

Arrest of former Islamic leader shakes Iran

By Nicholas Goldberg=(c) 1997, Newsday

QOM, Iran- In this holy city, where the Islamic revolution was born more than three decades ago, the arrest of Grand Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri has left people shaken and worried, and wary of the secret police now crawling the streets.

Montazeri's school has been wrecked and closed, his books burned by vigilantes. He himself was assaulted, according to his son, and knocked to the ground. Once a great leader of the Islamic revolution, he's now an elderly man under house arrest, being punished for his thoughts, and it is unclear what will become of him.

"If it is treason against the people- which it is- there will be no laxity," warned Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader. Treason, in this country, is punishable by death.

The bearded, 75-year-old mullah made his offending remarks last month during a speech on a seemingly obscure religious subject to a roomful of students. In it, Montazeri- a teacher of Khamenei and former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a leader of the Iranian revolution since the 1960s, and a man once slated to take over

from the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as supreme leader- joined a growing movement of dissidents challenging the most basic underpinning of the Islamic republic: the right of a clerical leader to run the government.

Along the way, he served as a harsh reminder that the revolution that was made in Qom can be unmade there as well.

"The system is being shaken from within- that's why they're so upset," said Daryoush Farouhar, a longtime opponent of the regime. "When it comes from one of their own, someone like Montazeri especially, who is respected as a learned Islamic scholar, it's like throwing a bomb into a building."

Nor is Montazeri the only insider criticizing the role of the supreme leader. There's also Ayatollah Ahmed Azari-Qomi, a senior cleric who distributed a 35-page document defending Montazeri. There's Abdelkarim Soroush, an influential Islamic philosopher who has been arguing for years that mosque and state should be disentangled- and who was physically barred from speaking to a student meeting in Tehran just a few weeks ago. There are others as well, like Ayatollah Sayed Sadegh Rohani, who has been

living under house arrest in Mashad for 14 years.

The controversy comes in the wake of May's watershed election for president, in which Mohammed Khatami won a stunning upset over the heavily favored, right-wing candidate backed by Khamenei. The election result was widely viewed as a call for dramatic change in Iran and for a loosening of social strictures that have gone along with Islamic rule.

Nevertheless, voicing dissent is not a safe practice here. When Heshmatollah Tabarzadi, head of the Union of Islamic Students and Graduates, said in an interview last month that the supreme leader should be popularly elected, rather than appointed by other clerics, his office was soon stormed by thugs believed to be directed by right-wing government forces.

"For 15 minutes, six or seven men beat me and kicked me," said Tabarzadi, whose hand was still in a cast during an interview last week. "They hit me in the face with a cable, and with brass knuckles. They yelled 'Why have you criticized the leader.'"

Few believe that the Islamic regime, which came to power under Khomeini almost 20 years ago when

Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was driven out, is on the verge of collapse. But for Khamenei, the hard-lin leader known as "Allah's deputy on Earth," the events of recent weeks are significant.

"Everyone knows that when change comes, if it comes, it will come from within," said Shirin Ebadi, a human-rights lawyer in Tehran. "That is why these internal battles are so important."

At the heart of Montazeri's comments- as well as those of Soroush, Tabrizadi and Qomi- is the concept of the ideological underpinning of clerical rule in Iran. As enunciated by Khomeini in 1970, it calls for selecting a supreme political leader from among the ranks of top ayatollahs, to run the government as the prophet Mohammed in the Islamic community in the 7th century. This supreme leader Khomeini was the first- empowered, among other things, to dismiss the president; to appoint military and police commanders and declare war. The leader, expected to be the most senior and learned cleric in the land, is chosen by a committee of senior clerics.

In his speech, Montazeri, himself a religious leader, as he virtually all

senior government officials, did not call for a separation of religion and politics. But he made two key assertions: First, he argued that Khamenei was not qualified to serve as the faqih because he was neither a senior-enough cleric nor a serious-enough scholar. Second, he argued that the supreme leader, whoever that person is, should act as an overseer, ensuring that secular government does not conflict with Islamic law, rather than as a hands-on politician running the machinery of secular government day-to-day.

"The duty of the leader is to supervise that nothing violates the religious principles," Montazeri said. "It does not mean that you form a large organization and a royal guard bigger than the ones of the kings and that no one can be in touch with you."

Montazeri, who studied with Khomeini as early as 1939 and was a leader of the anti-shah movement from the 1960s, was Khomeini's original choice to succeed him as supreme leader.

But in the late 1980s, the two clashed when Montazeri criticized mass executions as well as the regime's treatment of dissidents and its conduct of the Iran-Iraq war. Just three months before his death, in

June 1989, Khomeini purged Montazeri from the inner circle and removed him as designated successor.

To this day, many of Montazeri's opponents argue that he is nothing more than a disgruntled has-been who wishes he had gotten the top job.

