

How the clerics crushed the Iranian revolution

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Was the defeat of the working class inevitable? No, argues Rebecca Anderson, it was because of the disastrous mistakes and betrayals of the various left-wing parties.

How was it that despite the vanguard role the Iranian working class and the left played in events leading up to the revolution, and in the insurrection itself, the organisations of the working class were in the following three years first purged and co-opted then smashed by the caste of reactionary clerics led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini? We will argue that if a party had existed armed with the right strategy and tactics during the revolutionary upheaval, it could have transformed the struggle against the Shah, his US masters and the clerics into one against capitalism and for socialism. This would have meant defending from day one vital democratic demands, the rights of women, the minority nationalities in the Iranian state, and those of the workers, the peasants and the urban poor, resisting every step towards that of a clerical dictatorship.

Iranian politics before 1979

The Shah's regime up to 1978 played a similar role in the Middle East to that of Israel to which it was closely allied. It kept the other regional states in check with its huge American equipped army and opened up its economy to the US and European multinationals. The basis of the regime was its huge oil wealth and the Shah allowed the country's oil consortium "nationalised" under the nationalist government of Mohammed Mossadegh in 1952, to be run by British and American companies. This was why the British and the Americans had engineered the coup that ousted Mossadegh in 1953 and restored the Shah as an absolute monarch. At this time, Iran supplied 13 per cent of Britain's oil and 17 per cent of the US's. The imperialist countries financed his enormous army, trained his murderous secret police force, Savak, and his vast bureaucracy, which constituted a third of the urban workforce.

Foreign direct investment in the 1960s and 70s meant the expansion of the oil industry, creation of large modern factories in Iran and massively expanded the working class, which stood at 2.5 million in 1977 and was concentrated in the southern oil fields and in the large industrial plants in Tehran and other major cities. Another major oppositional force were the country's oppressed national minorities: the several million Kurdish speaking people in the north-west and the Arab speaking population of Khuzestan in the south west, the area of the main oil fields.

The Shah tried to repress these forces in the 1970s as the economy moved from the boom of the early 1970s (the oil price hike led by Opec oil producers' cartel) to the bust of the economic crisis of the later 1970s. All political parties were banned, except the Shah's Rastakhiz party. Savage repression was visited on the Tudeh Party, the country's Stalinist communist party, whose history stretched back to the early 1940s and the Fedayeen-e Khalq, a guerrilla force strong in the universities.

Iranian workers and intellectuals had a long tradition of socialism. Founded in 1908, the Iranian Social Democratic Party played a significant role in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11 and its leading figures corresponded with Karl Kautsky and Georgii Plekhanov, two of the leaders of the Second

International (1889-1914). An Iranian Communist Party was founded in June 1920 - before the British Communist Party. After the CP was crushed and its leaders exiled in the mid 1920s, the Tudeh Party was founded in 1941.

The economic crisis of the mid-1970s led to mass unemployment and runaway inflation. Iran was dependent on the imports of food and when prices started to rise the working class began to strike. There were 60 major strikes or other major workers' protests from 1975-77 despite the heavy repression. This repression gave the strikes and protests a more consciously political character that was soon directed at the Shah himself. He attempted to pacify the masses through tokenistic opposition to profiteering and the creation of a government but this wasn't enough.

General strike

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 November-December some 1.5 million workers (industrial, rural and white collar) were on strike. As the strike movement grew, the workers began to elect strike committees. These were strongest among the most powerful section of workers, the oil workers of the south. These committees organised campaigns against hated managers and against imperialist control of the oil industry. Increasingly they called openly for the downfall of the Shah.

Other sections of workers followed the oil workers' lead. Soon the strike committees combined to form shoras, councils of workers, and these led and co-ordinated the strike movement. The rail workers' shora blacked all military transport as the repression grew. There was some Islamist influence in the shoras from the start but the predominant force among workers was the Tudeh party. In the universities, the students were influenced both by the Marxist Fedayeen and an Islamist-populist force, the Iranian Peoples Mujahedeen (Mujahedeen-e-Khalq) led by Massoud Rajavi. The latter had an ideology that combined Islamism with Marxist influences.

The Shah's "land reform" of the 1960s had pauperised hundreds of thousands of peasants and they flooded into the cities in search of work. There they remained unemployed and were badly affected by price rises. Their hatred of the Shah was intensified by the repeated attacks on their shantytowns by the police and army. Rather than looking forward to democracy and an expansion of the modern economy without poverty, this layer of people looked back nostalgically to a time without industry and to the Mosque. As the organisers of welfare and as the defenders of the Mostazajin (the disinherited), the more radical Shia mullahs were able to cultivate widespread support among this layer.

The merchants, moneylenders and small scale industrial capitalists of the bazaar (the traditional market areas in Iranian cities) had been the targets of the Shah's anti-profiteering campaign, and foreign direct investment in large-scale production and banking left them out of pocket. The Shah's encouragement of department stores and state control of banks threatened these capitalists.

