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Iranian Cleric Predicts Opposition Will Topple Ahmadinejad

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By Thomas Erdbrink
Washington Post Foreign Service
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TEHRAN, Aug. 18 -- His newspaper was shut down Monday, and generals and hard-line clerics have called for him to be put on trial. Yet defeated Iranian presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi says opposition to the government is growing by the day.

The white-turbaned Shiite cleric, who has held several senior government positions since the 1979 Islamic revolution, said in an interview Tuesday that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, along with the clerics and Revolutionary Guard commanders who support him, will be defeated by what he describes as a burgeoning movement of ordinary people, ayatollahs and lawmakers.

"In the streets, in the bazaars, at weddings and in mosques, everywhere you can hear people complaining about what has happened" since Ahmadinejad's disputed reelection June 12, Karroubi said. "This belief is growing at an extraordinary pace. Yes, people might be more cautious, since the situation in our country is dangerous, but their thoughts, their ideas have not changed."

The mass trial underway in Tehran, in which some of Karroubi's close advisers have linked him to a Western-backed plot to overthrow the country's leadership, is unprecedented, he said.

"The court has a special purpose. It is organized by the winners of the vote, and only their opponents have been put on trial," the 72-year-old cleric said. "But people will never believe these wide-ranging accusations of murders, bombings and espionage against more than 100 suspects."

While his fellow opposition candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi, has issued a broad call for the full implementation of [Iran's](#) constitution, Karroubi has been pursuing violations of specific laws, urging an investigation into allegations of torture, deaths in custody and the rape of young detainees.

"Some of the detainees have reported that certain individuals have so severely raped some of the girls in custody that the attacks have caused excruciating damage and injury to their reproductive organs," he wrote in a public letter to a top cleric. "They also report that others have raped the young boys so violently that upon their release they have endured great mental and physical pain."

Parliament speaker Ali Larijani called last Wednesday for an investigation but a day later said Karroubi's allegations were unfounded and could be used by Iran's enemies. On Friday, prayer leaders nationwide -- all appointed by Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei -- denounced Karroubi, saying his accusations had undermined respect for the country's leaders.

"This was a letter with which America celebrated. It was a letter that was [Israel's](#) celebration," said Ahmadi Khatami, a leader of Friday prayers in Tehran. "The honorable judiciary said unequivocally that sexual assault, which this gentleman has alleged, is a lie."

But Karroubi refuses to back down. "I'm still pursuing the issue, and the propaganda has failed to change my mind," he said. Mousavi, who had been silent on the issue, released a public letter of support Tuesday, also accusing "establishment agents" of rape.

"I praise your courage and hope the other clerics join and strengthen your efforts," Mousavi's letter said, addressing Karroubi.

But Karroubi contradicted an announcement by Mousavi's aides Tuesday that he has joined Mousavi's new movement, the Green Path of Hope. "The results of our efforts are the same. We have no differences. But we follow our separate ways," Karroubi said, emphasizing that he wants to strengthen his own party, Etemad-e Melli, or National Trust, whose newspaper of the same name was shut down indefinitely by Tehran's prosecutor this week.

Born in the backwater province of Lorestan, Karroubi studied in the Qum Shiite seminary and was an early supporter of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic republic. He was imprisoned several times during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Western-backed former shah. After the revolution, he headed several religious foundations and was accused by some of embezzling funds, an assertion he denies. He was a two-term speaker of parliament and in 2005 ran unsuccessfully against Ahmadinejad.

In June, when he ran again, on an agenda of expanded women's and civic rights, he received so few votes, according to the official tally, that he came in last even in his home province.

For the government, he said, a downward spiral looms.

"This group succeeded in grabbing power, but can they solve the problems? Satisfy the people? Have good relations with the world? Solve unemployment?" he said. "Problems will not be solved, and people will be more unhappy. This is one of the consequences of the election."

Special correspondent Kay Armin Serjoe contributed to this report.

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