



1979: Iran - Revolution and counter revolution

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Iran's clerical rulers are celebrating the fifth anniversary of their "Islamic Republic". They do so against a background of temporary economic stability and in a country where all open opposition has been mercilessly crushed.

The aspirations of the millions who struggled successfully to overthrow the Pahlavi monarchy have been cruelly betrayed. These aspirations, not religious fanaticism, animated the huge mass movement that brought down the Shah.

The working class sought the freedom to organise in defence of its living standards and working conditions. The non-Persian nationalities that make up nearly half the total population of Iran wanted autonomy and self-government. The peasants wanted land and an escape from poverty. The urban poor and women wanted an escape from misery, enforced prostitution and oppression. The students, intellectuals and writers who suffered torture and death in the Shah's prisons wanted political freedom.

All these aspirations have been betrayed as the Khomeini counter-revolution advanced towards a totalitarian dictatorship.

Political freedom, always tenuous in post-revolutionary Iran, has now been totally obliterated. Misery and hardship have increased as the masses have been forced to pay for Khomeini's (now) reactionary war against Iraq. The national minorities have either been bludgeoned into submission or, like the Kurds, live in a state of permanent war. Women, whether they want to or not, are forced to don the Islamic veil and are legally regarded as second class citizens. The working class has been progressively robbed of the social gains it won through the revolution. The chains of Islam now weigh down every facet of Iranian life.

This counter-revolution, one that has turned the clock back in Iran, has provoked the question amongst many who fought in the revolution - how did it happen?

The most common answer is to argue that the largest mass mobilisation of the century to topple a pro-imperialist regime was doomed from the outset. Ramy Nima in his book *The Wrath of Allah* expresses this view exactly:

"Khomeini did not betray the revolution, for the revolution was his and the clergy's; he betrayed the aspirations of the masses who followed him. Khomeini's seizure of power was no counter-revolution, but the consolidation of victorious Islamic reaction". (p143)

He argues that the Iranian revolution was always an Islamic revolution, and therefore always a reactionary revolution.

This view is by no means unique. It is shared by the hand wringing academics and commentators around the journal *Khamsin* for example. Even the Socialist League has now a totally negative attitude to Khomeini, despite their initial enthusiasm. Phil Hearse, in *Socialist Action*, argues that "there can be no compromise with Islamic fundamentalism" (2.3.84) and laments that:

"The course of the Iranian revolution was determined at a very early stage during the struggle to bring down the Shah in 1978-79." (ibid.)

The reader might be expected to have forgotten that SA's predecessor, *Socialist Challenge*, printed glowing reports from Iran, frankly recording its correspondent's enthusiastic joining in the cries of "God is great" in 1979. Perhaps

comrade Hearse has also forgotten that instead of warning against the Islamic fundamentalists Socialist Challenge elaborated the most ludicrous analogies to defend Khomeini:

"Charles the first, too, was overthrown by a movement which spoke with a religious voice."

Hypocrisy and deceit aside, the real problem with Hearse is that, like Nima and others, he concludes that there was no alternative to Khomeini. The revolution was foredoomed runs the logic of all who tailed the Islamic leaders precisely when an alternative to Khomeini was possible.

The actual development of the Iranian revolution proves that Khomeini's victory was far from inevitable. Rather it was the result of the failure of the Iranian left to build an alternative working class communist leadership, independent of the Islamic movement, at a time when tens, if not hundreds, of thousands would have been receptive to just such an alternative.

The revolution in Iran was not simply or exclusively an Islamic revolution. It was not from the outset Khomeini's revolution. He did not create the revolutionary movement and was not in favour of the insurrection that finally toppled the Shah. He was actually pursuing negotiations to force the Bakhtiar government (the government appointed to head off the revolution) to resign peacefully. Even the Islamic-dominated mass demonstrations were not the decisive factor in the revolution.

The revolution came about as a result of mass discontent with the Shah's regime. It was led by a coalition of forces, united by their hostility to the Shah but with different goals and aspirations.

