



**The Meir Amit Intelligence
and Terrorism Information Center**

Spotlight on Iran

September 2010—Shahrivar 1389
Week of September 16-23, 2010
Editor: Raz Zimmt



Highlights of the week

- ✓ Ahmadinejad continues to praise Cyrus the Great, drawing strong criticism from conservatives
- ✓ Uncertainty continues over implementation of subsidy policy reform
- ✓ Mehdi Karoubi challenges Khamenei, demands that Assembly of Experts exercise its authority against the Supreme Leader
- ✓ Internet in the service of Islam: online religion classes by top Shi'ite clerics
- ✓ Pictures of the week: President Ahmadinejad on a visit to New York

Ahmadinejad continues to praise Cyrus the Great, drawing strong criticism from conservatives

After praising King Cyrus at last week's unveiling of the Cyrus Cylinder at the National Museum of Iran, this week President Ahmadinejad had more praise for the ancient ruler of Iran. In an interview granted this weekend to Iranian television, Ahmadinejad said that King Cyrus had helped the Babylonian people free themselves from the tyranny of the regime in Babylon without bloodshed, and allowed his subjects to worship God in accordance with their beliefs. The president praised Cyrus, saying he had established a regime based on justice, compassion, liberty, and respect towards human beings.

Ahmadinejad stressed that his remarks should not be construed as support for a royalist regime or an expression of nationalistic views, but rather a recognition of that Iranian ruler's noble deeds and contribution to humanity. He further added that, in like manner to Cyrus, who had announced that he had no wish to rule the world but rather to help the world, Iran has no desire to rule the world but rather to instate the world international system on the principles of justice and Islam (Press TV, September 18).

Ahmadinejad's preoccupation with Cyrus and his legacy sparked strong criticism from the conservative camp this week. Majles member Ali Mottahari, considered one of the president's strongest opponents in the conservative camp, claimed that even though there were some positive aspects in the Cyrus Declaration, the actions of the ancient Persian king did not fit well with the tradition of the prophets. In a letter sent by Mottahari to Ahmadinejad, the conservative Majles member wrote that while there was nothing inherently wrong with the president's remarks about ancient Iran and its rulers, his preference of ancient Iranian civilization over Islamic civilization and accentuation of the Cyrus Declaration over human rights as they are embodied in Islam compromised Iran's mission to export the Islamic revolution and offended the religious sentiments of the revolution's supporters, who had sacrificed their lives for the realization of its objectives.

Mottahari added that following the conquest of Babylon, King Cyrus chose not to abolish idolatry in the name of freedom of religion, instead of eradicating it, as Abraham and Muhammad were later to do. By avoiding conflict with idol worshippers, he could rule over the nations he conquered and exploit their resources. Mottahari claimed that the president's remarks reflected the negative influence of his controversial office chief Esfandiar Rahim Masha'i, who had recently stated that Iran should spread "Iranian thought" in the world and give it preference over "Islamic thought". Mottahari concluded his letter by saying that the president must keep in mind that the people's support for him depended on his adherence to Islam and his support for the Supreme Leader, and that if he failed in his duty to promote Islam, he could lose public trust and support (Mehr, September 18).

]



Cartoon by Nikahang Kowsar: "Mahmoud! Come on, sleep in peace, because you are keeping us up!" (a paraphrase on the Shah's eulogy for King Cyrus at the 2500 anniversary of Iranian monarchy in 1971: "Sleep in peace, King Cyrus, because we are awake"), Rooz Online, September 13.

Fatemeh Rajabi, a journalist belonging to the radical faction who was formerly considered one of Ahmadinejad's staunchest supporters, also voiced strong criticism of his remarks and even accused him of turning away from Islamic values. In an interview granted to the conservative Fars News Agency, Rajabi said that the president's remarks were inappropriate and marked a departure from Islamic thought. Regardless of whether those remarks represent his own views or those held by his advisors, they are dangerous, Rajabi said.

She noted that the glorification of Iran's pre-Islamic past was common before the revolution and was supported by some intellectuals after it, but at no time, including the reforms of the 1990s, was it as prevalent as it is now. She warned that it may eventually lead to hatred against Islam. According to Rajabi, the president's remarks during the TV interview were scientifically unfounded and should not have been made at all, let alone developed into a lengthy discussion. She further added that the president would have been better advised to address the denigration of the Quran (referring to last week's Quran burning in the US) rather than the Iranian monarchy, which many believe to have been planned in advance by the Jews, and to emphasize the principle of justice in monotheistic religions instead of the justice that allegedly existed during the reign of Cyrus. Ahmadinejad's behavior, Rajabi said, was cause for celebration among the regime's opponents, who considered it to represent the president's loss of the ideological foundation of his government (Fars, September 19).

