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Spotlight on Iran

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Highlights of the week

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New phase in political conflict between government, Majles: battle begins for next year's budget

This past week, the government's critics strongly criticized the government for an unprecedented delay in the submission of the budget law for the Iranian year 1890 (2011-2012) to the approval of the Majles. The budget proposal is supposed to be approved by the Majles before the end of the current year (March 21, 2011); however, the government has yet to submit the approval to the Majles members. Several Majles members warned that the delay in the submission of the budget law to the Majles would make it impossible to approve by the end of the year, which could lead to severe economic consequences.

The government claimed that the delay in the submission of the budget proposal to the Majles resulted from delays in the approval of the five-year economic program by the Majles, as well as considerations having to do with the launch of the subsidy policy reform nearly two months ago.

Majles Research Center chief Ahmad Tavakoli, considered one of the president's political rivals in the conservative camp, said this week that, according to Majles regulations, the government was required to submit the budget proposal to the Majles by December 6. According to Tavakoli, the government will not be able to submit the proposal to the Majles before February 13, leaving Majles members insufficient time to voice their opinions on the government's proposal and finalize its discussion by the end of the current year. As a result, Tavakoli said, the Majles will be forced to discuss and approve only the part of the budget that concerns the first several months of the new year, rather than the budget in its entirety. He added that such partial approval of the budget proposal was economically and politically wrong, and that the Majles had not been forced to recourse to such a solution since 1980, the year when the Iran-Iraq War broke out (Fars, February 6).

Earlier this week, Alef, a website affiliated with Ahmad Tavakoli, published a commentary article strongly criticizing the government for the delay in the submission of the budget proposal. The website claimed that the budget law was the most important law discussed by the Majles in the course of the year, and that delaying its submission to the Majles by over two months compromised its authority to discuss it properly and undermined the democratic right of the Majles to monitor the government's expenses. The budget for next year is expected to be particularly complicated due to the effects of the subsidy policy reform, the article says, and only God knows how the Majles can realize its legal right to seriously discuss the budget proposal in the short period of time left until the end of the year (Alef, February 6).



The president submits the government's budget proposal to the Majles speaker, February 2008

Meanwhile, several Majles members claimed this week that in the months March-November 2010, the government exceeded last year's budget by 21 billion dollars. Majles Planning and Budget Committee member Jabbar Kuchakinejad claimed that in a recent examination, the Majles had discovered inconsistencies having to do, among other things, with the non-realization of articles that pertain to the transfer of state oil revenues to the foreign currency reserve fund, the government's investments in the oil and gas sectors, and fund transfers for the development of Tehran's subway network. In addition, he said that the government had failed to meet budget goals concerning the expected revenues from the subsidy policy reform and the privatization of government assets.

Majles member Ja'far Qaderi also addressed the government's deviations from last year's budget, claiming that only about 80 percent of the revenues expected under the budget law had been realized in the first nine months of the year. According to Qaderi, the deficit was the result of oil companies not paying VAT, and the drop in state revenues from taxation on imported cars. Rahim Mombini, vice deputy of the Planning Department in the president's office, rejected the claims made by Majles members, saying that concerns about a possible budget deficit were unfounded (Khabar Online, February 6).

Rift between Rafsanjani, regime deepens as internal elections for Assembly of Experts leadership approach

With the elections for the Assembly of Experts leadership coming up next month, in recent weeks government supporters in the conservative camp have stepped up their criticism of Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, chairman of both the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Discernment Council. There have been more and more calls to impeach him from the chairmanship of the Assembly of Experts and replace him with top conservative cleric Ayatollah Mohammad-Reza Mahdavi-Kani, the secretary of the conservative Combatant Clergy Association.

A commentary article published this week by the conservative website Mahramaneh News says that the chairman of the Assembly of Experts has to be a person who is not involved in political and partisan battles, and works for unity while putting the good of the regime over personal interests. Rafsanjani's conduct following the presidential elections indicates that he is not such a person. The website claimed that, following the elections, Rafsanjani preferred his family's interests to the interests of the regime, did not defend the Supreme Leader, and did not take action to achieve unity among the various forces of the regime. His declarations and actions even serve the interests of foreign media to slam the Iranian regime. His activity this past year shows, according to the website, that he has been ineffective as leader of the

Assembly of Experts, and should therefore step down for Ayatollah Mahdavi-Kani (Mahramaneh News, February 7).

