

Iran reels toward popular counter-revolution

DEBKAFfile Exclusive Report

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DEBKAFfile's Iranian sources reveal that Mir Hossein Mousavi's nephew, Ali Habib, was not shot dead during a Tehran demonstration Sunday, Dec. 27, as reported, but waylaid and gunned down as he left his home. Fresh riots followed the disappearance of the body from the hospital Monday. The episode became even more ominous when Iran's security services chief Gen. Radan accused Mousavi of the murder to incite further violence. The opposition fears that the murder of Mousavi's nephew augurs physical liquidations of its leaders.

The current upsurge of violence across Iran is the most dangerous yet because for the first time demonstrators are turning round to attack security forces, the Revolutionary Guardsmen and Basij paramilitaries.

DEBKAFfile's Iranian sources report that the protesters are snatching their tormentors' nightsticks and other weapons as well as hurling firebombs.

To fend off the furious masses, whose numbers are swelling into tens of thousands and more, security forces are firing live bullets and tear gas in the crowds since Sunday, Dec. 27.

The death toll, admitted by the authorities as more than 15, is most likely in the 30-40 range; the number of injured is around 250 and detainees some 2,000, far more than the official figure of 300.

All these figures are hard to pin down because the violence has spread across Iran to places never before affected, such as Tabriz, Mashhad, Shiraz and Babol on the Caspian coast. Journalists are barred from covering the unrest.

Wherever dissent has sprung up, crowds of anti-government protesters have seized control of the streets and made government forces pull back. The most important flashpoint outside Tehran is Isfahan in central Iran, because it is the birthplace of the late Grand Ayatollah Ali Montazeri, the dissidents' spiritual mentor. His death a week ago spurred the current wave of unrest and gave the protesters the first spiritual icon for their struggle. Although dead and departed, Montazeri has provided the necessary rallying power missing from their sputtering rallies in the last six months.

Armed with the Montazeri image, the dissidents are not afraid to turn aggressively on the Guards and militiamen or hoist slogans that are no longer confined to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, "the Dictator" whom they accuse of stealing the presidential election but, for the first time, openly defy the supposedly infallible, unelected spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The revolutionary Islamic regime in Tehran thus faces its most dangerous threat, an opposition which can no longer be dismissed as foreign-inspired, but whose revolutionary Islamic Shiite credentials are impeccable and who claim greater legitimacy than the corruption-ridden, oppressive clique in office.

The gunning down of the nephew of Mir Hussein Mousavi, seen as an assassination, further stoked the fury raging in the streets of Tehran. Yet Moussavi stood aside as the movement's senior cleric, Ayatollah Mehdi Karroubi, used the opportunity to further question the regime's religious legitimacy by asking: "What has happened to this religious system that it orders the killing of innocent people during the holy day of Ashura?"

DEBKAFfile's Iranian sources estimate that the outbreaks can no longer be designated "riots" but the precursor of a popular counter-revolution which will gain momentum as time goes by. It will be extremely bloody and may be protracted because the heads of the current regime will not give the opposition an easy ride to power or let go of their positions without a fight.

Monday, showing they mean business, security forces were ordered to storm the offices of Moussavi and the reformist ex-president Mohammed Khatami and arrest seven of their aides.

They also detained two prominent critics of the regime, according to the pro-opposition Rahesabz website: former prosecutor-general and leading dissident Ayatollah Mousavi Ardabili, former foreign minister Ebrahim Yazdi and Emadeddin Baghi, a human rights campaign and journalist.

Revolutionary Iran's places of detention are notorious hellholes of torture and death which some detainees do not survive.

As for the US and the Europeans, they are seeing proof of the fallaciousness of their policy to refrain from applying undue foreign pressure on Tehran for fear of rallying the Iranian people around the regime. In fact, the opposite is the case; turning the heat on the regime will encourage the Iranian masses to more assertively resist their government and shorten its life.

Russia and China, though jealous of their ties with the current regime in Tehran, will not have missed the large cracks forming in its fabric and have to start taking the new situation into account.