The guild-like organisations of the bazaaris were closely linked to the Shia clergy and funded the Islamic charitable foundations. The clergy represented this more traditional but wealthy and numerous section of the capitalist class in Iran. Some prominent big capitalists also wanted an end to the dominance of the multinationals. One of their leaders was Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, who was briefly President after the revolution. Leaders of the ethnic minorities - the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Azerbaijani leader Ayatollah Shariatmadari - were also part of the anti-Shah alliance.

Khomeini's rise

Ayatollah Khomeini had been opposed to the modernising reforms of the Shah in the 1960s, on a reactionary basis. On 22 March 1963, in Qom, paratroopers and Savak agents fired on theological

students protesting the opening of liquor stores. Disturbance erupted in Tabriz too, with hundreds being killed. Khomeini publicly denounced the Shah as a tyrant. He was exiled, first to Iraq and in the year before the revolution to Paris.

In exile he developed his concept of an Islamic republic where there would be rule by Islamic jurists (velayat-i faqih). The monarchy must be abolished and replaced with a presidency and a government answerable to parliament. But the Shia clergy through a council of guardians would decide on whether laws passed by parliament or acts of the president and government, were consistent with Islam. If they judged they were not they could quite simply be abrogated. This system Khomeini insisted would end the corruption of the monarchy and its subservience to American imperialism. He also emphasised that it would raise up the poor and dispossessed masses of the shantytowns, ending social inequality and exploitation.

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 Bahktiar in February 1979.

Armed forces rebel

On 10 February 1979, at Farah Abad army base in east Tehran, there was a clash between the Fedayeen-e Khalq group's supporters and soldiers loyal to the Shah. The Fedayeen overwhelmed the officers and won over the rank and file. The following day they did the same at all the army bases and police stations in Tehran. At 2.00 pm on 11 February 1979, the army commanders declared it would not fight the people any longer. The revolution was victorious. Vastly important as the figure of Khomeini was, powerful as were the mullahs in mobilising the vast demonstrations, the overthrow of the regime had been accomplished by the workers strikes, led in important measures by the Tudeh, whilst the insurrection that split and disarmed the military was in large measure the work of the Fedayeen.

Khomeini, who had tried to call off the general strike, was horrified by the Fedayeen's actions and terrified that the left would now seize power. Through the mosques, he instructed his supporters to seize all the weapons the Fedayeen had taken. The latter all too meekly allowed this to be done. Why? Because they insisted Khomeini was an anti-imperialist, who in this stage was the leader of the revolution. Nevertheless in the coming weeks and months, Khomeini moved decisively to Islamise the revolution. On 1 April, following a national referendum, more than 98 per cent of the population voted in favour of the establishment of an Islamic Republic. Khomeini decreed that all women were to wear the hijab and his Hezbollah set out to enforce it. All demonstrations that were called to defend democratic rights, swiftly came under attack and were broken up by large gangs of knife and club wielding Islamist thugs.

Despite their historic achievement, and personal heroism in the revolutionary overthrow of the regime, the left parties, along with the Tudeh, were decisive in allowing Khomeini to achieve dominance over the mass movement. The Mujahedeen too as were an Islamist organisation despite the elements of populism and socialism, fell in behind the forces led by Khomeini because of his anti-imperialist rhetoric.

Stalinism in Iran

The Stalinist Fedayeen and Tudeh at first supported Khomeini because they believed a country like Iran could not go straight from a royalist dictatorship and imperialist domination straight to socialism. Instead it would have to first have a revolution to put the patriotic capitalists in power, who would create a capitalist democracy. This would give the workers' movement the legal rights with which to wage the class struggle. Then at a certain stage the struggle for a socialist revolution would begin. Misunderstanding Khomeini as

the leader of the national or anti-imperialist capitalists, the Stalinist organisations also fell in behind him.

Although Khomeini represented the more anti-imperialist sector of the bourgeoisie - neither he nor it had any intention of giving the workers a democratic space or stage to build up their forces for a socialist revolution. On the contrary, they would, despite using the Tudeh and Fedayeen for a limited period and under strict control, crush them as soon as they felt able to dispense with their assistance.

The workers fought on with local strikes but their organisations repeatedly urged them to compromise or surrender to the regime. Thus the Tudeh and the Fedayeen undermined their own base and presented their throats to the knife of the butcher Khomeini.

These organisations failed to warn about the dangers of Islamic reaction and its threat to the revolution or argue for working class independence from Khomeini and his followers while working alongside them against the Shah and imperialism, and so opened themselves and the working class up to attack once they had been used by Khomeini. They failed to intervene into and lead the shoras and develop them to the extent that they would be able to challenge Khomeini's claim to power. They just dissolved themselves into the mass movement and this meant that many forces of the revolution looked to Khomeini for leadership and attributed their victory to this leadership.

