



# Iranian clerical dictatorship rigs elections

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The supreme leader of the Iranian Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has declared last week's parliamentary elections a great success for the existing regime and a blow to Iran's enemies, namely George Bush.

He claimed the election was completely free and fair. Supporters of the regime have scored a total victory over the "reformists" - supporters of President Mohammed Khatami - but in circumstances of a low poll of around 48 to 50 per cent.

Turnout in the capital Tehran - a stronghold for the reformists - was 28 per cent of eligible voters. The BBC's correspondent reported another significant feature: it appeared that among the candidates returned there was not a single woman - there were 13 in the outgoing chamber.

Though the turnout was nothing like the boycott which the reformists had called for reports suggest widespread discontent with the poll, including riots in Firouzabad and Izeh - where eight demonstrators have been killed after police opened fire.

As part of its campaign to bring Iran firmly back under US dominance the Bush administration has declared:

"These actions do not represent free and fair elections and are not consistent with international norms." However since Bush himself lacks democratic legitimacy, this is pure hypocrisy.

The poll follows seven years of attempted "reforms" by President Khatami, who sought to allow increased freedom of the press and the loosening of some Islamic cultural and social restrictions. In fact his achievements, in terms of liberalisation have been meagre indeed. This is due to the entrenched position of the ayatollahs and senior clerics, their continued ability to use not only the police and the army to break up demonstrations but large gangs of thugs, paid for via the mosques and religious foundations.

The reformists look to the United States and Britain to pressurise the regime into limited reform. But in so doing they reinforce the "anti-imperialist" credentials of Khamenei and Co. The only standpoint from which to attack the clerical dictatorship is not that of pro-Americanism, or the dream of restoring the Pahlavi monarchy.

Nor can it be done by opening the country up to "western culture". This is a self-defeating strategy. The regime cannot be reformed it must be overthrown. This cannot be done hand in hand with imperialism but in real struggle against it.

This will never win over the mass social base the regime retains amongst the urban poor for the entry of the multinationals and full scale privatisation will spell an even greater deterioration of life for them. Only sections of the middle class and the intelligentsia would benefit from this.

Therefore the student youth who worked to bring the reformists to power, if they want to see real democracy and the independence of Iran from imperialism, if they want to see the conditions of the urban poor dramatically improved at the expense of the rich and the privileged, must turn to the working class as the principle force for change. Workers continue to struggle heroically against their own exploitation and when they do so immediately come under attack from the regime.

Examples are many and recent. On Saturday 24 January 2004, four workers were killed and over 40 injured when the

special police force ended an eight-day sit-in at the Nazkhaton copper smelting plant in the city of Shahr-e Babak, in Kerman Province. Workers had taken strike action and occupied the plant in protest against temporary contracts, layoffs and long delays in the payment of wages and benefits. Following the killings over 80 people were arrested.

Despite the most savage and brutal conditions Iran's workers continue to resist. What they need to turn these episodic acts of bravery into a mass social upheaval, that no police force, army or gangs of thugs can crush, is a revolutionary workers party. This must link the courageous student youth to the worker militants.

It must be armed with an action programme of social and economic demands for the workers, the urban poor and the poor peasants. Such a programme must, of course, demand unhampered democratic rights, free of clerical "guardians". It must defend the rights of women to free themselves from all Islamic legal restrictions and for the rights of the minority nationalities, Kurds, Arabs and Baluchis etc, to self-determination. It must demand the immediate convening of a sovereign constituent assembly, guarded by a workers militia, which can debate and adopt solutions to all the country's problems.

The ayatollahs and the mullahs must be returned to private life, where they can continue to feed off such of the faithful as voluntarily purchase their ideological opium. But this programme must at the same time totally oppose the entry of the North American and European "benefactors", who will only plunder the country as they did under the last Shah.

Only the strategy of permanent revolution - the goal of a revolutionary workers and poor peasants government, based on democratic shoras elected by these classes and the urban poor - can achieve the immediate and burning needs of the masses. Such a government could establish democracy for all, aid an agrarian revolution by the peasants, enact an emergency programme of providing decent housing, healthcare, schools for the dwellers of the shantytowns.

Though the Islamic republic looks strong at the moment its foundations rest on shifting sand. It is conservative, corrupt, bureaucratic as well as vicious. The young, the women, the workers will undoubtedly continue to challenge it and provide a basis for a revolutionary movement to develop. The sooner this happens the better for all the oppressed and exploited and the worse for the clerical obscurantists and the imperialists.

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