

Doc_Number: EU000284



THE STORY UNDERNEATH

Inter Press Service News Agency

Thursday, October 01, 2009 19:32 GMT

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TEHRAN, Sep 9 (IPS) - The stepped-up crackdown against reformist leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, notably the arrest of key aides, signals that the crisis faced by the Islamic regime in Iran has reached new heights.

On Tuesday, authorities arrested a senior advisor to Mousavi, Alireza Beheshti, and a senior advisor to Karroubi, Morteza Alviri.

The arrests followed the storming and closure of Karroubi's office on orders of Tehran's prosecutor. According to Parliament News website, security officials seized documents, computers, CDs and film and sealed the doors of the office.

Karroubi is a former head of parliament and reformist candidate who stood against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the Jun. 12 election.

Following the raid, security officials went to the offices of the Etemad Melli political party headed by Karroubi, searching the premises, seizing property and also sealing the offices of this reformist political group.

These raids followed a similar raid on an office associated with Mousavi's election campaign on Monday afternoon. This office, headed by Alireza Beheshti, was gathering evidence on arrests, deaths and human rights violations of protesters in detention, including torture and rape, in the aftermath of the contested presidential elections.

Karroubi and Mousavi had been working in concert to compile information through a joint committee they set up for this purpose. Morteza Alviri, who serves as the editor-in-chief of the Etemad Melli party website, was Karroubi's representative on this committee.

Some analysts believe that the increased pressure on these two reformist figures are connected to the work of the committee and fear on the part of security and military officials that they would be held accountable for abuses.

Last week, the committee set up by the two reformist candidates, who have refused to accept the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's second term as president, released the names of 72 individuals they allege were killed by authorities.

The parliament and judiciary have also set up committees to investigate the situation of those in prison and reported human rights abuses.

MP Allaedin Boroujerdi, who serves as the head of the parliamentary commission on national security, claimed that despite repeated requests, verifiable information like birth certificates has not been submitted by the joint committee run by Karroubi and Mousavi.

Tehran's prosecutor Ibrahim Raisi also said that no documentation was provided by Karroubi to the judicial committee during their meeting.

These claims were refuted by Karroubi, who in an interview published on the site of the Etemad Melli party said that he had provided documentation to the judicial committee on three cases and discussed two other cases during the meeting. He went on to say that he was ready to provide any further documentation to support his claims that detainees had been raped.

Karroubi had published a letter originally addressed to Ayatollah Rafsanjani urging him to independently investigate claims of sexual abuse and rape by those detained following the unrest and mass arrests in Iran.

The letter has stirred quite a bit of controversy, with government officials initially denying the charges and lashing out at Karroubi, but then promising to investigate the claims.

A letter by one rape victim who was detained following the mass public protests exposed the pressures placed on him by judiciary officials, who under the guise of investigating his claims of rape, interrogated him and threatened him.

Karroubi has since criticised the conduct of the investigative judges working under the direction of Saeed Mortazavi, the former prosecutor of Tehran, who many believe has orchestrated the post-election crackdown.

Political analysts had hoped that with the new appointment of Sadegh Larijani as the head of the judiciary and the appointment of a new prosecutor for Tehran, Ibrahim Raisi, the allegations of rape and torture in detention may be investigated more seriously.

Karroubi has claimed that due to these pressures, the victim who had come forward reluctantly has since disappeared. As such, Karroubi has pressed the head of the judiciary for guarantees of the safety of those who come forward with their stories.

Alireza Beheshti had also expressed concern about the threats against families and victims intent on preventing them from coming forward with their stories about arrest, torture or beatings.

Some human rights activists worry that documents taken from the committee set up by Mousavi and Karroubi, as well as documents from Karroubi's office, may further endanger the safety of victims who had come forward with their stories.

Still, there are those who believe that the increased pressures on Karroubi and Mousavi are due to a planned protest in about two weeks. The reformist leaders have called on their supporters to utilise the last Friday of the month of Ramadan to turn out in droves for what has traditionally been a state-sponsored march protesting the government of Israel and in support of Palestinians.

Similar religious festivities during the holy month where Muslims are required to fast have been cancelled, including a planned speech which was to be delivered by former reformist President Mohammad Khatami at the Mausoleum of Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic.

Additionally, officials have announced that the Mosallah Mosque in midtown Tehran would not be able to host the prayers for Eid-al-Fetr, the final day of the month of fasting. Instead they announced that the prayers would be held at Tehran University.

During a meeting with staff at Etemad Melli Daily, which was shut down several weeks ago, Karroubi expressed his commitment to the planned protest march.

Some analysts believe that the arrest of key advisors could herald the detention of Mousavi and Karroubi themselves.

Mousavi issued his twelfth statement Wednesday after the detention of Beheshti and Alviri. While condemning the arrests, he warned that they were "a sign of more horrendous events to come".

"Keep your calm and remain aware," he told supporters. "Be careful not to let them provoke you."

(END/2009)