



# The state and revolution in Iran

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The struggle that has taken place in Iran over the last two weeks is rich in lessons for all socialists, workers and youth. This article examines the role of state violence in Iran, the background of Mousavi and the importance of working class action in overthrowing the regime.

The political crisis, which started as a dispute over the elections, took on a more fundamental character as hundreds of thousands joined the movement. They were protesting not just over the question of who won the election but over deeper questions about the nature of the regime that they live under.

Of course, in response, the state moved to defend itself. It allowed the protests to occur at the beginning, the police idly standing by, but all the time the unofficial state forces of the Basiji militiamen were on the edges of the protests, singling out leaders, organisers, the more militant sections, subjecting them to brutal physical attacks, even killings. They revealed themselves clearly as the shock troops of the regime, the first line of defence against any and all opposition.

The pasadaran (revolutionary guard) threatened a 'revolutionary confrontation' with protesters last week but this violence is in fact distinctly counter revolutionary.

It has been said that the revolution proceeds under the whip of the counter-revolution, meaning that the more violence the class enemy uses, the more militant, powerful and effective our response has to be.

But this is not automatic. The forces of revolution only advance and learn to understand their enemy when a revolutionary organisation arises, draws the lessons of confrontations and makes preparations for an assault on the capitalists and their state. People facing daily beatings by the police and possible torture in Evin prison do not automatically become radicalised. More often than not they are beaten into submission. This is the fundamental role of the police in every country, Iran is no different.

### Mousavi ? a failed leader

Like previous so-called reformist leaders over the last decade, Mousavi has proven himself to be useful for only one thing, leading the pro-democracy movement to disaster. Mousavi is, on the one hand a pliant and willing component of the regime, 'one of them?', a member of the ruling elite in Iran, and, on the other hand a man who feels that he has been robbed in the election, and rages against the bureaucracy.

The government in Iran is composed of various factions contending and struggling for power. Mousavi feels excluded from the ruling group in the government, around Ahmadinejad and Khamenei. Supreme leader Khamenei wanted his man to win, Rafsanjani, the richest and at one time the most powerful man in Iran, supported Mousavi. It was, so to speak, through this crack in the ruling elite that the mass protests spilled out onto the streets.

Mousavi cynically used the protesters as a bargaining chip with the regime to get the election annulled. He wanted to use them as a stage army to apply pressure to the government, trying to turn the protests on and off like water from a tap. But as Ahmadinejad said, he had let the genie out of the bottle. It was not just a feeling that the election had been stolen that drove people out onto mass marches and fights with the police, it was a general desire to get the state out of their lives, an end to the morality police, an end to the overbearing state institutions and other repressive intrusions into their daily lives. Mousavi's campaign played on these desires, even though as prime minister throughout the 1980s he

was central to the growth and empowerment of the Morality Police and the strengthening of the Revolutionary Guard.

The youth and the wider progressive movement put their faith in Mousavi to lead them to the promised land. This is the same Mousavi who did not want to stop the bloodshed of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. The same Mousavi who was in power when over 30,000 communists, homosexuals and women's rights activists were murdered by the state. He took over from Bani Sadr in 1980 and spearheaded the purging of the civil service of anyone who was a Tudeh (Communist) party member or in the Fedayeen, or whose children were in those parties. He also ensured that the strict Islamic dress code for women was implemented rigidly, and targeted judges who were 'soft' for accepting bribes to commute death penalty sentences to life imprisonment. Life under Mousavi in the 1980s was horrific and violent.

Even during the election campaign there was a distinctly nasty, anti-working class, mood among some of his supporters. Some chanted 'death to the potato' (referring to the free food given out to the poor by Ahmadinejad) and Mousavi himself called for subsidies on essential items to be cut, something that would have hit the poor hardest.

