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Mousavi rally in doubt after Iran leader warning

Fri Jun 19, 2009 7:36pm EDT

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By [Dominic Evans](#) and [Fredrik Dahl](#)

TEHRAN (Reuters) - Backers of beaten presidential candidate Mirhossein Mousavi will decide on Saturday whether to defy a stern warning by Iran's top authority and stage mass protests over a disputed election.

(Editors' note: Reuters and other foreign media are subject to Iranian restrictions on their ability to report, film or take pictures in Tehran.)

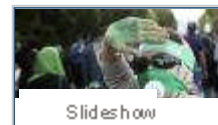
Iran's top legislative body holds an extraordinary session on Saturday morning to which it has invited Mousavi and the two other candidates who lost against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the June 12 election, which Mousavi wants annulled.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei demanded an end to the rallies on Friday, issuing a strong warning to leaders of the street protests that they will be responsible for any bloodshed.

President [Barack Obama](#) condemned the violence carried out by security forces and believed [Iranians](#) should be free to protest, his spokesman said on Friday after Khamenei's speech, sharpening the White House's rhetoric over the post-election events.

Khamenei's words appeared to hint at a future crackdown by authorities on rallies. Khamenei said the election was fairly won by Ahmadinejad and not rigged, as Mousavi who wants the poll annulled has said.

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Another defeated candidate, Mehdi Karoubi, called in an open letter to the Guardian Council legislative body for the election to be canceled.

There was no immediate word from Mousavi's supporters whether they would still go ahead with a planned demonstration in downtown Tehran at around 4 p.m. (7:30 a.m. EDT) on Saturday.

An ally of Mousavi said he was not calling on people to take to the streets again. "Mousavi has no plans to hold a rally tomorrow or the day after tomorrow," he told Reuters.

But his supporters may decide to show up anyway, as they did in their tens of thousands last Tuesday despite a call by Mousavi for them to stay home.

If they proceed in defiance of Khamenei's explicit warning, they risk a severe response from security forces, which have so far not tried to prevent [Iran's](#) most widespread street rallies since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

"If there is any bloodshed, leaders of the protests will be held directly responsible," the white-bearded cleric told huge crowds thronging Tehran University for Friday prayers.

State media have reported seven or eight people killed in unrest since the election outcome was published on June 13, prompting Mousavi's supporters to hold mass rallies in Tehran, with demonstrations reported in several [Iranian](#) cities.

Scores of reformists have been arrested and authorities have cracked down on foreign and domestic media.

In a sign of defiance, Mousavi backers took to Tehran rooftops after nightfall on Friday to shout Allahu Akbar (God is greatest), an echo of tactics in the 1979 Islamic revolution.

"SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY"

Khamenei called for calm in his country, a major oil exporter embroiled in dispute with major powers over its nuclear program which the West suspects could be used to make bombs. Tehran says its nuclear work is peaceful.

He also attacked what he called interference by foreign powers who had questioned the result of the election.

Britain said it had summoned the [Iranian](#) ambassador to complain about Khamenei's speech, in which he also called the British "the most treacherous" of Iran's enemies.

Asked about the call by Khamenei for street protests to end, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said on Friday: "He (Obama) believes that those who wish to have their voices heard should be able to do that without fear of violence."

"I think you're ... witnessing something extraordinary ... I'm not sure that anybody even a week ago or so would have expected to see the courageous images that we're seeing now."

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Iran's national security council dismissed a complaint by Mousavi, in a letter to the Interior Ministry body earlier this week, about plainclothes men using weapons such as sticks and metal rods to attack protesters.

"Your national duty and responsibility would require that instead of raising charges against police or army forces ... to try to avoid such illegal gatherings and not support them," Fars News Agency quoted its secretary Abbas Mohtaj as saying.

"You are certainly aware that in the event of instigating or inviting such illegal gatherings the responsibility for the consequences would lie with you," he said.

Mousavi has demanded the annulment of the election result, which showed he won 34 percent of the votes to Ahmadinejad's tally of nearly 63 percent.

The Guardian Council is considering complaints by the three losing candidates, but has said only that it will recount some disputed ballot boxes.

It has invited Mousavi, Karoubi and conservative Mohsen Rezaie to an extraordinary session on Saturday to discuss their 646 complaints about the election.


"We are urging candidates to avoid any remarks which can disturb public opinion until the Guardian Council carries out its final investigation," council spokesman Abbasali Kadkhodai told the official IRNA news agency.

(Additional reporting by Dominic Evans and Hashem Kalantari; Editing by Peter Millership)

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