



Boycott the elections! Down with the Islamic republic!

Sun, 15/02/2004 - 23:00

This Friday ? 20 February ? elections to Iran's parliament will take place. But most Iranians entitled to vote won't take part. Perhaps one in three across the country will go to the polls ? but it could be as low as one in ten in the capital Tehran.

As the country marks the 25th anniversary of the "Islamic revolution" that overthrew the hated US-backed Shah, and four years after the "reformers" gained control of parliament in the 2000 elections, the mass of the Iranian people ? overwhelmingly young ? are bitter and disillusioned with their leaders.

The first reason for this is the utterly cynical and reactionary decision of the right-wing vetting body, the Guardian Council to ban about 2,500 candidates. The biggest pro-reform faction, the Islamic Iran Participation Front, had most of its top leaders disqualified and is not taking part. Some 80 sitting MPs, including some of Iran's best-known politicians, were among the candidates. This decision, taken some weeks ago, led to about 130 of the parliament's 290 deputies to offer their resignations and sparked an immediate if short-lived sit-in by the reformist deputies in the parliament.

The formal reason for barring the candidates ? and thereby ensuring the conservative clerics will regain control of the parliament after Friday's elections ? is that they have breached articles 28 and 30 of the country's Islamic constitution; namely, that they do not believe in the Islamic republic, nor the "rule of the jurist" which vests most political power in the supreme leader (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) as the embodiment of God's will.

For some years within Iran's ruling institutions a weak form of dual power has existed. On the one hand, the parliament has the power to draft, debate and pass legislation. The directly elected President of Iran ? Khatami ? also has a democratic mandate and has edged Iran's foreign policy towards a more pro-western stance. On the other, the Guardian Council (made up of clerics appointed by Khamenei) is able to reject any laws adopted and countermand the foreign policy initiatives of President Khatami.

In the past all controversial measures, especially those that have sought to reduce the power of the Guardian Council have been slapped down. Ayatollah Khamenei aims to restore a pro-cleric majority in parliament and rid himself of a democratic irritant, only grudgingly conceded in the first place.

A prominent Iranian dissident, Hashem Aghajari, has urged people to adopt a policy of passive resistance. Aghajari, a jailed academic, launched an attack on the country's clerical establishment in an open letter. He was sentenced to death two years ago after he questioned the clergy's right to rule, a sentence later reversed by the Supreme Court.

He said that organising an "unfree election" marked an end for hope of reforms from within, and urged passive resistance. He blamed President Khatami for lacking the "will and courage" to bring about the change that he said most Iranians wanted.

At several points in the last three years millions of students have taken to the streets to protest against theocratic rule and for more democratic rights. At the forefront of these protests have been demands for a free and uncensored press and a fight against the rising costs of education. At first the students strongly backed President Khatami after he was elected; but he has equivocated in giving his full support to the students and has sought to mediate and conciliate with the Guardian Council. As a result the students and the working class have grown tired and distrustful both of Khatami and the parliament.

Student protests have been dealt with harshly by the gangs of armed thugs under the control of the Council, who have often raided student campuses and bludgeoned protestors and arrested hundreds of them. The lack of resolution of Khatami and the Islamic Iran Participation Front has made the students wary of mass protests.

In addition, the working class has experienced a rise in unemployment and a drastic deterioration in their living standards; meanwhile, the "reformers" have failed to press the urgent social and economic demands of the working class, and have appeared indifferent to the arrests of trade unionists compared to their concern at the fate of dissident journalists and academics. While the "reformers" have managed to oversee some changes ? such as allowing women to replace the full head-to-toe chador with headscarves for example ? they have failed to lead a fight to remove the real power of the clerics.

There is no doubt that since the crushing of the last major round of student demonstrations more than one year ago, the theocrats in the Guardian Council have taken the offensive against the "reformers".

The idea that "passive resistance" is going to seriously embarrass ? never mind dislodge ? these reactionary, religious zealots, is a sick joke.

Of course, a mass boycott of the elections this Friday is justified. But the democratic disaffection must be organised, put back on the streets and allied to the concerns of the Iranian working class. It was the mass, militant organisation of the Iranian working class in 25 years ago that forced the Shah to flee the country, allowed Ayatollah Khoemeni to return from exile and swept away the props of US imperialist domination of Iran. The same power can topple the Islamic Republic.

This task cannot be accomplished by the democratic middle class, peacefully nibbling away at the enormous power of the theocracy. It can only be swept away by the working class leading all democratic forces and the poor through strikes and mass, well-defended protests organised in shoras.

On the ruins of the Islamic Republic a workers and poor peasants' government will liberate women, grant the broadest freedoms of self-expression and rights of self-determination to national minorities. But it will also tear up the foundations of corrupt, exploitative Iranian capitalism and reorganise the national economy to provide for the basic needs of the people

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