq -- has been seen as the possible shape of things to come after Friday's elections, which most reformist politicians plan to boycott.

The ruling theocracy has barred more than 2,400 candidates who sought greater political and social openness -- effectively sending the 290-seat parliament back under the wing of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a hard-liner.

The only real drama is how many people will choose to vote on Friday.

Liberals have called for a mass no-show to embarrass the Islamic leadership and weaken the credibility of the new parliament. They have also broken a major political taboo and directly criticized Khamenei, whose backers believe he is answerable only to God.

The powerful judiciary -- controlled by Khamenei -- closed the two newspapers after they published portions of a statement from pro-reform lawmakers that attacked the supreme leader and said freedom was being "trampled in the name of Islam."

But some reformers saw the crackdown in broader terms: a possible pre-emptive strike in anticipation of a low voter turnout and a hint of strong-arm tactics to come.

"Banning papers is essential for those who plan to commit a parliamentary coup," said Hamidreza Jalaeipour, a columnist for Yas-e-nou and editor of three other newspapers that were banned earlier.

Yas-e-nou and Sharq were among the few survivors after a hard-line backlash against the liberal press that began in the late 1990s. Dozens of newspapers and publications have been shut and editors and journalists jailed. The liberal papers that remain do not have the circulation and influence of Yas-e-nou and Sharq.

Yas-e-nou, or New Lilac, was considered the voice of the pro-reform Islamic Participation Front, whose leaders include Mohammad Reza Khatami, the deputy speaker of the outgoing parliament who was disqualified from Friday's elections. Reza Khatami is the younger brother of President Mohammad Khatami, who was once described as a lilac.

Sharq, or East, gained a reputation as a forum for smaller reform groups.

Judiciary officials said the ban was temporary, but in the past similar closures were never lifted. A judiciary statement accused the papers of various charges including "undermining the Islamic Republic."

The expected election outcome will put reformists back to where they were before they won a landslide in parliamentary polls four years ago: seeking to pressure the leadership from outside the system.

Some dissidents see the loss of parliament as an opportunity to sharpen their protests to mount more demonstrations and other acts of civil disobedience.

"We could be seeing efforts to try to provoke a social and economic crisis," said Saeed Madeni, a member of the reformist group National Religious Front.

However, Mohammad Reza Khatami told the AP on Wednesday that it was "too risky for the time being" to try to organize mass demonstrations as people were not ready for them.

Much hinges on the turnout.

Liberals hope for a major rebuff, especially in the big cities that are the core of their support. Parliament elections in 2000 attracted 67.2 percent of voters nationwide and 46.9 percent in province of the capital, Tehran. Reformists hope the turnout on Friday will be about half those figures.

Hard-line media have pulled out all the stops to try to counter the boycott. Conservative newspapers ran editorials stressing voting as a civic duty. Television broadcast statements from the leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, equating voting with patriotism.

The reformers, however, insist that casting ballots is also a vote in favor of "undemocratic" elections and the unlimited controls wielded by Khamenei and his flanks of non-elected clerics.

The reformists seek to give elected officials a greater voice. Their other targets include guaranteeing more Western-style openness in political and business affairs, and accelerating the easing of Islamic social restrictions that President Khatami began after his first election in 1997.

Khatami's second and final term expires next year. Reformers have suggested they plan to put forward candidates for the office -- whose limited power would be mostly neutralized by a hard-line parliament.

"There is just one way to maintain the system of the Islamic Republic," said one of the barred lawmakers, Mohsen Armin, this week at a meeting to criticize the elections. "There is just one way: to apologize to the nation and seek forgiveness from God."