



Mass protests against election result in Iran - the time has come

Simon Hardy Wed, 17/06/2009 - 10:59

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Iran is gripped by a political crisis, reports Simon Hardy. Claims of rigged elections have spiralled into a mass popular movement on the streets, but is Mousavi the way forward?

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Thirty years after the Iranian revolution, which saw the creation of the Islamic republic, people are once again thronging the roof tops and the streets, chanting death to the dictator. But this time the target is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the chosen one of Iran's Supreme Ruler, Khomeini's successor Ali Khamenei.

The supporters of 'defeated' candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi organised a protest on Monday 15 June in Tehran. It was immediately declared illegal by the police and called off by Mousavi himself, who urged his supporters to stay away, to stay calm and keep things legal. But the momentum was too great, and the streets of Tehran were filled with people, defying the ban and the threatened violence from the state.

Agence France-Presse reported 1.5 million to 2 million people on the protest, others were more modest, alleging that only 100,000 had turned up. With powerful symbolism the demonstrators marched from Engelab Square (Square of Revolution) to Azadi Square (the Square of Freedom), places associated with the struggle against the Shah thirty years ago.

Veteran Middle East reporter Robert Fisk observed, 'this was not just the trendy, young, sunglassesed ladies of north Tehran. The poor were here, too, the street workers and middle-aged ladies in full chador [Islamic dress].'

After the protest part of the crowd attacked the barracks of the much hated Basiji militia men, armed gangs attached to the Mosques who are used as strike breakers and enforcers of 'Islamic codes of conduct' on the populace. They were in turn shot at by the Basiji, the government-radio reported that seven had been killed and several others injured.

The anger of the demonstrators against the Basiji was in response to a massacre at Tehran University the night before. These thugs had burst into the dormitories of Tehran University and shot dead five students in retaliation for the mass protests organised at the university during the day.

The state forces initially responded to protests with tear gas, plastic bullets and live ammunition. Yet still the protesters still mobilised and in such huge numbers that the police held their fire. Iran is now gripped by a political crisis that could open a revolutionary disintegration of the clerical regime which 30 years ago aborted the workers and popular revolution that overthrew the Shah.

In the Iranian presidential elections, held on 12 June 2009, many young people, women, trade unionists and large sections of the middle classes put their faith in Mir-Hossein Mousavi, a politician recently associated with the 'reformist' wing of the Iranian ruling class which wants to make the Islamic republic a little more socially liberal to attract the support of the young, whilst improving relations with the west.

The incumbent president, Ahmadinejad, standing as the Abadgaran candidate, an alliance of conservative political organisation, promised some measures to help the urban and rural poor - backed up by stronger anti imperialist rhetoric, which is his populist trump card.

The background to the election is the recent tensions with the west over Iran's uranium enrichment programme ? the offers of US President Obama to enter into negotiations with the Iranian regime - plus the developing economic problems, with inflation running at between 15-25 per cent.

The widespread anger is caused by Mousavi's defeat amid claims of electoral fraud. Mousavi had promised ?change? on issues which have galvanised many students and especially young women. He pledged to get rid of the morality police, sinister bigots who patrol the streets and arrests women for dressing 'inappropriately' and harass young people they find in mixed company.

Before the election he promised to ?reform laws that treat women unequally. We should empower women financially, women should be able to choose their professions according to their merits, and Iranian women should be able to reach the highest level of decision making bodies.? This is a pledge directed at particularly middle class women, promising them greater opportunities in their careers and in political circles.

He also offered a more diplomatic and less 'confrontational' approach with the west, leading to more economic liberalisation to the economy, and an opening to the world market. Naturally, sections of western liberals and the media have welcomed this.

For his part Ahmadinejad adopted a mixture of anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist rhetoric which is his hallmark style and has fooled some western ?anti-imperialists? into supporting him and his obnoxious regime.

He has developed policies which have gained him a serious base in some of the poorest sections of Iranian society. He recently said he was intent on ?bringing the oil money to the people's dinner table.? He has redistributed some of the oil wealth into pension funds and government workers wages. One of his more infamous recent policies was distribution of free potatoes and soup to the rural and urban poor. His rivals accused him of 'vote grabbing', a claim which he of course denied, claiming that Mousavi, with his mainly internet built campaign amongst the middle classes was out of touch with ordinary Iranians.

