

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC AND THE IRANIAN LEFT

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The students' protests and the demonstrations of July 1999 are undoubtedly the most significant demonstrations against Iran's Islamic Republic in the last eighteen years. They are the manifestation of a continued dissatisfaction with the rule of a corrupt clergy, a rejection of the interference of religion in every aspect of private and public life, and a rejection of religious dictatorship and its current supreme leadership, Ali Khamnei.

Over the last few months, as impatience with Khatami's promises of reform turned to anger, workers were the first group to force the Iranian government to retreat. Iran's workers were on the streets on May 1st 1999 in Tehran when the first nationwide workers' protests since the strikes and demonstrations that helped bring down the Shah's regime in the revolution of 1979 took place. Then, in June 1999, workers were the first group to force the Iranian government to retreat; changes to the labour law, passed by the Islamic parliament, were withheld as workers declared two days of national mourning and threatened strikes.

Despite two decades of Islamic anti-western rhetoric, the Iranian economy remains as dependent on western oil revenues as ever. And given the continuing decline in the price of oil, Iran's capitalists have responded in the only way they know how: by closing factories and sacking thousands of workers, and by the simple expedient of not paying tens of thousands of those who still have jobs. Without question, the workers have a lot to protest about, and the May Day demonstration was the culmination of months of local strikes and protests. Both in Iran and abroad, however, May Day news was dominated by the latest events of the factional infighting within the Islamic Republic. One example of which was the failure of the conservative dominated Parliament in its attempt to censure the Minister of Culture, a close ally of 'moderate' President Khatami. This seemed to mark a victory for the 'reforming' President.

This article discusses the possible future of the relation between these two processes. Will the President be able to satisfy and contain the increasingly vocal protests and demands of workers, students, women and others against the Islamic system? Or will, for the first time in the recent history of the Middle East, an independent movement from below challenge the very existence of Islamic power?

These questions raise one other crucial issue: the ability of Iranian leftism, after twenty years of repression and defeat, to intervene and influence the process.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a double surprise. Within a year an island of capitalist stability in the Middle East and one of the strongest links in the imperialist chain was

seized by nation-wide strikes, demonstrations and a popular uprising, providing inspiration to revolutionaries everywhere. But at the same time this uprising was led and dominated by an apparently backward fundamentalist Islamic movement. Within a year a new Islamic dictatorship had suppressed most of the democratic and socialist forces which had helped it come to power.

The uprising was a direct result of the failures of the Shah's regime to respond to the economic crisis that followed the economic boom of the early 1970s. Most skilled workers faced a drop in their living standards in 1976. The White Revolution in agriculture had left massive numbers of peasants landless and penniless, forcing them to seek seasonal jobs in major cities. Recession in the Iranian economy left them unemployed and destitute in shanty towns.

In addition to the above two groups, the small independent producers had been forced out of business (made bankrupt) by the decision of Iran's Chamber of Commerce to rescue the already privileged position of big capitalists. Corruption and the rule of a clique around the Royal court meant that many traditional merchants, often associated with the bazaar, were deprived of large profits available to the more privileged sections of the ruling class. Such decisions, exemplifying the arrogant dictatorship of the Royal family, fueled widespread political discontent.

The suppression of leftist and all secular opposition allowed sections of the clergy and the Islamic movement to mobilise class discontent in the language of religion. The clergy, who had survived the repressive measures of the Shah's dictatorship by compromising with the regime, was in a much better position to benefit from political discontent than secular, socialist groups who had lost many in their ranks through execution and imprisonment. In the summer of 1978 religious demonstrations in major cities were led by the clergy, financed by the bazaar, and supported by independent producers, the urban poor and students.

Also at this time, the workers' movement was taking shape. Councils (shoras) were formed in major industries where workers were organising strikes and go-slows, initially for minor economic demands, but the workers gradually became more political with demands for the expulsion of SAVAK agents (the Shah's secret police) from the factory. This movement, although supported by various groups of the left, had no clear leadership and remained subordinate to the Islamist movement. Some of the most important shoras were formed in Khouzestan province in the oil and steel industries where major strikes shook the regime in the latter part of 1978 and early '79. However, these shoras were never established nation-wide, although at times they took up political slogans.

Political forces opposed to the Shah

As in many countries, Iran's revolutionary left emerged in the late 1960s and '70s as a response to suppression and failures of nationalist forces and the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party. Various factions and parties of the National Front played an important role in paving the

way for a political take over by the clergy. The politicians of these factions and parties, representing the dissatisfied sections of the bourgeoisie, had survived the witch hunts after the *coup d'état* of 1953.

