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Highlights of the week

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Conservative camp steps up criticism of Ahmadinejad, accusing him of straying from principles of conservative camp

Criticism of President Ahmadinejad by the conservative camp has reached new peaks this week. In an extended interview granted by conservative Majles member Ali Motahari to Soroush, a weekly affiliated with Iran Broadcasting, he claimed that the president and his supporters do not represent a conservative view but rather a separate extremist view. He went as far as to compare their worldview with that of Furqan, a radical Islamic group which assassinated several top regime officials after the Islamic revolution, including Motahari's father, the top cleric Ayatollah Mortaza Motahari. According to Motahari, the views held by the president and his supporters are based on an independent interpretation of Islam; also,

they do not consider the top clerics to be particularly important and are not committed to the concept of “rule of the religious jurispudent” (*Velayat-e Faqih*) in light of their messianic notions.



Ali Motahari

Motahari further stated that the only reason why most clerics support the president and his government is that the government has the support of the Supreme Leader—support stemming from considerations that involve the interests of the regime. Not only does the criticism against the president and his government not weaken the conservatives, he claimed, it actually makes them stronger, and if all conservatives followed the radical views espoused by the president’s supporters, there would be nothing left of the conservative camp.

Speaking about the differences of opinion between the government and the Majles, Motahari said that the Majles must exercise independent judgment about the president, and that Ahmadinejad’s tendency to ignore laws approved by the Majles may pave the way to dictatorship. Motahari also commented on the president’s backing last week of his office chief Rahim Masha’i following the outrage sparked by his statement during a Tehran convention of Iranians residing abroad. Masha’i, who has already been the center of several scandals in the past, announced during the convention that Iran has to spread “Iranian thought” in the world and to give it preference over “Islamic thought”. His statement was strongly criticized by senior officials in the conservative camp and in the religious establishment, who accused him of encouraging secular nationalist views and offending Islam. However, the president took Masha’i’s side last week and said that he had his complete confidence, adding that the attacks against him were the work of certain political groups seeking to undermine the government (Mehr, August 11).

Commenting on the affair, Motahari said that Masha’i’s statement and the president’s support of him go against the principles of Islam. He noted that if such things had been said when

the reformists were in power, the conservatives would have taken to the streets (Aftab-e Yazd, August 14).

The president's decision to support his office chief also came under criticism from other Majles members. Majles member Gholam Reza Mesbahi Moqaddam said this week that instead of justifying Masha'i, the president would have done better if he had instructed him to take back his words, which go against national interests and the ideology of the revolution. He noted that several Majles members wrote a letter of protest to the president because of the affair, asking him to reprimand Masha'i for his statement (Fararu, August 15).

Ahmad Tavakoli, who chairs the Majles Research Center and is considered to be one of the president's strongest critics in the conservative camp, also lashed out against the president in view of the differences of opinion between the government and the Majles on the division of authority in the legislation process. Tavakoli criticized the president's disregard for laws approved by the Majles and the Guardian Council, accused the president of being stubborn, and said that he has a tendency of thinking too highly of his personal interpretation of the law.

This criticism was also shared by Majles member Parviz Sorouri, who said that it was not in the president's power to make decisions on the implementation of laws already approved by the Majles and the Guardian Council. He stressed that if the president does not sign draft laws within a certain period of time, the Majles speaker has the right to enact that law, which at that point becomes binding on all executive agencies in the country (Mehr, August 14). Hojjatoleslam Seyyed Mohammad Sa'idi, the Friday prayer leader in the city of Qom, also implicitly criticized the president, saying that nobody is exempt from the duty of implementing laws that have been approved by the relevant instances (Fars, August 13).

The comments made by Majles members Motahari and Tavakoli provoked strong reactions from government supporters, who claimed that they served the interests of Iran's enemies who aimed to create discord among top regime officials. Mohsen Kuhkan, a member of the Majles Presiding Board, noted that there is a difference between criticism and personal attacks, and that any action that weakens the president is improper. According to Kuhkan, the style of criticism used by the two Majles members is improper and does not help solve the issues. Majles member Fatemeh Alia also strongly criticized the comments made by the two Majles members, saying that Motahari should be brought to trial for his statements and accusations against the president (IRNA, August 15).

