

Nicholas Cumming-Bruce reports from Tabriz on the Iranian Government's attempt to quell rebellion

Executions unlikely to end defiance

ELEVEN executions by firing squad in the north-western city of Tabriz have brought home to its citizens the harsh realities of defying a revolutionary regime. Most Tabrizis, to judge from the turnout for opposition rallies in the city last month, had already lost their love for the present direction of the revolution.

For them, the executions will simply become another item in their litany of grievances. What has now to be seen is whether executions will break or stiffen the opposition.

The 11 targets of revolutionary justice were supporters of the Muslim People's Republican Party (MPRP), the main vehicle of Tabriz opposition among supporters of Iran's second most important cleric, Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari. They were seized after a night attack, lasting several hours, by the regime's revolutionary guards on the headquarters of the already bullet-scarred party headquarters.

In what was largely a show of strength similar to those previously laid on for the benefit of Kurdish and Arab minorities, they were taken to the city prison and summarily shot.

Local officials insist there was a trial, but they also tacitly concede that the point is somewhat academic. When faced with a charge such as "subversive acts with guns," the charge for which they were

shot, Deputy Governor Nishapour concedes: "There is no need for a very long trial." He went on to suggest that the men were thieves and rapists with prison records.

One of the exceptions was supposed to have been an air force commander (warrior officer) who had supplied the party with weapons.

Whatever the record of these men—in some ways irrelevant since many Tabrizis consider them genuine members of the party—the executions were evidently part of a calculated bid to stamp-out sources of a bitter resistance to the Central Government which three days earlier had erupted into bloody confrontations between rival followers of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Shariatmadari.

According to Mr Nishapour, the policy may have paid off. In a city of roughly one million people, Tabriz was at one time said to have no less than 47 revolutionary committees operating as general purpose supervisors of local affairs. Among them were several pro-Shariatmadari committees that responded only to the orders of the party.

Mr Nishapour said it had been a long-standing objective to amalgamate these into a single operation after vetting the members, but the scheme had foundered on the resistance of the pro-Shariatmadari committees. Within 24 hours of the executions, he claims, the

remaining committees had submitted to Government plans and surrendered their weapons. Time may bear out the claim, but in any event, it covers only a small part of the issue.

The inhabitants of the Azerbaijan province, guided by Ayatollah Shariatmadari, had already challenged Iran's new constitution and the formal justification it provides for Ayatollah Khomeini's de facto power. But there is a whole range of less precisely articulated grievances ranging from dissatisfaction with centrally-appointed officials to resentment at the crass propaganda put out by official media.

Azerbaijan contains all the ingredients for what should be the most dangerous provincial opposition yet encountered by the revolutionary regime. One of these is the Turkish-speaking population of some 10 million people, about a quarter of Iran's total population.

With some justice, local officials stress that the disturbances have so far been confined to Tabriz, but the contemptuously low turnout for December's referendum on the Constitution showed little solidarity with the regime in practice (the threat may not be so great).

At its best, the MPRP was weak in terms of organisation and never effective in pressing its demands for more local control at provincial government. Since December's

clashes in Qom and Tabriz between supporters of Ayatollah Shariatmadari and Ayatollah Khomeini, the party has been broken by the considerable pressures applied to both Ayatollah Shariatmadari and the party to back away from confrontation with the regime.

Ayatollah Shariatmadari, whose aides complained last week that he had been prevented from receiving visitors by revolutionary guards, has been largely silent except to appeal for calm and to say that he no longer supported the MPRP.

Without guidance, and with rapidly dwindling numbers of officials, the party was stripped of almost all power except its influence with the crowd.

Nor were the committees capable of providing much direction to the opposition. A haphazard operation. Gunmen moved up through the muddy streets in the general direction of shooting, stopping occasionally to fire — at targets of which only they were aware — to the applause of local spectators.

In the narrow streets no one had much idea of where the front line was.

The scene at the local committee headquarters was similarly chaotic. Groups of curious onlookers stood round the door of a half-built house that served the committee. In a

back room on the top floor, harassed individuals of indeterminate status shouted at one another and by turns into the single telephone.

Ranged against the party rump and the committees were the revolutionary guards, scarcely a picture of Cromwellian efficiency, but relatively well-organised, at least partially trained and with clear-cut objectives.

Behind them was the full weight of official sanction and the support of a substantial section of the Turkish-speaking public. Under their patronage, tens of thousands of Ayatollah Khomeini's followers assembled on the campus of Tabriz University for the rally which was later attacked by groups of Shariatmadari supporters, leading to last week's violence and rioting.

Two days later, a crowd perhaps 50,000 strong assembled for Friday prayers before marching under the revolutionary guards' protection into the centre of the city without encountering even vocal opposition.

If pro-Khomeini forces have succeeded in shattering the major events in the revolution against the Shah, events such as the riots of February 6, 1978, in Tabriz — one of the earliest and largest shows of defiance against the Shah.

Sources here believe that dates such as these are potential flashpoints for further violence. Many weapons are still in private hands, but Government officials believe they will be able to contain future disturbances. While the opposition groups lack organisation they may be right. But the legacy of the regime's intervention in Azerbaijan is a smouldering resentment that may erupt at any time. "The Government has won the battle," says one Tabrizi observer. "But not the war."



Photographs of Ayatollah Shariatmadari amid the debris of the Muslim People's Republican Party's sacked headquarters in Tabriz

