

International

In jab at hardliners, Iranian president says protests were not only economic

Rouhani calls for the lifting of curbs on social media

LONDON: Protests that shook Iran were not just aimed at the economy, President Hassan Rouhani said yesterday, remarks suggesting the real targets were powerful conservatives opposed to his plans to expand individual freedoms at home and promote detente abroad. The pragmatic cleric, who defeated anti-Western hardliners to win re-election last year, also called for the lifting of curbs on social media used by anti-government protesters in the most sustained challenge to hardline authorities since 2009.

"It would be a misrepresentation (of events) and also an insult to Iranian people to say they only had economic demands," Rouhani was quoted as saying by Tasnim news agency. "People had economic, political and social demands." Iran's influential Revolutionary Guards said

on Sunday the security forces had put an end to a week of unrest fomented by what it called foreign enemies. The protests, which began over economic hardships suffered by the young and working class, spread to more than 80 cities and towns and has resulted in 22 deaths and more than 1,000 arrests, according to Iranian officials. Hamid Shahriari, the deputy head of the Judiciary said that all ringleaders of the protests had been identified and arrested, and they would be firmly punished and might face capital punishment. An Iranian lawmaker confirmed yesterday the death of one detainee in prison. "This 22 year old young man was arrested by the police. It was informed that he has committed suicide in jail," Tayebeh Siavashi was quoted as saying by ILNA news agency. Many of the protesters questioned Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East, where it has intervened in Syria and Iraq in a battle for influence with rival Saudi Arabia.



22 killed in unrest, more than 1,000 held

Iranians can criticize 'everyone'
The country's financial support for Palestinians and the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah also angered Iranians, who want their government to focus on domestic economic problems instead. Rouhani won re-election last year by promising more jobs for Iran's youth through more foreign investment, as well as more social justice, individual freedom and political tolerance - aims questioned by his main challenger in the contest.

Echoing some of his campaign rhetoric, Rouhani said yesterday people should be allowed to criticize all Iranian officials, with no exception. Demonstrators initially vented their anger over high prices and alleged corruption, but the protests took on a rare political dimension, with a growing number of people calling on Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to

step down. The Supreme Leader is commander-in-chief of the armed forces and appoints the heads of the judiciary. Key ministers are selected with his agreement and he has the ultimate say on Iran's foreign policy. By comparison, the president has little power. "No one is innocent and people are allowed to criticize everyone," said Rouhani. Rouhani also dismissed calls from hardline clerics who had asked the government to permanently block access social media and messaging apps.

As protests have ebbed, the government has lifted restrictions it imposed on Instagram, one of the social media tools used to mobilize protesters. But access to a more widely used messaging app, Telegram, was still blocked. The government has said the restrictions would be temporary.

"People's access to social media should not permanently be restricted. We cannot be indifferent to people's life and business," Rouhani said. State television showed live pictures



QOM, Iran: An Iranian shopkeeper stands inside his store near the Massoumeh shrine in the holy city of Qom, 130 kilometers south of Tehran. —AFP

of more pro-government rallies in several cities, including Sanandaj in western Iran, as marchers carried posters of Ayatollah Khamenei and chanted slogans in his support.

Rouhani Vice-President Masoumeh Ebtekar tweeted yesterday that Rouhani has insisted that all detained students should be released. Mohammad Bathaei, the education minister said

yesterday there were many school children among the detainees and he was asking for their release before exam season. Amnesty International said last week that more than 1,000 Iranians had been arrested and detained in jails "notorious for torture and other ill-treatment over the past seven days", with many being denied access to families and lawyers.—Reuters

Egypt to hold presidential election on March 26-28

CAIRO: Egyptians will head to the polls on March 26-28 in the first round of a presidential election, National Elections Authority chief Lasheen Ibrahim said yesterday. A second round will be held on April 24-26 if required, he told a news conference in Cairo. Ibrahim said the commission would accept applications from presidential hopefuls between January 20 and 29. "The provisional list of candidates and the numbers of their supporters will be published" in state-run newspapers Al-Ahram and Al-Akhabar on January 31, he said.

Once any appeals by rejected candidates are settled, "the final list of candidate names and their symbols will be announced and published in the official gazette and Al-Ahram and Al-Akhabar newspapers" on February 24, he said. That will mark the official start of the campaign, which will run until March 23, Ibrahim said, with final results to be announced on May 1. Egyptians living abroad can vote between March 16 and

18, he added, with second round ballots on April 19-21 if necessary.

