

Cabinet receives draft budget, set to decide judicial appointments

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BEIRUT: Finance Minister Ali Hasan Khalil Wednesday referred the draft 2020 state budget to the Cabinet general secretariat, a source close to the minister has confirmed.

Khalil's move comes after he announced earlier this week that the draft would be discussed by Cabinet next week. Parliament in July ratified the 2019 state budget, which sought to address Lebanon's fiscal woes by reducing the deficit-to-GDP ratio, which stood at more than 11 percent in 2018, to 7 percent.

The 2020 budget is expected to further reduce the deficit. According to the Constitution, Cabinet should send the budget to Parliament in October. Parliament then has until the end of the year to pass it.

Speaker Nabih Berri told lawmakers at his Ain al-Tineh residence that he had requested that Khalil present the draft "out of respect" to those dates.

During his weekly meeting, Berri also appeared to be unsatisfied with the pace of implementing economic decisions that have already been agreed on, saying that things have been "slow."

On Aug. 9, a team of economic experts joined a high-level meeting held at Baabda Palace in order to draw up a blueprint to rescue the country's economy.

That meeting was followed by another earlier this month, at which the attendees declared a state of economic emergency. During the September meeting, Aoun presented the economic blueprint, which gained the approval of all participants, except Kataeb Party chief MP Sami Gemayel, a source at Baabda Palace told The Daily Star at the time. Berri has also called for a legislative session of Parliament on Sept. 24, according to Bazzi.

Telecoms Minister Mohamed Choucair headed a delegation from the Economic Committees that met with Prime Minister Saad Hariri at the Grand Serail.

"Hariri assured the delegation [of] Lebanon's ability to get out of the financial and economic crisis as part of a clear vision that is based on reforms and on the implementation of CEDRE projects," Choucair said after the meeting.

Meanwhile, the Cabinet is set to meet Thursday in a session headed by Aoun at 11:30 a.m. at Baabda Palace, in order to address a 29-item agenda, which includes key judicial appointments.

Among the key posts in the judiciary that the Cabinet needs to fill are those of state prosecutor, head of the Higher Judicial Council, head of the State Shura Council and director-general of the Justice Ministry.

The FPM was reported to have named two candidates, Judges Suhail Abboud and Roukoz Rizk, for the position of head of the Higher Judicial Council, which is reserved for a Maronite. The FPM's nominees, Judges Rita Karam and Youssef Nasr, are competing for the post of head of the Shura Council, the country's highest administrative court.

Media reports said Judge Ghassan Oueidat was tipped to be appointed as a state prosecutor, replacing Judge Samir Hammoud, who reached retirement age last May. Oueidat, a Sunni, is backed by Hariri.