The Tudeh, Mujahedeen and Feyadeen did not oppose the establishment of an Islamic Republic and simply abstained in the March 1979 referendum. This referendum was used by Khomeini to renege on his earlier promises of democracy, arguing that they were in contradiction to Islam. Rather than establishing a constituent assembly, he instead called the election of a council of experts who created a constitution that recognised Khomeini's god-given right to rule and gave him and the council the ability to veto any law in the name of Islam. They used this veto to claw back the victories the workers and peasants had gained through the revolution - the nationalisations, land reform and expropriation of exiles property.

The cleric's offensive

In late 1979, with their government consolidated, Khomeini and the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), founded by the pro-Khomeini clergy, began to smash the organisations that helped him win power. He ordered the raiding of the Fedayeen's offices and shut down media critical of him. A subsequent demonstration of 60,000 against the media clampdown was attacked by counter-revolutionary gangs (the hezbollah) loyal to Khomeini. He had to use these fascist gangs because there were shoras in the barracks and some soldiers were refusing to attack the Iranian workers. This demonstrated that it was still not too late for the Iranian revolution to be won back from Khomeini as the loyalty of the army is key to a government, but the left still failed to organise against the Islamic reaction.

Khomeini launched a fierce attack on the Kurds who had risen up and established a de facto autonomy in their region. Fortunately many in the army also refused to take part in this invasion, which weakened the attack and forced Khomeini to pit his ill-disciplined and inexperienced gangs against the well-organised Kurds. Khomeini was forced to retreat.

Part of the reason that Khomeini was able to begin to attack the left and wage war on the Kurds was because he was at the same time demobilising the shoras. This began even during the revolution itself when he argued that the shoras were un-Islamic as they challenged private property. The labour minister made clear that the councils should be trade unionised: "I do not believe in shoras. At most we can accept trade unions."

This was not enough to defeat the shoras and so in April a policy of Islamising the shoras began. 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 islamise them. In 1980 it sped up its attack on the workers' organisations by establishing a special body to purge them - the Heyat-e-Paksazi. Finally even the Union of Islamic Shoras itself was declared illegal in the spring of 1980 and everywhere Anjoman-e-Eslami (pro-Khomeini Islamic Societies) were established.

There continued to be strikes but without shoras and with much of the left backing Khomeini, the strikes, even when they won concessions, did not halt Khomeini's counter-revolution. This demobilisation was not inevitable and could have been fought against but this could only have been done through a rejection of the islamisation of the shoras and a commitment to turning them into workers councils capable of organising against the government and fighting for socialism. This would have required the intervention of a revolutionary party with these aims and none of the Iranian left took up this task.

The other reason Khomeini was able to enact a counter-revolution was his use of anti-imperialist rhetoric and largely symbolic actions. The Left were completely fooled by this. He supported the occupation of the US embassy and used Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980 to appeal once again to the anti-imperialism of the workers and the left. The Mujahedeen fell into step and so did most of the Fedayeen, with only a minority heroically opposing him. The Tudeh continued to believe that Khomeini was a progressive force and went as far as to say that he was progressive against Iran's liberal capitalists who he was now struggling against.

The new President, Bani Sadr, was much closer the liberal bourgeoisie but the IRP and Khomeini dominated the parliament and forced Bani Sadr to accept their candidate, Mohammad Ali Rajai, as prime minister. After this consolidation of power, the IRP and Khomeini intensified the counter-revolution and it became an all-out war against the Mujahedeen, the Left and the Kurds. About 20,000 were executed by the new regime and in this period the new regime proved itself even more barbarous than the Shah.

By mid-1982, Khomeini had succeeded in smashing the left and the Mujahedeen and defeating the Kurdish struggle for independence. He also understood the need for Iran's economy to be allowed to recover and so moved the focus of the state to increasing oil production. He was also successful in this and 1983 Iran began trading with the US, although there were still stringent economic sanctions in place that continued to strangle the economy.

The last political organisation that Khomeini needed to decisively smash was the Tudeh - who had supported him so loyally since 1979. This he finally did in 1983 when he arrested 1,500 of their members and executed many, forcing its leaders to appear on television to confess their "crimes" and renounce Marxism.

Permanent revolution

The Iranian revolution demonstrates both the potential for revolution in the Middle East and also the dangers of accommodation either to religious leaders or the national capitalist class. While it is important to defend the Middle Eastern states whenever they are obliged to defend themselves against imperialism, both its wars and its exploitation of the natural resources and people of these countries, socialists must understand that these leaders may rely for a period on the force of the working class but only for their own objectives. As the Iranian revolution shows, the workers will be forcibly excluded from power and their organs of struggle smashed so that they cannot be used against the new regime in the way they were used against the old.

The working class is the strongest force in society because it is able to shut down the oil fields, factories, and the railways. Yet the Iranian Left conceded leadership and state power to those who exploit the workers and break their strikes. Yes, there needed to be a de facto combination of mass forces in action to overthrow the Shah, but this made totally independent organisation and the development of the shoras all the more important. It made the creation of mass working class party even more important. Rather than allow the capitalists and clerics to consolidate their power, the left should have fought for the workers to take power themselves and create a socialist society rather than the brutal dictatorship that they still suffer under in Iran today.

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