Incumbent Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi is widely expected to stand for re-election and win in the first round. The former army chief was elected in 2014, a year after leading the military to oust his predecessor Mohamed Morsi amid mass protests against the Islamist's year-long rule. On Sunday, former premier Ahmed Shafiq, once seen as a main challenger to Sisi, said that he would not be a candidate, reversing a previous pledge to stand. Shafiq was appointed premier by Hosni Mubarak shortly before he was toppled from the presidency in the 2011 uprising, and only narrowly lost out in the 2012 election to Morsi.

Years of turmoil

After years of political, security and economic turmoil since Mubarak's ouster, many Egyptians might have voted for Shafiq, nostalgic for a continuation of Mubarak's rule, analysts believe. Other potential candidates include Khaled Ali, a rights lawyer and 2012 presidential candidate who challenged the government over Red Sea islands Egypt gave to Saudi Arabia. In November, Ali announced his intention to stand again in 2018.

However, he had been sentenced in September in absentia to three months in jail on accusations of "offending public decency", a ruling he appealed. The sentence was over a photograph Ali says was fabricated and that appeared to show him making an obscene gesture while cele-



CAIRO: National Elections Authority chief Lasheen Ibrahim gives a press conference yesterday to announce that Egyptians will head to the polls on March 26-28 in the first round of a presidential election. —AFP

brating a court ruling in the case of the islands' transfer. Ali has said only the committee organizing the election can decide whether that ruling would disqualify him as a candidate.

Another hopeful, colonel Ahmed Kongsowa, was given six years in prison in December by a military court after the previous month announcing his intention to stand. Kongsowa's lawyer said his client

was given the sentence for stating political opinions while still a serving officer, even though Kongsowa said he had been trying to resign from the military for more than three years.

Lawyer Asaad Heikal said Kongsowa had only followed Sisi's example in announcing his candidacy. Sisi was in uniform when he did so, before later resigning as defense minister. —AFP

Corruption crackdown in Vietnam

HANOI: Vietnam brought 22 executives to court over losses at the state oil firm yesterday, in the most important trial of a widening crackdown on corruption. Among those being tried was the first politburo member to be arrested in decades. In a separate trial in Ho Chi Minh City, a banking fraud case began with 46 defendants. As well as shedding light on graft, mismanagement and nepotism within state firms at a time privatization is accelerating, the arrests show the ascendancy of a more conservative faction within the ruling Communist Party.

How many people are involved?

Scores have been arrested across PetroVietnam and the banking sector. Some have been tried and sentenced already. The most senior figure arrested is former PetroVietnam Chairman Dinh La Thang, among those whose trial started yesterday. Neither he nor his lawyer was available for comment. Germany has accused Vietnam of kidnapping one PetroVietnam suspect, Trinh Xuan Thanh, who was also among the 22 in court. More than 100 other officials are also under threat of prosecution or have been demoted or fired. In another case linked to the corruption crackdown, a Vietnamese tycoon was arrested last week after being sent home from Singapore.

What is PetroVietnam?

PetroVietnam is a tangled enterprise of 15 direct units, 18 subsidiaries and 46 affiliates in which it owns smaller stakes. Hundreds of millions of dollars in losses have been racked up at units ranging from banks to construction firms and power plants to textile mills. The scandals at PetroVietnam are connected to the banking sector through a deal in which the oil firm lost \$35 million in an investment in Ocean Bank. The lender's former chief executive - a previous PetroVietnam chairman - was sentenced to death.

The crackdown

It shows a concerted effort to rein in large-scale corruption through which some officials had secured massive personal wealth and tarnished the ruling party's image. But it has also allowed the current Communist Party leadership to strengthen its hand under General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong after winning out in a power struggle with former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung last year. Whether or not the arrests go even higher, Trong's supremacy is assured through a term that lasts until 2021 and the faction is better placed to maintain its dominance even beyond.

Groups in ruling party

Although the party presents a public image of unity, there are diverse views on everything from the pace and openness of reforms to Vietnam's delicate diplomatic balancing between China, the United States and other powers. What best characterizes the current leadership is conservatism in preserving the party's absolute authority in close alignment with the security establishment. It marks a change of style from the leadership under Dung and his allies, some of whom emerged as personalities in their own right and shown signs of readiness for greater political openness. Alongside the corruption arrests, Vietnam has also arrested more bloggers, activists and other critics this year than in any other since a 2011 crackdown on youth activists.

Corruption crackdown

Few tears are shed in Vietnam over the arrests of former officials, but there is also skepticism over the real motives. The day-to-day corruption of low-level officials and police is still a factor of Vietnamese life.

