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Rafsanjani's family members arrested after deadly protests Iranian clerics seek supreme leader alternative



Clashes between protesters and police Saturday left at least 13 people dead (File)

TEHRAN/DUBAI (Al Arabiya)

Religious leaders are considering an alternative to the supreme leader structure after at least 13 people were killed in the latest unrest to shake Tehran and family members of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, were arrested amid calls by former President Mohammad Khatami for the release of all protesters.

Iran's religious clerics in Qom and members of the Assembly of Experts, headed by Ayatollah Rafsanjani, are mulling the formation of an alternative collective leadership to replace that of the supreme leader, sources in Qom told Al Arabiya on condition of anonymity.

Five family members of Rafsanjani, one of Iran's most powerful men, were arrested at rallies on Saturday, including his eldest daughter Faezeh Hashemi, but released later.

A new structure for Iran

The influential Rafsanjani, 75, heads two very powerful groups. The most important one is the Assembly of Experts, made up of senior clerics who can elect and dismiss the supreme leader. The second is the Expediency Council, a body that arbitrates disputes between parliament and the unelected Guardian Council, which can block legislation.

Members of the assembly are reportedly considering forming a collective ruling body and scrapping the model of Ayatollah Khomeini as a way out of the civil crisis that has engulfed Tehran in a series of protests,

The discussions have taken place in a series of secret meetings convened in the holy city of Qom and included Jawad al-Shahristani, the supreme representative of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who is the

foremost Shiite leader in Iraq.

An option being considered is the resignation of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran's president following condemnation by the United States and other European nations for violence and human rights violations against unarmed protesters.

Rafsanjani issued no statements following Khamenei's speech last Friday in which the supreme leader praised him along side Ahmadinejad as Iran's new president.

The moderate Khatami called Sunday for the immediate release of protesters arrested in the country since June 13, saying their release could "calm the situation in the country," the semi-official Mehr news agency reported.

Protesters killed Saturday

His statements came after Iranian state television reported Sunday that 13 people were killed and more than 100 were wounded during clashes in Tehran the previous day.

Government restrictions prevent foreign media from reporting on demonstrations, including Al Arabiya, and the scale of any casualties or arrests was unclear.

But one amateur video appeared on the internet showing a young girl being fatally shot.

"The robocops beat us up badly," one protestor told AFP. "Men and women were beaten up.... My whole body is bruised.... They confiscated my camera."

Another witness said: "Lots of guards on motorbikes closed in on us and beat us brutally. "As we were running away the Basiji were waiting in side alleys with batons, but people opened their doors to us trapped in alleys."

According to statements posted by witnesses on the social networking site Facebook, foreign embassies even opened the doors to injured protesters, among them the Danish embassy. The report was not confirmed by the Danish foreign ministry.

"Ready for martyrdom"

Mousavi, the focus of the biggest protests since the Islamic Revolution ousted the U.S.-backed Shah in 1979, said the June 12 elections that delivered an overwhelming victory to hard-line anti-Western Ahmadinejad were fraudulent and must be annulled.

Mousavi, who claims victory in the poll, told supporters he was "ready for martyrdom," according to an ally, but also said he did not seek confrontation with the Islamic establishment.

"We are not against the Islamic system and its laws but against lies and deviations and just want to reform it," he said in a statement posted on his website at the end of a tumultuous day Saturday. But was quoted by a witness as calling for a national strike if he is arrested.

Iranian newspapers reported on Sunday that Iran's police chief warned Mousavi that officers will "decisively confront" any further unrest.

"I announce that if the current situation continues the police, in line with preserving the society's and people's order and security, will decisively confront illegal activities," Ahmadi Moghaddam said,

according to the Etemad-e Melli daily.

(With agencies)