

TEHRAN (Press TV) -- Iran's security forces have arrested a ringleader of the terrorist Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO), who was seeking to create chaos during the funeral procession of Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in Tehran.

Iranian media reported on Wednesday that the MKO member had been arrested the day before in the central city of Isfahan. The terrorist had been identified by Iranian security forces before entering the country, according to the reports. The individual had come to Iran with the aim of creating chaos during the funeral of.

TEHRAN (Press TV) -- Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani said here on Wednesday that the Palestinian issue has been overshadowed by the crises gripping the Middle East region.

"The current crises in Muslim countries have overshadowed the Palestinian issue," Larijani said during a joint press conference with his Malian counterpart Issaka Sidibe. He said Iran and Mali shared views on political developments in the region and the fight against terrorism. He described Mali as an important African country, adding that Tehran attached high significance to its ties with Bamako.

Viewpoint

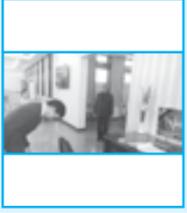
By Kayhan Int'l Staff Writer

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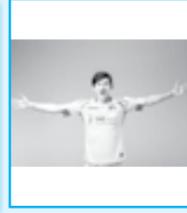
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Will Erdogan Remain President Until 2034?

ISTANBUL – Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan could soon find himself with a raft of sweeping powers that would make the White House or Kremlin envious, as his party pushes for a far-reaching law with limited checks and balances.

The constitutional amendment bill – as it is known – envisages a shift to an executive presidency style of governance. It is now being debated in parliament, with a final vote expected in two weeks.

But there are strong concerns that this change, if introduced in its current form, will leave Erdogan with even more say than presidents in fully fledged dictatorships.

Turkey's current constitution was drafted in 1982 by a post-coup administration. It is deemed to be highly statist, introducing measures such as the punitive 10% national threshold of the vote for a political party to be able to enter parliament.

Some observers say that the current constitution has been amended so much that it hardly resembles the 1982 original text. There is also widespread public and cross-party support for a new constitution, based on more civilian-centered principles.

Yet the proposed changes lack any measure of widespread support, with many worried that the process will end in one-man rule.

"This is not a move to change the system, this is an attempt at regime change to introduce one-man rule," has been the stark and repeated warning issued by the country's main opposition leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu of the CHP.

Certainly it would leave Erdogan, were he to be elected, with more official powers than the presidents of the United States and Russia. With the first election cycle to go into effect in 2019, Erdogan could remain the country's leader well beyond the next decade.

Any president would be allowed three five-year terms: Erdogan's current period in office will not count as one of those, meaning he could be in power until 2034 if he wins three successive polls.

Erdogan, now 62, has ruled the country since 2003 when he took up the role of prime minister. It was the most powerful political role in Turkey - until 2014 when Erdogan was elected president.

He has largely ignored the ceremonial nature of the presidency since taking office and insisted on playing an active role in the country's affairs, saying that direct election grants him that right, even that he is duty bound.

But detractors say that years ago Erdogan drew up plans to stay in power for as long as he can - and is determined to ensure that it comes to fruition.

Erdogan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) defend this shift to an executive presidency form of governance, saying it is the only way to smooth the path of Turkey's progress. They also say it will prevent political crises in the future.

Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, in a speech to parliament on Monday, insisted that this shift would rid Turkey of political crises such as those it had faced in the past. As evidence, he pointed to Turkey's inability to elect a president in the late 1970s, which he said partially led to the 1980 coup.

And he also hit back at critics who say there are almost no checks and balances in the proposed system.

"Every five years the president has to go to the polls and answer to the public. What better way to hold someone responsible than that," said Yildirim.

He also had a jibe at the Republican People's Party (CHP), implying they were against the shift for personal reasons. "Don't you worry," he told lawmakers. "Work hard and emulate us and maybe you will also have a CHP president someday."

The government says the current two-headed executive of prime minister and president, which arose after the president was elected by direct public vote for the first time in 2014, creates unnecessary complications and increases bureaucratic hurdles.

Yildirim also said Turkey's domestic and international enemies that seek to continue to impose their tutelage on the country made use of various existing power structures to further their aims.

He said a strong presidency would solve those problems too and help Turkey attain its goals when it marks its centennial in 2023, one of which is to be among the world's top 10 economies.

But the opposition says the government's claims that an executive presidency will bring stability of all types - whether it be economic, political and security-related - is blatantly false, given that the AKP has been in power uninterrupted for the past 14 years yet still failed to achieve any of those things.

Bulent Tezcan, an MP from the CHP, Turkey's first political party created by Turkey's founding father Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, told parliament: "They want to reverse history by snatching power back from the people and handing it back to the palace. This is clearly an attempt at regime change."

The CHP is calling this attempted shift of system a civilian coup. "We will resist this attempted putsch today in the same way that we resisted the bombs dropped on parliament on the night of July 15," said Mahmut Tanal, a CHP MP. "We are the representatives of the people. This is a fight between those who believe in democracy and those do not."

However, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which became kingmaker after it decided to change position and back the AKP's attempt to introduce an executive presidency system, insists that it is just trying to legitimize a system that is already being implemented de facto.

"It is impossible to accept the term regime change. If what is being implied is that the system of governance is changing then fine," said Erkan Akcay, an MP from the MHP. "The first four articles of the constitution are untouched, so no one can use the term regime change."