The Shah shaped Iran according to the needs of the imperialist powers that had enthroned him in 1953. He fulfilled the role of gendarme of the Gulf for the imperialists. He tamed Iraq and sent troops into Oman. He built up an enormous army and a vast bureaucracy. Nima reports:

"By the late 1970s they (civil servants - WP) had increased to over 560,000. The state bureaucracy accounted for as much as a third to a half of all full-time employees in the urban areas, at least in all the major cities." (p.44)

The military and bureaucracy were substitutes for the Shah's lack of a real mass base of support in Iranian society.

The Iranian economy was extremely valuable to the imperialists. It was administered by the Shah's bureaucracy and guarded by the army and the security forces, the notorious SAVAK.

The Shah's 'white revolution' of industrialisation had turned Iran into an El Dorado for foreign corporations. Talbot (then Chrysler), Hawker Siddely, GEC and a host of other companies had stakes in Iran. Most important to imperialism was the oil industry. At the time of the revolution, Iran supplied 13% of Britain's oil and 17% of America's. The consortium that controlled sales from the 'nationalised' oil industry was 40% British and 40% American-owned.

The problem for the Shah's regime was that his modernisation programme left the economy at the mercy of the imperialists. In the 1970s the world economy moved into a severe crisis. The Iranian economy was brought to the brink of catastrophe. There was runaway inflation and mass unemployment. The luxury, corruption and incompetence of the Pahlavi court circles, amidst mass hardship and poverty, stood out as a symbol of all that was wrong in Iran, alienating even the weak and timid national bourgeoisie. Iran was chronically dependent on imports particularly of foodstuffs. The influence of rising world prices upon Iran triggered a combination of shortages and escalating prices for from 1976-78.

These price rises hit the living standards of Iran's proletariat. The Shah's industrialisation programme had resulted in a large increase in the size of the working class - it stood at 2.5 million in 1977, with as many as one third of all workers concentrated in large plants. Many of those plants were in Tehran and the other big cities.

The price rises in 1976 drove sections of this proletariat into strike action. From 1975 to 1977, sixty major strikes or

other forms of workers' protests took place. All of them were met by vicious repression. The combination of repression and hyperinflation drove the workers into all-out opposition to the Shah. In 1978 a rolling general strike was launched. It began with the oil workers in Abadan and rapidly spread throughout the Iranian working class.

By late 1978 1.5 million workers (industrial, rural and white collar) were on strike. They did not return to work until the Shah and Bakhtiar's government were overthrown.

As the strike action grew, the workers began to form strike committees. They were strongest amongst the most powerful section of workers, the oil workers of Khuzistan. These committees organised campaigns against hated managers and against imperialist control of the oil industry. Increasingly they fought directly for the downfall of the Shah.

These were the workers who turned the oil taps off and effectively strangled the Shah's regime. Moreover, they were not dominated by Islamic forces at the outset of the struggle. Details are scanty but it would appear that the Stalinist Tudeh party was the predominant influence amongst workers. Other sections of workers followed the oil workers' lead and the shoras - workers' committees - grew out of the strike committees. The rail workers' shora showed the potential of these bodies in the revolution when it blocked all military transport.

The urban poor were another element of the anti-Shah mass movement. The Shah's 'land reform' of the 1960s had pauperised hundreds of thousands of peasants, who subsequently flooded into the cities. There they remained unemployed, becoming shantytown dwellers. Rising prices and the lack of any chance of getting a decent job drove them to desperation. Their hatred of the Shah was intensified by the repeated attacks on their shantytowns by the police and army.

This vast layer, of poor and unemployed workers as well as lumpen-proletarians, was at the core of the demonstrations in 1978-9. However despite its loathing and hatred for the Pahlavis, the lumpen-proletariat and the urban petit bourgeoisie - because they played no essential role in modern economy - lacked the decisive social weight to finish off the Shah. These classes looked nostalgically backward to the old feudal society and to the Mosque. As the organisers of welfare and as the defenders of the Mostazajin (the disinherited) the Shi'ite mullahs were able to cultivate widespread support among these layers.

The bourgeois elements of the anti-Shah coalition were the mercantile capitalists of the bazaar - represented by the higher clergy - and the liberal 'nationalist' capitalists. The latter were represented by figures like Bazargan (the first post-Shah Prime Minister) and eventually ex-president Bani-Sadr. Leaders of the ethnic minorities - the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Azerbaijani leader Ayatollah Shariatmadari - were also part of this alliance.