Claims the election was stolen

Allegations of fraud emerged near the end of the election count when Ahmadinejad declared victory by quite a wider margin than thought possible. The interior ministry said that the incumbent president had been re-elected by 63.3% to 34.7% on a turn out around 85 per cent - the highest for an election in a long time. Mousavi submitted a formal complaint to the twelve member Guardian Council, the real power behind government in Iran. Half the council is chosen by the Majlis (parliament) and the other half by the Supreme Leader.

However above both the leader and the Guardian Council sits the 86-member Assembly of expert Islamic scholars. It can overturn decisions and even replace the Supreme leader though it has so far never done so.

It is quite usual for defeated presidential candidates in the third world to shout 'fraud' almost before the ballots have finished being counted.

But, as socialists we should never be dismissive of the possibility of fraud in a system as corrupt as capitalism and as undemocratic as the Iranian regime. However whether there was fraud or not, the protests are against something more than a stolen election. They are an explosion of pent up anger and frustration against the regime and the way it controls and dominates the lives of Iranian people.

Of course the governments in Washington and across Europe, as well as Israel, would prefer Mousavi, a man they have identified as easier to do business with and safe politically, not too radical, not too democratic. They would like at best

a 'Green Revolution', similar to the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine or the 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia, where pro-western politicians were installed but little else changed.

What they do not want is an eruption of genuine revolution that could pass from democratic political slogans to ones that address the social needs of Iran's workers and the urban and rural poor. They most certainly do not want to see the Iranian machinery of state repression disintegrate and collapse and power pass into the hands of the youth and the workers.

Where is Iran Going?

What is clear is that despite the official leaders of this movement, a massive outpouring of popular will has begun which will increasingly demand fundamental change in the system. The demands will focus on the concerns of the middle classes, as long as they are the majority of the protest movement.

Some on the left have dismissed the movement, claiming it is just middle class, that the fraud did not happen and that they are simply puppets of the imperialists. This wilfully ignores the obvious fact that the entire election process - its vetted candidates, its government controlled media, its election commission whose head announced his support for Ahmadinejad before the counting began - is grotesquely undemocratic. Opposition to a 'stolen election' is simply the lightning rod for popular discontent with the regime as whole. The goal now is to help the movement outstrip its limitations and push for a truly revolutionary struggle against the entire Islamic capitalist state.

By late Monday (16 June) the Supreme Leader had declared that there would be a limited recount of some of the disputed regions. This was hailed as a partial victory by Mousavi, but is in fact a move by the regime to demobilise the protesters and restore order. Mousavi has gone further, demanding a rerun which would see the situation intensify dramatically.

Mousavi ? fake ally of workers and youth

However, the widespread support for Mousavi is the fundamental weakness of the movement, which threatens to wreck it. Mousavi is in fact not a 'reformer', or at least has never been one in the past. He is quoted as describing himself as a 'reformist who refers to the principles [of the Islamic revolution]'. He was the Prime minister of the republic from 1981-1989, during the Iran-Iraq war and whilst the regime consolidated itself by massacring communists and other democratic opponents. He spoke out against ending the war with Iraq, wanting to continue the bloodshed which had already cost so many lives in almost a decade of fighting.

No presidential election candidate will independently act as a vehicle through which real change can occur. This is simply because of the structure of the Iranian political system, no candidate may stand before they are vetted by the Guardian Council. Even if Mousavi was elected on a democratic programme (which he did not have) then the institutions of the Islamic state would frustrate any attempts at reform and no doubt seek to remove him from office.

This is why the western media lens view of the struggle between the 'reformists' and the 'conservatives' has to be taken with caution. All of the Iranian political establishment is reactionary, undemocratic and elitist. The argument is over surface modifications, whilst maintaining the rule of the Shia hierarchy over Iranian society. The most prominent reformists like Ali Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who lost to Ahmadinejad in 2005 raise criticisms of the regime, but this is part of their manoeuvrings within the political establishment ? no one should be fooled that they offer a serious way out. Rafsanjani is a millionaire, reputedly the richest man in Iran. This is what enables Ahmadinejad to pose as the voice of the poor and disinherited.