In this context, the conservative Fars News Agency has accused people in Rafsanjani's inner circle of attempting to slander Mahdavi-Kani to prevent him from submitting his candidacy for chairman of the Assembly of Experts. The news agency claimed that more than 50 of the 86 assembly members support Mahdavi-Kani's appointment for chairman (Fars, February 4).



Rafsanjani (left, standing) and Mahdavi-Kani (sitting to his right)

Rafsanjani's absence from last Friday's prayer in Tehran, which was led instead by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was also cause for strong criticism against him. The conservative website Raja News claimed that Rafsanjani's absence proved once again that he is interested in isolating himself from the regime. By his actions, Rafsanjani has proven that he would rather pursue the interests of the leaders of "incitement" (a term used to refer to the reformist opposition) than take the side of the Supreme Leader. The website estimated that Rafsanjani's insistence on sticking to the mistakes he had made this past year would lead to his impeachment from the chairmanship of the Assembly of Experts (Raja News, February 6).

Meanwhile, Rafsanjani has issued a memorandum of opinion addressing the latest developments in Tunisia and Egypt. In the memorandum, Rafsanjani expressed support for the popular uprisings in both countries, stating that they were the result of the policies adopted by Egyptian and Tunisian leaders, who refused to heed the voice of the people. No tyrant can stand against a popular movement, even with the support of foreign powers, Rafsanjani argued.

The chairman of the Assembly of Experts expressed his confidence that the popular uprising would not remain limited to Egypt and Tunisia, and that it would expand to many other countries in the world where oppression still prevails. In a possible insinuated reference to the situation in Iran, Rafsanjani stressed that it was the duty of the political and social elites

across the globe not to wait until it's too late, to exercise wisdom, and to comply with the people's desire for democracy (Aftab, February 7).

Iran's population crosses 75 million mark

Fars News Agency reported this week that according to the Iranian Chamber of Statistics, last Thursday the population of Iran crossed the 75 million mark, an increase of over one million people in less than a year (Fars, February 4). Iran's population growth rate is currently estimated at about 1.3 percent a year.

In recent months, the debate on the family planning policy pursued since the late '80s has reemerged after President Ahmadinejad has declared on several occasions that he does not agree with the policy encouraging families to have only two children. The president first presented his views on the issue in October 2006 by stating that he objected to the idea according to which two children per family is enough, saying that Iran is a country with tremendous potential that could accommodate 120 million residents.

In an interview given to Iranian TV in April 2010, the president claimed that even Western governments now regretted their family planning policies and were forced to make considerable efforts to preserve Western identity and culture in light of the significant decrease in population growth.

In a visit recently held by the president in Yazd Province, he said that the formula of two children per family is designed to eliminate Iran's society. This formula, which, according to Ahmadinejad, is associated with liberal and Western regimes, may put Iran in a similar position to that of Europe, and that is something Iranians will not accept. He added that low population has nothing to do with economic welfare, claiming that the present economic welfare of Iranians, at a time when there are 75 million people living in Iran and it exports 5.2 million barrels of oil per day, is better than it was in the early days of the Islamic revolution, when its population was 35 million and it exported 5 million barrels of oil per day (ISNA, January 20).



The president's remarks on the need to change the family planning policy were strongly criticized even by elements affiliated with the conservative camp. The president's critics claimed that, in light of Iran's current economic situation and the severe problems facing the education and health systems, changing the family planning policy is not the right thing to do. In early January 2011, the Expediency Discernment Council also asserted that it was not right to change the family planning policy. In an interview given by Seyyed Reza Salehi-Amiri, deputy head of the Center for Social and Cultural Studies under the Expediency Council, to ILNA News Agency, the senior researcher said that the council had conducted a study about the president's proposal to increase the population of Iran and arrived at the conclusion that the current family planning policy should not be changed, and that increasing the population is not a logical strategy for solving Iran's problems (ILNA, January 4).