All had good reason to oppose the Shah. His modernisation programme conflicted with their Islamic traditions. The Shah's land reform stripped the mullahs of many of their estates. He deprived them of their control over education. His encouragement of modern distribution methods and department stores, of state administration of banks etc., undermined the traditional role of the bazaar. All of this was compounded by the Shah's austerity programme in 1977, which placed huge tax burdens on the merchants.

The liberal bourgeoisie found itself constantly elbowed aside by the parasitic court clique and therefore from the rich pickings to be had from the industrialisation programme. They put forward a national solution to this arguing for a 'friendly' transition to national, rather than imperialist controlled, capital. Finally, the national minorities had suffered a denial of national rights and severe repression at the hands of the Shah.

Thus a grand coalition of forces came together in 1978 to overthrow the Shah. It was in the final stages of this process that the principal forces of the left emerged. The Mojahedin and the Fedayeen were both secret guerrilla organisations with little contact with the mass movement. They stepped into the open and garnered widespread support by organising and conducting the popular rising that overthrew Bakhtiar in February 1979.

Despite this monumental achievement, and despite their heroism, these forces, along with the Tudeh, were decisive in

allowing Khomeini to achieve dominance over the mass movement.

The principal organisations of the Iranian left lacked a strategy based on working class independence and on working class leadership. The Mojahedin blended Shi'ite Islam with populism and socialism. Their goal was a harmonious Islamic republic based on the concept of Towhidi (divine integration). Thus their clash with Khomeini was never over the defence of the working class and its organisations. It became a clash over who was the guardian of true Islam.

While the Fedayeen were free from such Islamic influence they were subject to the pressure of Stalinism. This led them to view the revolution under Khomeini as an inevitable and progressive stage in the "people's democratic revolution". In this schema the independent interests of the working class and its leading role were subordinated to the united struggle against imperialism. This led the Fedayeen into the fatal belief that they could peacefully co-exist with Khomeini until the next stage of the revolution. The Tudeh party, well practiced at this game (having collaborated with the bourgeois nationalist Mossadegh in 1953) followed a similar line.

Their views on the nature of the revolution led all of these groups to cede leadership of the mass movement to the Khomeini-ites. During the revolution they raised no warnings against Islamic reaction. They did not raise to the fore the independent class demands of the proletariat in combination with revolutionary democratic demands, which would have met with an enthusiastic response from the masses in struggle. Instead they contented themselves with empty "anti-imperialist" rhetoric. They did not combine in action along with the mullah-led opposition whilst opposing its project of an "Islamic Republic" and offering no support to any bourgeois clerical government. Instead they remained silent and dissolved into the mass movement.

After the victory of an insurrection he opposed, Khomeini was therefore able to claim credit that was rightfully due to the left. Their lack of a political profile distinct from the mass movement enabled Khomeini to get away with this.

After the revolution, in the early period (March through August 1979) the left failed to develop the shoras into independent working class fighting organisations. They failed to turn them into soviet-type bodies - workers' councils - going beyond the workplace and exercising control in all spheres of social life. Most importantly they failed to arm the workers and bring a workers' militia into being. In short, in the first period of the revolution the shoras were left to themselves by the leftist groups. Insofar as the left did influence workers, they encouraged them to support the liquidationist "people's revolutionary" line.

Khomeini moved to fill this vacuum. The shoras could not yet be smashed. They were too powerful a force and Khomeini's grip on power was too weak for that. Besides in reviving production in factories, which the management had deserted, they were performing a service to the beleaguered economy. Khomeini chose to Islamicise the shoras instead. In the first place their control over production was eroded. Bazargan's Labour Minister made clear that the councils should be trade unionised: "I do not believe in shoras. At most we can accept trade unions."

By April Khomeini's confidence was growing. New managers were installed in the nationalised industries (some 70% of all industry) and in May the Islamic Revolutionary Council passed a law empowering the Minister of Justice to "prevent the interference of unauthorised individuals or institutions in workplaces." At the same time a United Centre of Islamic Shoras was set up. This body began the process of purging the left from the shoras, However it failed to completely Islamicise the shoras. This infuriated the regime.

In 1980 it speeded its attack on the workers' organisations by establishing a special body to purge the councils - the Heyat-e-Paksazi. Finally the Union of Islamic Shoras itself was declared illegal in the spring of 1980 and everywhere Anjoman-e-Eslami (Islamic Societies 100% pro-Khomeini) were established.