And which parties backed Mousavi? He was the candidate of the Hambastegi (Solidarity) the primary reformist party, composed of members of the ruling elite who are critical of some of the more repressive and undemocratic measures in Iran but in favour of maintaining the Islamic state. He was also endorsed by the Association of Combatant Clerics (ACC), Khamenei's party. The Secretary General of the ACC is Ayatollah Mohammad Mousavi Khoeihi, the first prosecutor general after the 1979 revolution who developed a passion for summary executions. So did Ayatollah Sadeq Givi, the 'hanging judge', who was supported by another ACC leader, Majeed Ansari. He was also had the support of the Islamic Iran Participation Front, the leaders of the coalition government put together after the 2000 elections. Ironically, that fragile coalition fell apart when Rafsanjani, backed by the conservatives, stood for the presidency and pulled some of the centre ground reformists with him.

Today, his supporters are chanting 'death to the dictator' (Marg bar dictator!). They are radicalised and fighting for a solution that goes inextricably beyond the electoral mechanics of Iran. Of course, some of his supporters come from the middle classes and the richer residents of north Tehran, many of these 'rayban-wearing, coca cola drinking youth' (as they are identified in the western press) have even been known to express support for the imperialist strategy of regime change in their own country.

But it would be wrong to simply write off the whole movement due to the class composition of some of its leaders and organisers, as some on the left have done. In a country like Iran, a genuine pro democracy movement can, and usually will, emerge from sections of the middle classes. The question that Marxists ask themselves is whether the democratic drive of the movement is genuine (or is it just a stage-managed activist group funded by some Washington based think-tank?) and is it possible to intersect with the movement and proletarianise it, that is give it a working class dynamic. Of course, the demands of such a movement are inadequate at the beginning, but that is true of many protest movements and struggles waged under capitalism.

Equally, some have also been soft on Mousavi, trying to imply that he is in some way a radical break from Ahmadinejad. It is clear that, if the superficial reforms that he proposes were passed, the regime would still retain its fiercely reactionary and dictatorial nature. If he was such a progressive at heart why did he not fight for these changes in the 1980s when he was in a much stronger position to do something about it? In fact, he used his position then to tighten restrictions on women and political dissidents. It is a twist of history that his supporters now face the full might of the state forces that he helped to construct and consolidate after the revolution (or, more accurately, after the Islamic counter revolution).

## Imperialism and its designs

In Washington and Europe, the imperialists watch Iran with greedy self-interest. Iran is a thorn in their sides, and it threatens to grow worse if are armed with nuclear weapons. Removing the core of the Ahmadinejad-Khameini regime might open up the country to more foreign capital, more trade with the west, unfreeze some of the diplomatic relations, etc.

A more tantalising outcome would be a full regime change, either in the form of a colour revolution a la Ukraine, Georgia or Lebanon, which installs some pro-Western businessman of some description, or an outright coup from some group or other that could install a dictatorship that was more willing to work with Washington.

Of course, Obama and the others are not coming forward actively or openly to support Mousavi. They recognise that this would actually weaken him and give an extra weapon to Ahmadinejad. Whilst the language with which Obama condemned the beatings, killings and imprisonments dished out by the regime was relatively mild, it should still be compared with his complete silence on the equally violent and repressive records of other regimes. Only a few weeks ago he was delivering a keynote speech in front of one of the world's worst human rights violators, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, a dictator 'elected' to power on two absurdly large margins (over 90 per cent both times), who rules over a police state where beatings, disappearances, torture and murder are a way of life for the police force. Anyone wondering why Obama is not a little more consistent need only understand that Egypt is a key US ally in the region, but Iran is not.

Now the Obama administration begins to make more favourable noises in the direction of Mousavi. As complete opportunists they want to use the crackdown as a stick with which to beat the regime. Obama refers to the outrage of the 'international community' concerning the violence 'preparing the way for more resolutions to be passed at the UN or the G8 to tighten sanctions on the regime.

Anyone who wants real change in Iran must resolutely and utterly oppose any intervention by western powers, especially those wrapped in the flag of 'humanitarian' protection. The US has a track record of overthrowing regimes it does not like and installing worse ones. Iranians themselves remember the CIA sponsored overthrow of the democratically elected government of Mossadeq and the installation of the Shah in 1954. The imperialists would use any kind of opportunity to strengthen their position in the Middle East, and in Iran in particular, as part of their power games in the region. Consistent democrats, therefore, cannot look to such reactionary, militaristic and anti working class forces to liberate the people of Iran.

