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Thousands March in Iran Opposition Protests

Hard-liners attack reform leaders in dueling opposition, government rallies in Iran

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TEHRAN, Iran

Tens of thousands of protesters — many decked out in the green colors of the reform movement and chanting "Death to the dictator!" — rallied Friday in defiance of Iran's Islamic leadership, clashing with police and confronting state-run anti-Israel rallies.

In the first major opposition protests in two months, demonstrators marching shoulder-to-shoulder raised their hands in V-for-victory signs on main boulevards and squares throughout the capital.

Lines of police, security forces and plainclothes Basij militiamen kept the two sides apart in most cases. At times they waded into the protesters with baton charges and tear gas volleys. The demonstrators responded by throwing stones and bricks, and setting tires ablaze.

Hard-liners attacked two senior opposition leaders who joined the protests. Former pro-reform President Mohammad Khatami was shoved and jostled, gripping his black turban to keep it from being knocked off as supporters rushed in to protect him, pushing away the attackers and hustling him away.

The protests were a significant show of defiance after supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei explicitly banned anti-government marches on Quds Day, an annual memorial created by Iran's Islamic Republic to show support for the Palestinians and denounce Israel. Quds is Arabic for Jerusalem.

It was also a show of survival. The opposition has been hit hard by a fierce crackdown in which hundreds have been arrested since disputed June 12 presidential elections sparked Iran's worst political turmoil in decades. Friday's protests could escalate the confrontation — hard-line clerics have demanded the arrest of any opposition leaders who defy Khamenei's order and back protests on Quds Day.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who the opposition contends won re-election by fraud, delivered a nationally televised address, railing against Israel and the West.

Speaking before a crowd of supporters at Tehran University, he questioned whether the Holocaust was a "real event" and called it a pretext for the creation of Israel. He said the Jewish state was founded on "a lie and a mythical claim."

Outside the university, while the speech blared on loudspeakers, opposition protesters shouted "liar, liar!"

U.S. officials denounced the Iranian leader's comments on the Holocaust, which Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, called "hateful." She said President Barack Obama would not meet with Ahmadinejad during next week's gathering of world leaders at the U.N. General Assembly.

In protests around Tehran and other Iranian cities, demonstrators chanted "Not Gaza, not Lebanon — our life is for Iran" in a challenge of the government's priority of supporting Palestinian militants in Gaza and Lebanon's Hezbollah guerrillas instead of focusing on problems at home.

The Quds Day rallies, which attracted several hundred thousand people, far outnumbered the tens of thousands who turned out for the opposition — a reflection of the government's freedom to rally supporters.

Opposition supporters wearing green T-shirts and wristbands poured onto main boulevards and squares in the capital, waving green banners and balloons, and pictures of opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi, who claims to be the rightful winner of the election. "Death to the dictator!" they shouted.

Just hundreds of yards away, crowds of Ahmadinejad supporters marched carrying huge photographs of the president and supreme leader Khamenei. Some chanted, "Death to those who oppose the supreme leader!"

A group of hard-liners attacked Khatami nearby, surging toward him as his supporters shoved them away and surrounded the cleric, witnesses said.

Elsewhere, government supporters also tried to attack the main opposition leader, Mousavi, when he joined another march. As supporters scuffled with the attackers, Mousavi was rushed into a car and driven away, a witness said.

All the witnesses spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of government retaliation.

The government imposed restrictions on journalists, allowing them to cover the Quds Day rallies but not opposition protests. As often happens during opposition demonstrations, Internet access and phone service was frequently cut, apparently in a state attempt to sever protesters' communications.

In one of Tehran's main squares, Haft-e Tir, security forces wielding batons and firing tear gas tried to break up an opposition march, and were confronted by protesters throwing stones and bricks, witnesses said. Several policemen were seen being taken away with slight injuries.

Protesters set bonfires during another clash in the city, and young men and women wrapped green scarves over their faces against the clouds of tear gas.

At least 10 protesters were seized by plainclothes security agents in marches around the city, witnesses said.

The pro-government Quds Day rallies were held around the country, and the opposition staged competing rallies in several cities. In Shiraz to the south, police rushed protesters with batons, scuffling with them, witnesses said. Footage put out by the opposition showed hundreds of protesters fleeing a police charge in the northern city of Rasht.

Hundreds of thousands marched in support of Mousavi in the weeks after the June election, until police, Basij militiamen and the elite Revolutionary Guard crushed the protests, arresting hundreds. The opposition says 72 people were killed in the crackdown, though the government puts the number at 36. The last significant protest was on July 17.

The Quds Day occasion was established in 1979 by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the revolution that created Iran's Islamic Republic. Customarily on Quds Day, Iranians gather for pro-Palestinian rallies in various parts of Tehran, marching through the streets and later converging for the prayer ceremony.

In his speech, Ahmadinejad hailed the commemoration as a "day of unity" for Iranians and denounced criticism of the election.

(This version CORRECTS SUBS 4th graf to correct Khatami's first name to Mohammad. Multimedia: An updated interactive timeline of Iran's recent history will be available in the —international/iran—timeline folder this afternoon. AP Video.)

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