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Iran hardliners take gloves off against opponents

Sun Aug 9, 2009 6:29pm EDT

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BEIRUT (Reuters) - Iran's latest mass trial is meant to deter dissent but may also reflect insecurity among hardliners jolted by street protests and political splits after a disputed June election.

The crackdown shows no willingness to compromise on the part of re-elected President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He must now pick a cabinet and get it approved by a parliament with a conservative majority containing many who mistrust the firebrand leader.

Many conservatives were angered by the death in custody of the son of an aide to presidential candidate and former Revolutionary Guard commander Mohsen Rezaie, which may help explain why Iran's police chief announced on Sunday that the head of one notorious detention center had been jailed.

But in other signals that the gloves have come off, a senior Guard commander demanded that Ahmadinejad's election rivals Mirhossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi face trial, and a military commander urged greater control over foreign media.

"The sham trials are actually to shore up support among (Ahmadinejad) supporters who have begun having doubts," said Muhammad Sahimi, a professor at the University of Southern California.

An Iranian court charged a Frenchwoman, two Iranian staffers at the British and French embassies and dozens of others on Saturday with spying and plotting to overthrow clerical rule, in the second mass trial to open within a week.

Mousavi and Karoubi say the election was stolen to keep Ahmadinejad in power and have denounced the trials. They and influential backers like former presidents Mohammad Khatami and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani have solid revolutionary credentials.

"If Mousavi, Karoubi and Khatami are main suspects behind the 'soft revolution' in Iran, which they are, we expect the judiciary ... to go after them, arrest them, put them on trial and punish them," said Yadollah Javani, head of the Revolution Guard's political unit, the official IRNA news agency reported.

It is not clear whether Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei will yield to such demands to lock up mainstream opposition leaders in the world's fifth biggest oil exporter.

The influence of the Revolutionary Guard, a military force with extensive business interests, appears to have grown since Ahmadinejad, a former officer in the corps, took power in 2005.

But Khamenei, whose status as lofty arbiter has been eroded by his pro-Ahmadinejad partisanship, knows many senior clerics and politicians are alarmed at where the Islamic Republic is heading and are ready to protect their own interests.

Such divisions within the elite mean Mousavi may still be able to challenge the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's government, said Mehrzad Boroujerdi, at New York's Syracuse University.

"The fact that the government has not arrested Mousavi and Karoubi suggests that they are worried about the repercussions."

"SIGN OF WEAKNESS"

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