"In his last days, Imam Khomeini no longer recognized Montazeri as a good figure to replace him, and he changed his mind," said Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, one of the senior clerics in Qom, during an interview last week at his Koran school. "But he and some members of his entourage believe it was his right, and they're still trying to make that point."

Others argue that Montazeri simply hasn't done his homework.

"Any source which claims that the holy prophet Mohammed was only an adviser in the consultative body which (guided) Islam at that time doesn't know what the Koran has revealed," charged Ayatollah Mohammed Yazdi, head of Iran's judiciary, during his sermon at Friday prayers in Tehran. "Have you not observed in history that the Prophet himself issued decrees both on wars and peace, in addition to taking care of financial affairs?"

Robert Downey gets 6-month sentence for violating probation

By Robert W. Welkos=(c) 1997, Los Angeles Times

MALIBU, Calif.- Delivering a stern message to a celebrity who has grappled repeatedly with substance abuse, a judge Monday ordered actor Robert Downey Jr. to serve 6 months in jail for violating terms of his probation for a 1996 drug conviction.

Municipal Judge Lawrence Mira told Downey, 32, that the jail term he was imposing was intended "to let you know that when you make the choice for drugs, you're going to jail- it's that simple."

"I'm going to incarcerate you, and I'm going to incarcerate you in a way that's very unpleasant for you," the judge said. "I don't care who you are. What I care about is that there is a life to be saved from drugs."

Downey issued an emotional statement at the hearing, noting at one point that he had been addicted to drugs since the age of 8.

"I have no excuses," he told the judge. "I find myself defenseless."

The actor, whose finely tuned performance as comedian Charlie Chaplin led to an Oscar nomination for the 1992 film "Chaplin," added:

"I don't know why... the severity and the fear... of you, of death and of

not being able to live a life free of drugs has not been enough to make me not continually relapse... again. I really need to do this, even if I don't want to, I need to."

As he was led away in handcuffs to Los Angeles County Jail, Downey nodded and smiled to his supporters in the courtroom.

In addition to jail time, which could be reduced for good behavior, the judge ordered Downey to enroll in a residential treatment program upon his release from custody.

Downey has been in and out of courtrooms and treatment programs since the summer of 1996, when he was stopped for speeding. Police searching his pickup truck found cocaine, heroin and a pistol. His name made headlines again a month later, when he was found passed out in a child's bed in a neighbor's home. He was later arrested after leaving a recovery center.

Downey was sentenced to three years probation after pleading no contest to drug and weapons charges. He spent about three months in a live-in treatment program. His probation was revoked Oct. 17 after his drug counselor said he violated a court order by using drugs again. The actor could have been sent to jail for as

long as three years or allowed to remain free in a rehabilitation program.

"What's ordinary about you is your drug use," the judge told the defendant. "What is exceptional about you is your willingness to endure so much pain and so much turmoil in your life just to use these drugs. You need to find out why, and I hope by the help of all the people that I got letters from today, that we'll be able to do that."

Despite his legal troubles, Downey's film career seems to have gone ahead full steam. He has several films scheduled to come out next year- "U.S. Marshals," a spinoff of "The Fugitive," for Warner Bros.; "The Gingerbread Man," a Robert Altman-directed thriller for PolyGram Films, and "Two Girls and a Guy," a dark comic look at an unusual love triangle for Fox Searchlight.

The actor also is scheduled to appear in a still-untitled film for DreamWorks SKG directed by Neil Jordan. The film, which also stars Annette Bening, is a thriller about the search for a serial killer who kidnaps young children.

Hard winter predicted for homeless

By Cindy Loose=(c) 1997, The Washington Post

WASHINGTON- Housing Secretary Andrew M. Cuomo urged providers of services for the homeless Monday to gear up for a particularly bad winter that could

be a death sentence for hundreds of the people they serve.

Using a satellite TV hookup from HUD headquarters, Cuomo spoke Monday to 5,000 providers for the homeless gathered at 70 HUD field offices. He was accompanied by a meteorologist who predicted El Nino would bring floods and unusually rough winter storms to large areas of the country, requiring a bigger and more coordinated response if deaths by exposure are to be avoided.

"Homeless people will die; the only question is how many," Cuomo said. "El Nino will make a bad situation worse, but how much worse we don't know."

Cuomo announced HUD would distribute more than 300,000 wallet-size cards that include the 800 number and 10 tips on ways to help the homeless. The cards will be distributed by HUD field offices to supermarkets, bookstores and community centers.

Cuomo said federal resources for the homeless have never been greater: When he joined the department about four years ago, HUD had \$300 million available in grants for homelessness programs. Despite shrinking federal budgets generally, that figure has increased this year to \$823 million.

