



Iran: Islam, repression and rebellion

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While the West plots 'regime change' in Iran, Simon Hardy reviews a new book on the class struggle inside the country, a timely reminder that regimes can also be changed from below

For anti-imperialists, perhaps no country poses a greater dilemma than Iran. It is one of the few states to stand up to imperialism but it is ruled by an arch-reactionary clerical regime. The increasing threat of war makes it essential for socialists to understand the complexities of Iranian society and its history both in order to defend the country against imperialist attack and to elaborate a political programme for the working class to smash the regime and take power.

Iran on the Brink is an important contribution to that understanding, providing essential insights into the nature of the Iranian regime, its effects on the workers' movement and its relationships with the rest of the world.

Malm and Esmailan root their analysis of the Iranian regime in the dynamics of the revolution of 1979. In that year, the working class organised a successful revolution against the Shah, overthrowing his pro-imperialist regime with a general strike and mass demonstrations. Workers' councils, shoras, organised by mass meetings of workers, were set up across the country. Some even began to exercise control over production, acting as embryonic forms of a new working class state. Khane'ye Karegar (the workers' house) organised protests with slogans like 'Workers' democracy is limitless'.

What was limited, however, was the workers' political leadership. The authors of *Iran on the Brink* correctly point to the lack of a revolutionary leadership in the workers' movement, whose main party, the Tudeh Party, was Stalinist and loyal to the USSR. Fearing the spread of a revolutionary movement, Moscow ordered a boycott of the shoras and Tudeh activists began a campaign urging workers to leave them.

At a time when it was crucial for the working class movement to go forward, this was enough to sow confusion and uncertainty in its ranks. In the resulting political vacuum, the Islamists were able to take the initiative. They oriented towards the petty bourgeoisie of the market places, the Bazaari, a socially conservative force, certainly, but one that was fundamentally opposed to both the Shah and US imperialism. The alliance between the Bazaari and the imams, inspired and led by the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, was, therefore, both anti-imperialist and anti-working class.

Khomeini's rise to power

Khomeini returned to Iran after the Shah's departure and found the workers' movement prepared to hand him power. He ordered an end to strikes, condemning them as non-Islamic and began the counter-revolution, ordering his supporters to set up Shora-ye eslami, Islamic councils, in workplaces. This created a situation of dual power between the existing, but politically leaderless, workers' movement and the Islamists. The Islamic leaders resolved this in their own favour by organising and arming the petit-bourgeoisie and many unemployed workers in the Pasdaran. This organisation took on violent fascistic qualities and was unleashed on the workers' movement with the aim of crushing the revolution.

The lack of an independent leadership, and illusions in the Islamic movement's ability to fight imperialism, led to the drowning of the workers' revolution in blood. One eyewitness describes this period: 'You could turn on the radio and hear nothing but the names of executed shora activists being read out with contempt.'

After consolidating power, the Islamic republic began an antagonistic relationship with the USA. The regime expelled

US multinationals and established rigid control over industry, nationalising it and using it to enrich the leaders, which led to a generation of 'Millionaire Mullahs'. This contrasted sharply with the abominable conditions of many workers in the country, especially those in the oil fields and the brick-making industry.

Repeated confrontations with the US, including the eight year war with Iraq, in which Saddam Hussein was funded and armed by Washington, served to maintain the Islamic regime's 'anti-imperialist' credentials as well as justifying repression of oppositionist movements. Nonetheless, as the book makes clear, Tehran also followed a policy aimed at achieving stable relations with the major imperialist powers, particularly via links with the European Union.

Increase in poverty

Today, the regime's disastrous economic policies have created mass unemployment. This is used by the bosses to keep down wages and to pressure workers into accepting harsher conditions. As a result of poverty, drug abuse is rife - 1 in 5 adults abuse drugs on a regular basis. Prostitution is also common as the sole means of income for young women and their families. The number of prostitutes in Tehran alone is estimated to be at least 300,000.

The regime has repeatedly attacked living standards: 'In 2005 the government set the poverty line at \$320 per month. At the same time, it announced a new official minimum wage of \$130 per month - such arrogance is outstripped by employers who frequently offer wages as low as \$65 a month.'

Another aspect of modern Iran that the book deals with is the role of ethnic minorities. Iran is home to Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, Azeris and Jews. The state oppression of the Kurds led to a revolt in 2005 after a Kurdish leader was shot dead in the street by Pasdaran thugs. A mass uprising in Kurdish towns and villages was only crushed by the intervention of 100,000 troops.

Similarly, the Arabs live in one of the most oil-rich areas, but see only 1.5 per cent of profit put back into their communities. There were Arab uprisings in April and July 2005 and then again in January 2006.