Those "first four articles of the constitution" basically state that Turkey is a social democratic secular republic founded on the principles of Ataturk and with Turkish as its official language.

The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) has said it will boycott the vote because it cannot condone such a move. It is also expressing solidarity with its imprisoned MPs who are being deprived of their right to participate and vote in this crucial debate.

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Lebanese President Defends Ties With Iran



Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud chats with Lebanon's President Michel Aoun (L) in Riyadh, Jan. 10, 2017.

RIYADH (Dispatches) -- **Lebanese President Michel Aoun said after a visit to Saudi Arabia that his country's close ties to Iran should not impede relations with the wider Arab world.**

"We have normal relations with Iran," which "shouldn't be a barrier in the face of normal relations with the Arab world," Aoun said in remarks published by the pan-Arab and Saudi-run Asharq al-Awsat newspaper on Wednesday.

Iran is a longtime supporter of the resistance movement Hezbollah, which represents much of Lebanon. Aoun, whose Christian party is allied with Hezbollah, said Iran's support for the group "could continue indefinitely."

Saudi Arabia halted a \$3 billion arms deal with Lebanon

in February and banned Saudis and other Persian Gulf nationals from traveling there after what the Saudis described as Beirut's failure to condemn attacks on Saudi missions in Iran by demonstrators angered by the kingdom's execution of a prominent Shia cleric. Weeks later, Lebanon abstained from an Arab League vote branding Hezbollah a terrorist organization. Hezbollah is fighting alongside President Bashar Assad's forces in Syria, while Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries support the terrorists.

Aoun said he discussed the arms deal with Saudi officials, without elaborating. The former general also said that "the decision about the return of the tourists has been taken."

Saudi officials told The

Associated Press that the Saudi king has promised to review the restoration of the aid package to the Lebanese army but without giving a timetable.

At Least 80% of East Mosul Liberated

MOSUL, Iraq (Dispatches) -- **Iraqi forces have retaken at least 80% of east Mosul from Daesh terrorists, the spokesman of the special forces spearheading the campaign said Wednesday.**

"I think you can say that we have retaken 80 to 85 percent" of the eastern side of Mosul, Sabah al-Noman, spokesman for the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), told AFP in the city.

Tens of thousands of troops launched a huge offensive to retake Mosul, Daesh's last major bastion in Iraq, and areas around it on Oct. 17.

The initial phase of the offensive saw a variety of forces retake significant swathes of land in little time but the going has been tough inside the city itself.

After a lull in operations, the CTS and other forces stepped up their coordination and launched a fresh push just before the New Year.

Over the past two weeks, Iraqi forces have overrun several districts and reached the Tigris River that runs through the heart of the city for the first time.

Combined with the destruction of all bridges over the river, that has made it difficult for Daesh terrorists in east Mosul to resupply or escape to the west bank, which they still fully control. The western side of Mosul, which is

They also said that the king has assured Aoun that he will give instructions to the powerful Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Muhammad bin Salman to "give attention to the issue."

A senior Lebanese official told the Associated Press that Saudis have conditions to unblock the military aid to Lebanon, including assurances that such assistance won't end up in the hands any Lebanese parties — a reference to Hezbollah.

All officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak to the press.

Aoun flew from Saudi Arabia to Qatar on Wednesday, said QNA, the official Qatari news agency.

Aoun was elected in October after a 29-month vacuum in the country's top post. In December, the parliament approved a national unity government headed by Lebanon's top Saudi ally, Saad Hariri. He endorsed Aoun, ending the deadlock.

home to the old city and some of the Takfiri group's traditional strongholds, was mostly tipped as likely to offer the most resistance.

On Tuesday, a top Iraqi commander told The Associated Press that the operation to retake Mosul from Daesh could be complete in three months or less.

"It's possible" that Mosul will be liberated in that time frame, Lt. Gen. Talib Shaghatai said in an interview. However, he warned it is difficult to give an accurate estimate of how long the operation will take because it is not a conventional fight.

"There are many variables," he said, describing the combat as "guerrilla warfare."

The massive offensive involving some 30,000 Iraqi forces was launched in October and Iraqi leaders originally pledged the city would be retaken before 2017. However as the fight enters its fourth month, only about a third of the city is under government control.

Shaghatai said the counterattacks by Daesh — specifically car bombings — have slowed. He estimated his forces are seeing less than half the number of Daesh car bomb attacks on the front than they were faced with when the operation first began.

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Leader Hosts Mourning Ceremony

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- **Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on Wednesday hosted a mourning ceremony for Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani who was passed away on Sunday from a heart attack.**

Ayatollah Khamenei, hailed as the Leader's "longtime companion, fellow fighter on the path of Islamic Revolution, and close colleague following the establishment of the Islamic Republic," was laid to rest at Imam Khomeini's mausoleum in southern Tehran following a large funeral procession on Tuesday.

The Wednesday ceremony was joined by the bereaved family of the cleric, President Hassan Rouhani,

Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, Judiciary Chief Sadeq Amoli Larijani, and other government and military officials.

The event was also attended by Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Ja'afari, leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq Ammar al-Hakim as well as a number of other foreign dignitaries.

A defining figure in the 1979 victory of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Rafsanjani was the first head of Iran's parliament before being elected as president for two consecutive terms.

He was also the chairman of the Expediency Council, a position he kept until his departure.