

Iran clergy move to tighten their grip

From Liz Thurgood
in Tehran

The Iranian clergy has moved further to institutionalise its rule by rendering the country's Lower House of Parliament effectively powerless and naming Ayatollah Khomeini as the ultimate authority in the land.

The move, which comes amid waning enthusiasm for the clergy and new reports of violence from the troubled western province of Kurdistan, is contained in articles 77, 78 and 84 of Iran's controversial draft constitution that is now being virtually rewritten by a Council of Experts.

The council, heavily-weighted in favour of the clergy, approved the three articles in two days of secret sessions earlier this week, indicating perhaps that the elderly ayatollahs might have expected some opposition.

The new articles were seen as a further entrenchment of Velayat-e-Faghaih — Ayatollah Khomeini's little expounded "Government of Theologians" — which, as contained in article 5 of the draft constitution, gives Iran's clergy political powers unprecedented in the history of Moslem Shi'as.

According to articles 77 and 78, a 12-man Council of Guardians to Protect the Constitution will have veto power over all legislation enacted by Iran's Lower House.

Article 84 names Ayatollah Khomeini as the highest authority in Iran, having the power of velayat-e-amr, or total executive authority, including, it appears, the right to declare war and make key Government appointments. The overthrown Shah possessed far fewer powers.

The draft constitution states, furthermore, that should a single religious leader not enjoy "the support of an overwhelming majority of the population," another council made up of "the nation's experts" would either select the most prominent clergyman or choose between "three to five qualified men" as members of a "leadership council."

Such a system of interlocking councils might initially appear to be a genuine attempt at preventing the emergence of a new dictator, but many of the more articulate Iranians increasingly view the constitution as a vehicle aimed at nothing more than ensuring the clergy a perpetual place in the sun of Iranian politics.

● Kurdish rebels have taken control of two posts close to the Iraqi border, and attacked another two. No casualties were reported, but according to reports reaching Tehran the Kurds had taken 45 gendarmes hostage.

