



Iranian government clamps down on opposition

Tue, 03/08/1999 - 18:16

More than 2,000 students and workers are currently being tortured in Iranian jails after the Islamist regime moved to crush a nationwide rebellion over the summer months. A number of prisoners are already believed to have been killed.

In June and July 1999, thousands of students took to the streets and occupied their campuses, demanding, 'Death to dictatorship!' and 'Long live freedom!'.

The response from the police, the right wing military squads, the Pasdars, and the clerical fascist thugs of Hizbollah, and the Asaar, was swift and brutal. They surrounded the universities in Tehran and in other cities and began arbitrarily arresting everyone in the street who might be a student or a sympathiser of the pro-democracy movement.

Although mass demonstrations forced the regime to release some protesters, others were attacked by baton-wielding cops and thugs. In an attempt to crush the movement, Pasdars even raided the dormitories of Tehran university, where the students were staging a defiant sit-in. On 5 July seven students were killed by police in their dormitories in Amir Abaad near Tehran.

Those who were not immediately arrested were beaten up so badly they were hospitalised. But even in hospital, the gangs pursued the students, dragging their victims from their beds and taking them to torture camps like the infamous Evin prison. Two students reportedly died in the hospital.

Two prominent student leaders, Manouchehr Mohammadi and Gholamreza Mohajerinejad, were paraded on television, having clearly been drugged and tortured, to recant their crimes and admit to being agents of 'foreign powers'.

During the past two years, the Iranian ruling class has been bitterly divided. Despite the continued anti-Western rhetoric of the Islamists many bosses and clerics too, want a thaw in Iran's relations with imperialism. This reforming wing is prepared to make democratic concessions in order to undermine the fundamentalists and win the trust of the USA.

It was these forces who put forward President Mohamad Khatami who was swept into office in 1997 with mass support. In a country where 60 per cent of the population is under 25, students are a large and significant section of society and they played a large part in Khatami's campaign.

But in the last few months, workers and students have grown increasingly frustrated not only by Khatami's failure to introduce meaningful reforms but also his willingness to bring in counter-reforms. The first signs of this growing anger were felt in the workplaces.

Independent trade unions are illegal in Iran. Meanwhile workers face all the problems associated with the worldwide neo-liberal offensive. Wages are often paid late, or not at all. Privatisation results in massive lay-offs.

Parliament is in the process of passing a major amendment to the labour laws, which will exempt workers from any protection in workplaces with less than four employees. That amounts to two million workers or 40 per cent of the nation's workforce. No health and safety checks, no minimum wage, no redundancy rights for them. In a situation where there are, according to official figures, 10,000 deaths at work every year and 150,000 injuries resulting in loss of limb, this new attack was rightly seen as legalising murder.

A massive May Day demonstration with over 100,000 workers on it forced Parliament to delay, but not withdraw, the introduction of the new law. It also signalled to the working class and students that the regime could be challenged.

A new mood of confidence spread from the working class to the students.

At the start of the student protests, the majority of the activists saw their role as exerting extra-parliamentary pressure in support of the President Khatami. But when the president declared that "deviations will be repressed with strength and determination" illusions in the reforming president rapidly dissipated. In an angry letter to Khatami the Tabriz Independent Student Union summed up the new mood:

"We began our movement thinking you are behind us in bringing about a change and "civil society". But it is clear now we were deceived by your smiles and promises. You seem to have sided with the fundamentalists now in attacking the students."

The Tabriz students are absolutely right. Khatami has sided with the fundamentalists. The crunch came at the end of July, when the Pasdars issued a warning in the fundamentalist newspaper, Kayhan, demanding that the president stop supporting the students and claiming that his reforms had gone too far. Within days, Khatami capitulated and a wave of repression was unleashed.

It is now crucial that the international workers' and students' movements do everything in their power to halt the torture and murder and demand the immediate and unconditional release of all the students and workers arrested over the summer.

If we succeed in this, then there is every indication that a new revolutionary situation will begin to develop in Iran. Evidence of workers joining the students on the demonstrations and of a high level of women's participation in the protests point to an alternative to relying on the reforming wing of the bourgeoisie. Indeed the "Islamic Republic", in reality a foul clerical dictatorship, cannot be reformed it can only be blown up by mass revolution.

But if the workers and students are not to be cheated out of everything they fought for as they were in the early 1980s they must fight not only for full democratic rights and workers' demands but for a workers' republic based on shoras (councils) made up of delegates of the workers, the urban and rural poor and the youth. To fight for this a revolutionary workers party must be built in Iran.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/iranian-government-clamps-down-opposition>