Criticism of the president's remarks was also voiced by Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor-in-chief of the conservative daily Keyhan. In an editorial published in the daily this week, Shariatmadari mentioned the harsh criticism voiced by Iran's clerics of the celebrations organized by the deposed Shah in 1971 to mark 2500 years of Iranian monarchy, as well as their criticism of the praise lavished on King Cyrus on that occasion. The editor-in-chief of Keyhan wondered whether it was the president's discontent with the values of Islam that made him believe it was appropriate to emphasize the need to govern the world in accordance with the Cyrus Declaration. Shariatmadari claims that Iran's progress in all spheres stems from the fact that since the Islamic revolution it has been a nation rooted in

Islamic values. It is therefore unclear why the president prefers “Iranian thought”, a term whose meaning is unclear, over “Islamic thought”, and how he intends to rule on its basis (Keyhan, September 20).

Uncertainty continues over implementation of subsidy policy reform

On the eve of the date set for the launch of the subsidy policy reform (the Iranian month of Mehr, which starts on September 23), uncertainty continues over the exact date of its launch and the method of its implementation. President Ahmadinejad announced this week that the transfer of cash benefits to some bank accounts of Iranians included in the subsidy policy reform program would begin during the next month. In a television interview aired last Friday, the president expressed satisfaction with the cooperation of Iranian citizens in compliance with the government requirements in the early phases of the program's implementation, saying that the information delivered by the citizens on their economic situation would allow the government to dampen the possible negative effects of the program and improve economic planning. Ahmadinejad announced that 56 to 57 million out of the 65 million citizens registered for the program had already opened bank accounts for receiving cash benefits from the government.

The president noted that while the program was naturally expected to drive the costs of some products up and lead to an increase in the price of energy, the government would reimburse the citizens through the cash benefits, transferring them directly to their bank accounts. According to Ahmadinejad, the cash benefits will first be transferred to the bottom seven income deciles of Iranian society.

The president rejected claims made in recent weeks according to which the increase in electricity prices in certain parts of Iran had to do with the effects of the subsidy reform. He said that the increase in electricity prices was not related to the reform program, and that it was a result of the government's decision to increase prices for excessive electricity consumption by some users.

Ahmadinejad refused to answer journalists' questions about the exact date of the launch of the reform, saying that releasing information on the set date ahead of time could cause unnecessary problem. For example, if the government were to announce an upcoming increase in gasoline prices, there will be long lines of people queuing up to buy gas at the subsidized price (Fars, September 17).

Despite the president's words, ISNA News Agency cast doubt on whether the program would be launched this coming month. The news agency reported that the government's decision to

extend the registration of Iranian citizens' bank accounts until the end of the current Iranian month indicated that the program's implementation will not begin early next month, as previously scheduled. In an interview granted to the news agency, Deputy Minister of Economy Mohammad Reza Farzin refused to divulge information on the launch date of the program, the predicted new prices of currently subsidized products, and the way cash benefits will be paid. He stressed, however, that the government intended to transfer about 20 billion dollars' worth of cash benefits to Iranians' bank accounts in the second half of the Iranian year (ISNA, September 17).

Details on the upcoming reform were also given this week by Subsidy Policy Reform Organization chief Behrouz Moradi, who announced that the transfer of the cash benefits was set to begin in the coming days. According to Moradi, all Iranians included in the program will receive equal cash benefits this year, except for low-income, welfare-supported families, whose cash benefits will be 10 percent higher compared to the rest of the population. Moradi noted, however, that starting next year, the sum of the cash benefits will depend on the income of each family. He further added that in the next several years, the government intends to take additional measures to compensate for the abolishment of the subsidies, such as tax exemptions, discounts on various services, and so forth (Tabnak, September 19).

According to calculations performed by Mehr News Agency, each citizen included in the program will receive a monthly cash benefit of about 25 dollars, while citizens from low-income families will receive a monthly cash benefit of about 45 dollars (Mehr, September 20).

