

Mass protests and repression in Iran

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The biggest opposition demonstrations since the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution erupted in Tehran and other cities over the weekend of July 10-11. The protests were touched off by the passage of a new law further restricting press freedom, and then the order July 8 by the Special Clerical Court banning the liberal newspaper *Salam*. The newspaper was shut down for violating security laws by publishing information last winter on the murder of dissident intellectuals by Intelligence Ministry agents.

When hundreds of students gathered July 9 in a dormitory at Tehran University to protest the closure of *Salam*, they were savagely attacked by police and by members of an Islamic fundamentalist militia, Ansar-e Hezbollah, which had been mobilized for that purpose. Dozens of students were injured and more than 100 arrested, while estimates of the death toll ranged from one to eight. Several students were thrown out of second- and third-floor windows and others were severely beaten with clubs and meat cleavers. Students arrested in the raid and later released said they had been tortured.

The reaction to this atrocity was an explosion of protest throughout the student population of Tehran and then nationally, which has surprised and frightened the ruling Islamic clergy. Thousands of students marched on Saturday and Sunday on the Tehran University campus, and some 10,000 students and staff participated in a peaceful sit-in on Monday.

On Monday evening police cordoned off the university and, with the assistance of Ansar-e Hezbollah thugs, swept through the campus, driving out the entire student population, in an effort to suppress all protests. Dozens of students were taken to the hospital with injuries. Tehran's governor issued a ban on all demonstrations, issuing a statement which decreed: "No group or organization will be given a permit for a rally or protest march and any protest march is illegal."

The response to these repressive measures was an intensification of the protests. Crowds as large as 25,000 gathered at various points in the city Tuesday in defiance of the ban on demonstrations, and for the first time, townspeople joined a movement which had been largely confined to students. In some cases protesters attacked the police with sticks and stones, set fire to police vehicles, set up barricades and smashed shop windows. Demonstrators attacked television camera crews, believing them to be working for the state-controlled media.

Police repeatedly fired tear gas canisters and emptied revolvers into the air to scatter crowds of demonstrators, while helicopters swept over the streets broadcasting orders to disperse over loudspeakers.

Meanwhile protests spread to a dozen or more cities throughout the country, including Tabriz in the northwest, Shahrud and Gilan in the north, Khorramabad and Hamadan in the west, Yazd, Shiraz and Mashhad. A seminary student and member of an Islamic militia was shot to death during violent clashes with demonstrators in Tabriz on Sunday. Iranian state radio claimed that a member of the opposition Mojahedin-e Khalq organization had been arrested in the shooting.

As the demonstrations grew larger and more militant in Tehran, they also became politically bolder. For the first time since the 1979 Revolution, signs and slogans openly criticized the supreme Islamic authority in the country, the successor to Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It is illegal to publicly criticize Khamenei, but students chanted "Down with the dictator!" and "Commander-in-chief, resign," as they marched. At a Tehran University demonstration, students booed down the reading of a message of condolence from Khamenei for the deaths during the dormitory raid.

The Islamic regime has been in deepening political

crisis since the election of President Mohammed Khatami in May 1997. Khatami won a landslide victory over the more conservative cleric backed by Khamenei, but under the constitution of the Islamic Republic his powers are limited to the management of economic development and social services, while Khamenei controls the courts, police, military and state-run media, and his supporters hold a large majority in the country's legislature.

Over the past two years a subterranean conflict has been fought within the ruling clergy, between those like Khatami who favor a relaxation of strict Islamic rule and concessions to foreign, and especially European capital, and those around Khamenei, who opposed such changes.

In the course of this conflict, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, a clerical opponent of Khamenei, was placed under house arrest. Tehran mayor Gholamhossein Karbaschi was jailed on corruption charges in what was widely seen as a political attack on Khatami by hard-line opponents. Most recently, Culture Minister Ataollah Mohajarani narrowly avoided impeachment on charges of "corrupting Islamic values."

The attack on the student dormitory has become the latest incident in the factional struggle. Khatami and his supporters immediately sought to capitalize on popular sympathy with the victims of the police attack. Higher Education Minister Mustafa Moin and the University of Tehran Chancellor Mehdi Khalili Araqi resigned to protest the violence.

Senior ministers toured the dormitory complex and condemned the police raid, and on Saturday the Supreme National Security Council met under Khatami's chairmanship and ordered the dismissal of Tehran police chief General Sadat Ahmadi and his deputy for ordering the attack.

But as the protests became more explosive, Khatami sought to defuse them. He issued a statement Monday praising the "restraint" of the majority of students and appealing, "students should cooperate with the government and allow law and order to be established in society."

For his part, Ayatollah Khamenei broadcast a speech in which he blamed the unrest on outside "enemies," mainly in the United States. He condemned the police attack on the student dormitory and urged both his

supporters and the students to refrain from violence. But he rejected demands that the national police chief, General Hedeyat Lotfian, be removed from office as well as the local Tehran officials.

All factions of the clerical regime are concerned that the student movement can become a detonator for the mounting social tensions in Iran, as similar protests against the Shah touched off the mass movement in 1978-79. More than half of Iran's 70 million people were born after 1979 and have grown up knowing no other regime than that of the Islamic Republic, which has failed to deliver on the popular hopes of economic growth and social justice.

Iran's economy is in dire straits, under the combined impact of the long-term slump in world oil prices, the US orchestrated trade embargo, and the destruction and sacrifices caused by the 1980-88 war with Iraq.

Thursday will be a test of strength for the opposition movement. Student groups called for July 15 to be a national day of mourning for the students killed in the protests. The Islamic Propagation Organization, an arm of the ruling clergy, called for massive pro-Khamenei demonstrations the same day.



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