

Renewed clashes between demonstrators and security forces in Iran

A correspondent
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The annual conference of the biggest Iranian student organisation, scheduled for August 25 in the city of Khorramabad, triggered violent street battles between demonstrators and government security forces. About 70 people were injured, some so severely they were admitted to hospital. One policeman was killed. On the following weekends administrative buildings and shops in the centre of the city of 400,000 located 400 kilometres southwest of Teheran were attacked with stones and devastated.

The annual meeting of the Bureaus for the Consolidation of Unity opened with the reading of greetings from President Mohammed Khatami. But the two most prominent speakers scheduled to appear were unable to leave the local airport. It had been surrounded by the Ansar e-Hisbollah militia, bringing all air traffic to a standstill for hours.

Hojjatolislam Mohsen Kadivar, an oppositionist clergyman who had been released from custody only three weeks earlier, as well as Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush were unable to reach the premises of the conference. At the instigation of the local governor they were eventually brought back to Teheran by car after hiding in the airport mosque for several hours.

Mohammed Rezai, who as the representative of the provincial government had planned to welcome the guests, was beaten so badly by the Hisbollah that he fell into a coma. A veteran of the Iran-Iraq war, Rezai is severely handicapped and confined to a wheelchair.

Meanwhile the assembled students were harassed and attacked by “revolutionary guards”—the Basij militia, which is notorious for its cruelty—as well as the state police, the LEF. As a result the student association called off its meeting before it had really begun.

In protest against these acts a large crowd consisting mainly of young people assembled in Khorramabad. Repeated violent clashes have taken place about which few details have emerged. The town was closed to

journalists while fresh troops were brought in and martial law declared.

The reaction of the president emphasised the deep alienation of Khatami from the broad masses of the population, the overwhelming majority of whom voted for his “reformers” in elections last February. The Islamic Participation Front, which is led by Khatami's brother and represents the largest faction of “reformers” within the Iranian parliament, issued a statement the following Sunday repeating their usual appeals for “calm and order”.

The declaration said: “The events taking place in Khorramabad have shown that, contrary to the claims made by the opponents of reform, the government does not have sufficient instruments at hand to guarantee security in accordance with its tasks. The events of recent days show that unfortunately the ‘power-mafias’ have once again begun to stir up conflicts and precipitate crises.”

A deputy from the Participation Front added, “The public has nothing to do with these occurrences. Rather some fringe groups, pursuing their own interests, are responsible for dragging other people in and inciting them to commit such deeds.” He was referring to the demonstrators, although it was obvious that the provocation came from the right-wing militias.

Since the parliament assembled early this year, the reformers have continuously lowered their democratic sights, while the faction of the old conservative rulers has systematically consolidated its position. Although the reformers have a majority consisting of more than two thirds of the delegates, they have proven to be a paper tiger. They fear a mobilisation of the people far more than the terror of the Islamic security forces.

One of the most important issues animating and mobilising broad layers of the population is freedom of the press. Many hoped that the election victory of the

reformers would lead to the abolition or at least moderation of the censorship imposed by the Islamic clergy. Over the preceding two years dozens of newspapers had been banned and numerous journalists and publishers imprisoned. This was accompanied by a series of sinister killings of people known to be in opposition to the regime.

At the beginning of August a new press law was to be debated in the Iranian parliament, the Majlis. It was drafted by the majority and designed to ease the censorship. But after the religious leader of the country, Ali Khomeini, addressed a letter to the Majlis on August 6, in which he bluntly forbade such a debate, the draft ran to ground. When the president of the parliament read out Khomeini's letter there were cries and some tussling among the delegates, but the "reform" majority accepted the ban. The new law was abandoned.

Encouraged by this cowardly retreat, Islamic militias besieged the Majlis the next day and threatened the delegates. In a letter addressed to the people, the latter reiterated their good intentions but stressed that, unfortunately, their powers were restricted by the constitution, according to which the Islamic clergy has the last word. It was necessary to keep calm, they reiterated.

This experience obviously inspired the conservative fraction. During the whole of August there were bans of more or less critical newspapers. As previously, journalists were imprisoned. President Khatami, who regularly meets with well-known representatives of the opposing faction, has increasingly been accused of treason by sections of students and intellectuals.

On August 21 Khatami gave a long interview on state television to justify himself. Once again he called for collaboration and reconciliation "within the framework of the law".

He said, "I completely agree that each offence and each deviation must be punished, but within the framework of the law.... I hope that the academics and thinkers will be capable of understanding the situation and recognise the problems and dangers that threaten us internally as well as externally. I hope that they will learn a lot more and we will all work together to strengthen the system."

Indirectly Khatami made the press itself responsible for its persecution: "One of the problems of our press is the lack of logical and ethical safety measures. If those involved had complied with such measures, we wouldn't have to pay such a high price."

Meanwhile, the conservatives are driving forward with their offensive. The commander of the Basij troops

announced that by March 2001 the strength of his "voluntary militia" would be increased by 1.5 million. There are currently 25 Basij centres in the country, a number that is to be increased to 140 by the end of the year. The deputy minister of the interior, Gholamhussein Bolandian, announced the authorisation of private security companies. To justify this move he referred to increasing criminality, especially among young people.

A further development took place on August 26 when the minister for information (the secret service), Hojjatoleslam Ali Yunesi, demanded that the president remove from the government the minister for Islamic leadership and culture, Mohajerani, who is known to be a slightly more energetic reformer. The Iranian press itself judges this demand to be an attempt by the conservatives to undermine the government, after having successfully gagged the parliament.

Hopes for achieving broader democratic rights by means of the new parliamentary majority are increasingly proving to be a chimera. The representatives of the old regime have an easy task in this respect. With regard to economic policies, things look different. In this area the reformers are pushing through their policies of opening up and liberalising the economy.

On August 22 a draft version of a law aimed at attracting foreign investment passed its first reading in parliament without any problems. The new law will cancel the regulation preventing foreign investors owning more than 49 percent of Iranian companies. It also protects investors from nationalisation and guarantees the unlimited repatriation of profits.

At the beginning of September the state-owned news agency IRNA reported that 100 lead and copper mines were being put up for sale as a prelude to the privatisation of the state sector.

Both factions, reformers as well as conservatives, fear the social consequences resulting from economic policies which they regard as unavoidable. The minister for information assured international business interests that "the security forces of the country stand prepared to protect foreign investments in Iran."



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