Iran's family planning policy has undergone far-reaching changes since the Islamic revolution. The family planning program officially launched in the summer of 1967 to decrease the natural population growth rate was suspended shortly after the revolution. Around the same time, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the revolution, ruled that there was no religious prohibition against using contraceptives; however, the executive board of family planning was disbanded, a significant number of family planning clinics were shut down or cut back, and the supply of contraceptives remained limited. After the Iran-Iraq War broke out (September 1980), Iran's authorities began portraying population size as a major source of military strength and national security. The regime's policy to strengthen the status of the family by encouraging marriage and encouraging women to return to their homes led to a sharp increase in birth rate in the first half of the '80s, when it reached an annual 3.9 percent.

The second half of the '80s saw an increased recognition of the economic and social consequences of an uncontrolled increase in population, perceived as an impediment to economic growth and development. The government's increasing difficulty to provide for the needs of the population and the economy in urban centers reinforced the regime leaders' understanding that a clear policy was needed to limit the birth rate. Following an instruction issued by then prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi to examine the effects of high natural population growth, a national seminar was held in the city of Mashhad in September 1988 to discuss the increase in Iran's population, among other things. The seminar concluded with a declaration that a large population was a threat to the economy and a danger to the country's future, stressing that the family planning program had to be revived to limit the birth rate. In December 1989, Iran adopted a birth planning program to limit the number of pregnancies and the number of children per family. The family planning law, which cut benefits for families with many children while encouraging small families, was approved by

the Majles in 1993. The program included a public awareness campaign on the media and through the education system, as well as the establishment of clinics and medical centers to provide family planning services. The authorities also encouraged the use of contraceptives, including castration and sterilization operations. Young couples were even required to receive instruction on contraceptives to get their marriage license. The renewal of the birth planning policy was a success, and the birth rate dropped to 1.2 in 2001. The regime's efforts to limit the birth rate from the late '80s were also assisted by clerics, who emphasized that Islam did not prohibit the use of contraceptives and that, according to the Prophet's traditions and the Quran, the economic welfare of Muslims is the top priority, making it acceptable to limit population size in some cases.

Iran follows up on the sheep and the goat with first cloned calves

This week, the first cloned calves were born in Iran from frozen embryos. The calves, Abgoun and Abgineh, were cloned at the biotechnological research center at Royan Institute.

Mohammad Hossein Nasr Esfahani, the director of the cloning project, said that the cloning of the calves was the latest link in the ability of Iranian biotechnology researchers to produce cloned animals (Mehr, February 6).

The sheep Royana was cloned at the institute in September 2006; in April 2009, Royan Institute in Esfahan produced Iran's first cloned goat, Hana, who had developed for 147 days in the uterus of a surrogate goat.



Since the '90s, Iran has been making considerable achievements in genetic engineering and brain stem cell research. The achievements were made possible thanks to government support and encouragement. Established in 1991, Royan Institute for Reproductive Biomedicine, Stem Cell Biology and Technology is involved in stem cell research and development for medical purposes. It started as a center for performing limited surgery for the development of medicines and research. It developed over the years, and in 1998 was granted the Iranian Health Ministry's approval to become a stem cell research center and

perform genetic cloning. In 2002, the institute launched a stem cell department focused on the production of stem cells from embryos. The institute, which has two branches in Tehran and Esfahan, is currently the most advanced biomedical center in Iran and one of the leading stem cell research centers in Asia and the Middle East.

In 2002, Iran's Supreme Leader gave his blessing to research on embryo cloning for fertility treatments carried out by the institute. However, he said that the scientists must be careful not "to create a human being". According to religious rulings issued by Shi'ite clerics, cells and embryos can be cloned as long as they are not older than 120 days, for that is the age when the soul enters the embryo. These rulings allow Iranians to circumvent the public debate on the question of embryo stem cell research, which impedes the development of research in that field in the U.S.

Pictures of the week: four new Iranian-made satellites unveiled