In summer 2005, a conference of Iranian ethnic minorities, held in London, led to the founding of an organisation to coordinate their struggles. Few of them want to separate from Iran, but all want an end to the Islamic regime. Since the 'minorities', when totalled up, account for over 50 per cent of the population, their collective action could have a powerful impact.

Other issues are dealt with to illustrate the source of the regime's power in its anti-imperialist rhetoric, its complete control over resources and production and its violent dictatorship over the working class. When it comes to issues in the news, like the nuclear programme and the possibilities for social change in the country, the authors seek to give some context to the headlines.

Without explicitly saying so, they suggest that anti-imperialists should defend Iran's nuclear programme. Indeed, they give some credence to the government's claim that it only wants to reduce the amount of oil that is used internally so that more can be sold internationally. An alternative source of energy has to be found and nuclear power is the first choice.

As the authors point out, both Germany and Japan have civilian nuclear power stations that could be used to create nuclear weapons, but neither of those countries has suffered sanctions or been subjected to detailed international inspection of its facilities. Why should Iran be treated differently?

This is, frankly, rather disingenuous. Tehran is almost undoubtedly trying to develop a nuclear weapon capability and has every right to do so. Perhaps the authors wanted to avoid offending a western audience brought up on hostility to nuclear weapons. Given their own commitment to a class analysis of politics, they would have done better to explain the difference between a principled defence of the right of a semi-colony to possess such weapons and principled opposition to all aspects of the military power of imperialist states, not just nuclear weapons.

Western liberals have generally identified two forces as possible sources of change. One is a reformist movement

developing within the political system that could liberalise the country and open it up to the west; the other is the development of a strong middle class that could act as a new comprador bourgeoisie.

However, the authors correctly point to the failures of the reformist movement that arose around the 2005 election campaign. They describe its political incoherence and ties to the political institutions that already exist in the country: 'It emerged from the interior of the very state apparatus it was supposed to transmute.' Because of this, it failed to provide any kind of radical leadership to the oppressed. When the students protested, the head of the reform movement, Khatami, condemned them and sided with the security forces sent to crush them.

More recently, a third force has attracted the attention of some British journalists: Iran's youth. A chapter of the book is devoted to growing western interest in books, like *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and the wild sex and drug parties of middle class Iranian youth. Journalists provide anecdotal evidence of the dislike for the regime and even a pro-USA sentiment amongst many of the bikini-clad women and goateed snow boarders who drink Coca Cola and praise the invasion of Iraq.

Those ideologues and writers who expect this select section of middle class youth to fulfil a 'revolutionary' role are playing a dangerous game. Even though they may not support a military attack themselves, they are providing, as the book puts it, 'an intellectual bridge requisite for a western attack on Iran'.

Oppressed workers

What these approaches have in common is that they overlook the exploited and terribly oppressed workers. The central theme of this book, however, is that Iran's history of political 'frosts and thaws' is related to the strength of the workers' movement. The struggle against dictatorship is successful for a time, creates space for democracy to grow, and then is cruelly defeated, usually by reactionary forces supported by foreign imperialism. The 1953 victory of the Shah represented a defeat for the working class as the US imposed its control on the country. The defeat of the Shah showed that the Iranian workers had the courage and ability to take a serious step towards socialism, but the rise of the Islamists and the subsequent counter-revolution ushered in a new era of misery and violence against the class.

Now, the Iranian working class is recovering. Since 2004, a series of major strikes and protests has gripped key industries, including the huge Iranian Khodra factory. The fact that most major companies are run by the state means that the workers' protests have an innate tendency towards politicisation.

All independent working class organisations are banned in Iran. No strikes or independent working class actions are allowed. Yet the workers are defying the regime to fight back. The book is full of wonderful examples of workers and socialists beginning to reorganise, learning the lessons of the '79 revolution, and refusing to accept their miserable situation.

Workers' demonstrations and strikes are routinely attacked, not only by the police but also the Pasdaran. Militants are arrested and thrown into prison for joining a trade union. Many are tortured by the regime and disappear. Some are simply shot dead on the picket line, as happened in 2004 during a strike of construction workers. Still the actions escalate. May Day has become an important day of struggle in Iran since 2004, with each year a bigger march taking to the streets. The number of strikes is growing too, with over 140 reported monthly by the end of 2005.

As the book's title says, Iran is moving towards another decisive confrontation. The imperialists are clearly plotting the imposition of 'regime change' but regimes can also be changed from below; by the workers and youth who can lead a new revolutionary struggle against the reactionary Islamic government.

For that to happen, a revolutionary party that has learnt the lessons of past struggles, particularly 1979, and can apply a revolutionary policy to the struggles of today must be built. *Iran on the Brink* is a valuable book – not only for those who want to understand the history and present motivations of the Islamic republic, but also for anyone interested in the future of the struggle to overthrow the dictatorship.

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