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Is Iran on the Verge of a Popular Explosion?

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Hassan Beheshtpoor has been on the run since the summer. He is a Tehran University student whose political activism marked him out several years before this summer's controversial presidential election triggered an ongoing campaign of opposition to the Iranian government.

Beheshtpoor, 22, was arrested and cautioned about his activities back in 2007. Now, this financially stretched student hailing from a traditional Azeri family has been banned from the Tehran University dormitories. Along with yellow stars awarded to troublemakers, on-the-spot beatings by campus militiamen and even arrest, torture and long prison terms, these are the forms of pressure yielded by the regime in its campaign against the opposition movement that has surged in Iran over the past six months.

Now living in a house shared with other student activists, Beheshtpoor headed to Qom last week for the funeral of Grand Ayatollah Ali Montazeri, who was the spiritual leader of the opposition before passing away on Sunday.

Three days of street protests followed Montazeri's eventful funeral. Their length and intensity evoked the summer's daily protests that were only suppressed after the government killed at least 11 demonstrators on one day in late June. But the past several days have witnessed an unprecedented widening in the scope of protests across the country. In seeking to suppress commemoration ceremonies for the departed ayatollah, the government sparked off violence in heretofore □ quiet provincial cities.

On Thursday, a senior ayatollah called Jalaeddin Taheri was stopped by security forces from presiding over a memorial service in Esfahan. His son complained in an interview to BBC Persian of "very harsh treatment ... so he could not reach the place where the ceremony was scheduled for."

There was more rioting on Wednesday in Najafabad, Ayatollah Montazeri's birthplace. Esfahan and Najafabad belong to the Iranian plateau's ultra-conservative central zone, long considered a bastion of the Islamic Republic. Esfahan's extended bazaar-clerical families are a particularly popular recruitment zone for the Iranian intelligence apparatus. The city's extensive Graveyard of Martyrs is studded with thousands of bearded men looking out at the visitor from the illustrated gravestones typical of Shia Islam.

A more extraordinary challenge to state authority occurred in the sleepy southeastern Iranian city of Sirjan. A scheduled hanging was disrupted by a rioting crowd that took away the victims' unconscious bodies, resuscitated them and rioted again when the execution was repeated later that day. Some Iranian news sources claimed that three people were killed and another 27 injured when members of a 5,000-strong police force opened fire on a crowd.

"In such smaller communities, the residents and the security forces know each other, limiting the government's ability to implement harsh policies," said Nader Uskowi, a Washington-based political analyst and consultant to the US government.

Small conservative cities have largely withstood calls to join the opposition movement to the Islamic Republic.

Besieged by negative news, government-aligned media such as the Kayhan newspaper are turning their focus to foreign affairs.

Police deputy commander Ahmad Reza Radan warned that "illegal gatherings that pass the red lines will be dealt with by measures that include arrests." The Intelligence Ministry banned all memorial services for Ayatollah Montazeri. Recognising that the killing of demonstrators creates a cycle of mourning and violence similar to that which undid the Shah's military government during the 1979 Revolution, there have been no further fatal shootings in recent months.

Back in Tehran, Beheshtpoor has decided to keep his head low and wait for opportunities such as religious festivals and state-sponsored demonstrations to take to the streets with his anti-government message.

"The Islamic Republic is really scared and this fear is prompting it into strange actions," he concluded. "But whatever it does, it just boomerangs back onto itself. It's the end of this system."