The Tudeh Party was the official pro-Moscow communist party. By the 1940s it had acquired a sizeable popular and trade union base, but its politics were always determined by those of its northern neighbour, e.g., it opposed an independent Azerbaijan Republic, then supported one when it was set up by Soviet troops in 1946. In 1952 it defended Mossadegh's nationalisation of Iranian oil, but its inconsistent position towards his government led to its failure to anticipate and oppose the Shah's coup the following year, resulting in the further failure to build an effective opposition afterwards.

By the 1960s the Tudeh Party had become widely discredited amongst a new generation of Iranian radicals and socialists who were attracted to a burgeoning third-worldist Islamic movement taking hold in Iranian universities. This movement was influenced by the writings of Ali Shariati, a French educated Islamist scholar who had used the writings of Franz Fanon and other radical intellectuals to develop a critique of the Shah's regime and its western backers. More practically, the religious radicals were impressed by the growing influence of Marxism on Iranian campuses, and they attempted their own synthesis of socialism and Islam.

In the late sixties a number of small groups influenced by 'activism' in Europe and Latin America joined to form a guerrilla group, the Fedaiin, with the aim of starting an armed uprising against the Shah. Most of the original members of this group were executed. Others were arrested and spent most of the last years of the Shah's rule in prison. However, by the mid 1970s the Fedaiin had substantial support amongst university students and intellectuals inside and outside Iran.*

The most visible of the Islamist groups was the People's Mojahedin, who combined a nationalistic blend of Islamic radicalism together with 'heroic' military actions against the Shah's secret service. Their attempts to forge an alliance with the exiled Khomeini were rebuffed because of their apparent communist sympathies. The most conservative faction of this movement, associated with people such as Rafsanjani, forced a Marxist split from

* As a note on the growth of radically-inspired religious groups, it is important to point out that, contrary to the claims of the Islamic leaders and the opinions of experts, there was no tradition of religious radicalism in Iran. Iran's clergy backed the Shah's 1953 coup which toppled the nationalist government of Mossadegh. Sections of the clergy opposed the Shah's White Revolution (the US sponsored programme of modernisation from above) during the 1960s, but from a reactionary point of view. In particular, Khomeini opposed the land reform bill and voting rights for women. This led to his enforced exile. The rest of the clergy were mainly quiet and conservative. However, the mosques remained the only places where legal gatherings of more than two people could take place. As the movement against the Shah gathered pace, this law concerning public assembly together with the ability of the Islamist movement to show a more radical image played an important role.

the Mojahedin in 1974. This split, known as Peykar, resulted in violence (a number of people were killed) and cemented an alliance between the right in the Mojahedin and the fundamentalist clergy.

The new Islamic regime and the left

Faced with continuing chaos by various sections of the population, the new Islamic government showed its character soon after coming to power. Beginning with attacks on women's demonstrations against forced veiling in March 1979, liberal opposition newspapers were then attacked and closed down. In the summer of 1979 the government intervened militarily in Kurdistan to suppress the Kurdish people's demands for autonomy. Workers' shoras were dismantled and workers' strikes and protests were attacked by the army and the Islamic guards. When peasants in Torkman Sahra took over the land they cultivated and started a system of co-operative agriculture, the government sent in troops.

The response to these events by the bulk of the left was a disaster. The Tudeh Party began by uncritically supporting the 'anti-imperialist' regime and its consolidation. But now, together with its new allies in the 'Fedaiin Majority' (the majority of the Central committee of the Fedaiin who now adopted identical politics to the Tudeh Party) in a classic piece of wooden Marxism, it increasingly supported the 'petit-bourgeois' line of Khomeini and the fundamentalists against both the 'bourgeois liberals' in government and against the regime's opponents on the left: the latter denounced as counter-revolutionary. The ensuing occupation of the American embassy by the 'students of the Imam's line' and the outbreak of war with Iraq would see the crystallisation of this political line and its suicidal effects.

Various factions and parties of the National Front had played an important role in paving the way for a political take over by the clergy. They were alarmed by the radicalisation of the workers' movement and were determined to control this movement from the beginning. Khomeini's first prime minister, Bazargan, who came from this political grouping, summarised this group's political position in his comment regarding the revolution of February 1979: 'We wanted rain, but we got floods.' As the clergy strengthened its position, the need for 'professional' politicians of the National Front diminished, and the latter lost their influence and eventually their political posts. Bazargan was dismissed during the US embassy take over and many of his ministers had lost power months before. (The National Front remains the semi-legal opposition inside Iran, calling for liberalisation of the Islamic regime. Its offices are periodically raided by Hizbollah and, despite repeated attempts to register a candidate in a number of presidential or parliamentary elections, its candidates are invariably disqualified for failing the religious criteria set by the Council of Guardians.)