#### The role of the state in a revolution

The Guardian newspaper described Tehran as being like 'a war zone' after 10 days of demonstrations. As soon as the police and Basiji moved in seriously to smash the protests everyone knew that the violence would be horrific. But in this war zone the most powerful army has yet to take to the field 'the Iranian working class is sympathetic to the protesters and appalled by the level of violence, but has yet to engage actively in the struggle.

The protests alone could not succeed in really challenging the might of the Iranian state. This is a state with distinct militarist and quasi-fascistic features, presiding over gangs of armed thugs, alongside the normal police and army (the oppressive tools of a more democratic state) whose job it is to wage a campaign of terror over society.

The protests lacked a sense of purpose and strategy 'were people like Nida really going out on the streets and sacrificing their lives just for a recount of votes in a few disputed regions in a presidential election? Were workers really willing to strike and face the bullets and batons of the security forces just to get Mousavi another chance at the presidency? In a situation like this politics determines everything 'if the slogans of the day do not chime with the needs and drive of the working class then a real fusion of the pro-democracy movement with the workers will not be possible, or will at least be seriously hindered.

The protesters, who are genuinely struggling for democratic rights and an end to the repressive regime, need to go to the factories and the workshops to speak to the workers, call on them to join them in an all out strike and protest against the government. The workers at the massive Khodro factory have already organised a short protest strike in solidarity with the protestors, but this is not enough. Industry and production must be brought to a stand still. Activists need to go to the oil wells and pumping stations and make contact with the workers there 'to tell them about what is going on and to win them over to the struggle for democracy.

This will be very difficult. The current rulers of Iran are all too aware of how powerful the oil workers were in 1979 when they struck and stopped the flow of oil out of, and money into, Iran. The oil workers are kept in labour camp conditions, in barracks surrounded by barbed wire, 'guarded' by men with guns. Many of them are addicted to opiates and kept in a stupor to prevent their engagement with wider society.

What kind of slogans to galvanise workers into action? Basic economic demands, a higher wage, more rights at work, the right to form trade unions, the right to strike and other demands would radically improve the lives of the working class in Iran.

The demand for a constituent assembly in Iran, to rewrite the constitution and draw up plans for a workers' and peasants' government should be the crowning democratic slogan of the current stage of the struggle. It is not in the interests of workers to get someone like Mousavi elected. Far from it, it is in their interests, and those of wider society, to seek a massive systemic change within Iran.

How can they get these demands? Only through militant action, strikes, occupations, mass demonstrations ? these methods of struggle are not 'over the top' or 'too provocative?', they are essential in a situation where the state is willing to kill, kill and kill again to maintain its rule.

The most powerful weapon in the current phase of the struggle would be a general strike. A nationwide general strike, built and coordinated by shoras (councils) would shift the balance of power dramatically. Of course, the workers taking such action would face the most terrible repression, and so they would need to equip, arm and prepare to defend themselves. A workers' defence militia should be organised in every factory and large workshop, every university and office which decides to take such action.

Pacifists might recoil in horror at this, but when it comes to a revolution everything is determined by force. So far, the protesters have relied on spontaneous outpouring of anger, organised through unofficial networks and internet technology like Twitter. But, as Thomas Friedman wrote in the International Herald Tribune in mid June, 'Bang bang beats tweet tweet'. In the end, whoever holds the guns and is willing to use them will determine who runs society. The Shah knew that he had lost in 1979 when sections of the army went over to the revolution.

So what about the army? One video circulated on youtube shows students surrounded by police and some soldiers. The students chant at the soldiers that their fight is alongside them, not against them. This is a clear and correct message, but it is not enough. Fraternisation with the soldiers is essential, to speak to them, discuss with them, bring them over to the side of the revolution and against their officers and the government. Not all of them will join the movement, but a split in the army is a sure sign that the regimes days are numbered.

