

Death of Taleghani will shake

Iran's political balance

Tehran mourns the ayatollah of moderation

From Liz Thurgood in Tehran

Thousands of people poured on to the streets to pay homage to Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani, the country's second-ranking religious leader, who died yesterday.

The Ayatollah, aged 68, died

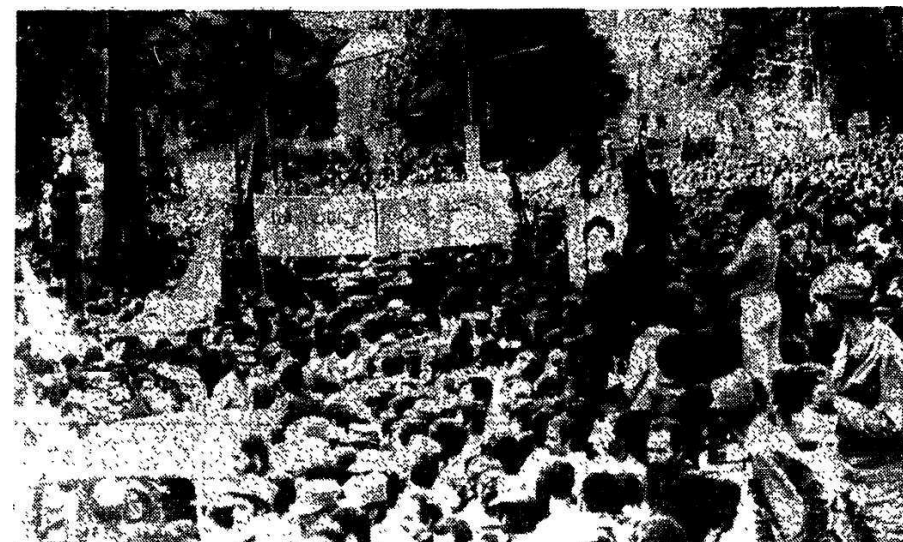
is expected to upset radically whatever political balance still existed in the trouble-torn country. Ever since the ayatollahs swept to power last February, Taleghani has been seen as a moderating force who managed the almost impossible task of spanning Moslem Right and secular Left.

Yesterday's show of grief was unprecedented, genuine, and at times nearly hysterical, as thousands of weeping Iranians accompanied the body to Beheshte-e-Zahra, the big cemetery in south Tehran. The Prime Minister, Dr Bazargan, who had spent many years in prison with the Ayatollah, was distressed as he joined the marchers following the body covered by a simple cotton quilt.

Iran's itinerant Sheikh ~~Montazeri~~ yesterday ordered his men to gouge out the eyes and smash in the teeth of a man in Kurdistan found guilty of torturing the Shah's regime. Relatives of the man he had tortured rushed forward, however, and saved him from the punishment after only three teeth had been extracted.

Taleghani's sudden departure

An indication of his high level, but little-known involvement with State affairs came in the Government's announcement that the Ayatollah's death followed a 21-hour meeting with the Soviet Ambassador, Mr Vladimir Vinogradov. Although no details were available, the talks were believed to have involved the Ayatollah's recent charges of Soviet involvement in the western province of Kurdistan,



The body of Ayatollah Taleghani is borne through the crowded streets of Tehran

and a heated denial from Moscow.

Ayatollah Khomeini's message of condolence from Qom was brief: "I did not expect to survive while losing my close and trusted friends one after another." Assassins have killed three close aides.

But the death of a man whose popularity had come close to rivaling that of Ayatollah Khomeini himself raised the immediate question of who would succeed Taleghani to several key positions. In addition to heading the Revolutionary Council, the Ayatollah had also been picked by Khomeini to lead Friday prayers in Tehran, and had held a seat on the controversial Council of Experts which was examining the draft constitution.

The elderly Ayatollah Montazeri was expected to replace Taleghani at Friday prayers, a politically very important event held weekly on the campus of Tehran University and attended by thousands of young, politically idealistic Iranian Moslems. Ayatollah ~~Montazeri~~ has been described as a Right-wing militant, who spent years in the Shah's jails.

In theory, Mr Ali Asgar Haj Seyyed Javadi, a Left-wing

writer who played a prominent role in the Shah's overthrow and has been a leading critic of the Mosque since, should succeed Ayatollah Taleghani to the Council of Experts. The writer fought the August elections for a Tehran seat on the council, but came in eleventh. It was just one place short to win him representation from Tehran, which was to be represented by 10 seats.

But to many Iranians, Ayatollah Taleghani was irreplaceable. Tempered by years of imprisonment and political opposition to the Shah, the Ayatollah opened his doors to

all political factions, including the Marxist Fedayeen and the Islamic Mojahaddeen-e-Khalq guerrillas, whose members counted one of his five sons.

Meanwhile, 28 soldiers have been murdered in the small town of Saqqez, close to the Iraqi border, Iran's Chief-of-Staff said yesterday. The murder, said Major-General Hossein Shaker, took place after the soldiers accepted a Kurdish invitation to join in "celebrations." After the traditional slaughter of several sheep, the Kurds then reportedly turned on the soldiers, killing all 28.

