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Highlights of the week

- ✓ Has the opposition reconsidered its stance and now recognizes the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's government?
- ✓ Rafsanjani declares his support for the Supreme Leader but continues to take criticism from government supporters
- ✓ The president submits the state's annual budget for the approval of the Majles: a 90 billion dollar increase compared to last year
- ✓ Yet another expression of Western cultural influence: more tattoos and piercings among young Iranians
- ✓ Pictures of the week: train goes off the rails between Tehran and Mashhad (January 23), killing 8 and injuring 12; airplane crashes in Mashhad (January 24), injuring 46

Has the opposition reconsidered its stance and now recognizes the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's government?

A political scandal was sparked in Iran last week when reformist opposition leader Mehdi Karoubi was quoted by the conservative Fars news agency saying that he recognized President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the president of Iran (Fars, January 25).

Shortly after the report appeared, Karoubi's son, Hossein, commented on it by saying that his father still believed that the last presidential elections were forged, but since the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, recognized Ahmadinejad's presidency, he, too, recognized Ahmadinejad as the "prime minister of the regime" (Saham News, January 25).

In an interview granted by Hossein Karoubi to the BBC in Persian, the opposition leader's son said that since the presidential elections his father had expected the regime to consider and comply with the demands of the people, but since that had not happened, he was now seeking a way to resolve the crisis. His views had not changed, Hossein Karoubi stressed; instead, it was an attempt to find a way out of the situation created by the government, which brought the country to the brink of destruction (BBC in Persian, January 25).



Reformist opposition elements have also stressed recently that Karoubi had not backed down from his stance and that his statement did not imply recognition of Ahmadinejad's legitimacy as a president but rather recognition of the fact of his presidential tenure.

In a meeting with political activists last week, Karoubi himself said that he intended to continue standing alongside the Iranian people in the struggle for their rights and for free elections (Rah-e Sabz, January 26).

Meanwhile, several Iranian news websites reported last week that in a letter sent recently by former president Mohammad Khatami to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Khatami also declared that the reformist camp officially recognized Ahmadinejad's government. According to that report, Khatami wrote to the Supreme Leader that the current crisis had to be resolved within the framework of the law, that extremism on both sides had to be avoided, and that action must be taken to defuse the situation (Farda News, January 24).

It should be noted that following the Ashura riots that broke out in late December, opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi issued a memorandum of opinion in which he proposed a plan to

resolve the political crisis in Iran. That memorandum of opinion was also viewed by some of Iran's politicians as Mousavi's recognition of the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's government, as it was the first time since the presidential elections that Mousavi did not bring up an explicit demand to cancel the election results and did not question the validity of the government.

Rafsanjani declares his support for the Supreme Leader but continues to take criticism from government supporters

Last week, Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the chairman of the Assembly of Experts and chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council, broke once again his months-long silence over the political crisis in Iran and declared his support for the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In a meeting with the central council of the Moderation and Development Party held on January 23, Rafsanjani said that Khamenei was the most fitting person for solving Iran's current problems, with the assistance of moderates from both Iranian political camps.

Rafsanjani stressed that his views had always reflected the interests of Islam, the revolution, and the Iranian people, noting that at times he had preferred to remain silent in light of "inappropriate conditions". He said that the Supreme Leader never supported radical or illegal action from any political camp, adding that he was confident in the regime's ability to solve the problems facing it with the support of the people and to foil the schemes of Iran's outside and anti-revolutionary enemies (various news agencies, January 23).

Rafsanjani's statement was made several days after the Supreme Leader called upon the political elites to break their silence over the latest incidents and make clear their position regarding the conflict between the regime and Iran's enemies. When the leaders of Iran's enemies take a clear stance on happenings inside Iran, it is inconceivable that the political, influential elites should take ambiguous stances, Khamenei said (Mehr, January 19).

Despite Rafsanjani's expression of support for the Supreme Leader, government supporters from the conservative camp once again strongly criticized the chairman of the Assembly of Experts. In an editorial published in the ultra-conservative daily Keyhan, the editor-in-chief Hossein Shariatmadari addressed Rafsanjani's statement, claiming that his silence over the latest incidents meant that he had taken the side of Iran's enemies. Shariatmadari wondered whether Rafsanjani had yet to understand that the latest events had nothing to do with the government or the elections, and that they were not a reflection of a political struggle between two political camps but rather a plot by the West and the enemies of Islam against Iran. Not only does the silence of senior political figures over the events not assist in uncovering the truth behind them, it also helps fan the flame of incitement. The editor-in-

chief of Keyhan strongly attacked Rafsanjani's silence over the Ashura riots, saying that in spite of his opposition to the government, he should have condemned the support of the "leaders of incitement" of Israel and the US and the offense they inflicted upon the founder of the Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, and the Shi'ite Imam Hossein (Keyhan, January 24).

The senior cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi also harshly criticized Rafsanjani. In a meeting with Iran Broadcasting executives, the head of the Association of Lecturers in the religious seminary in the city of Qom and the Assembly of Experts member said that Rafsanjani was growing ever farther from the regime due to his views. According to Yazdi, Rafsanjani's recent statements were offensive and disrespectful towards Khamenei, since such statements were tantamount to questioning his leadership. If Rafsanjani would like to discuss Iran's problems, said Yazdi, he must first condemn the burning of Khomeini's picture and the offense against the sanctity of the Ashura. He further added that Rafsanjani's smiles were not helping to solve differences of opinion. He even warned Rafsanjani that he may suffer the same fate as Ayatollah Montazeri (the designated heir of Khomeini, whom the latter impeached in 1988 for criticizing the regime's policy) (Fars, January 25).