Of course there is the danger of 'anything but this regime' from some Iranians. Sections of the middle classes would no doubt support an imperialist invasion if it secured a more liberal form of democracy ? as long as it was less bloody than Iraq or Afghanistan (a kind of utopian, nice imperialism which hurts no one but the bad guys).

This disastrous course must be fought against. Imperialism does not care about the Iranian people. It exploits peoples

desire for democratic change because it wants a way into Iran to exploit its resources. Obama would be happy to put them in the stranglehold of another Shah, (or an equivalent of Egypt's Mubarek or the Saudi Royal family) if the US could get its hands on Iranian oil.

Which way forward?

Despite the many analogies with the demonstrations and protests during the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, there is one key factor missing as yet. In 1979 Iran was brought to a standstill by a massive general strike, particularly hitting the lucrative oil industry. The workers there were a powerfully organised force which crucially contributed to the downfall of that hated US-backed dictator. But now the organised workers movement has suffered under 30 years of some of the most barbaric attacks on their rights, their ability to organise, to take action, even to meet and discuss. The judges sentence union organisers to months or years in prison and floggings, working class activists who carry on their struggle for free trade unions can find themselves in the notorious torture prison at Evin.

The Islamic regime knows that its most powerful enemy is the Iranian working class, they alone have the power to smash the regime to pieces and create a new political order. This is why they treat workers more brutally than even the Shah did.

So calls must be raised for a national strike demanding an end to the regime and for greater democratic freedoms. This strike would be supported by workers across the world who are in solidarity with the struggle of the Iranian workers. The need for economic justice must be brought to the fore of the protests in order to bring wider layers of workers and the urban poor into the movement.

For a full-blown Iranian revolution to break out, the protests must go beyond the student youth, the women who want to be free of the morality police and the stifling cultural restrictions. To do this it must raise demands of burning importance to the poor, the factory workers, the transport workers, the oil workers and the poor peasants. The working class has no interest in sustaining a police state which repeatedly smashes strikes, arrests their leaders. But at the same time it has no desire to be exploited by the imperialist multinationals. Strikes and occupations of key industries and sectors by workers would accelerate the struggle towards the point of no return for the regime.

The key political demand should be for a sovereign and revolutionary constituent assembly. Such a body could sweep away not only all the cultural restrictions on women and young people but the whole structure which condemns the people to an infantile status in need of guardian councils and 'supreme leaders'.

To co-ordinate the struggle against the regime and for such an assembly shoras (councils) should be created, workers shoras, students shoras, shoras in the shantytowns- all made up of freely elected and instantly recallable delegates, free from any 'guardianship' of the local mosques or imams. IN short they should be just like those originally created in 1978 and 1979. They should create militias able to defend themselves from the Basiji and the Revolutionary Guards who will carry on, drowning the protests in blood in order to maintain the regime in power as long as they alone are armed and the masses are unarmed.

The goal of socialists is to argue for a strategy whereby the shoras can act as the new ruling power, to begin the task of organising society along truly democratic lines. Such a vision of society seemed so close in 1979, only to be cruelly crushed by the Islamic counter revolution led by Khoemini. This needs to occur alongside workers control of industry and distribution of goods.

Now the working class and radicalised students must look to their own leadership, the construction of a revolutionary party in Iran with a strategy for taking power is essential if there is to be a serious fight against both the regime and capitalism, the system behind it. The creation of a socialist state and a planned economy would help turn around the economic problems in Iran, genuinely using the oil wealth for the benefit of the poor.

As Leon Trotsky wrote, in words as true today as in 1906: 'Above everything else [the workers] must be free from illusions. And the worst illusion in all its history from which the proletariat has up till now suffered has always been

reliance upon others?. The workers must free themselves from the likes of Mousavi as leaders, just as much as the dictator Ahmadinejad. They must not fall victim to the machinations of the imperialists either. That way only lies yet another defeat.

All of these demands are posed concretely because in the next few days a new question will arise, where next? The election recount will come in, it will again declare Ahmadinejad the winner, and eventually Mousavi will be called into someone's office and told to call off the protests. The essential next step is a political general strike, the mobilisation of the Iranian working class onto the field of battle, the election of shoras. If this happens then as Ahmadinejad said, 'the genie is out of the bottle.' Everything is possible.

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