When the staff at the American embassy were taken hostage, the Tudeh Party and Majority Fedaiin together with some Trotskyist groups (who considered the regime progressive for its anti-US stance) fell in line and called for unconditional support of the 'Imam's line'. When the war with Iraq broke out all these groups called on workers to stop their strikes and for all opposition forces to rally behind the 'anti-imperialist' government. Centrists within most organisations of the left were soon forced to choose between support for or opposition to the regime.

During the blood bath of 1981, when the regime launched an all out attack on the Mojahedin and all opposition groups, the Tudeh Party, Fedaiin Majority and sections of the 4th International continued to support and defend the Islamic government at home and internationally. (This marked the defeat of the revolutionary movement.) The attacks lasted until 1983 when, in a classic piece of political farce, members of the Tudeh Party, Fedaiin Majority and the pro-state Trotskyist groups were themselves arrested by the very forces they had hitherto supported. By the mid 1980s, as Iran made a mockery of the clerical claims to anti-imperialism and as the defeat in war with Iraq was making the government unpopular, the left was in no position to benefit from the tide of anger and disillusion with Islamic fundamentalism.

Contrary to the analysis proposed by socialists abroad, including those in Britain, the division within the Iranian left was not simply between reformists and revolutionaries. Nor was it between Stalinists and anti-Stalinists; it did not centre on the classic issue of 'stages' of revolution, bourgeois or socialist. Rather the issue of division was the supposed existence of a 'socialist camp' led by the Soviet Union and the extent to which the politics of third world regimes were judged on the basis of their anti-US rhetoric.

The Fedaiin's belief that the 'guerrilla activism' of the 1970s was an adequate Marxist alternative to the 'passivity' of the Tudeh Party was already exposed by 1979, when its surviving cadres, in prison, recognised their isolation from the working class and the revolutionary movement. But their only solution was to return to the traditional politics of the 'socialist camp'. Iran was perhaps the most disastrous example - but only one example - of an international trend which, in the face of disappointments of the international left and the collapse of Maoist China together with the rise of liberal Eurocommunism, saw a renewed sympathy for the Soviet Union and for pro-Soviet politics. By the time the Central Committee of the Fedaiin took a clear pro-government and pro-Soviet position, some in the membership were ready for this change. However the majority of the members and a minority in the central committee formed Fedaiin Minority, but without a clear agenda or policies: more as an alliance of small groups who opposed the Islamic government and were still critical of the Soviet Union to varying degrees. The split in the Fedaiin marked the separation of what we have called 'revolution' and 'counter revolution' in Iran. Similar splits occurred amongst Maoists and Trotskyist tendencies, both within and outside of the Fourth International.

Inevitably, as the repression increased and as the leadership was forced into exile (first in Kurdistan and later abroad), major splits and smaller divisions fragmented what remained of the organisation, which was at the time of the revolution one of the largest political groups of the left in the region.

Khatami: Iran's Gorbachev?

In May 1997, a 'moderate' cleric known for his tolerance of non-Islamic codes of behaviour was elected by a massive two-thirds of those who voted. Support for Khatami was widespread throughout the population, but came especially from women and young people alienated from the religious establishment. Similar results reflecting such sentiment were repeated in local council elections in 1999 as well.

His surprising election was more than anything else a rejection of fundamentalism as personified by the candidate supported by Khameneii, the supreme clerical leader, but it may have marked the beginning of the end of a Shia Fundamentalist state. Khatami realises that old ideas and methods will not work and that, to survive, the Islamic regime has to reform itself. For the ten years between 1982 and 1992 he held ministerial positions in the Islamic Republic, including minister of culture. During most of this period, which coincided with the consolidation of the new regime, Khatami went along with repressive policies: books were systematically censored and some book publishers had their licenses revoked. But by 1992 Khatami had come to the conclusion that the Islamic state had to reform itself to remain in power. However, even his limited relaxation of the censorship laws worried the more fundamentalist faction in parliament, which considered Khatami too liberal. He was thus forced out of the government.

The current factional fighting inside the Iranian regime is the culmination of a debate between those who believe that the survival of the present regime depends on liberalisation and tolerance of secularism, and those who believe that with repression and dictatorship Iran's multinational population can be forced to accept the rule of Shia Islam. The dilemma for President Khatami and his supporters is that the tolerant civil society they profess to defend inevitably raises the issue of the separation of state and religion, questioning the Islamic character of the Iranian state.