Of course this protest did not kill off the workers' protests. In July 1982, for example, a strike at the huge Esfahan steel mill won concessions from the regime. However by failing to build and unify the shora movement in the immediate post-revolution period, the left handed Khomeini a golden opportunity to dissipate a potential rival centre of power, the power of the workers.

His victory over the shoras was not inevitable. A correct policy backed up by a mass agitational campaign could have turned the workers' movement into a conscious contender for power. Unfortunately the absence of a communist leadership capable of carrying out such a strategy allowed Khomeini to triumph.

At the level of national politics the left also handed Khomeini a victory. In the first period of the revolution they refused to argue against the establishment of an Islamic Republic. They foolishly believed that the 'democratic stage' of the revolution could be fulfilled under a clerical garb. For this reason despite their boycott of the March 1979 referendum on the Islamic Republic, they merely argued about the form and terms of the referendum. They did not wage a campaign against an Islamic Republic.

Khomeini had no intention of allowing his Islamic Republic to serve as a 'democratic stage'. He used the referendum as a plebiscite to legitimise his bonapartist rule. He moved quickly to renege on the convening of a constituent assembly. A Council of Experts was elected instead. This pushed through an Islamic constitution in which Khomeini was recognised as the Velayat-e-Faghih - God's interpreter and ruler. Despite its religious trappings, the constitution was a bonapartist one, granting Khomeini and a Council of Guardians a Shi'ite veto over all laws. Under this procedure laws on land reform, nationalisations, and expropriations of exiles' property have all been blocked.

With his power constitutionally recognised, Khomeini and the Islamic Republican Party led by his closest supporters in the hierarchy, like the late Ayatollah Beheshti, launched their first counter-revolutionary offensive in August 1979. The Fedayeen offices were raided, liberal and left papers were closed down, and Kurdistan was invaded. To some extent Khomeini's real power fell short of his constitutional power. The Kurds proved more than a match for the ill-trained Pasdars (the newly formed units of Islamic guards) and the demoralised soldiers sent against them. The left were able to retreat in good order and regroup their forces. Faced with this situation Khomeini himself was forced to make a tactical retreat.

To gain time and strength he opportunistically supported the occupation of the American Embassy to rally the whole country around him. He employed anti-imperialist demagogy to reassure those worried by the August events that the revolution was still true to its original course. Later in 1980 when Iraq invaded Iran, he again appealed to the masses' hostility to imperialist aggression - for at that time Saddam's Iraq was acting in concert with US imperialism - in order to strengthen his hold and isolate his enemies.

The trick actually worked. The Mojahedin fell silent. The Fedayeen split, and a majority went over to Khomeini's side, declaring that the Islamic regime 'despite many deficiencies continues to be a bastion of anti-imperialism' (quoted in *Iran Since the Revolution*, Sepehr Zabih).

Likewise the Tudeh party believed the 'democratic alliance' had come into being. They argued that Khomeini and the IRP were progressive as against the liberal bourgeoisie, increasingly personified in 1980-81 by Bani Sadr (then president). Thus they believed in unity with Khomeini which was, in their own words, designed 'to give a scientific framework to Khomeini's thoughts which were very general, vague and hazy.' (Marxism Today, August 1983, interview with Tudeh leader, A. Sadegh).

Far from having 'hazy thoughts', Khomeini and Beheshti knew exactly what they were doing. They used vacuous 'anti-imperialism' to rally the masses to their side, weaken their liberal bourgeois rivals, give cover to their demobilisation of the shoras and incorporate and disarm the left.

At the same time they consolidated their hold on power, coming to dominate the Majlis (parliament) and force Bani-Sadr to accept their candidate, Rajai, as Prime Minister. Most important of all they trained, equipped and enlarged the Pasdaran into a permanent pro-IRP/Khomeini fighting force. While this took place, the principal forces of the non-Islamic left - the Tudeh, Fedayeen majority and the so-called Trotskyist (USFI) HKE - all became slavish followers of the Imam's line. The Fedayeen minority was an honourable exception to this.

