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Prosecutor in Iranian Opposition Trials Is Fired

By Thomas Erdbrink
Washington Post Foreign Service
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TEHRAN, Aug. 29 -- The new head of [Iran's](#) judiciary, Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, fired the main prosecutor in the trials of dozens of opposition figures accused of plotting to overthrow the country's leadership, the semiofficial ISNA agency reported Saturday.

Prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi had built a case based on confessions and intended to prove that senior aides of the defeated candidates in the June 12 presidential election were involved in a foreign-backed plot to bring down the leaders of the Islamic republic.

The opposition says that the election was rigged to ensure President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reelection and that the confessions were coerced.

Mortazavi was replaced by Abbas Jafari Dowlatabadi, who is known to be less ideological than his predecessor, according to lawyers defending several high-profile defendants.

"I hope the court will now free the accused," said Saleh Nikbakht, who is defending six prominent politicians, including former vice president Mohammad Ali Abtahi. "Mortazavi was the judicial cover for the arrests. He issued the warrants three days before the elections."

The dismissal was Larijani's first important move since his appointment two weeks ago by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, and it appears to signal that he is trying to follow a course independent of the government.

"This is a good start, but he must make more replacements in order to make the people feel safe," said Abdolfattah Soltani, a human rights lawyer. He was detained for 72 days for questioning the election outcome before being released Wednesday. "If that happens, some of the negative things that happened might be countered," he said.

Mortazavi's ouster is seen as a blow to Ahmadinejad, who on Friday for the first time publicly joined members of the Revolutionary Guard Corps and other hard-liners in demanding "severe punishment" for former candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi.

Ahmadinejad's words indicated that he disagrees with Khamenei over the court case, which opposition members say is an attempt to purge the former candidates from Iran's political system.

Khamenei said in a speech this past week that he had not seen enough evidence to label the two men, whom he did not name, as foreign agents. His stance undermined Mortazavi's case, which is based on allegations that the defendants are linked to the U.S. and British governments.

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"Ahmadinejad added fuel to the fire, where the leader had tried to calm the situation," Soltani said. "Despite his slogans of following Khamenei, Ahmadinejad has starkly opposing views."

State television broadcast only parts of Khamenei's speech, with news presenters reading most of the text. Ahmadinejad's lecture before the Friday prayer was repeated in full during prime time Saturday.

Khamenei said any official affiliated with security organizations who had committed crimes during the election turmoil would be dealt with.

Ahmadinejad, however, defended the security forces and said he had proof that they were not responsible for a raid on a student dormitory after the election. According to students, five people died in the attack, an allegation that authorities deny.

"These acts were part of the enemy's plot and were carried out by coup elements," Ahmadinejad said. He was referring to supporters of Mousavi and Karroubi, who he says were planning to stage a takeover through the mass protests that followed the vote.

The president was backed by the commander of the Revolutionary Guard Corps. "Our forces were carrying out their duties in an organized manner . . . along with the police force," Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari said on state TV.

Jafari said 20 members of his paramilitary Basij force were "assassinated" during election unrest.

The opposition said 69 people died; authorities put the number at 30. It is not clear whether either figure includes security forces.

Special correspondent Kay Armin Serjoe contributed to this report.

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