Moreover, nonprofit groups have been working with the private sector and state and local governments to maximize their efforts.

"Now," Cuomo said, "we need to get individuals involved."

He also called on volunteers throughout the nation to step forward, and announced the Department of Housing and Urban Development will operate a toll-

free number to link potential volunteers with local agencies needing help.

That number- 1-800-HUD-1010 - also can be used to report homeless people in need of services. A HUD operator will alert local providers who can respond immediately.

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Wal-Mart and Kmart pull album from shelves over lyrics

British band Prodigy sparks controversy over "Smack my Bitch Up"

By Chuck Philips=(c) 1997, Los Angeles Times

Wal-Mart Stores Inc., the nation's largest retailer, yanked a controversial album by the British rock act Prodigy from 2,300 stores on Friday because of objectionable lyrics contained in the song "Smack My Bitch Up."

This is apparently the first time Wal-Mart has pulled a record after it already was on the shelves based on the content of its lyrics. The decision is certain to have a significant impact on sales because the company is one of the largest sellers of records in the country.

Kmart, the giant Troy, Mich.-based mass merchandiser, also pulled the recording from its 2,100 stores late Friday. Both retailers decided to take the album off their shelves following a report published Wednesday in the Los Angeles Times.

"Smack My Bitch Up" - a tune that critics say glorifies domestic violence- was released last week as a single on Madonna's Maverick label, which is half-owned by Warner Bros. Records, a subsidiary of Time Warner. The song is also included on Prodigy's Time Warner-distributed "The Fat of the Land" album, which debuted in April at No. 1 on Billboard's national pop chart and has since sold 2 million copies in the U.S.

The controversy underscores problems with the system used by record companies and retailers to monitor and label music with potentially offensive lyrics. Some albums, mostly by black rap groups, have become lightning rods for criticism while seemingly offensive lyrics by rock groups frequently slip under the radar.

Janice Rocco, president of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women, applauded Wal-Mart and Kmart for pulling the record.

Warner Music continues to back the song, which Prodigy says has nothing to do with domestic abuse, and blames the Times for instigating the controversy.

"Given their internal policies on monitoring lyrics, it is the only appropriate thing to do," Rocco said. "It sends a message to women and men who shop at their stores that these companies do not want to be a part of the problem in our culture that perpetuates violence against women."

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"In the past five months, we have not received a single complaint

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Director of internal communication for Kmart

about this recording from anybody," said Bob Merlis, senior vice president of worldwide corporate communications for Warner Bros. Records. "In fact, the album was critically acclaimed around the country- especially in the L.A. Times. It wasn't until an L.A. Times reporter brought it to the attention of people who could only be expected to take exception to it that the record became an issue. In my opinion, the L.A. Times seized on an opportunity and in essence created the news- and then covered it."

Rocco said NOW intends to request a meeting next week with the top brass at Time Warner to discuss the content of the company's product. On Friday, Richard Parsons, president of Time Warner, said "if NOW wanted to meet with executives from Time Warner's businesses, Time Warner would be glad to do that."

Prodigy producer Liam Howlett has denied that the group's song is about hitting women, saying that "Smack My Bitch Up" is a phrase (that means) doing anything intensely, like being on stage- going for extreme manic energy."

That interpretation isn't apparent in the song, which repeats the lyric a dozen times, or in the 3,000 Warner-financed promotional

posters making the lyric into a slogan for display in record stores.

Prodigy's album, one of this year's best-selling albums around the world, contains no parental warning sticker indicating that it includes explicit or potentially offensive lyrics. Sources say that officials at Maverick and Warner Bros. determined that the album's lyrics did not merit a parental advisory.

Nevertheless, the companies, with Prodigy's approval, manufactured an alternate version of the record's artwork- one which obscured the word "bitch" on the CD jacket- to be sold to mass merchants that refuse to stock albums with lyrics or cover art they deem objectionable.

Wal-Mart, Kmart and other mass merchandisers refuse to carry recordings with parental warning stickers. The retailers rely on record companies and distributors to identify potentially offensive music.

The amended version of Prodigy's album artwork shipped to Wal-Mart and other mass merchandisers contained a CD with the same lyrics as the original album. When it was called to their attention, Wal-Mart and Kmart officials listened to the recording and decided that the lyric "Smack My Bitch Up," would offend its customers.

"This thing should have been a stickered product, and if it had been, we would have never carried it to begin with," said Dennis Wigent, director of internal communication for Kmart.

"Smack" continues to be played uncensored on about a dozen stations across the nation..

A music video based on the song, originally rejected by MTV, will begin airing in an edited version with a disclaimer next week on the music cable station between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. The video contains images of women being manhandled as well as explicit scenes of sex and injecting drugs in the bathroom of a dance hall. In the past, MTV has rejected videos made by rap artists with similar imagery.