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Protests boost Iran president's fading efforts for democracy

TEHRAN, Iran (KRT) — Pro-democracy demonstrations by university students over the past two weeks have given Iranian President Mohammed Khatami a badly needed boost at a time when his efforts to loosen political and social restrictions in Iran appeared doomed, fellow reformers say.

Before the student protests, Khatami had threatened to resign if appointed clerics who wield the final say in all matters continued to trample his efforts to improve democracy and human rights.

The latest of those efforts are two bills winding their way through Iran's parliament that would place restrictions on the all-powerful, un-elected Council of Guardians headed by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran religious and political supreme leader.

One would allow the president to override judicial ver-



KHATAMI

dicts deemed unconstitutional. The second would end the Council's right to vet candidates for public office.

The oversight bodies and hard-line judiciary have consistently blocked Khatami's reform agenda since he was first elected in 1997, and they were expected to strike down the two reform bills as well, possibly precipitating Khatami's resignation.

But since Nov. 9, when students began rallying behind a condemned academic who had openly criticized theocratic rule, the hard-liners realized they could no longer act with impunity, said Mohammed-Reza Khatami, the president's brother who heads the country's main reform party, the Islamic Iran Participation Front. The overwhelming demand for democratization, while largely silent, extends far beyond reform politicians, he added, likening it to an iceberg of which only the tip is visible.

Even Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, who opposes

reforms, was concerned about the students to give demands that the parliament reverse the death sentences against popular history professor Hashem Aghajari, who challenged blind obedience to the and other ruling clerics. On Feb. 17, Khamenei chastised the judiciary for failing to take account the impact of the and ordered jurists to re-

Aghajari still faces 24 lashes by a leather whip, eight months imprisonment and a 10-year ban on teaching. Judiciary officials say Iran's highest court will review the sentence, but not at least another two weeks.

"The students have pushed back the conservatives, at least knocked them down temporarily," said Mohammed Semati, assistant professor of law and political science at Tehran University. The advantage of the moment, Mohammed-Reza Khatami last week called for a referendum the two bills if the hard-liners strike them down.

Scholar defends identification of burial box as Jesus' brother

TORONTO (AP) — The French scholar who discovered the purported burial box of Jesus' brother, James, strongly defended the artifact's identification Sunday against skeptical points raised at a convention of religion scholars.

Despite the doubts, Andre Lemaire asserted that "myself, I have been very cautious. I say it is very probable."

The animated panel discussion, attended by 800 people, involved mainly crucial technical points such as grammar and the forms of handwriting in the inscription, which reads "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."

The words appear on a 1st century bone box known as an "ossuary," a form of Jewish burial that ended in A.D. 70. The New Testament identifies James as Jesus' brother and the leader of Jerusalem's early Christians.

If experts decide the inscription refers to Jesus of Nazareth rather than some other Jesus, and is not a forgery, the box would rank as a monumental archaeological discovery.

Since Lemaire reported the box's existence last month in Biblical Archaeology Review magazine, some have suggested the Jesus phrase could have

been added by a forger, more likely in ancient than modern times.

Some scientific questions about the box's display at the Royal Ontario Museum through Dec. 29, may be clarified when the Israel Antiquities Authority conducts further examination.

Two specialists with Israel's Geological Survey have certified that the surface patina indicates the letters were inscribed in ancient times without sign they were tampered with.

Eric Meyers of Duke University, who got his first look at the box last week, told the meeting he has "serious questions about authenticity" and urged caution, among other reasons because the "brother of Jesus" phrase could have been added.

Due to the claimed link to Jesus, the artifact has been valued at \$1 million to \$2 million, Meyers said.

University of Toronto archaeologist Peter Richardson told a separate panel at the museum that the inscription shows two different writing styles, but the "character of the letters changes gradually" from one end to the other, making forgery less likely.



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