Impact on PetroVietnam

PetroVietnam's net profit margin in 2016 was its lowest in at least seven years at just over 7 percent from over 15 percent in 2009. The company told Reuters the oil price was the biggest factor, but it has also said failed projects, wrongdoing by officials and the investigations themselves had an impact. PetroVietnam's shares are not listed on a stock exchange, but some of its units have underperformed its Thai peer PTT since 2009.



HANOI: Dinh La Thang (left), former politburo member and former Vietnam's National Oil Company PVN (PetroVietnam), is escorted by policemen to the courtroom at Hanoi People's Courthouse yesterday. —AFP

Reform and privatization

Although the crackdown points to the political strengthening of the party, the leadership has shown less sign of delaying economic reform than the previous administration. Facing pressure because of its budget deficit, the government has accelerated plans to sell major stakes in the most attractive assets - including the sale of a majority stake in brewery Sabeco late last year. It is also selling stakes in three units of PetroVietnam. Some economic and business analysts believe the fear among officials of being branded corrupt could further hold up bureaucratic decision making in state-run firms and ministries. —Reuters

News in brief

Communal violence kills 83

ABUJA: At least eighty-three people have been killed in communal violence in Nigeria since Dec 31, government and police officials said, much of it involving clashes between Muslim cattle herders and Christian farmers. The killings endanger efforts by President Muhammadu Buhari to bring security and stability to Nigeria - a central pledge of his campaign for election in 2015. Muslim herdsmen, mainly of the Fulani ethnic group, and Christian farmers often clash over the use of land in parts of the Middle Belt. The region is one of Nigeria's most diverse, where religious, ancestral and cultural differences have frequently kindled conflict. Terve Akase, chief press secretary to the governor of Benue, attributed 71 of the deaths from Dec 31 to Jan 6 in the state to killings by the Fulani. Reuters was unable to verify the figures. "The attacks happened in very remote villages," said Akase. "Now, with security operatives on the ground, villagers have been going about the bush to pick up more corpses."

Kick gambling addiction

HELSINKI: Finnish researchers yesterday said they were to launch a study to see if gambling addiction can be treated with a fast-working nasal spray. The spray contains naloxone, an emergency treatment for opiate overdoses (heroin, opium, morphine) that blocks the production of dopamine, a neurotransmitter linked to pleasure with a central role in addictions. "The spray goes to the brain in a few minutes so it's very useful for a gambler... if you crave gambling, just take the spray," Hannu Alho, professor of addiction medicine at the Helsinki-based National Institute for Health and Welfare, told AFP. Up to 130 volunteers will take part in the experiment, which is "the first of its kind globally to use nasal spray," Alho said. Half will use the treatment for three months, and the other half will get a placebo.

Worldwide 'No Pants' ride

JERUSALEM: Tram passengers in Jerusalem stripped down to their underwear Sunday for the worldwide annual "No Pants Subway Ride", drawing embarrassed smiles and dumbfounded stares from fellow travelers. In bracing 10 degree Celsius weather, around 20 young men and women met up at an open-air tram stop on the city's central Jaffa Street and boarded carriages for the 20-minute ride to Mount Herzl. "The goal of this event is simply to have fun, to do something strange for the people, so when they board the tram suddenly something strange happens with people taking off their pants," one man who declined to give his name said. Another, also speaking on condition of anonymity, said friends had voiced concerns that the show of flesh could bring trouble in a "powder keg" of a city where Orthodox Jewish and Muslim sensibilities are acute. "But every year this proves to be wrong," he said.

Soldier, 5 rebels killed

MANILA: Five Muslim rebels and a soldier were killed during a weekend ground and air assault by Philippines security forces on militants supportive of the Islamic State group in a restive southern region, the military said yesterday. The Philippine army pounded some 50 militants with artillery in a five-hour attack on the island of Mindanao Saturday, according to regional military spokesman Captain Arvin Encinas. One soldier and at least five members of the rebel Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) were killed in the clash, he said, adding that while small and fragmented the militant group was a threat in the region. "They have enough people to conduct atrocities, and they are actively recruiting," he said. The Muslim minority of the mainly Catholic Philippines considers Mindanao as its homeland. Decades of armed rebellion in the region has claimed more than 100,000 lives by official estimates. Last year another group pledging allegiance to IS occupied the Mindanao city of Marawi and fought a bloody conflict with US-backed Philippine government forces for five months, leaving more than 1,100 people dead.