Gholam-Hossein Elham, member of the Guardian Council and former spokesman of Ahmadinejad's government, also strongly lashed out against Rafsanjani last week, going as far as to accuse him of an attempt to destabilize the regime and take power out of the Supreme Leader's hands (Fars, January 27).



In other comments on Rafsanjani's statement, Mohammad Javad Larijani, a senior judiciary figure and the brother of Majles speaker Ali Larijani and judiciary chief Sadeq Larijani, referred to Rafsanjani as a "great man", the likes of whom were few and far between in the history of the Iranian revolution. He added, however, that even great men committed errors, listing three such errors supposedly made by Rafsanjani in recent years: the establishment of the Servants of Construction Party (SCP) in the mid-90s, saying it led to the emergence of the

reformist camp; his decision to run for presidency in 2005; and his harsh statements against President Ahmadinejad in the last election campaign (Fararo, January 24).

In recent months Rafsanjani had not attended the Friday prayers at Tehran University, which he used to lead until the latest presidential elections in Iran. In light of the political events in the country, pro-government conservatives strongly attacked Rafsanjani, accusing him of collaborating with the reformist opposition against the regime and blaming him to a great extent of the ongoing political crisis.

The president submits the state's annual budget for the approval of the Majles: a 90 billion dollar increase compared to last year

On Sunday, January 24, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad submitted the budget proposal for the coming Persian year (March 21, 2010 – March 20, 2011) to the approval of the Majles. At 368 billion dollars, the annual budget has increased by 89 billion dollars compared to last year. The budget is based on the assessment that oil is going to cost 60 dollars per barrel, while the working assumption in last year's budget was that oil would only cost 37.5 dollars per barrel.

In a speech given to the Majles during the submission of the budget, Ahmadinejad said that this year's budget reflected social justice, a fair distribution of resources, and an increase in government spending on construction, development, and scientific research projects. According to the president, the budget also reflects the government's special emphasis on cultural issues and on strengthening Iran's national identity and religious values through the allocation of about 1.5 billion dollars to building culture centers, cinemas, mosques, religious seminaries, and so forth.

Ahmadinejad asked the Majles not to take too long to approve the budget, saying it was formulated with the assistance of experts and was "clear and understandable". In his speech, the president also assessed that despite the expected implementation of the subsidy reform policy the inflation would drop to an annual rate of only 5 percent earlier than halfway through the implementation of the economic development plan for 2010-2015 (various news agencies, January 24).



Photo : Shaigan

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Not surprisingly, the budget proposal drew criticism from the president's critics. According to an editorial published last week in the daily Khorasan, published in Mashhad, the government's proposal submitted to the Majles for approval reflected a "fragile, uncertain" budget both in terms of the sources of revenue that it is based on and that are unrealistic, according to the daily's assessment, and in terms of the expenses specified in it. There is no doubt, says the article, that the Majles will introduce significant changes in the budget proposal before approving it (Khorasan, January 25).

Fararo, a website affiliated with government-criticizing conservative circles, also criticized the budget proposal, defining it as "inflationary". A commentary published on the website following the submission of the proposal by the president says that the proposed budget is likely to lead to an increase in liquidity and a decrease in the value of the currency just when the government states once again that it makes everything possible to lower inflation rates (Fararo, January 25).

Farda, a website affiliated with the pragmatic conservative camp, also had several reservations regarding the budget. An editorial published on the website says that the budget is based on the working assumption that the government will receive 70 billion dollars as a result of the expected cancellation of the subsidies. According to the website, that assumption contradicts the subsidies law recently approved by the Majles, which estimates the expected revenue from the subsidy policy reform at only 20 billion dollars. The article also criticizes the suggested significant increase (nearly 50 percent) in the budget of government companies, and questions the government's ability to meet the budget goals with regard to construction projects whose budget has greatly increased compared to last year (Farda, January 26).

Yet another expression of Western cultural influence: more tattoos and piercings among young Iranians

In an article published last week, Tabnak, a website affiliated with the pragmatic conservative camp, warned against the intensification of the phenomenon of tattoos and piercings among young Iranians. The article reports that in recent years, young men and women turn to tattoo and body piercing salons—mostly due to the influence of Western rock bands. The website reports that the tattoos and piercings are done by centers which operate without a license and without medical supervision, warning that they are not just an ugly and negative social and cultural phenomenon but also a severe health hazard for the young people.

The website complains that, without government monitoring, there has been a proliferation of underground tattoo and piercing salons, which have no qualms about publicly advertising themselves on public transportation, through the Internet, and on advertisement boards.

Eyebrow, eye, and lip tattoos are also performed in women's hairstyling salons without the young women being aware of the dangers of having a tattoo, such as skin conditions, blood diseases, and so forth. The website also warned against the danger in the transmission of diseases as a result of reusing needles and lack of proper sanitary conditions.



Tattoos on the backs of young Iranians, from the website of the daily Hamshahri (<http://www.hamshahrionline.ir/News/?id=24839>)

The website also reports that tattoos and body piercings are expensive. The cost of a small tattoo ranges from 30 thousand to 150 thousand tomans (about 30-150 dollars), the price of a tattoo covering a large area of skin can range from 100 thousand to several hundred thousand tomans, and the price for a piercing ranges from 80 to 200 thousand tomans.

Tabnak warns that according to information published on the media, about 50 percent of those who choose to have a tattoo or a piercing later regret their decision and wish to remove it, which is nearly impossible, and quite often a tattoo removal is unsuccessful and very expensive (Tabnak website, January 20).

It should be noted that as part of the campaign waged by Iran's internal security forces to more severely impose the Islamic code, several dozen hairstyling salons have been closed down in recent years on charges of giving their customers Western-style haircuts and tattoos.

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