Even as criticism continues to build against the president, the weekly Yaltharat al-Hosseini, affiliated with the ultra-conservative group Ansar Hezbollah, has reported this week that during a secret meeting held in early 2010 between Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and a group of conservative Majles members, whose topic was the political crisis in Iran after the presidential elections, the Supreme Leader once again expressed his support of President Ahmadinejad. In an interview held by the weekly with conservative Majles member Hamid Rasa'i, the president's supporter said that in response to criticism against government policy voiced by some Majles members during the meeting, the Supreme Leader said that while there may be some problems with the government's functioning, on the whole its advantages far outweigh its disadvantages. The Supreme Leader stressed the need for fighting the reformist opposition, saying that efforts must be focused on uprooting the fundamental causes of the reform movement rather than putting the opposition leaders to trial. He claimed that if the reform movement had been dealt with at the root after the student demonstrations in July 1999, Iran would not have been facing a new political crisis ten years later (Jaras, August 14).

Final registration phase begins as implementation of subsidy policy reform about to start

Amidst doubts over the government's intention to meet its obligations and begin the implementation of the subsidy reform policy this coming September, another step towards the implementation of the program has started this week. The final phase in the online registration of Iranian citizens' bank accounts (on the www.refahi.ir website) has been launched in the provinces of Tehran, Qom, and Qazvin. The government is to use the bank account details to transfer allowances to Iranians in accordance with the proposed program. It was decided that August 25 would be the deadline for registration of bank accounts by the citizens of Iran. Mohammad Reza Farzin, the spokesman of the government's economic development plan workgroup, has stated this week that the registration of the bank accounts of 86 percent of citizens included in the program in 26 provinces is now complete (Alefi, August 16). This week, the Ministry of Welfare has published a telephone number Iranians can use to find out details about the reform plan and the registration of their bank accounts. The hotline is available 24 hours a day, and can be reached at 021-48031222 (Fars, August 14).

The head of the Subsidy Policy Reform Organization, which was established under the reform law, has issued details regarding the new organization this week. In an interview to Fars news agency, Behrouz Moradi said that the major responsibility of the organization is national-level and province-level monitoring and coordination between the executive bodies involved in the implementation of the reform. He noted that the organization, currently

located in the Ministry of Welfare offices, is only going to operate in Tehran and not in the provinces. According to Moradi, the sum of the allowances that the government intends to pay to Iranian families to compensate for the abolished subsidies has yet to be determined (Fars, August 15).

Meanwhile, internal debate in Iran continues about the possible repercussions of the subsidy policy reform on the inflation rate. The website Tabnak has reported this week that economists working for the government have been unable to determine the precise effect the plan will have on the inflation rate. According to the report, during a meeting held recently in one of the government ministries, one of the experts said that the economists had looked into several economic models in an attempt to assess the possible impact of the program on inflation, and arrived at various estimates ranging from a 11 to 30 percent increase in the inflation rate as a result of the implementation of the program (in addition to the current inflation rate of about 10 percent) (Tabnak, August 16).



The login page of www.refahi.ir, the website used by Iranians to register their bank accounts

This week, the conservative daily Ebtekar has warned that, improperly implemented, the reform plan would hit the weaker sectors of Iranian society. An editorial published by the daily says that the implementation of the program will prove beneficial to the poor only if the payment of the allowances that are meant to replace the subsidies is carried out in a satisfactory manner. The daily criticized the fact that, even though it has been six months since the subsidy policy reform law has been passed, there are still many doubts about its implementation and uncertainties about the mechanism that is supposed to determine which families will be eligible for the allowances. The daily pointed out discrepancies in the statements made by Iranian top officials about the implementation of the program, the sum of allowances to be paid, and the impact of the program on gasoline rationing. According to the daily, those contradictory statements undermine the public trust in the program and may jeopardize its implementation (Ebtekar, August 16).

It should be noted that, according to the subsidy policy reform program, which is supposed to be implemented in a gradual fashion over the course of several years, the government subsidies on gasoline, natural gas, electricity, water, and bread currently granted to the entire population will be abolished and replaced with allowances paid in cash to the less privileged sectors of society.

Unemployment increases by 3.5 percent while arguments on figures continue

This week, Mehr news agency has reported a 3.5 increase in Iran's unemployment rate in the spring of 2010 compared to the same period last year. According to data from the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI), the unemployment rate reached 14.6 percent, with the number of unemployed estimated at over 3.5 million people.