Under the reform program, the government subsidies on natural gas, electricity, water, and basic foodstuffs will be abolished within five years. During the first year, the government is planning to cut a total of up to 20 billion dollars in subsidies. The Subsidy Reform Organization, established under the program, will be in charge of distributing cash benefits to compensate the Iranian population for the abolishment of the subsidies. Under the reform law, government revenues from the abolishment of the subsidies will be distributed as follows: 50 percent will go towards paying direct cash benefits to citizens, 30 percent will be allocated to industries that are currently highly dependent on subsidies and to the improvement of the energy and public transportation sectors, and the remaining 20 percent will be allocated to the treasury to cover expenses incurred by the government in the implementation of the program and to reduce economic dependence on oil revenues.

Ahead of the upcoming launch of the reform program, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the Friday prayer leader in Tehran, also discussed the program, saying that its implementation was both necessary and welcome. He added, however, that the government must implement it in such

a way as to minimize the impact on the weaker sectors of society (various news agencies, September 17).

Mehdi Karoubi challenges Khamenei, demands that Assembly of Experts exercise its authority against the Supreme Leader

This week, Saham News, a website affiliated with Mehdi Karoubi, one of the leaders of the reformist opposition, published the contents of a letter sent by Karoubi to Assembly of Experts Chairman Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani ahead of last week's meeting of the assembly. In his letter, Karoubi called for increased monitoring of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the bodies under his direct responsibility by the Assembly of Experts.

In the letter, sent on September 13, Karoubi called on Rafsanjani to exercise the constitutional powers of the assembly and take all measures necessary to prevent the principle of "rule of the religious jurispudent" from being eroded by the Supreme Leader's negligence in performing his duties and abuse of his powers.

In his letter, Karoubi pointed a finger at some of the state institutions under the Supreme Leader's responsibility, mainly the judiciary, the Revolutionary Guards, and the Basij. He accused the judiciary of failing to maintain its independence and perpetrating injustice against political prisoners and journalists, and the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij of meddling in politics and economy. He accused the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij of forging the presidential election results, suppressing Iranian citizens after the election, and illegally penetrating into economic spheres.

Karoubi stressed that the Assembly of Experts is constitutionally empowered to monitor the Supreme Leader and claimed that the assembly does not properly exercise the powers vested in it by the constitution, including Clause 111, which allows it to depose the Supreme Leader, and Clause 107, according to which the Supreme Leader is equal in law to any other citizen. According to Karoubi, the role of the Supreme Leader in the Islamic republic is not just symbolic, and he has to bear responsibility for the consequences of his actions. If the Supreme Leader becomes unfit for his job, the Assembly of Experts must recognize that and remove him from office (Saham News, September 18).



Karoubi's letter naturally provoked strong criticism from government supporters, with several conservative Majles members reiterating their demand to put the reformist opposition leaders to trial. Conservative Majles member Behrouz Ja'fari issued a call to fight the "leaders of incitement" and bring them to justice. Majles member Mohammad Javad Abtahi said that Karoubi was acting like a person who has lost his mental and spiritual balance, and that regardless of that legal action must be taken against him and the other opposition leaders. He criticized the judiciary for not putting them to trial so far, claiming that by doing so it made the "leaders of incitement" believe that the regime lacks the courage to fight them. He also criticized the silence of Assembly of Experts Chairman Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani over Karoubi's strong-worded letter, saying that Rafsanjani had better make it clear where he stands with regard to the letter and distance himself from the elements involved in anti-government incitement.

Esma'il Kowsar, deputy chairman of the Majles National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, also strongly reacted to Karoubi's letter, saying the letter showed that the opposition leaders were emboldened by the lack of decisive action from the judiciary. The judiciary must take measures so that they no longer feel themselves entitled to send such letters (IRNA, September 20).

Internet in the service of Islam: online religion classes by top Shi'ite clerics

Rasa News, an agency affiliated with the religious establishment in the city of Qom, reported this week that a new online service has been launched on the occasion of the new school year at religious seminaries. It will allow web surfers to watch and listen to religion classes taught by top Shi'ite clerics in main religious centers in Iran and Iraq.

Javad Javadi, the director of Sada-ye Bahar, the institution responsible for the website (www.eshia.ir), said in an interview granted to the news agency that the lessons' contents will be made available to web surfers within 24 hours after they are taught, while the audio

files will be made available 2 to 4 hours after they are taught. The lessons will also be stored in an archive for the website visitors to access.



Javadi also noted that in several months, the website will start offering video recordings of several dozen religion lessons once taught by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic revolution. Those lessons are currently being converted to a digital format and will be uploaded once the process is complete.

He further added that the website can also be accessed by cell phones, allowing students to interact in real-time with the senior cleric teaching the lesson (Rasa News, September 19).

Pictures of the week: President Ahmadinejad on a visit to New York