As the conflict between Bani-Sadr and the IRP intensified, the Mojahedin made an about turn and sided with the President. His role as a butcher of Kurdistan in August 1979 was conveniently forgotten. He became the new bourgeois

ally in the "people's democratic revolution". (For a full account of the fall of Bani-Sadr see Workers Power No.24). The counter-revolution in Iran began on a national scale as early as August 1979. It was completed in the period between June 1981 and mid-1982. In this period a full-scale war on the Mojahedin, the anti-Khomeini left and the Kurds was launched. Some 20,000 executions were carried out. Public hangings, torture, show trials, mothers televised denouncing and betraying their children - such barbarity became the norm. The Khomeini regime survived the Mojahedin's desperate acts of individual terror on it. In so doing it proved itself more barbarous than ever the Shah had been.

In mid-1982 Khomeini called for the terror to be eased. This was prompted by the need to stabilise Iran for economic purposes, and the belief that the principal threats to the Islamic republic had been defeated. Events since then would seem to suggest that Khomeini has enjoyed some success on both fronts. Urban guerrilla warfare has decreased considerably. The economy seems to have had a modest revival. Oil production has risen from 1.48 million barrels a day in 1980 to 3.2 million in 1982. In January 1983 oil rationing was abolished. Relations with imperialism have improved. In the first quarter of 1983 the "Great Satan" (the USA) granted 13 export permits for previously embargoed goods, and US exports to Iran were worth 200 million dollars in 1983.

Appearances, though, can be deceptive. In the first place the regime remains torn by factional strife. The Imam's line and Hojatieh (factions within the ruling Islamic Republican Party) have waged a battle over economic policy that had fatal consequences for the Tudeh party. The Imam's line faction favoured a state-capitalist approach and extensive trade with the USSR and the Eastern bloc. Their model was Libya. The Hojatieh, based on the mercantile capitalists and controllers of the state industries ("technocrats"), counterposed to this the decentralisation of the economy and a heavy reliance on trade and private capitalism as the norm. The Minister of Industry spoke for the Hojatieh when he declared:

"The government would better leave industry to the private sector...Islam respects private ownership."

It is undeniable that Khomeini favours this faction, but is not prepared to allow it to completely destroy the Imam's line faction in the way Bani-Sadr was destroyed. He recognises that his continued mass support amongst the urban poor is, to some extent, due to the social policies of the Imam's line faction. He knows he still needs that support. However, as a bonaparte, he has protected the Imam's line faction and warned them not to oppose him and the Hojatieh policies he favours. He did this by sacrificing his most loyal ally, the Tudeh. Their reward for slavish support has been the arrest of 1,500 members, the closing down of their press and the banning of their party.

As in Spain, Indonesia and Chile in previous decades, the "democratic alliance" has cost the blood of the Stalinist party's rank and file. The executions of Tudeh members have begun.

The fact that Khomeini has to continue with a limited terror to contain the rifts in his regime and continue the senseless war with Iraq to maintain the Islamic fervour of the Iranian people, testify to the underlying instability of his regime. Iran remains a powder keg. Its economic revival is hollow, based entirely on oil exports. Production throughout Iranian industry is still at pre-revolutionary levels. Living standards are down to one third of their 1975 level. Unemployment stands somewhere between 2 and 4 million out of an economically active population of 11.5 million. Only 800,000 of the unemployed receive dole. The cost of imports is rising constantly. In 1981 Iran's import bill was up to \$18.2 billion and is still rising.

The same combination of repression and economic crisis that plunged the Shah's regime into disarray will do the same to Khomeini's system. Religious exaltation will not indefinitely hold out against crude material factors. Then no "miracles of Allah" will save Khomeini's regime. The Islamic Republic cannot last. Even more than was the case with the Shah, the action of the workers will prove decisive in the downfall of Khomeini or his successors.

The forces of the Iranian left who have not been either decimated or demoralised must learn the lessons of 1979-84. The revolution, if it is to triumph, must be a workers' revolution. Power cannot be shared with progressive bourgeois elements or clerics.

They serve and belong to a class antagonistic to the interests of the masses in Iran. To lead the next Iranian revolution a revolutionary Trotskyist party armed with a clear programme for workers' power must be built. Only such a party can lead the revolution out of the dark night of Islamic reaction and into the freedom and light of a revolutionary workers state.

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