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AP News

Iran intel chief warns of extent of opposition

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Dec 10, 2009 09:58 EST

Iran's top intelligence official denounced senior clerics who he said support the country's opposition, an acknowledgment of the split in the leadership amid the postelection turmoil and a sign of growing pressure by hard-liners within the government to extend the crackdown.

The comments, reported Thursday by the state news agency IRNA, came after this week's widespread student protests, the biggest anti-government rallies in months. The unrest appears to have raised authorities' frustration that a wave of arrests since the June election has failed to crush the opposition.

Intelligence Minister Heidar Moslehi spoke to a gathering of pro-government clerics in the holy city of Qom and warned that the opposition movement — which authorities label as a foreign-backed plot to overthrow clerical rule — extended into the country's high ranks.

"Unfortunately, based on precise intelligence, a lot of forces that were expected to defend the supreme leader instead went with those who rose against the supreme leader, he said, referring to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who stands at the top of Iran's clerical leadership.

"The recent plot is like an iceberg floating in the ocean. Its larger part is under the water, while a small part of it is visible," he said in the address Wednesday evening.

A number of prominent clerics have sided with the opposition since mass protests erupted over the election, which the opposition says President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won by fraud.

Most notably, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president and a powerful figure in the clerical establishment, has criticized the postelection crackdown.

Hard-line clerics and politicians have been denouncing Rafsanjani for months. But Moslehi's comments were among the strongest by a figure within the government — and the most sweeping, depicting the opposition as having infiltrated leadership ranks. Moslehi was installed in his post after Ahmadinejad removed his predecessor, reportedly for not taking strong enough action against protesters, activists and opposition figures.

"Shockingly, Rafsanjani expresses the same ideas that come in the statements of (opposition) leaders," Moslehi said. The minister accused Rafsanjani of supporting the idea that the supreme leader should quit if the people do not support him. Under Iran's system, the supreme leader is answerable only to a body of clerics, and hard-liners believe his power comes from God.

Because of his status, Rafsanjani has been viewed as untouchable amid the crackdown. The government has also balked at hard-line pressure to arrest the political leader of the opposition, Mir Hossein Mousavi, likely because such a step could inflame more protests.

Moslehi said authorities would investigate accusations by hard-liners that Rafsanjani's son Mohsen Hashemi has helped fuel unrest. He also broadly lashed out at the sons of some senior clerics who he said were promoting the opposition's pro-reform agenda.

"Through the sons of clerics, the enemy is effecting the thought of some of the country's senior figures," Moslehi said. He said intelligence officials had uncovered a pamphlet outlining "plans for overthrowing the system" in the office of a son of one cleric, whom he did not identify. Under questioning, the son "gave the names of others (involved), which were earthshaking."

The opposition claims that Mousavi was the rightful winner of June's election. The supreme leader declared Ahmadinejad the legitimate victor, and security forces crushed mass opposition protests by hundreds of thousands in the weeks following the vote. Since the summer, the opposition has held smaller protests more sporadically.

More than 200 protesters were arrested in Tehran alone during Monday's student protests, in which tens of thousands marched on campuses around the country. The number of arrests outside the capital has not been announced. In the wake of the rallies, Iran's top prosecutor announced a tougher stance against protesters, saying the courts would no longer show "leniency" and hinting at action against Mousavi and other senior figures.

On Monday, authorities shut down an opposition daily, Hayat-e No, which is run by a brother of the supreme leader, Hadi Khamenei, who has been in the pro-reform camp for years.