Dictatorships can be wary of using the army. They are trained to fight enemies abroad, not their own people. They often draw soldiers from some of the poorest sections of society (even imperialist armies in Britain and the US target poorer youth in places like Glasgow or Detroit) and may not be reliable when used on the streets. The police, on the other hand, are institutionalised to act as a line of defence against the general population every day. For them, it makes no difference if they are beating a criminal or a student protester. They are trained to view everyone with suspicion and contempt, as potential criminals and enemies of law and order.

From protest to power ? permanent revolution

Amnesty International released a report asking the Tehran regime nicely to stop using the Basiji on the demonstrators and to allow the right to protest peacefully. Such a change of policy would be welcome, but it is frankly utopian. The regime is fighting for its life, to try and defeat Ahmadinejad with a letter writing campaign, or a petition, is futile.

We have seen how the state acts when faced with a serious challenge to its rule. We know the reformists within the regime cannot launch a serious challenge to the system. We have seen that the imperialists are waiting, watching, preparing everyday for the time when they can have their man back on the throne in Tehran.

Change in Iran can come, it must come, it is worth fighting for, despite the terrible repression. But socialists and

workers, youth and pro-democracy activists, must build a party to fight for change, a revolutionary party with a programme aimed at seizing power. Such a party would seek to organise the vanguard class fighters in the struggle for power, to overthrow the regime and establish genuine democratic change ? socialism is the only system that can ensure prosperity and an end to both the reactionary dictatorship and imperialist exploitation. As Marx said; ?this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.?

That revolution, pursued by a revolutionary party with a clear strategy, starts from the struggle for democracy, gathers its strength as it widens and deepens its support amongst wider layers, drawing the working class into the fight. In doing so, the working class becomes the driving force of the struggle, the key fighter in the battle against the government. Using militant methods of struggle the economy can be paralysed by strikes. This raises the question of who runs society? Who rules? Who has the power? At this point, a concerted and serious push for power by the working class can win over wavering sections of the middle classes, drawing in more of the rural poor and breaking a section of the army away as people see that a serious fight is on for the future of Iran. The question of the state forces can be resolved only in one way; the Iranian state must be smashed in the act of revolution.

A revolutionary constituent assembly should be convened under the supervision of the mass organisations of the working class and peasantry, the overwhelming majority of the country. The struggle for such an assembly would help dynamise and strengthen the pro democratic forces. Its task would be to decide on how the country is to be run in future. A revolutionary party would argue that the new government should be based on the Shoras, truly mass democratic bodies directly connected to the workplaces and farms across the country and its programme should be, in addition to the fullest democratic rights for all who accept its rule, the expropriation of all large capital and its coordination under democratic planning.

That is why we fight for:

Neither Khamenei and Ahmadinejad nor Mousavi, Rafsanjani and Khatami!

The workers? and democracy movement must not fight for the interests of any factions of the ruling class. It must fight for its own democratic and social goals!

No to the privatisation of public enterprises! No to price liberalisations and cuts in food subsidies!

Build defence forces in every factory and place of struggle!

Establish shoras to co-ordinate the resistance against the regime.

For a nationwide General strike now!

For a revolutionary constituent assembly!

Build a revolutionary party, as part of a revolutionary, fifth international

For a workers? and peasants? government

For international working class solidarity with the Iranian democracy movement!

For protest actions in front of Iranian embassies!

For material aid for the Iranian workers? movement!

The international workers? movement must fight alongside the Iranian democracy movement against imperialist

attempts to regain their influence in Iran as it was under the Shah! No new Western puppet!

For unconditional solidarity with the Palestinian liberation struggle and the resistance in Lebanon and Iraq! A workers? and peasants? government would not use material support as a tactical tool to increase the influence of the Iranian state ? as the reactionary Ahmadinejad regime is doing. Instead it would see this support as part of the strategy of internationalising the revolution.

For a socialist federation of the Middle East!

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