Time of change

Poverty, cynicism about the religious state and high birth rates, which were encouraged during the war with Iraq, have all brought major socio-political changes in Iranian society. Incompetence, the rampant corruption of the post-war years under President Rafsanjani (a period when clerics, technocrats and their associates accumulated huge fortunes at the

expense of the dispossessed) has left the gap between the rich and poor wider than ever before. Following defeat in the war with Iraq, the death of Khomeini, the revelations surrounding Irangate, and at a time when corruption amongst the clerical rulers has reached unprecedented level, the Islamic revolution has run out of steam.

The current factional fighting inside the Iranian government has allowed a more open expression of dissent. Some 30 daily papers are published in Iran and although they all claim to be Islamic, there is no doubt that secular journalists are challenging Iran's censorship laws. Papers are banned regularly yet the same writers re-launch their papers under a new name. Book publishers are enjoying much more freedom: many translations; many Persian books banned for two decades are getting published; and some 1000 women publishers have given women writers and poets new opportunities. In fact, Iranian women have been notably successful in challenging every aspect of Islamic fundamentalism, especially its interference in individuals' private lives.

A burgeoning students' movement, which started out in support of the reformist faction of the regime, has continuously been radicalised over the last few years. Today the students' movement openly challenges the very existence of the Islamic state. They now demand more freedom, an open society and freedom for all political prisoners.

On a grim note, Iran's intellectuals have paid heavily for the so called liberalisations. Now that death sentences cannot be dished out as easily as before, the regime is using death squads to silence the opposition. At least three writers and two dissidents have been killed by death squads over the last few months. The two factions of the regime tried to blame each other as well as 'foreign agents' for these murders.

Popular discontent is directed not only at the politics of the Islamic fundamentalist state but also at the catastrophic economic situation over which it has presided. While fortunes have been made by members of Iran's parasitic capitalist class, merchants, technocrats and clerics who run the Islamic economic foundations, most of the population has been immiserated by inflation and unemployment. The severe economic crisis and the sharp drop in the price of oil, as well as economic sanctions, mean that many workers have not been paid for over six months. The rate of inflation is 30-40 per cent and unemployment is estimated as 20-30 per cent. Over 4000 small manufacturing plants have closed down.

The problem for the Iranian clergy is that the majority of the population remember the idealist egalitarian slogans of 1979 and the war years, while the leadership has moved on to become the new elite. Today 70 per cent of the population is below the age of 25, following a policy of enforcing birth during the war with Iraq. The majority of this younger population is literate and urbanised, yet high levels of unemployment, and a worsening economic crisis have left them little hope. (The government admits to 800,000 unemployed school leavers.) Undoubtedly, the spread of mass media (satellite television/videos/internet) has also helped to dramatically change the lives and attitudes of the youth in urban areas. As they join the protest movement, their contribution to the radicalisation of the opposition can be crucial.

In the period between March 1998 and March '99, there were some 181 workers' protests. According to figures accumulated by underground workers' organisations, workers in 39 factories went on strike, on seven occasions workers occupied the factory, in three cases they blocked major roads (inter-city auto routes), and in 55 cases workers staged a protest outside the factory. There are reports of two cases of hunger strikes and two cases of workers taking managers hostage to enforce their demands. In seven of these protests security forces intervened to arrest the workers and in some cases shots were fired. The above figures are more impressive if one considers that: going on strike is illegal in Iran; workers' protests are considered as waging war on God and Islam; the minimum punishment for such protests is imprisonment.

There is no sign that Khatami's government has even begun to address these problems. Ranked amongst his supporters are technocrats and free market liberals on the one hand, and groups who favour state intervention to reduce social inequalities on the other. None of the factions in power has supported the recent workers' protests. As a matter of fact, the security forces were used to break up the protests and Khatami went out of his way to denounce the May Day demonstrators for jeopardising Iran's investment prospects.

Despite the militancy of the workers' struggles, major difficulties remain in building a movement which can express and enforce the workers' demands. Although the students' movement is experiencing a political radicalisation, it has as yet shown few signs of supporting the workers, or of uniting its demands with theirs. Supporters of the Tudeh Party and the Fedaiin Majority, chastened by their repression and by the collapse of the socialist camp, have merely swapped their political revisionism for a liberalism which results in an uncritical support for Khatami. Only a few organisations of the left, abroad and underground in Iran, have publicised the workers' struggles and tried to win support for them. Yet, unless the workers' movement against exploitation and inequality can link its demands to a critique of the Islamic state, uncertainty remains of its possible suppression or recuperation within Islamic populism.

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