The figures indicate an increase in unemployment rate in 26 provinces across Iran. The unemployment rate among men is 11.9, and the rate among women is 25 percent. Among young people aged 15 to 29 the unemployment rate reached 26.1 percent (20.6 percent among men and 44.3 percent among women). The figures from the SCI also indicate that, during the spring, only 41.5 percent of those employed in Iran worked at least 49 hours a week on average (Mehr, August 17).

The argument between the SCI, legally responsible for publishing unemployment data, and the Ministry of Labor has continued this week on the backdrop of the publication of the figures. Abdol-Reza Shekholeslami, the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, has questioned the data provided by the center, saying that, in his opinion, they are wrong. He noted that a 3.5 percent increase in unemployment rate relative to last year would mean that there are at least one million new people out of work. According to the Ministry of Labor data, only 20 thousand Iranians joined the unemployment rolls last year, making the figures released by the SCI look odd, as he put it (Mehr, August 17).

On several occasions in recent months, there have been arguments about Iranian economic data, including the unemployment figures. According to media and economic experts, the actual unemployment rate is significantly higher than the figures released by the government.



Following the publication of the unemployment figures, the daily Mardom Salari has issued a warning this week about the negative effects of that phenomenon on Iranian society, including impact on the family institution, increase of crime, and so forth. The daily called on the government to take several measures in order to deal with the continuing rise in unemployment; the measures suggested by the daily include increasing control of the country's borders (particularly with Afghanistan) to prevent unskilled laborers from entering Iran, building up the connection between Iran's industry and its universities, implementing the privatization program, supporting non-government organizations which train workers, amending the labor law to provide better protection to workers, and carefully examining the procedures followed by banks when granting loans to factories (Mardom Salari, August 17).

The conservative daily Jam-e Jam has criticized a statement recently made by the minister of labor, according to which a considerable part of the unemployed are young people who are too lazy to work. The daily rejected that claim, saying that many educated young people are interested in working, but that they tend to refuse job offers which do not match their education and high expectations. The daily called to improve the employment conditions of young educated people to encourage them to work (Jam-e Jam, August 14).

Going to movies instead of mosques: top clerics criticize movie showings during Ramadan

Public showings of movies during the nights of Ramadan have been attracting strong criticism from several top clerics. The movies are shown as part of a project called "From Azan to Azan" (from the call to prayer in the morning of Ramadan to the call to prayer at the end of the fast), the initiative of several large movie theater owners, which was approved by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance. The project was launched last year in several large movie theaters in Tehran and was expanded this year to include movie theaters in other major cities, including Ahvaz and Rasht. Movies are shown from 3 PM to 3 AM, and the project itself aims to promote the Iranian film industry and ticket sales during the month of fasting, in which the number of tickets sold is considered relatively small.



Fars news agency

The project drew strong criticism from several conservative clerics. The ultra-conservative cleric Hojjatolislam Seyyed Ahmad Alam al-Hoda, the Friday prayer leader in mosques in the city of Mashhad, lashed out against the project, claiming it encouraged people to watch movies instead of attending prayer. During his Friday sermon, the cleric called on senior officials in the major cities to stop the project, saying it prevents people from devoting their attention to God and to the Quran (ISNA, August 13).

Seyyed Ahmad Miremadi, the Friday prayer leader in the city of Khoramabad, also lashed out against the project, saying it is “anti-religious”. According to Miremadi, while clerics make efforts to draw people to pray in mosques, movie theater owners encourage the public to watch movies. He noted that the Ministry of Islamic Guidance must encourage Iranians to come to mosques during the month of Ramadan, not to movie theaters.

The movie theater owners claimed, however, that the project is highly successful with the public, and that many Iranians come to the movie showings with their families. Responding to the criticism voiced by the clerics, Ali Sartipi, a senior figure in Iran’s movie industry, said that the project does not compromise the religious programs customarily held during the month of fasting, and that, at any rate, no religious activities take place in mosques or religious centers when the movies are shown. He stressed that the project has the approval of the authorities and that it is carried out with the cooperation of the internal security forces (Fars, August 14).

It should be noted that, while movies are shown in the movie theaters, there are also movies broadcast on Iranian television. In the past, the broadcasting of movies by Iran Broadcasting was also criticized by clerics, who claimed that the movies encouraged people to stay home and engage in movie watching over going to mosques and attending religious ceremonies that take place during the month of fasting.

Picture of the week: President Ahmadinejad shares fast-breaking meal with orphans

